

The future workforce is facing a massive crisis unless child and young person mental health is made a priority by the NHS, according to the chief executive of a leading charity.

Sir Tony Hawkhead, from Action for Children, made the comments during his keynote speech at this year's annual Allan St John Holt Memorial Lecture, hosted by Royal Mail and RoSPA.

He told delegates that the children and young people he serves say mental health is the biggest issue they face in their lives today, but claimed that unless the NHS improves its mental health provision, the safety of society is at "serious risk".

He said: "One in five children aged five to 16 has a diagnosable mental health disorder. But only a quarter of those are getting help.

"Ninety per cent of NHS money is spent on cure. If we are throwing money at curing everything, are we not creating an inexhaustible beast because we aren't preventing anything?"

"There's a massive economic cost to our future by not addressing this."

He claimed that due to the NHS' own targets, two thirds of children and young people with a diagnosable issue will not receive treatment. While he welcomes the Government's desire for parity between mental and physical health, he believes much more needs to be done.

"There are very severe shortages in the (mental health) workforce, and years of underfunding have to be addressed," he said.

"The cost to society and the workforce will rise, so we need to see a sustained national focus. We need to see a range of joined-up services focused on prevention and early intervention."

Sir Tony was invited to speak as part of Royal Mail's charity partnership with Action for Children, and following the announcement of its own five-year mental health strategy, which will see, among other aims, a drive to inform and support its staff, promotion of increased awareness and better mental health, and a campaign to tackle stigma around mental health.

In closing the lecture, RoSPA chief executive Errol Taylor made his own case for an increased focus on prevention, and pointed to mental health issues as being a factor in workplace accidents, particularly those linked to stress-related sleep deprivation.

RoSPA's position paper on mental health states that good work is good for people and good for business. To read more about RoSPA's position on mental health at work, see www.rospace.com/occupational-safety/affiliated-groups/noshc/