



Helplines Survey 2014

Our members tell us about their challenges and suggest solutions for sustainable services in the UK.

Sonia Howe, Head of Policy

Helplines Partnership compiled and executed a survey amongst our members with regards to the challenges they face, and how wider changes could enable more people to be helped, whilst saving money for the NHS. Here are the results of the survey.

The changing landscape of helpline services



Helplines in the United Kingdom are facing a number of challenges. Calls to helplines have increased significantly in the past year, with some helplines reporting volume increases of over 40%. Our members tell us that the complexity of the calls they receive is also increasing, with callers having multiple and complex issues that include mental health problems, housing, debt, unemployment or substance abuse.

Helplines can offer support to young people, families, older people, disabled people, people with chronic health conditions and people with poor mental health. They also provide specific advice and support on areas like debt, housing and other complex matters.

Helplines are accessible to individuals without a diagnosis and those who find it hard to engage with mainstream services and have a critical role to play in offering crisis support to people who are experiencing suicidal feelings or who are emotionally vulnerable. They can also be an important first step in seeking help or advice on a range of issues. A survey by the Mental Health Foundation on mental health helplines found that most of the GPs surveyed (73%) were aware of mental health helplines, and over half felt helplines were a useful service and could prevent crises.

Helplines of all sizes face problems with call volumes and answering calls. Limited resources mean that in practice helplines answer as many calls as they can within financial and staffing constraints rather than meeting the overall level of demand. Three quarters of helpline call handlers are volunteers.

Helplines are an essential part of the social fabric of the UK, but they are facing challenges through lack of funding and challenging in accessing current funding models, increased demand and increased complexity of calls. Helplines cannot answer every call attempt because they lack capacity. Unfortunately, in this sector, the caller that doesn't get through might be a person with suicidal feelings.

What our members say

With our survey Helplines Partnership engaged with helplines of different sizes and offering support to different sections of society, in order to understand more about the challenges that helplines face. Furthermore, we wanted to identify the wider changes that are needed in order to better support the sector to receive the estimated 50 million contacts taken a year across telephones, emails, text and other forms of communication.

Increased volume of calls, decreased funding

86% of helplines in our survey reported that calls to their helpline had increased in the past year, yet only 9% of helplines have seen their income increase over that time. Worryingly, 36% of helplines reported that their income had actually declined, and within this group, all the affected helplines had reported call increases.

The value of helplines is not adequately understood

Our research also identified an additional barrier, in that helplines don't believe that funders and local health commissioners have a good understanding of the value that helplines can bring.

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Funding cut year on year, for 5 years with no commitment to funding continuing at all beyond September.

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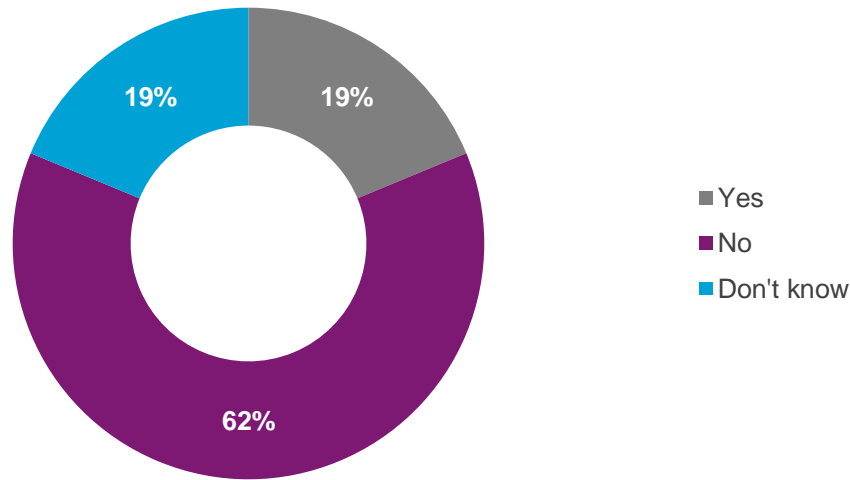
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Thresholds for mental health services are going up and people are increasingly being signposted to other support sources as an alternative - this is great in some ways but helplines need to be adequately resourced to meet these needs. We can't pick up the slack with no extra investment.

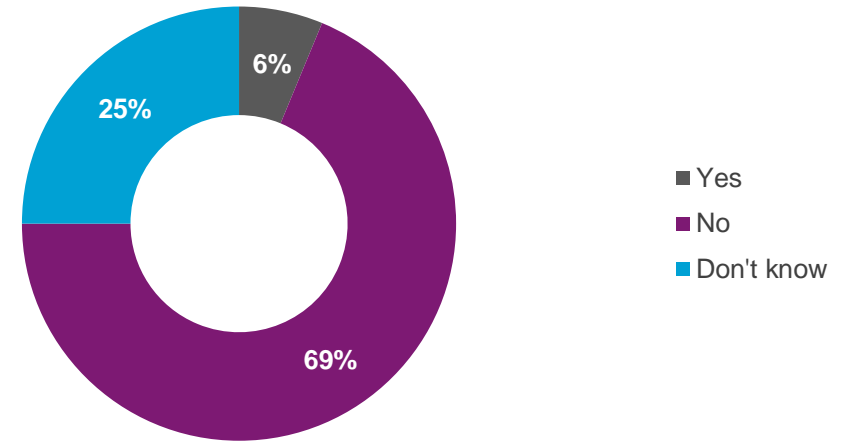
SELF INJURY SUPPORT

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Do you feel that funders understand the helplines sector and the work that you do?



Do you feel that local health commissioners understand the helplines sector and the work that you do?



Funders can include trusts, foundations and central government funding streams. It is of particular concern how low the levels of understanding that local health commissioners have of local helpline services given the high levels of calls from vulnerable people that helplines receive.

Helplines Partnership feels that GPs and other local Commissioners need to have a greater understanding of helpline services and of the work that is being done every day by helplines that actively complements NHS provision. Helplines are professionally run with trained staff and volunteers. A number of helplines work to professional quality standards. GPs and other health professionals are actively referring patients to services that local Commissioners are not supporting.

While some helplines have had good experiences with local Commissioners, the situation can be described as patchy. Relationships work best where local Commissioners have a good understanding of local helpline provision. Relationships that were developed with PCTs have not necessarily transitioned across to new commissioned service arrangements. Helplines have reported a loss of continuity, and a perception that the voluntary and community sector will be able to fill gaps in local services, without funding being made available to this.

One helpline told us that local commissioners *“generally don't understand how complex calls are and the quality of response that callers expect”*

Another commented that: *“Helplines can be a very positive gateway or preventative service for many and provide support anonymously which just cannot be done in statutory services. I'm not sure funders and commissioners understand how valuable this can be or understand that the type of evaluation information they demand is not possible to collect on these type of services and that most of us run on an absolute shoestring compared to other services - imagine what we could do if we were well resourced!”*

Looking forward: what needs to be done

There is evidence to suggest that changes in how NHS and local authority services are organised locally has resulted in more vulnerable people seeking support from helplines, but that local health commissioners do not understand how helplines are providing valuable support to vulnerable local populations, leading to a situation where an explosion in need is being met with declining resources.

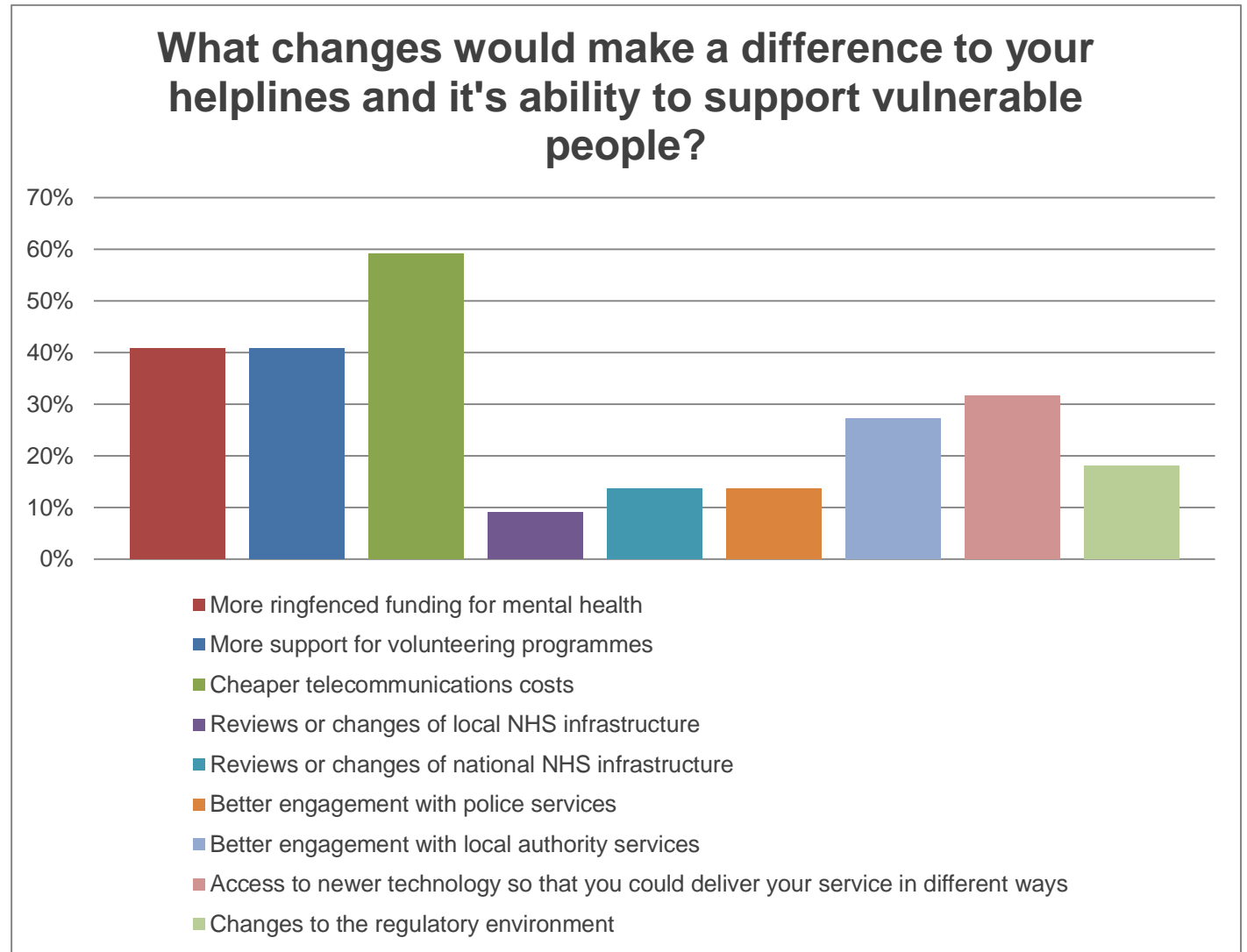
One helpline told us: *“We did have two paid members of staff working every evening on a rota system, but unfortunately due to the government imposing cuts we lost our funding from the local council we now have to rely on volunteers.”*

Another said that they had to *“restrict opening times and numbers of volunteers manning the lines”*

We asked helplines apart from funding, what would make a difference to the helplines sector, and enable better support to be offered to vulnerable callers.

The need for cheaper telecoms solutions for the helplines sector is not surprising. Helplines Partnership has done previous work highlighting the vulnerability of helpline callers and their needs to access support in a low cost and accessible way. Changes are coming to number pricing that could prove unaffordable for helplines if action is not taken.

Helplines would like to have better engagement with a range of statutory services where there is overlap in their work. Better structural investment is needed in helplines to boost their capacity to engage. Where engagement can be made, cost savings and great efficiencies can occur.



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We recently gave a presentation on mental health to paramedics (in our local area), and the outcome was extremely good, they listened and asked questions, and now when they are called out they refer us to their patients for back up support and by doing this it also prevents the patient to call out an ambulance unnecessarily.

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SERVICE USER NETWORK SWINDON



Changes to the regulatory environment are largely focused on pleas to the Charity Commission and HMRC to go further to reduce the administrative burden on small charities, though there are also some specific concerns with how the new vetting and barring disclosure scheme works with helpline volunteers.

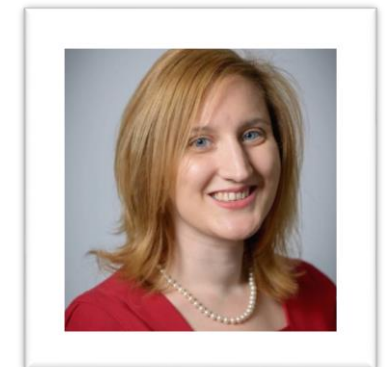
Helplines are seeing growth in demand from callers, but a decline in the resources available. Urgent action is needed for better engagement with the helpline sector and better joint working to support vulnerable callers.



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