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£1.3m national study launches to evaluate changes to police involvement in mental health crisis responses

A major new research project will examine how changes to police involvement in mental health crisis responses are affecting people, services, and communities across England.

The 'PIONEER-MH' study is being led by experts at Cumbria, Northumberland, Tyne and Wear NHS Foundation Trust (CNTW), Northumbria University, and Newcastle University. It is supported by £1.3 million in funding from the [National Institute for Health and Care Research](#) (NIHR).

The work comes at a time when police forces across the country are making significant changes to how they respond to emergency mental health calls, under the national ‘Right Care, Right Person’ strategy.

‘Right Care, Right Person’ aims to ensure that people in mental health crisis are supported by the most appropriate service. Some incidents do need the police to attend. But when there is no public safety risk or crime suspected, health or social care services are often better placed to support someone.

This new study will investigate how this shift is affecting people in crisis, frontline staff and multi-agency services, and whether the changes are improving safety, access to care and outcomes.

The project aims to give NHS leaders, commissioners, police forces and policymakers evidence they can use to shape future crisis care.

Dr Iain McKinnon, Senior Lecturer at Newcastle University, Consultant Psychiatrist at CNTW, and Chief Investigator on this study, said: “This research will give us crucial insight into what effect these changes are having on the NHS, ambulance services, social care, the voluntary and third sector, and – most importantly – people who are in distress themselves.”

The study will run across four areas of England: South London, Avon and Wiltshire, Cumbria, and West Yorkshire. Each area has different approaches to crisis response, levels of deprivation, and use of police powers.

Researchers will look at how local services and systems are organised, and analyse what effect changes to their crisis responses are having.

[Professor Nicola Clibbens](#), a Professor of Mental Health Nursing in a joint clinical academic position in the [School of Healthcare and Nursing Sciences at Northumbria University](#) and CNTW, who is co-leading the study said: “We are delighted to have been funded by the NIHR to work with a team who bring a wealth of expertise – including research methods, crisis services research, policing research, lived experience and knowledge mobilisation – from across England.

“Research that can drive improvement of crisis services is of critical importance to ensure timely and good-quality care for the most distressed

people in our communities.

“Crisis services are the front line in responding to very distressed people, preventing suicide, identifying treatable mental health issues and directing people to appropriate follow-on support and intervention. It is also critical that people who may be less often heard are included in our research to address marginalisation of people due to their socioeconomic situation, their ethnicity or culture or their diagnosis.”

A core part of the project is working with people who have experienced a mental health crisis themselves. Four peer researchers and a panel of 24 [public contributors](#) will shape the study and advise on the findings.

Wendy Hope, one of these Lived Experience Partners, said: “As someone who has been through mental health crisis care, I know how important it is that responses are compassionate, coordinated, and timely.

“This project matters because it will look at how recent changes in policy are affecting that – and real voices will shape the findings and how things are going forward.”

To find out more about the project or how to get involved, email pioneermh@cntw.nhs.uk

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