

Fire and rescue services could help early detection of mental ill health in older adults

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Fire and rescue service staff could help health care providers reach more patients in need by including early detection of mental ill health in older adults as part of their routine Home Fire Safety Visits, researchers have

said.

Fire services up and down the country include routine Home Fire Safety Visits to potentially [vulnerable people](#) in their area, including [older adults](#), to ensure their properties are as safe as possible and to provide fire prevention advice.

And now a team of researchers, led by Professor Carolyn Chew-Graham OBE and Dr. Tom Kingstone (Keele University) in collaboration with Staffordshire Fire and Rescue, Midlands Partnership University NHS Foundation Trust, and colleagues at other academic institutes, have completed research to examine the potential use of Home Fire Safety Visits to include detection and sign-posting for anxiety and depression in older adults.

Under-diagnosed and under-treated

Mental ill-health, such as anxiety and depression, in older adults (aged 60 years and over) is often under-diagnosed and under-treated, and they are less likely to access [mental health services](#) due to perceived stigma and fear of being a burden.

Pressure on health care systems, particularly mental health services, make it difficult for health care professionals to identify conditions like anxiety and depression early, but visits like these provide a unique opportunity for fire and [rescue](#) service staff to support this early detection.

To investigate this proposal the research team conducted interviews with [fire](#) and rescue service staff, to understand more about their attitudes to incorporating mental health checks in their routine visits.

They found that staff were open to expanding these visits to include a

focus on mental health, provided they had sufficient training and support from partner agencies in primary and social care settings to accept referrals for service users presenting with symptoms of anxiety and/or depression. [Their findings](#) have been published in the *British Journal of General Practice*.

Improving well-being of communities

Lead author Dr. Tamsin Fisher said, "We are very grateful to have worked so closely with Staffordshire Fire and Rescue Service throughout the course of this research. We have spoken with a variety of personnel at the service who have been very honest and open about the research and potential to expand the services that they are providing.

"Other stakeholders, including older adults across Staffordshire, have been interviewed and a second paper is in progress to report these findings. By publishing this research, we are hoping to demonstrate that non-traditional providers of care, such as the Fire and Rescue Service could support the detection of anxiety and depression in older adults and help guide and encourage them to receive the care and/or support that they might need."

Ian Read, head of Prevent, Protect and Partnerships at Staffordshire Fire and Rescue Service, added, "Working with the research team at Keele University and partner organizations has been a positive experience. Through engagement with this research, we have built new relationships with our collaborators and used our involvement in research as a means to engage with other outside organizations.

"This research gives good evidence that interaction between the Fire and Rescue Service and the public during Home First Safety Visits can be used to further the objectives and priorities of the NHS, ultimately leading to better health outcomes for the individuals involved. At a time

of diminishing resources for Fire and Rescue Services, a more collective approach to the health agenda can only be beneficial to the well-being of communities and utilization of public funding.

"This research will also inform our approach to staff well-being going forward. We look forward to working with the team in the future to develop new ways to support members of the wider community."

More information: Tamsin Fisher et al, Can the fire and rescue service work with primary care to improve identification of mental health problems in older adults?, *BJGP Open* (2023). [DOI: 10.3399/BJGPO.2023.0059](https://doi.org/10.3399/BJGPO.2023.0059)

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