I almost died. Now I use my experience to improve people’s mental health

Mental health nurse Matty Caine on how he started a pioneering socially progressive mental health service, First Person Project, to boost people’s well-being

Six years ago, consumed with grief after my mum died, I started hearing voices and hallucinating that I was talking to her. I started taking more risks with my safety, mixing up handfuls of powerful painkillers and taking them at random, not caring if I lived or not.

Now I am a mental health nurse enjoying a successful NHS career, but my experience with services when I was feeling suicidal brought what I had already been thinking into clear view. Those thoughts were that mental health services are not working for most people who need them.

I wanted to do it differently. I wanted a service that was not dominated by professionals, but supported a community to draw on its own strength. A service that did not have barriers to access, that was open to everyone and did not turn people away.

My journey has taken me from growing up in an area of Liverpool that — although I hate labels like this — was one of the most deprived in the country to now running a community interest company called First Person Project.

Social enterprise

First Person Project is a pioneering not-for-profit social enterprise specialising in providing socially progressive mental health services in Liverpool. Our service model is designed to be socially focused and citizen-driven: placing people at the heart of all things ‘mental health’ in their communities.

Where I grew up, no one went into further education. It was a tough place: there were high levels of crime. But places like these make characters, give us things that help in life. I left school at 16 and undertook an apprenticeship in carpentry, which was my only available choice at the time. When that ended at 18, there wasn’t any work, so I answered an advert looking for a support worker for two men with schizophrenia.

Working with Charlie and Greg changed everything. It did not feel like working. We would talk about music and cooking, and just connect on a human level, building on their strengths. This led me to do a university access course, and then I chose to study mental health nursing. I have been in education ever since, which still seems incredible. I have taken master’s programmes, including in business, and I am now undertaking a PhD.
I worked extensively in NHS personality disorder units and health services in prisons, getting promoted rapidly. I learned a lot about leadership from some fantastic mentors, about how to challenge and ask for change in a way that made it more likely to happen. But the care I was seeing and was part of was not what I wanted to offer.

All I could see were long waiting lists, barriers to care, complex referral criteria that people had to meet when they just wanted help.

In 2018, I was working three long days in the NHS, then on other days I went randomly door to door in inner city Liverpool. I asked people if they needed any support, if there was anything I could help them with, using my mental health skills. It was as simple as that.

**Deprived areas**

I went to the places that some people do not want to go; the places with lots of labels, like where I am from – labels like impoverished or highly deprived, areas of low employment and poor health.

The pandemic was the best thing to happen to me as people wanted to talk. First Person Project started off with me chatting in someone's front yard or back garden, to eventually being allowed into the living room or the porch.

I was able to do things: write letters for people; social prescribing; advocacy; mentorship; advice on education; make a phone call; and help unblock routes into services – this could be health, housing or benefits for people.

There was no money changing hands, I was doing it for nothing; but it was doing things and getting something back. I was finding meaning, purpose.

In 2022, we got our first big contract, and now we have contracts from the NHS, from social housing providers, from councils and from national care companies. The remit of the contracts vary, but we provide mental health and community building support, education and consultancy.

First Person Project has five full-time members of staff, including me, and more than 60 volunteers. Everyone who works for us has experienced poor mental health and is happy to share their experiences.

I am the only nurse. While there is a time and a place for mental health professionals, so much can be done by people who are not professionals.

Anyone can access our service. Whether you have a mental health problem or not, come along, you do not have to be referred. People can walk in off the street into our mental health hub in Liverpool, they can contact us through social media or phone.

We offer counselling, sports and fitness, holistic health, spiritual health, meditation, breathwork (a calming strategy to help with stress), men’s and women’s groups, community building sessions and coaching. These are offered by other services, but we deliver them in a different way.

### Service design

We design the service around what people want. We are trying to build the mental health resilience of communities where individuals have often been told they have little value and little to offer, but we always start with what they can do.

In a mainstream mental health service, a typical question is: ‘What is your problem?’ Then staff tell you what you need to do to combat that – which could be medication, therapy, counselling, some sort of professional intervention, or it could be a referral somewhere else. There is definitely a time and place for that, and we use the NHS in a small number of cases for those in acute crisis.

Often we can avoid that point by working with people before it gets to a crisis.

We start a conversation about what gifts a person has, what assets they have. I am not forgetting about the things that the individual needs, or the things they don’t have. But we start with where someone is strong first, rather than what is wrong.

My personal experiences have formed how I work throughout my life, given me the respect for the people I work with. I am so proud to be a mental health nurse but, sadly, some of my experience showed me how I did not want to work. But it did give me the confidence to start First Person Project, which last year worked with 10,000 people. We are trusted by the communities we work with, and nothing is more important than this.

Find out more at [firstpersonprojectcic.co.uk](http://firstpersonprojectcic.co.uk)