



## A practitioner's guide to smoking cessation support among people with severe mental illness

### Introduction

People with severe mental illness (SMI) have much higher rates of smoking than the general population, and those who do smoke are more likely to be heavy smokers. An estimated 50% of deaths of people with severe mental illness are from smoking-related illnesses. This is a major cause of the 15-20 year life expectancy gap.

Yet rates of wanting to quit are about the same as for the general population, and with the right support in place, smoking cessation can be successful for people with severe mental illness.

In the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, it is more essential now than ever that people who smoke are offered the right help to quit.

This briefing introduces practitioners, commissioners and policymakers to some of the key themes and evidence around the needs of people with SMI severe mental illness and what is known about successful approaches to smoking cessation. It summarises the findings of a report based on a review of published evidence alongside interviews and focus groups with people living with SMI severe mental illness, families and carers, and practitioners in statutory, voluntary and community health and care services.

### About this guide

This project has been commissioned by the VCSE Health and Wellbeing Alliance (HWA), a partnership between the Department of Health, NHS England, and Public Health England, and 20 national voluntary sector organisations and consortia. The Alliance aims to bring the voice of the voluntary sector and people with lived experience into national policy making, to promote equality, and to reduce health inequalities.

The Association of Mental Health Providers, Centre for Mental Health, and Rethink Mental Illness, as members of the Mental Health Consortium, led this project alongside HWA partners Friends, Families and Travellers, The National LGB&T Partnership and Race Equality Foundation. Together, we have carried out extensive engagement with people with lived experience, the VCSE sector, the NHS, local government and academic bodies.



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### Helpful steps and actions

Practitioners in mental health services, primary care, acute, community and public health services can make a difference. By listening to the views and experiences of people who have first hand experience, we have identified three steps that can be helpful.

#### **1 Talk about smoking: speak to people who smoke about it. Ask at any opportunity if they would like to cut down or quit.**

There are still widespread myths about the risks of giving up smoking to mental health and perceptions that it will be more difficult for someone with a mental illness. This sometimes stops health professionals from offering help to people who might want to quit smoking. While quitting smoking can be harder, especially for heavy smokers, research shows that it is possible and that medications such as varenicline are safe for people with a mental illness.

#### **2 Offer holistic help: people with severe mental illness told us they didn't know what help was available but they wanted access to a range of techniques to find what works for them.**

Research shows that what helps people with severe mental illness to quit smoking is broadly similar to that for the general population, including behavioural techniques, medication and help from peers, families and friends. It's important to have all of these available so that each person gets the right combination for them, some of which may need to be adapted to meet the needs of people with severe mental illness.

#### **3 Provide ongoing support: people with severe mental illness want help from professionals who understand their needs, and it's important for it to be sustained**

To help them to do this, it is important that health professionals are trained in how to support people with severe mental illness in smoking cessation. It can also be necessary for antipsychotic medication to be adjusted when people stop smoking, as people often need smaller doses. It's also crucial for ongoing help to be offered to sustain quit attempts.