

Joint Committee on Future of Mental Health Care

Wednesday 27th June 2018

Opening Statement

Kate O’Flaherty, Head of Health and Wellbeing, Department of Health

Good afternoon, and thank you for the opportunity to speak to this Committee about Healthy Ireland and its relevance to your work. I particularly note within your terms of reference the aim to achieve a long-term vision for the direction of mental health policy in Ireland, and it is in that context that Healthy Ireland - its vision, goals and its implementation - provides a useful and supportive frame of reference.

Healthy Ireland

Healthy Ireland is the national framework to improve the health and wellbeing of the population. Approved by Government in 2013, it was developed in response to a number of significant public health challenges, including projected increases in levels of chronic preventable disease and growing health inequalities. Healthy Ireland asserts that population health and wellbeing is critical for our social, economic and cultural progress, and our overall quality of life. It recognises the requirement for a ‘whole of Government’ approach to addressing the social and environmental determinants of health, as well as the requirement for an inclusive, intersectoral approach to improve population health and wellbeing by shifting emphasis more towards prevention, and for empowering individuals and communities to take more responsibility for their health and wellbeing.

The vision is that we can achieve a healthy Ireland “where everyone can enjoy physical and mental health and wellbeing to their full potential; where wellbeing is valued and supported at every level of society and is everyone’s responsibility.”

Defining Health and Wellbeing

The Healthy Ireland Framework uses World Health Organization definitions which regard ‘wellbeing’ as an integral part of overall health; that reflects a person’s quality of life, and the concept of positive mental health, i.e. in which a person can realise his or her own abilities, cope with the normal stresses of life, work productively and fruitfully, and be able to make a contribution to his or her community.

Progress on Implementation

Since 2013, there has been significant progress made in getting implementation underway. Much of our focus has been on building a more enabling environment for cross-sectoral and partnership collaboration. An ongoing focus on stakeholder engagement and communications is an important element of that.

Also since 2013, a suite of national policies, strategies and plans to address risk factors such as obesity, tobacco and physical inactivity have been developed and published, and the policy direction across a number of important areas such as cancer, maternity care, substance misuse and mental health has been informed and influenced by Healthy Ireland.

A range of cross-departmental initiatives have also been established to help underpin strategic partnership action, and to support local implementation of national policy. These include the establishment of a National Healthy Cities and Counties Network in affiliation with the World Health Organization, the development of first national Healthy Workplaces Framework, and the commencement of a Healthy Campus initiative with the higher education sector. These initiatives will form an important part of the future architecture and environment for implementation of health and wellbeing policies, including those aimed at supporting and promoting mental health and wellbeing.

Mental Health and Wellbeing Promotion

In terms of more specific work under Healthy Ireland to promote mental health and wellbeing, these include some work related to actions in the national strategy to reduce suicide, Connecting for Life. These are the development of a national mental health and wellbeing promotion plan, which is at an early scoping stage, and a related action around the promotion of physical activity as a protective factor for mental health through the National Physical Activity Plan.

The implementation of the National Physical Activity Plan is jointly overseen by the Department of Health and the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport. It aims to promote increased physical activity levels across the population, as well as promote enhanced understanding of the many and life-long benefits of an active lifestyle, which include significant benefits for mental health and wellbeing.

In 2017, Healthy Ireland was identified by Government as one of the priority areas for cross-government communications and citizen engagement, and a new communications campaign has been running this year. The campaign aims to encourage and support behaviour change across three key themes of healthy eating, physical activity and mental wellbeing, and a summer phase of the campaign #FeelGoodTogether is currently underway with a range of partner organisations.

Conclusion

I will conclude by re-iterating that the cross-Government, wide-ranging and partnership working to implement Healthy Ireland will greatly contribute to the supportive and enabling environment and culture required to achieve the aims of this Committee's work.

The Healthy Ireland Programme looks forward to contributing to the future work arising from your considerations and recommendations to help improve the mental health and wellbeing of people living in Ireland.