

UK digital healthcare company wins third NHS grant to support Autistic people

Submitted by: Brain in Hand Ltd

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UK/Southwest digital healthcare company Brain in Hand has won a third prestigious Small Business Research Initiative (SBRI) Healthcare award. The near £400,000 GBP award, funded by NHS England & NHS Improvement, will help provide support services for young autistic and neurodivergent people (16-25), whether diagnosed or currently awaiting a diagnosis.

There are an estimated 125,000 young people (16-25) in the UK with neurological differences (including autism, ADHD, and dyslexia, among other diagnoses), many of whom will face unacceptable health inequalities. They will have poorer health outcomes than their neurotypical peers: the average life expectancy for an autistic person is 25 years less than for the population as a whole(1), nearly eight in ten autistic people are also managing mental health conditions such as anxiety disorders(2), and 15% of people hospitalised after a suicide attempt have an autism diagnosis(3) (a disproportionately huge figure considering that just an estimated 1% of the general population is autistic(4)). Perhaps most strikingly, 66% of autistic adults have considered suicide(5).

Many autistic and neurodivergent young adults do not receive support services to help with transitioning into higher education, employment, or independent living, putting them at greater risk of crisis later in life. Many are unemployed (only one in five autistic adults is in work, the lowest rate of any disabled group), disconnected from the world, and isolated. They have the greatest difficulty accessing services and often fall through the support gap: their needs are not identified and supported until they reach breaking point. By then, it is too often too late.

Connor Ward, autistic advocate and user experience advisor to Brain in Hand, explains: "I cannot emphasise enough how difficult it is to access services if you are on the waiting list or seen as mid- to low-level need. So many autistic people suffer anxiety and stress just to get a clinical diagnosis, then when we do, if our needs are not deemed complex enough, we are essentially abandoned. We do not 'fit' the criteria for support. The message is we must have a mental health crisis just to get support in place, when all we want is some help to access a world that is not accessible to us."

Brain in Hand believes it is long past time for a radical change to the way services are offered and delivered. This latest SBRI Healthcare funding award will allow the company to develop, test, and evidence a new method of reaching those who need help: harnessing the power of technology to remove barriers, make services more accessible, and provide much-needed assistance to more people.

Working with forward-thinking partners including Surrey County Council, Cheshire West and Chester Council, Devon Partnership NHS Trust, Derbyshire County Council & CCG, the Royal Borough of Greenwich, and the South West Academic Health Science Network, the Brain in Hand team will reach out to the neurodivergent community more directly than ever, recruiting people to use digitally enabled support through the power of social media and online search advertising.

There is a huge unmet need in this community, and many who need help will have no idea how to access help

– or even what help is available to them. This project will provide evidence to demonstrate the impact of direct marketing and online screening to engage people in services, dramatically reducing the challenges usually associated with seeking support. It will help health and social care services determine whether this new, more inclusive and accessible approach is an acceptable, scalable, and effective way of engaging an often-overlooked demographic.

“Brain in Hand aims to turn the traditional model of support on its head: to reach out to people in need and offer support preventively, rather than waiting for problems to escalate,” says Dr Louise Morpeth, CEO of Brain in Hand. “We want to provide support designed around each user’s needs, accessible when needed and available 24/7. This third award, bringing a total of £1.2M GBP in NHS awards, will allow us to make significant inroads on fulfilling that ambition. It not only acknowledges the importance of addressing the unmet needs of autistic people but validates Brain in Hand as a potential delivery model to do this.”

Dr Morpeth adds: “For too long, the autistic community has been underserved, all because so many do not ‘fit’ the current criteria for support. Many thousands of autistic people who need and want support at college, in work, and in the community are just not getting it. The massive health inequalities they experience need to be tackled. With our partners, we seek to address the support gap experienced by so many.”

Brain in Hand believes that the digital tools they offer, along with their transformational approach to providing access to support, could – if embraced nationally, which they hope this award will take them some way to achieving – reduce mental health inequalities, improve lives, and make health and social care services more effective and better value for the public purse’s money. Thousands of people in a demographic with unacceptably poor health outcomes could get help they might not otherwise have known existed, helping them to live healthier and more fulfilling lives with the right support for them.

“Without Brain in Hand,” says Connor, “I could be one of the statistics often quoted about autistic people. It’s not right for everyone, but for a lot of people it has the potential to be absolutely life changing. The issue previously has been: who will fund it for me? How will I access the funding? If more local authorities and the NHS agreed to fund services like this – services that are easy for us as a community to access – then prevention, unmet need, and the health inequalities we face would start to be truly addressed.”

Before the end of 2022, the Brain in Hand digital support system will be available to autistic and neurodivergent young people in the listed locations through a very simple online application process. They and those who support them (parents, guardians, or professionals), will be able to find out all about the service, for whom it’s suitable, how it can help, and how to apply, all via one point of contact on the Brain in Hand website.

(1)Hirvikovski et al, ‘Premature mortality in autism spectrum disorder’, 2016

(2)Autistica, ‘Understanding suicide in autism’,

<https://www.autistica.org.uk/our-research/research-projects/understanding-suicide-in-autism> © 2022

(3) Autistica, ‘Understanding suicide in autism’

(4)National Autistic Society, ‘What is autism?’,

<https://www.autism.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/what-is-autism> © 2022

(5)Cassidy et al, 'Suicidal ideation and suicide plans or attempts in adults with Asperger's syndrome attending a specialist diagnostic clinic: a clinical cohort study', 2014

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