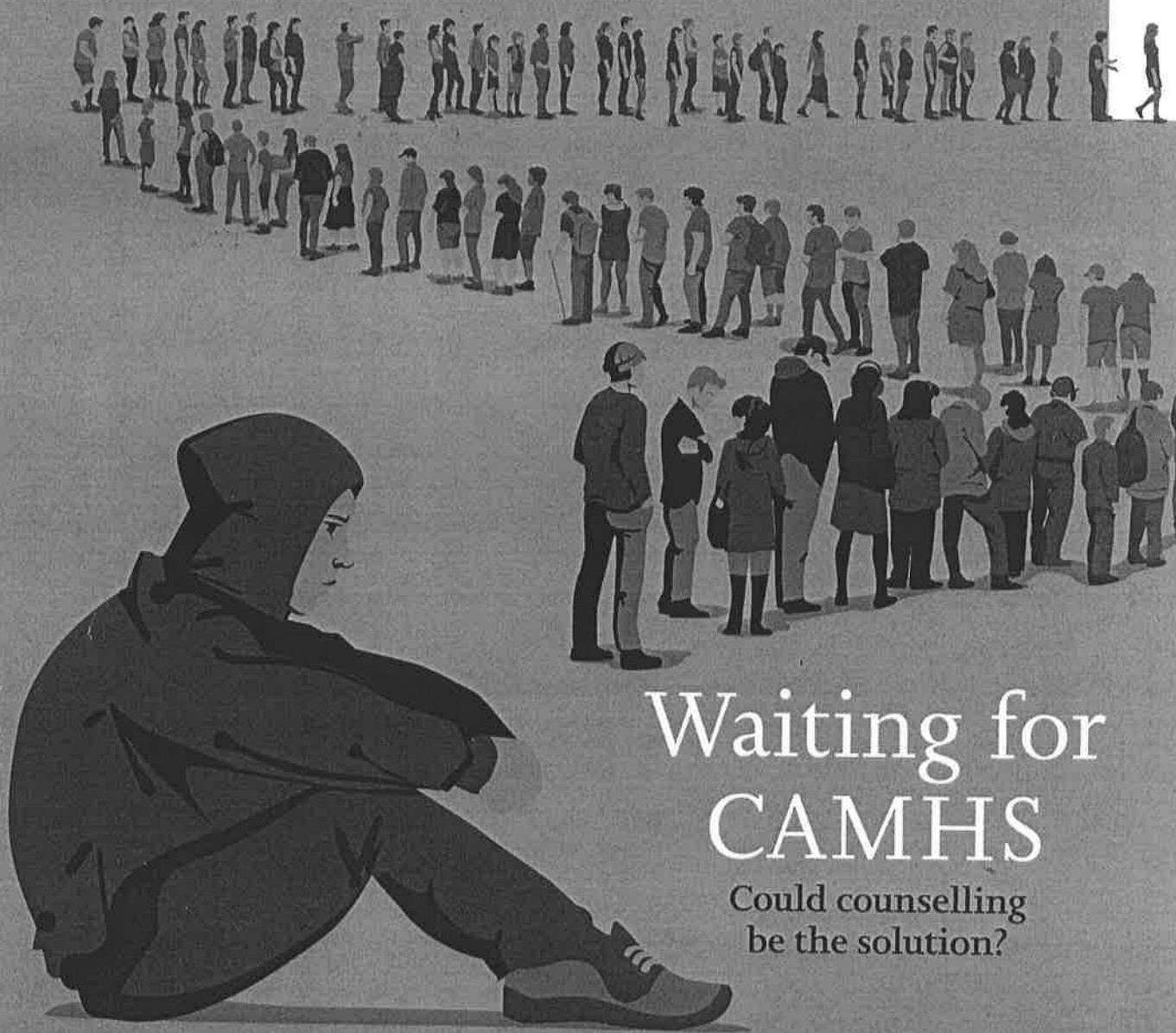


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Counselling changes lives

Other times, the clients work while they are talking and they clear up together. Some already have the bags ready when the buddy arrives. We are flexible about that, as the talking isn't the focus of the whole session.'

Crossing the line

Mind in Croydon enhanced its existing Lone Working policy to cover the buddies, and the council undertakes a risk assessment of every participant's home before the buddy goes in. Buddies are given a mobile phone to contact the office when they leave the house. There is also an emergency procedure should there be any safety issues while they are working. According to Counselling Manager Louise Kyffin: 'We give the buddies supervision every two weeks as we recognise that this is working well outside their comfort zone. A lot of the counsellors who volunteer to be buddies have their own experiences of hoarding, so they know a bit about what it entails. They have to be robust. We interview them before they take on the role, because not everyone is suited for it, although no one has opted out.'

Mind in Croydon has run four programmes so far, and another is planned for this year. Interestingly, when participants were recruited for the first group, some 120 individuals were suggested by social services but just one in four actually agreed to join the group and were eligible, indicating the high level of complexity around the issue. Participants identified by social services were particularly wary, at times fearing that they might be evicted, or lose their children because of the state of their home. Arguably, the line is crossed when the person can admit that the hoarding is causing them distress.

Of course, what looks like hoarding to one person may be a treasured collection of possessions to the individual concerned. One participant commented in his assessment that in his view the solution to the problem would be for the council to give him a bigger flat. Going forward, Mind in Croydon now takes the lead on finding



and engaging participants, which has resulted in a better take-up rate.

Both the buddies and the groupwork are highly valued by participants, Awal says. 'What has really surprised us is how quickly the groups have gelled. People have formed strong supportive bonds - I've never seen it to this extent in other groups. They're a complete cross-section of residents across the borough, and they're of all ages. Some live alone, but some of the younger clients live with their families. For them, it can be a considerable source of tension. If they are parents, it can be distressing because their children feel they can't bring friends home. Shame is such a big part of the presentation.'

The people who do sign up to attend are strongly motivated to do so, but often struggle with their feelings, whether of despair and overwhelm at the enormity of the task, or of emotional distress if they do try to throw things out. 'Part of the work is normalising

'Once they understand the meaning of possessions to them, it makes it a lot easier to pull it apart'

their reactions because what a lot of them feel is anxiety,' says Awal.

Childhood abuse, loss, bereavement and attachment issues feature frequently in people's histories. Women tend to be more affected (or are at least more likely to come to the group) than men.

'Once they understand the meaning of possessions to them, it makes it a lot easier to pull it apart. A lot of it goes back to childhood - like many issues in counselling,' says Kyffin.

'The hoarding is the surface issue. It's what's behind it that leads to the situation, so we also offer the option of one-to-one-counselling after the programme finishes, so there is some follow-through for the participants.'

'People tell us that they are able to do things they haven't been able to do for years. We feel incredibly privileged to have developed and implemented the programme so successfully and to be part of that transformation.' ■

www.mindincroydon.org.uk

Catherine Jackson is a freelance journalist specialising in counselling and mental health

REFERENCE

1. Sarah features in a BBC news feature about the project: www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-41949044



THE HOARDING PROJECT

It's a pleasure to be in [the house] now. I used to come in and it was just too horrible to feel it was a home... So yeah, I do feel proud, but the biggest thing is that I can enjoy it - it's really nice to be here now.' So says Sarah, one of the participants in an innovative counselling programme in Croydon set up with the local council to help people tackle their problems with hoarding.¹

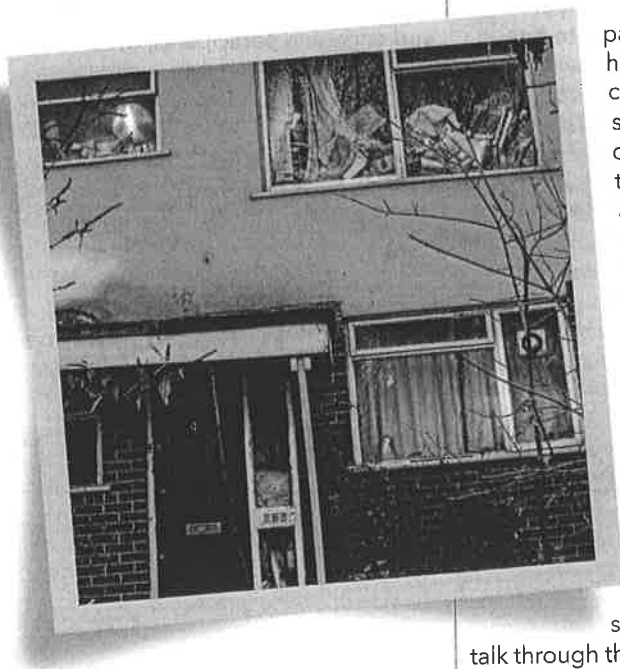
The impetus for the scheme came from the implementation of the Care Act 2014, which, for the first time, recognised hoarding as a form of self-neglect. The then Adult Safeguarding Officer at Croydon Council acknowledged how big a problem it was for housing staff in particular. It was agreed that some kind of therapeutic programme was needed, rather than punitive eviction. Bids were invited from third-sector organisations, and Mind in Croydon's counselling service was chosen.

The Mind in Croydon team credits its colleague, Jan Stanton, with the idea of setting up a buddy system to provide one-to-one support alongside a programme of group therapy. Advice was also sought from a clinical psychologist

who was involved in a hoarding project. 'Any groupwork that had been done in the past had a high drop-out rate. People can be very wary of anyone interfering in their lives and homes. Shame is also a barrier to getting help; we knew that we needed to be able to get people past that in order to build a therapeutic alliance,' says Ritu Awal, one of Mind in Croydon's four staff counsellors and co-developer of the project.

Having read up on the literature, the team devised a 12-week programme of fortnightly workshops for between eight and 12 participants, supported by weekly one-to-one buddying sessions in the participants' own homes with a designated buddy. The counselling service's 34 volunteer counsellors provided a ready-made pool of buddies. The buddies also attend the workshops with their clients, to provide support

there too. The workshops themselves explore what hoarding is, how it affects people's lives and how they think it might have developed, before moving on to unpick the mental blocks that prevent them clearing out their homes. The work considers what impels them to collect stuff (sorting, discarding and acquiring) and then devises strategies for disposing of the contents of their homes - what works and doesn't. The Fire Service has also attended group sessions and has made one-to-one visits to participants' homes. 'They've been incredibly understanding and non-judgmental, which is so important,' says Awal. 'We also invite people from previous cohorts to attend groups and talk to participants, which has been received very positively. It helps to move people on because they see that change is possible.'



'The aim is that the participants make the changes themselves, rather than having someone do the clearing up for them'

The buddies first meet participants outside the home for a coffee and a chat. Thereafter, buddy sessions will be spent clearing up and talking through the emotions and issues that the process raises, in whichever balance the client prefers. The aim is that participants make the changes themselves, rather than having someone do the clearing up for them, while recognising the huge psychological barriers to their doing so. The buddies offer emotional and practical support, listening as clients

talk through their feelings and (or while) filling refuse sacks and going with clients to the recycling centre or to take goods to charity shops.

'For a lot of people, the buddy is the first person who has gone into their home for some time,' says Awal. 'Sometimes, the person just wants time to offload and talk through their emotions first. Once they have done that, the clearing becomes easier.'

ALAMY