

Keep the health of the nation in mind

New Trustees at the Scottish Association for Mental Health will help shape the charity’s agenda, says **Ken Mann**

A MID positive change in recent public perceptions of mental illness, nearly 50 per cent of people still believe it unlikely a person would disclose current or historic mental illness experiences for fear of losing their job.

Number crunching from a national opinion poll offers up that unsurprising statistic; perhaps an obvious answer to a simple question based on common convention.

Yet it begs deeper consideration: when will we, as a nation, fully embrace greater understanding of a topic that should never be regarded as a social taboo?

It forms the backdrop to a range of issues – and other, more probing, data – that shape the agenda of the Scottish Association for Mental Health (SAMH).

An established charity, its overarching mission is to challenge stigma and inspire well-being through intervention services, fundraising and policy campaigning. Assuming you apply to

be one of three new Trustees, its cause will become yours: making a difference.

Chris Creegan, Chair of the SAMH Board, agrees moves to promote good mental health, public awareness and tolerance have improved dramatically. That applies in general society and in employment, though he insists wider appreciation of the causes and mitigation measures remains a significant work in progress.

Olympic velodrome hero Sir Chris Hoy is an official, and enthusiastic, ambassador for SAMH. He represents a powerful message, being conspicuously associated with sporting achievement and physical wellbeing. “We know there is a strong relationship between physical and mental health,” Creegan underlines.

“There is a greater openness about mental illness than ever before and that’s a big step forward,” he says. “The fact that some people have been willing to be open about their experiences has

given others the position to do so. But mental illness is still viewed differently from physical illness and this compromises healthy dialogue within the workplace and between employer and employee.

“It’s a problem for those who experience mental illness because it means they are still less likely to be open about it for fear of the repercussions. This in itself can exacerbate the illness. But there’s a significant incentive for employers to drive culture change, too, because we know that mentally healthy work places are more productive.

“Our 2011 research suggested the loss to Scotland’s economy as a result of mental ill health tops £3bn per year. At the same time 40 per cent of employers have stated that they wouldn’t employ someone with a mental health problem. Hardly surprising, then, that for those experiencing severe and enduring mental health problems the picture is stark.

“Almost 80 per cent of them are not in

work. So we need to do more to keep people well in the workplace and to ensure that those who are too unwell to work can participate in society and live dignified and fulfilled lives.

“SAMH is the lead managing partner of See Me, Scotland’s programme to tackle mental health stigma and discrimination. See Me involves an extensive programme of work with organisations and individuals to build a movement to end stigma and discrimination, working with people to change behaviour, uphold human rights and ensure that workplaces are mentally healthy places to be.

“We also deliver Individual Placement and Support, an evidence-based employability programme which has significantly more impressive results than any other in Scotland – and we’re calling for this approach to be funded and rolled out across Scotland.”

The Association’s footprint includes more than 650 employees providing direct support to some 4,000 people. A

growing supporter base of more than 10,000 people (volunteers and fundraisers) provides welcome additional traction in achieving its aims.

“Most of our workforce is involved in the delivery of more than 60 services across Scotland, providing mental health social care support, including employment services, homelessness and addictions, often working with those whose mental illness makes them some of the most vulnerable people in Scottish society,” Creegan adds.

Fiscal constraint in the latest era of local authority spending cuts naturally occupies minds at SAMH. As a funding stream, it is clearly crucial in the delivery of services but the Association’s workflow focus has also been rebalancing, tackling the cause end of the spectrum as much as the effect.

The Chair explains: “We are also increasingly focused on ‘upstream’ provision, with a view to prevention and early intervention.

“A very significant part of our mani-

festos for the 2016 Scottish Parliamentary elections is devoted to work in that area. The economic and social toll of mental ill health has been unacceptably and unsustainably high for too long, so this is vital.

“What we need is a long term approach; our manifesto is centred on a 10 year strategy. We will continue to press for significant investment in mental health.

“We’re in the third year of a corporate strategy. We’re making significant headway and later this year we’ll be looking at how we want that strategy to evolve over the next few years.

“Ensuring we are financially healthy will continue to be a focus for Trustees but our ambitions aren’t about financial growth for the sake of it. Rather it’s about making sure we have adequate levels of funding, targeted at the sort of programmes, services and activities which can contribute to real change. It’s about laying the foundations for change over a generation.”



INFLUENTIAL SUPPORT: SAMH Chair Chris Creegan is pictured with the signatures of Scotland’s political leaders who have pledged to support mental health issues.