



**Opening statement to the Oireachtas Sub-Committee on Mental Health
26/11/2020**

Good morning.

Ba mhaith liom buíochas a ghlacadh leis an gCathaoirleach agus le baill an Choiste as an gcuireadh teacht in bhur láthair inniu. (I'd like to thank the Chairperson, and the members of the Sub-Committee for inviting Mental Health Reform to appear before you today.)

Mental Health Reform is Ireland's national coalition on mental health. With over 75 member organisations, we provide a platform for our members to work together to drive progressive reform of mental health services and supports in Ireland.

I would like to start off by saying that Mental Health Reform warmly welcomes the establishment of this Sub-Committee on mental health, which we feel will play a critical role in examining mental health at this important historical moment. 2020 has been a year of unprecedented challenges, both for our citizens and for our mental health system. It has also been a year of opportunity, with the launch of an ambitious new mental health policy, *Sharing the Vision*. The establishment of this Sub-Committee recognises the urgent need for a focus on the new context facing our mental health system and our society more broadly. We see this Sub-Committee as a critical instrument through which the Oireachtas and the Government will be accurately informed to make the right leadership decisions regarding mental health services.

Mental Health lens missing from Government COVID-19 response

COVID-19 is a mental health emergency as well as a physical health one¹. Not alone does the threat of contracting and spreading this virus instil fear and anxiety across our population, but the public health restrictions and our broader approach to the virus have also had a profound impact on people, increasing social isolation and loneliness, and undermining the social and cultural supports that we have come to rely on. This profound sense of loss and dislocation represents a societal trauma that will have a severe cost that will be felt in the weeks, months and years ahead^{2,3}.

In Ireland, we are already starting to see an indication of the impact of the pandemic on people's mental health. In a survey of our member organisations in April of this year, 76% of respondents said they had to withdraw mental health services they usually provide due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This is despite a significant increase in demand – our members Jigsaw, for example, have reported a 50% increase in demand for their services. In terms of statutory services, the HSE has said recently that traffic to its mental health website was up 490%, with more than 800,000 visits between March and July.

Inadequate mental health services straining under pandemic pressure

¹ <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7471570/>

² <https://unsdg.un.org/sites/default/files/2020-05/UN-Policy-Brief-COVID-19-and-mental-health.pdf>

³ <https://www.who.int/news/item/05-10-2020-covid-19-disrupting-mental-health-services-in-most-countries-who-survey>

While the mental health need grows, more and more people are coming forward for support. However, what is very clear is that our mental health system is not adequately prepared to cope with any significant increase in demand. In fact, our mental health system was struggling to cope with demand long before the pandemic hit. For example, the number of referrals to child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS) increased by over 40% from approx. 12,800 in 2011 to 18,100 in 2019. Despite this, nationally, CAMHS services are at less than 60% of recommended staffing levels. There are more than 2,000 children currently waiting for their first CAMHS appointment. The challenges that CAMHS face today are just one example of a system that has not received the level of prioritisation, resources and political leadership needed to deliver for our citizens.

An opportunity to drive change

Mental Health Reform believes there are very clear actions that will help achieve the progressive mental health system that our country deserves and should aspire to⁴. These can be achieved through investment in and full implementation of our new national mental health policy *Sharing the Vision*. However, three overarching areas must be addressed.

- i. **Firstly, we must *substantially increase investment in our mental health services and move to gain greater accountability and transparency over the mental health budget.***

Ireland's national health budget currently stands at over €1Billion. The WHO recommends that mental health spending should be 12% of overall healthcare budget, Sláintecare recommends 10%. However in 2020, Ireland's mental health budget was approximately 6% of the overall health budget.

While more investment is needed, we also need to make wise investment. The development of an appropriate, electronic mental health information system based on key performance indicators will assist in driving transparency and accountability in the development and delivery of mental health services. It is not acceptable that more than 14 years after publication of *A Vision for Change* there is no national information system to accurately account for performance and mental health expenditure.

- ii. **Secondly, we need to *re-establish a dedicated lead for mental health within the HSE that reports directly to the CEO.***

Mental Health Reform believes that the decision to disband the HSE's National Office for Mental Health along with the role of the National Director for Mental Health was a significant backwards step in driving oversight and accountability for expenditure and the development of services across the mental health system. While we understand the need for reform of HSE structures and governance, we know that to drive forward changes in mental health, which are decades behind where they need to be, a role of this type is essential.

- iii. **Finally, we believe that *greater political focus and scrutiny on mental health in Ireland is critical.***

⁴ <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/2e46f-sharing-the-vision-a-mental-health-policy-for-everyone/>



While this sub-committee represents a significant step forward in that area, we are eager to see mental health become a more prominent feature across all relevant committees and debates in the houses of the Oireachtas. This means holding the Minister of State for Mental Health & Older Persons and Minister for Health to account at a granular level on both our mental health budget and the delivery and implementation of national policy.

Thank you for your time; myself and my colleague look forward to answering your questions.