18 September 2026

CONFERENCE PUTS SPOTLIGHT ON BRAIN INJURY IN SOCIAL WORK AND BEYOND

‘The Intersection between Marginalised Groups and People with Acquired Brain Injury’ was the theme for the annual Brain Injury Social Work Group (BISWG) conference, held at The Foundry, Victoria Hall in Sheffield.

More than 110 delegates gathered for the summit which saw a packed day of presentations where people with lived experience took centre stage alongside industry experts for a day of learning, connecting and sharing.

Dr Caroline Bald, Chair of BISWG, opened the conference, which saw delegates from as far afield as New York make the journey, and she welcomed everyone saying the day was a ‘call to action’ and recognised ‘there is a passion that keeps us going’.

Across presentations on homelessness, domestic abuse, veterans, refugees and migrant communities, alcohol-related brain injury and criminal justice, a common thread emerged, that is brain injury is often hidden, and its consequences can be misunderstood as difficult behaviour, non-engagement or individual choice. Speakers highlighted how people can become further marginalised when health, social care, housing and justice systems work in isolation or fail to recognise the impact of acquired brain injury.

The morning session was chaired by Professor Fiona Lecky, Clinical Professor in Emergency Medicine at the University of Sheffield.

The Chair of Sheffield’s Head Injury and Homelessness Research Group (HIHRG), Steph Grant, was the first speaker and he gave an update on the co-production between HIHRG and Changing Futures which is researching and supporting those living with an Acquired Brain Injury (ABI) and who are to be found in the most marginalised and disadvantaged groups in Sheffield, including homeless people. He explained how the hidden nature of brain injury can see certain behaviours misread and misunderstood. They are speaking with frontline services to help educate about ABI, particularly in disadvantaged groups.

Steffy Bechelet from Brainkind highlighted their ‘Too Many to Count’ research which found that one in two domestic abuse survivors in England and Wales may have sustained a brain injury. Brainkind has created a digital resource for professionals

working with survivors of domestic violence. Brainkind Adapt facilitates structured conversations about brain injury with a view to improving outcomes for survivors.

The issue of mental capacity was the focus for the presentation by Jess Harris, Senior Research Fellow at the Health & Social Care Workforce Research Unit, King's College London. The Mental Capacity Act 2005 applies to England and Wales and *'empowers us to make decisions for ourselves where possible and protect us if we can't*.
Jess addressed delegates and spoke of the first study to be carried out that examined attitudes to and assessment of mental capacity and how these impact support for people experiencing homelessness and multiple disadvantage. The findings evidenced gaps, disputes and challenges in how practitioners are thinking about and assessing mental capacity when people in this population are 'taking decisions' or 'refusing engagement' about care or support.

'Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI) and Veterans - When Families Become Experts', was the powerful and moving presentation given by Kate England. She is a carer, advocate, Military Brain Injury Campaigner and Military Advisor to the Concussion Legacy Foundation UK. She talked about her family of six including husband James and their four sons. James is a veteran and Kate talked about how his brain injury changed his, and their lives, and how families are often the first to recognise changes following a TBI.

Kate spoke passionately about the challenges of navigating health, social care, education, and veterans' systems. She said at times her family saw social workers when they were at crisis point and that was too late. She says families should not have to reach crisis point to get support. Her testimony gave social workers in the audience practical insights into supporting individuals and families living with the long-term consequences of brain injury.

The morning session ended with a joint presentation by Professor Andrew Bateman, Co-Lead of the NIHR Acquired Brain Injury and Social Care Network Incubator and Jo Hunt, a member of HIHRG, specialist Occupational Therapist and ABI survivor and carer. Their talk, 'Acquired Brain Injury among Refugee, Asylum Seeker and Migrant Communities' highlighted that brain injury among refugee, asylum seeker and migrant community is a relatively untold story. The Social Care Network Incubator brings together a cohort of researchers, clinicians, practitioners, people with lived experience, community partners and more.

A host of exhibitors attended the conference, sponsored by Irwin Mitchell Solicitors, and delegates had the opportunity to talk to representatives from Sheffield organisation,

Ben's Centre for Vulnerable People; Exemplar Health Care; Cygnet Health; Empowering U and the Brain Injury Group.

The conference attracted professionals from social work, probation, academia and community organisations. One attendee, Jordan Margolis, had travelled from the United States to attend during a four-day visit. He is a doctoral student in Social Welfare at the City University of New York. He said: "The presentations have all been fantastic and many deeply moving. I really wanted to attend as one of my oldest school friends has an ABI and I also have a social worker background. The conference has been very rewarding."

The afternoon session was opened by Professor Nathan Hughes, Professor of Adolescent Health and Justice at the University of Sheffield and Chair of the Acquired Brain Injury Justice Network. He introduced Craig Andrews who presented 'Understanding and Meeting the Support Needs of Unpaid ABI Carers of ABI Survivors. He shone a spotlight on the pressures faced by unpaid carers including financial hardship, poor mental health and social isolation.

Craig, a PhD Researcher at the Department of Sociological Studies, Politics and International Relations at the University of Sheffield, provided an update on the research being carried out to understand the support needs of ABI carers; evaluate current support provision and service gaps and develop evidence-based support and resources to address carers' needs.

Social Work and Alcohol Related Brain Injuries was the topic for a presentation by Jess Overton, Senior Social Work Practitioner and Kevin O'Keefe, Senior Social Work Practitioner at Brighton & Hove City Council.

Jess started by highlighting research which shows Social Workers don't know enough about brain injuries; Mental Capacity Act assessments are subjective; Executive Dysfunction is difficult to assess, and decision making is an emotional process.

Kevin then gave details of a case study of a gentleman he has been supporting for the past three years and the huge amount of work that has happened to support someone with an alcohol-related brain injury and the policy and legal issues encountered. His dedication and passion was obvious to the delegates who welcomed his insights and experience.

Dr Caroline Bald's presentation 'Criminal Justice and ABI Social Work: The Cost of Disconnection' explored the hidden costs created when ABI, adult social care and

criminal justice systems fail to connect. The estimated annual UK economic cost of ABI is £43 billion according to UKABIF's Right to Rehab figures. Caroline said 'while we can increasingly put a cost on ABI, care and justice individually, we are much less able to quantify what happens in the gaps between systems'. Addressing delegates, she said' every social worker is an ABI social worker, and every social worker is a criminal justice social worker'.

The conference drew to a close with a discussion panel of Kate Mellor, Hospital Liaison Service Co-Ordinator with lived experience; Basirah Oloko, Senior Social Worker at King's College Hospital NHS Foundation Trust and Clinical Director and Case Manager Patrick Boyd.

They all reflected on their own experiences and talked about the benefits and importance of the conference, being able to connect, share best practice and most of all hear from people with lived experience as they are the experts.

Dr Caroline Bald ended the day saying: "We have built, and continue to build, a great network with the shared aim of improving the lives of people with an ABI. Brain injury is a community and there is such kindness and positivity. That is always evident at our conference where the room is full of people wanting to make a difference."