

## **Sub-Committee on Mental Health (Joint Committee on Health)**

-Thursday 13<sup>th</sup> May 2021-

### **Opening Statement: Dominic Layden, Chief Executive at Aware**

Good morning, and thank you for the invitation to speak to this sub-committee in relation to Aware's role within Irish society and the organisation's key concerns, particularly within the context of Covid-19.

#### **Overview of Aware:**

Aware was originally established over 36 years ago to provide support and understanding to individuals experiencing depression and bipolar disorder, along with their loved ones. Importantly, the organisation also aimed to inform and educate the public on the nature of depression and bipolar disorder in order to reduce stigma and improve understanding for those living with a mental illness.

Over the years, Aware has evolved into a national organisation with a wide range of support, education and information services. Today, Aware's free services include Support & Self Care Groups nationwide and a Support Line and Support Mail service, both of which operate 365 days a year. Aware also delivers a range of evidence-based educational programmes designed to empower adults experiencing depression or anxiety with the knowledge and skills to build resilience and protect their mental health. Additionally, Aware offers a psycho-educational programme designed specifically for those supporting a loved one experiencing depression or bipolar disorder.

Aware remains a volunteer led organisation with over 500 Aware recruited and trained volunteers delivering our support services nationwide.

*In 2020, Aware responded to almost 35,000 people seeking support for their mental health, almost 12,000 adults and young people participated in our education programmes and over 1 million accessed our website for information.*

#### **Impact of Covid-19:**

Aware has experienced similar financial and operational challenges as the majority of organisations over the past year. For Aware, this was within the context of a dramatic and immediate increase in demand for our services, highlighting the impact of the pandemic on the general public and those with pre-existing mental health issues. Aware recorded an overall increase of 36% in calls to our Support Line in 2020, with peaks of over 80% in April, May and July. Our volunteers observed higher numbers of very distressed callers and increased engagement with service users sharing more intimate details than we have experienced before.

Like everyone else, we had to modify our services for virtual delivery to ensure continuity of service for the many people who depend on us. While technology presented a challenge for both our volunteers and service users at the beginning, it was remarkable how quickly everyone adjusted. We have also observed the benefits of these adapted offerings, specifically around improving the accessibility of our services both for volunteers and service users. We have been particularly interested to see the uptake of our Zoom and phone-in Support & Self Care Groups which have allowed us to reach new audiences who may not have attended in-person groups.

### **Key concerns of the organisation within the context of Covid-19:**

Adversity is a well-established risk factor for short and long-term mental health problems. Research on past epidemics has highlighted the negative impact of outbreaks of infectious diseases on people's mental health, with multiple studies suggesting a three-fold increase in general mental health difficulties (Source: Psychological Society of Ireland, 2020). We need to be prepared and adequately resourced for a sustained surge in demand for mental health services over the coming years.

It has been incredibly positive to see increased focus on educating and supporting the general public with their mental health over the past year. However, this approach is weighted towards protecting and promoting good mental health. It has not addressed the needs of people with existing and enduring mental illnesses like depression and bipolar disorder.

There is clear evidence that isolation, loneliness and lack of social connectedness are considerable risk factors for mental illness. Over the past year, Aware's service users have expressed legitimate concerns that the safety measures employed to protect our physical health are having a negative impact on their mental health, exacerbating pre-existing mental health issues, triggering depressive episodes and reducing their ability to access healthcare services, social and community supports which they previously depended on. Reinforcing these concerns, a 2020 survey of consultant psychiatrists reported an increase in the number of emergency referrals, relapses and increased complexity in presentation (Source: College of Psychiatrists of Ireland). It's clear that the impact of these safety measures is not equal across society and we believe that individuals living with depression and bipolar disorder have been disproportionately affected. We are gravely concerned that an already vulnerable cohort is now at risk of significant and long-term distress with very few measures in place to support these groups.

Additionally, loneliness among young people and related impacts are also a concern following substantial disruption to their social and educational lives (Source: Psychological Society of Ireland, 2020). It's important that we understand the potential outcomes and long-term impacts on the mental health and wellbeing of this generation.

### **Conclusion:**

In conclusion, as we emerge from the pandemic, it's crucial that we also prioritise the mental health needs of those living with mental illnesses like enduring depression and bipolar disorder. We need to educate the public on the symptoms and empower people to reach out for support, offering clear pathways of care and timely access to mental health services. This will also serve to increase awareness and empathy amongst the general public, therefore reducing stigma for those living with depression and bipolar disorder.

### **Recommendations:**

1. Along with promoting positive mental health to the general public, we would strongly encourage the Department of Health to be more targeted in its approach to mental health and allocate resources to the most vulnerable in our society, specifically those with enduring depression or bipolar disorder.
2. Aware considers the reinstatement of a National Director for Mental Health as a matter of vital importance to ensure a centralised approach to mental health as we deal with the

impacts of Covid-19 and with clear responsibility for implementing the 'Sharing the Vision' strategy.

3. The government needs to prioritise increasing the mental health budget. While additional funding has been allocated to mental health services over the last number of years, it still falls far short of the recommended 10% of the overall health budget as recommended by Slaintecare. In fact, percentage wise, it has fallen to 5.2% in 2021 despite the expected surge in demand for mental health services post pandemic.

Thank you for your time.



Dominic Layden

**Chief Executive Officer**

**Aware**

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## **Appendix**

### **Our Impact: Strategic Period 2018-2020**

#### **Support Services**

- Support Line: Answered over 62,000 calls for support
- Support Mail: Replied to 7,727 emails
- Support & Self Care Groups: 27 groups offered nationwide (replaced by Zoom and phone in options during Covid-19 restrictions)

#### **Education Services**

- Life Skills Online Programme: Supported 6,201 participants
- Life Skills Group Programme: Delivered 296 programmes to 6,416 adults
- Relatives & Friends Programme: Delivered 67 programmes nationwide
- Life Skills for Schools: Delivered 454 programmes in schools nationwide

\*Currently developing a new educational programme for individuals with a diagnosis of bipolar disorder, due to pilot in late 2021.

#### **Information Services**

- 1m unique website visitors each year
- 100,000+ social media followers
- Monthly Aware Lecture Series recordings receive 900,000+ views per year (featuring experts on a range of mental health topics)
- High engagement with video series 'Resilience Series' and '#WeAreAware' recording over 3m views

## About Aware

Aware is the national organisation providing support, education and information services for those impacted by depression, bipolar disorder and other mood related conditions. Founded in 1985 the organisation developed in response to the clear need for information, understanding and support, both for individuals with a diagnosis of depression or bipolar disorder as well as family members supporting a loved one. For more information, please visit [www.aware.ie](http://www.aware.ie)

## Support

**Support & Self Care Groups** | Locations nationwide \*currently operating via Zoom and phone in

**Support Line** | Freephone 1800 80 48 48 | 365 days a year | 10am-10pm

**Support Mail** | [supportmail@aware.ie](mailto:supportmail@aware.ie) | Answered within 24hrs

**Education Programmes** \*currently operating via Zoom

**Life Skills Programme** | Group 6 week programme | Online 8 week programme

**Relatives & Friends Programme** | Group 4 week programme

**Life Skills for Schools Programme** | 4 week programme | Senior cycle students

**Wellness@Work Programme** | Mental health education and training programmes

## Information

**Aware Website** | [Aware.ie](http://Aware.ie)

**Aware Lectures & Webinar Series** | Monthly | Watch back at [aware.ie](http://aware.ie)

\*Our Lecture Series has been replaced by the Aware Webinar Series since January 2021. We currently record up to 1,300 registrations per session with minimal promotion.

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