Summary

Around one in four people in the UK suffer from a mental health problem each year, but mental illness often goes untreated, and historically, treatment options for mental health compare unfavourably with those for physical conditions. While mental illness is estimated to account for almost a quarter of the total burden of disease, only 13 per cent of the NHS budget is spent on mental health services.

The NHS has set out that it wants to achieve “parity of esteem” between mental and physical health, in terms of access to services, quality of care and allocation of resources. While the achievement of parity of esteem has been a long-term policy goal, since 2010 this aim has increasingly featured in legislation and in government and NHS policy statements.

In October 2014, NHS England and the Department of Health jointly published Improving access to mental health services by 2020. This set out a vision to ensure mental and physical health services are given equal priority in terms of access times and service quality. In April 2016 the NHS in England extended the 18-week referral to treatment waiting time standard to the improved access to psychological therapies (IAPT) programme, and introduced a new standard that 50% of people experiencing their first episode of psychosis will begin treatment within two weeks of referral.

In February 2016 an Independent Mental Health Taskforce published The Five Year Forward View for Mental Health, which made a series of recommendations for the NHS and Government to improve outcomes in mental health by 2020/21. In July 2016 NHS England published Implementing the Five Year Forward View for Mental Health, confirming that the NHS had accepted the Taskforce recommendations. It also included a breakdown of the additional funding that will be made available. In particular, the Government committed to an additional £1 billion by 2020/21 to support implementation of the Taskforce’s recommendations.

In January 2017 the Prime Minister gave a speech on mental health, which included a commitment to “…transform the way we deal with mental health problems right across society, and at every stage of life”. Alongside the Prime Minister’s announcement, the 2015 Government published its response to the work of the Mental Health Taskforce, accepting its recommendation in full, and committing to a number of cross-government reviews and initiatives, applying to the NHS, to education, employment and the wider community. As well as measures to ensure that mental health is prioritised in the NHS in England, the Queen’s Speech on 21 June 2017 confirmed that the Government will reform mental health legislation under which people with severe mental illness can be detained for assessment and treatment.

On 31 July 2017 the Health Secretary Jeremy Hunt launched a workforce strategy for implementation of the Five Year Forward View for Mental Health, which sets out plans for 21,000 new posts across England by April 2021 (the Government had previously pledged to an increase of 10,000 posts by this date). The plan has been developed by Health Education England (HEE) together with NHS Improvement, NHS England, the Royal College of Psychiatrists and others.

This briefing provides a summary of policy on mental health in England, focusing on measures taken since 2010. It focuses on health policy, and so does not look in detail at wider changes that may affect people with mental health problems, such as welfare reform and social care policy. However, links to further reading are included in section 12.
of this briefing. Further information on policy on child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS), including work to improve the provision of mental health services in schools, is available in the Library briefing *Children and young people’s mental health – policy, CAMHS services, funding and education*.

Statistics in this area can be found in the Library briefing, *Mental health problems: statistics on prevalence and services* (January 2017)

As health is a devolved matter, the Governments of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland are responsible for setting their own policies in this area. Links to policies of the devolved administrations are provided in section 11 of this briefing.