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5th May 2017

Bridget Doody,  
Clerk to the Seanad Public Consultation Committee,  
Seanad Office,  
Leinster House,  
Kildare Street,  
Dublin 2.

Dear Ms. Doody,

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission to this valuable public consultation on the very important issue of children and young people's mental health.

## EXPERIENCE

I lead the small team behind SpunOut.ie, Ireland's youth information website by young people, for young people. Our aim is to empower young people with the information they need to navigate life's challenges and lead active, happy, healthy lives. We have worked hard over the last decade to inform young people about mental health and have run many campaigns to destigmatise issues like depression, anxiety, self-harm and suicide. We have worked to educate young people about the protective factors for good mental health and risk factors to mental health. We are also currently working with the HSE to develop information resources to better communicate about the Child & Adolescent Mental Health Service to children, young people, their families and GPs.

I am also President of the National Youth Council of Ireland and a member of the Government's national taskforce on youth mental health.

## OBSERVATIONS

Owing to a welcome reduction in stigma and a significant increase in public awareness, more young people than ever before are reaching out to talk about problems with their mental health.

Too often however, young people who do reach out don't get the immediate care they need to be able to cope with their problems before they get worse.

In the last five years, the issue of mental health has been consistently prioritised by young people as the top issue preventing them from flourishing and being the happy and healthy children and young adults we want them to be.

Parents across Ireland are forced to watch their children suffer without the support they need to recover and our communities have lost too many young people to suicide.

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Community Creations Company Limited by Guarantee trading as SpunOut.ie

Companies Registration Office Number: 384783 | CHY (Revenue) Number: 16212 | Registered Charity Number: 20057923

Board of Directors: Chris Donoghue (Chairperson), Celine Doyle (Vice Chairperson), Catherine Falvey (Secretary), Niamh O'Brien (Treasurer), Kirsten Connolly, Anita Ghafoor-Butt, Amy McArdle, Pedro Serrano, Aine O'Connell, Eoin Corbett, Donal Harkin.

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Despite asking for our help, and despite universal support for improving the situation, progress is painfully slow. Mental health is incredibly complex and the list of issues affecting the mental health of young people in Ireland is long.

Our ability to address the many flaws in our current mental health system will determine our success in creating a supportive environment that protects young people from preventable harm.

## EARLY INTERVENTION

The evidence tells us 75% of all serious mental health difficulties first emerge between the ages of 15 and 25, and that 4 in every 10 young people in Ireland have reported their life is not worth living at some point. We also know Ireland has the fourth highest suicide rate among 15 to 24 year olds in the EU.

Therefore we should understand that in order to prevent difficulties emerging or getting worse, we have to act early and fast. We have to do more to support good infant mental health and we have to equip children with the mental health literacy, coping strategies, optimism, self esteem and resilience as early in their lives as possible.

We know that children and young people equipped with these skills manage to navigate life's major transitions, like moving to secondary school or college, in ways that are less likely to negatively impact their mental health.

## RISK FACTORS

The list of things that hurt the mental health of young people is considerable, and growing. Perennial challenges like alcohol abuse, drug abuse and bullying have been joined by growing levels of sexual violence, body image pressures, an increasing prevalence of problem gambling and growing economic inequality.

Systemic economic inequality which has been building in Ireland over the last decade is creating an environment that doesn't support young people when they need it most. The recession has affected their economic power and they experience reduced access to secure employment, income support and housing. Increasingly, young people can face years of temporary, low-paid employment after college, with poor conditions and pay.

All of this matters, not just because of the injustice of the situation, but also because one of the most important protective factors for your mental health is economic security.

Then there are groups of young people for whom society further prevents their ability to flourish by means of discrimination and prejudice. LGBT young people in Ireland are three times more likely to attempt suicide, while the suicide rate within the Traveller Community is six times higher than the general population.

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Today in Ireland, around 10% of the young adults admitted to psychiatric units are homeless. Direct provision has been described as 'toxic' to the mental health of those forced to live there by mental health clinicians.

The simple fact is too many of our young people are needlessly suffering when instead we should be reversing inequality and providing people with the support they need to find a path to recovery.

## IMPROVEMENTS

As a result of the growing public demand to improve our response to the mental health needs of young people, the system is changing, albeit slowly and starting from a low base.

The Department of Education are introducing a new wellbeing curriculum this autumn which will hopefully be comprehensively and enthusiastically implemented by schools, and in doing so, equip our children and young people with the skills needed to be happy and healthy.

The Mental Health Division in the HSE has a number of service improvement projects in train, including the appointment of new clinical leads for self-harm and dual diagnosis, and significant efforts to reform the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS). It is also currently implementing Connecting for Life, a new strategy to reduce suicide and self-harm. It is clear though that there are significant challenges in ensuring CAMHS teams are adhering to the new Standard Operating Procedure (SOP) and it is welcome a review of the SOP is currently under way.

From recent analysis it is clear one of the biggest challenges facing the mental health system is a gaping hole in the national availability of free and accessible early intervention and primary care psychotherapeutic services for young people. Demand for these types of service currently massively outstrips supply and is placing pressure on our acute system, including CAMHS.

Three new brief intervention Jigsaw centres for youth mental health will open in Dublin, Cork and Limerick this year, bringing the total to 13. A plan to recruit 100 assistant psychologists to staff primary care psychology services around the country is also currently awaiting approval from the Department of Public Expenditure & Reform.

All of these are welcome developments, but for those relying on these improvements to make a difference to their lives, you can understand their impatience and frustration at the pace at which change is happening.

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There is a significant issue facing CAMHS and mental health services generally and that is not being able to recruit people to work in our services. CAMHS is operating at 50% of the staff complement prescribed for in Vision for Change and we know the HSE has had significant difficulties in hiring staff to new posts in the last three years. This is especially pronounced in rural areas. There are a number of reasons for this that need to be addressed. Firstly, potential candidates do not want to work in a broken and chaotic system. Confidence must be restored to staff by setting out a bold and optimistic vision for reforming our mental health services so that they are a place where staff are not placed under stress or at risk. Secondly, the pay and conditions require improvement to attract candidates from abroad and to attract people back into the system.

## CONCLUSION

Ultimately, Government needs to invest significantly more money in the system in order for it to provide 24/7 access to the appropriate care and therapy young people need to cope with their complex needs. This investment must be matched with a different way of doing things. Too many of our services and professionals are operating in silos. This mindset must be challenged and Government must show leadership in getting departments to work together in a collaborative spirit. Progress is being made, but if we're serious about making a difference we need to work harder.

Best Wishes,

Ian Power

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

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