



Insights from our Guardian Council:

with Member,
Dr. Ian McPherson



In this piece, Ian McPherson, Ph.D., Member of the Togetherall Guardian Council, reflects on the evolving role of social impact organizations in addressing mental health challenges. He discusses how profit and purpose can coexist, why digital platforms like Togetherall are uniquely positioned to complement overstretched clinical services, and the importance of governance structures that ensure social impact principles guide strategy.



Ian McPherson, Ph.D.
Member of Guardian Council

Drawing on decades of experience as a clinician, leader, and advocate, McPherson shares his perspective on the rise of digital mental health tools, the need for trust and safety in online support, and the opportunities and risks that come with innovation in this critical space.

The two questions the Guardian Council members help us to answer are:

1. Is Togetherall fulfilling our purpose?

Charter Principles:

- Access: continuously expanding our reach and it's available to all – no discrimination
- Impact: improve the mental well-being of members and deliver real benefit to commissioning orgs
- Sustainability: a financially self-reliant business model with the ability to attract investment to meet our ambitions

2. How can we continually improve to ensure our principles and actions align?



Q. What is a social impact organization and why do they exist? Can profit and social impact co-exist?

IM

Social impact organisations can take many different forms but often focus on projects and interventions that aim to increase access and quality of support and reduce health problems. In the UK, social impact organisations have historically been associated with the public and not-for-profit sectors rather than the for-profit sector.

As a result, there is often a mistaken belief that making a profit is somehow incompatible with aiming for social impact. The reality is that all organisations need to generate sufficient income to be sustainable. The question, therefore, should be not be about generating a profit but how the organisation uses that resource to enable to fulfil its core purposes.



Q. Why are social impact organizations in the mental health space relevant?

IM

In mental health there has been a strong tendency to concentrate resources on the clinical care of individuals and ignore the evidence that many mental health issues are significantly affected by social determinants related to people's life experiences. Over the last twenty years there has been a wealth of research emphasizing that there is a need to shift the focus of mental health from clinical interventions for individuals with significant problems to incorporate more social interventions that can be used to promote the well being of wider populations.

At the same time, the demand for mental health services has significantly increased, making a shift from clinical to population health difficult for many existing mental health organisations. Given this, bringing in new types of support may be more appropriately undertaken by social impact organisations such as Togetherall using alternative evidence based approaches, often working in partnership with existing services.



Q. What is the Guardian Council and why should people care about it?

IM

Having worked in mental health as a Clinician, Executive Director and Non-Executive Director/Chair, primarily in the public and not-for-profit sectors, I am aware that the majority of mental health organisations aspire to have social impact as part of their corporate social responsibilities. However, while this may feature in mission statements, it rarely receives much attention in the work of the Board who are primarily tasked with overseeing strategy together with operational and financial performance. Indeed at times meeting these responsibilities may be incompatible with delivering benefits for the communities they serve.

In this respect, Togetherall's decision to establish an independent Guardian Council whose members are highly experienced in different aspects of mental health to oversee its Charter Principles and ensure that the organisation's actions align with these principles has been a major development in governance in relation to social impact.



Why have you decided to join Togetherall effort to help safely scale digital mental health support across the world?

IM

I have a longstanding interest in digital mental health as a means of transforming support available, particularly to the very large numbers of people whose needs are not met by mainstream clinical services. I first encountered Togetherall (formerly Big White Wall), when I was on the judging panel for the Health Service Journal Awards and BWW received an award for innovation.

This, plus my involvement with other digital startups both in the UK and in other countries, helped me appreciate their potential in mental health, but also how challenging it could be for the added value of digital products to be accepted by existing commissioners and providers of mental health care. It also highlighted the need for more investment, evaluation and commercial experience in the teams promoting these developments. It was reassuring, therefore, when I was approached about joining the Guardian Council to discover that the new leadership team at Togetherall had put this in place.



Q. Why are mental health and wellbeing so important?



I have been involved in mental health services in both personal and professional capacities for over 60 years. This combination of experiences has given me a life-long interest in mental health which I pursued initially as a Clinical Psychologist and subsequently in other roles developing and transforming services at local, regional and national levels.

This has helped me appreciate that mental health and wellbeing have a major impact on many aspects of people's lives, including education, employment and physical health. This in turn can have an adverse impact on communities particularly in terms of providing support for the healthy development of children and families.



Q. What have been some of the more significant changes in this space over the past 10-20 years?



Over the last 20 years, campaigns to encourage people to acknowledge that they are experiencing mental health issues have led to greater openness about conditions that were previously highly stigmatized. However, this has also resulted in more people seeking help, putting demands on services that they have not been able to meet.

It has become evident that clinical models of service delivery, while broadly beneficial for those who manage to access them, are never going to be sufficient for the much wider population who experience significant mental distress.

This has led to moves towards offering support to people in non-clinical contexts such as in educational and employment settings. It has also encouraged the adoption of different models of working in which mental health professionals rather than trying to see everyone themselves, train and support people such as teachers or work colleagues already engaging with those who are experiencing distress. Increasingly, this has included people who have lived experience of dealing with similar issues who following appropriate training can offer peer support.



Q. In your opinion, what are some of the changes we should anticipate going forward?



The greater willingness to acknowledge experiencing mental health issues and to seek help presents significant challenges from both a societal and economic perspective, but also creates opportunities to try to meet these in innovative ways. In this context there has been a massive growth in the development of digital products aimed at addressing mental health and self-care, including mobile apps, web platforms, chatbots, SMS services, and teletherapy tools. The American Psychological Association estimates that as many as 20,000 such products exist, with global spending on this technology predicted to reach close to \$500 million in 2025.

While this is generally perceived to be positive for those previously unable or unwilling to access support from clinical services, it has to be acknowledged that many of these digital products have no evidence base to demonstrate their effectiveness and are not currently subject to the level of evaluation or regulation associated with clinical services.



Q. When considering the evolution of mental health support systems, what has been your experience in dealing with the progression of technology and support?



Having witnessed the evolution of digital mental health support systems, it is apparent that, while much of this has been led by clinicians and mental health practitioners, their enthusiasm for these developments has often been met with resistance from their professional colleagues. In part this could be explained by an unwillingness to accept that a digital product could produce similar results to interventions that often have required years of specialist training.

A further constraint is that commissioning bodies in the UK have been used to dealing with large National Health Service (NHS) mental health providers for a wide range of services for their communities and are not used to dealing with social enterprises for specific products. This has meant that the adoption of digital approaches has often been dependent on having local champions showing that incorporating digital products into local services can add value and make better use of limited clinical resources.

The adoption of AI while creating exciting possibilities has also raised some fundamental questions about what function digital products can and cannot serve in mental health. There have also been significant concerns expressed about whether digital products may reinforce negative feelings in young people about their mental health. In a recent high profile legal case, it has been alleged that an Open AI ChatGPT product did not flag up the risks when a 16-year-old shared on numerous occasions that he was planning suicide and that it actually provided responses which may have contributed to him taking his own life.



Q. How important is trust and safety within the mental health and well-being space?

IM

A sense of trust and safety are always important in interactions between people and services, but particularly so in those relating to mental health, as people seeking support are often doing so because they already feel vulnerable. Also, because having mental health problems can still be stigmatised and seen to reflect personal weakness, they may feel embarrassed about seeking support and concerned about being judged, as well as worried about confidentiality. Given this it is incumbent on all mental health services to consider how to create a sense of trust and psychological safety in the way in which they offer support.

Establishing and maintaining trust and safety presents particular challenges when support is being provided via a digital device. It is a crucial feature of Togetherall that there is a team of licensed/registered professionals who monitor, moderate, and safeguard the global peer support community around-the-clock and are able to respond to risk in real time.

In this respect it has been argued that there needs to be more focus on the "human in the loop" infrastructure, its critical role in mental health, and ask why it is not being used more widely in digitally delivered mental health support.



What is one piece of advice you would give to people within the mental health space?

IM

With so many potential opportunities in digital developments in mental health there is a risk of being distracted by what the technology can do and less focus on whether this is actually going to meet the needs of those we seek to help.

As such it is worth questioning whether we are developing services that could be used with confidence not just by those who are used to living in a digital environment but also those who may feel uncomfortable or even excluded by a digital offer, as they often may include those with the greatest needs.



What are your thoughts on the upcoming MHRA regulations from the UK?

IM

The Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency (MHRA) has recently issued guidance to help manufacturers meet UK medical devices regulations and ensure digital mental health technologies are effective, reliable and acceptably safe. In essence the MHRA is establishing a more structured regulatory framework for digital mental health technologies: defining what counts as a medical device, classifying risk, requiring clinical evidence, ensuring cybersecurity, and monitoring safety after-market launch. Further guidance is expected in this year.

Given the current absence of a national regulatory framework covering digital products in mental health, MHRA's initiative should be seen as welcome. However, determining what should be regarded as a medical device in digital mental health is not a straightforward task and carries the risk that the MHRA may impose standards on those they determine to be medical devices that are not being applied to other products that will continue to be available to the public. Given this my view is that we should approach the MHRA regulations positively but with a degree of caution.



Q. When considering the myriad of options within the digital mental health space, what makes Togetherall different?

IM

In an environment where there can often seem to be more hype than substance, Togetherall can demonstrate that it operates in line with its principles, the impact this has on people's lives and that it can deliver this consistently and with integrity within the resources available.



Q. What is the most exciting aspect of your involvement with Togetherall?

IM

The stimulating discussions with my Guardian Council colleagues and the Leadership Team, and their openness to different views and suggestions.



Established in 2007, Togetherall is available to more than 20 million individuals worldwide. Togetherall is the leading clinically managed, peer-to-peer, online support community where members can share what's on their minds, anonymously, safely, and in-the-moment, 24/7/365. Members can connect through shared lived experiences with a global network of peers, backed by the safeguarding of nearly 50 licensed and registered clinicians overseeing the community around-the-clock. These clinicians empower individuals in peer support and foster and maintain a safe, vibrant environment.

If you are interested in offering safe and scalable ways to support your people's mental health, [contact us](#) to learn more about Togetherall's online community.

