



Joint Oireachtas Subcommittee on Mental Health

Opening Statement - Ian Power, CEO, SpunOut.ie

Covid and Youth Mental Health

Thank you for the opportunity to present to the Subcommittee today. SpunOut.ie is Ireland's youth information website run by young people, for young people. Around 180,000 young people visit the site each month looking for information about everything from mental health to sexual health, employment and education.

In June 2020, we launched the free crisis support service '50808', giving us quite an insight into the enormous strain on young people's mental health during the pandemic. The 50808 is targeted to young people aged 16-34 but is open to all ages.

We had 33,000 support conversations last year on everything from anxiety and depression to self-harm and suicide. About one in every five texters told us they had thoughts of suicide. Last year we had to engage the National Ambulance Service on behalf of over 400 people in a place of real and active danger.

Each of us has had our own personal experience of the pandemic, but while it has been a shared struggle it has been those with fewer resources and weaker support structures that have borne the heaviest burden, the pandemic only highlights what has always been the case.

Meeting people's basic needs for security, whether in housing, healthcare, income or education is the best long-term protective factor for their mental wellbeing. There can be no effective mental health strategy that fails to grapple with the need to protect children from trauma in their early lives; to promote a loving and supportive home environment; to ensure access to safe and positive learning; to activities, sports, and friendships; and to a childhood where adversity is the exception rather than the norm.

We cannot forget this is the second time in a decade that young people have been transformatively impacted by global circumstances far outside their control. Many of today's young people were children when their parents lost their jobs in the great financial crisis. Today, they are facing into their own difficulties of a youth unemployment rate that far outstrips the very worst days of the early 2010s. Insecurity building on insecurity passing between generations as crisis succeeds crisis is a surefire recipe for mental health disaster.

We must invest in the mental health supports young people are going to need. But we must also take care of the basics of housing security for our younger citizens of access to good, quality jobs on which a life can be built and of freedom from discrimination based on

ethnicity, sexuality or gender identity. In tackling these issues, there can be no substitute for authentic, driven leadership from Government and from the Oireachtas.

The root causes of mental health difficulties are too wide and too deep to be seen as the responsibility of one Department alone. Every aspect of our political system has a role to play in this - In housing, health, justice, education, youth affairs, and in the allocation of public resources.

Coming out of Covid gives us all a chance to do things differently and to bring new focus to areas where progress has been allowed to stall. I'm thinking, for instance, of the excellent Pathfinder proposal that would redefine, at little cost, our entire administration of youth mental health policy.

This is a blueprint for a whole-of-Government approach and that is ready to go now. But, we have now seen more than three years of inexplicable, inexcusable delay as the report gathers dust with the Department of Public Expenditure. We need Pathfinder just as we need a National Lead for Youth Mental Health and a regional lead in each Community Healthcare Organisation to coordinate, collaborate and target our mental health resources as effectively and efficiently as possible.

We also need a National Director for Mental Health in the HSE to bring the system together in pursuit of its essential objectives. And, more than ever, we need to expand the number of training places in key mental health professions.

There is broad agreement within the system on the basics of what needs to happen. What is missing is the drive and the will to bring it all together and to tie the work of mental health services into a broader societal plan to address the insecurities at the heart of the crises we have outlined today.

I would therefore urge the Committee not to see its role in isolation to adopt a broad, societal approach to the interconnected issues of mental health inequality, and insecurity to support the National Youth Council's call for a Youth Employment Taskforce, for instance as well as other measures that treat the causes of mental health crisis as well as those that address its symptoms.

Ultimately, young people have never been more reliant on us to deliver in the area of mental health what we require is the investment, the leadership, the structures of accountability and above all the big picture vision to ensure their needs are met.