

# DÁIL ÉIREANN

## AN FOCHOISTE UM MEABHAIRSHLÁINTE

### JOINT SUB-COMMITTEE ON MENTAL HEALTH

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*Déardaoin, 6 Bealtaine 2021*

*Thursday, 6 May 2021*

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Tháinig an Comhchoiste le chéile ag 9.30 a.m.

The Joint Committee met at 9.30 a.m.

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Comhaltaí a bhí i láthair / Members present:

| Teachtaí Dála / Deputies | Seanadóirí / Senators |
|--------------------------|-----------------------|
| Gino Kenny,              | Martin Conway,        |
| John Lahart,             | Aisling Dolan,        |
| Mark Ward.               | Annie Hoey.           |

Seanadóir / Senator Frances Black sa Chathaoir / in the Chair.

## **Business of Sub-Committee**

**Chairman:** As we have a quorum, we will commence the meeting in public session. Apologies have been received from Deputy Hourigan. We need to agree the draft minutes of the meeting of 17 December 2020, which was our last meeting in public session since the level 5 lockdown. They were circulated earlier on. Can I take it that these are agreed and that there are no matters arising? Agreed.

I note the upcoming Darkness Into Light event, which is taking place this Saturday, 8 May. The event is an opportunity for people to show their support for those who have been impacted by suicide and to help raise awareness of the importance of mental health services. The prevention of suicide and self-harm is an important aspect of the sub-committee's work and we look forward to engaging with a number of groups working in this area over the coming months. Pieta House will probably appear before us next week. Does anyone wish to comment on that before we move on?

**Senator Martin Conway:** Participation in Darkness Into Light will be strange again this year - walking on our own.

**Chairman:** I know. They did really well last year.

## **Youth Mental Health: Discussion**

**Chairman:** I welcome our witnesses to the meeting this morning. They will be presenting virtually to discuss youth mental health and the challenges arising out of the Covid-19 pandemic. From the National Youth Council of Ireland, I welcome Ms Rachael Treanor, manager of the national youth health programme, and Ms Louise Monaghan from the national youth health programme. From *Spunout.ie*, which is Ireland's youth information website, I welcome Mr. Ian Power, CEO, and Mr. Jack Eustace, governance and policy officer.

Before we hear the opening statements, I must point out that there is uncertainty as to whether parliamentary privilege will apply to the witnesses' evidence as it is given from a location outside the parliamentary precinct of Leinster House. Therefore, if they are directed by me to cease giving evidence on a particular matter, they must respect that direction. I call on Ms Treanor to make her remarks.

**Ms Rachael Treanor:** On behalf of the National Youth Council of Ireland and the national youth health programme, NYHP, I thank the committee for the invitation to speak today on the topic of youth mental health and the challenges Covid-19 has presented. The National Youth Council of Ireland is the representative body for 51 national voluntary youth work organisations working with young people in every community in the country. We represent and support the interests of our member organisations and use our collective experience to act on issues that impact on young people.

The NYHP is a partnership between the National Youth Council of Ireland, the HSE and the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth with a vision for Ireland to be a country where all young people can experience positive health and well-being.

Since the arrival of Covid-19 onto the island of Ireland, the NYHP has worked to collate and

support the identified mental health needs of the youth work sector, including young people, staff and volunteers. As a result, new initiatives have been developed during this time that not only provide support in the current climate but will continue to address emerging needs when restrictions begin to ease. I will outline this work that the NYHP have carried out in the face of Covid-19, the emerging trends identified by youth workers and needs arising for the youth work sector.

How did the NYHP support the youth work sector during Covid-19? The Mind Out 2.0 is an evidence-based mental health promotion resource with an accompanying training programme that is facilitated by the NYHP. This resource and training aims to promote the social and emotional well-being of young people. The programme addresses the core competencies required for social and emotional well-being in young people, including self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship management and decision-making skills. The NYHP quickly adapted this training and moved to delivering online training to approximately 100 people since the beginning of the pandemic.

A gap was identified within the sector regarding the need to support youth workers and volunteers' mental health and well-being. As a result, Building Blocks for Wellbeing was developed. In addition, support sessions entitled How is the YOU doing in Youth Work were provided and an additional training programme entitled Caring for the Caregiver: A Mindfulness Programme for Compassionate Self Care was rolled out. Building Blocks for Wellbeing was designed in partnership with The Sanctuary to provide those working on the front line, especially those providing support to young people, with invaluable tools to help maintain and support mental well-being. How is the YOU doing in Youth Work is a supportive online space that offers participants the opportunity to stop for a moment and take stock - to give time to reflect on the challenges they were and are facing, explore some of the positives they have encountered and identify what is needed in terms of ongoing support. To date, over 14 sessions have been facilitated supporting over 140 youth workers and volunteers. Caring for the Caregiver afforded youth workers an opportunity to experience mindfulness and compassion practices with a focus on exploring empathy and open, inclusive and non-judgmental communication; identifying stress and anxiety within both their personal and professional life; and supporting the youth workers and those working with young people in this challenging times we all face

In partnership with Jigsaw and the National University of Ireland, Galway, the NYHP has developed a specialist certificate in youth mental health promotion. This level 7 certificate will commence in September 2021 and run throughout the academic year of 2021 to 2022 and aims to build the capacity of youth workers and staff from Jigsaw to respond to the mental health needs of young people.

What are the young people's needs identified by youth workers? In 2020, the National Youth Council of Ireland in 2020 commissioned a review of the youth work sector response to the Covid-19 pandemic. While the focus of this study was on the youth sector's response to Covid-19, the research also highlighted how the pandemic has impacted negatively on young people. There is a high level of concern over the negative impact on young people's mental health such as increased anxiety, social isolation and health anxiety. Young people are worried about the uncertainty around exams and results and the impact this will have on their future through missing the emotional support schools provide. There was concern around the conditions for reopening schools. Young people already experiencing poverty became even more deprived. Young people whose families relied on jobs in the retail and hospitality sector were also negatively impacted. On the personal and social impact, a lack of social contact alongside

the lack of structure and routine has had a negative impact on young people both physically and emotionally.

In addition, through the roll-out of the MindOut trainings from last year and into quarter 1 of 2021, the issues and concerns identified by youth workers in relation to young people's mental health were also collected. The issues and concerns identified include long waiting lists for support services for young people's mental health, such as counselling and therapeutic services; loneliness due to restrictions; a loss of social skills, for example, communication and decision-making skills; an increase in young people self-diagnosing mental health conditions; the negative impact of social media, in some cases highlighting loneliness and a sense of disconnection; low self-esteem and confidence, which was impacted greatly with restrictions; addiction and an increased engagement with online gaming and social media; disturbed sleep patterns as for some young people staying up at night was the only chance they had to get space on their own; struggling to engage or re-engage with the outside world as restrictions ebbed and flowed; inability to cope with everyday stresses due to decreased resilience; second-hand trauma which was influenced by Covid-19; dealing with bereavement and the impact of restrictions on the usual grieving process and accompanying supports; self-harm and suicidal ideation; an awareness of stresses within the family due to the strains on relationships, concerns about money and employment, lack of space and general frustrations; a lack of access to the usual supports, including grandparents, other extended family members, groups of friends, teachers, youth workers, etc.; concerns about the future in terms of education and employment as young people who may leave school after completing their junior cycle without a formal junior certificate, which they rely on for future opportunities; and concern about falling behind in their education and not being able to catch up.

The young voices programmes, which is facilitated by NYCI, captured young people's reflections on their experience of Covid-19. Five themes emerged and were identified. These included the fact that young people are significantly impacted by Covid-19, with loss of connection, isolation, disrupted relationships, education and opportunities. Youth work helped mitigate that impact by holding connections, "being there", maintaining relationships and maintaining hope for young people. Young people demonstrated resilience and drew on their own sense of self-efficacy to sustain themselves throughout the pandemic. The experience, while sharing similar characteristics with that of their peers, was different for individual young people and there is need for tailored responses and significant investment in youth work as we prepare again to emerge from significant restrictions.

How did the youth sector respond to Covid-19 and the challenges facing youth workers and volunteers? Youth organisations responded rapidly and creatively within the varying levels of restrictions throughout the period of the ongoing pandemic. NYCI conducted a review with its members to capture how the sector has responded. In many cases this involved moving to online spaces to provide services. This, however, came with challenges; one of the main ones cited was a lack of adequate digital infrastructure. Some projects continued their outreach services, in line with public health advice, for example, through detached work, socially distanced house visits, delivery of food packages, or delivery of activity packs directly to young people as a form of outreach and connection.

Many projects had a particular emphasis on supporting the emotional well-being and mental health of the young people they engaged with. Almost two thirds of NYCI members generated social media or website content on health and well-being. Some services made use of surveys to assess needs and adapted accordingly. Some projects engaged directly with parents as a way

of contacting young people. Although engagement continued, it was identified within

NYCI's review that there was a reduction in the number of young people engaging with the services. Some of this was due to the lack of technology. For others, there was a fatigue in engaging online or a discomfort and a general lack of confidence in engaging in this manner.

Youth workers now feel that they are fulfilling roles outside their remit. For example, many youth workers are engaging in family support work by delivering food parcels and supporting parents with issues that ideally should be dealt with in person, such as supporting a young person through a bereavement or navigating the young person through a court case. For themselves, youth workers have identified a lack of boundaries between work and home life. As services moved online and young people engaged with youth workers through phone calls and messages, there was an expectation from young people that youth workers would be constantly available to them and give them instant replies. This has led youth workers to feel they are constantly working. There was an appreciation from the sector that youth work was recognised as an essential service by Government. This acknowledgement of the worth and importance of youth work and the critical role it plays as a safety net for young people, especially vulnerable young people, was greatly appreciated.

On some of the needs of the sector identified in relation to mental health, the NYCI welcomes the commitment in the 2020 programme for Government with regard to youth work, which states that the incoming administration will "continue to invest in community and voluntary family support services and youth work recognising their value in preventing harm and in responding to the needs of vulnerable families". It is vital that we see evidence of this commitment in budget 2022 and beyond. Additional investment in youth work is crucial in supporting the sector to meet the needs of the growing number of young people, particularly the most vulnerable. This is even more important now as we emerge from Covid-19, because the new way of working which many youth organisations have developed to engage with young people, while meeting the social distancing requirements, will be more staff and cost intensive. This need was there prior to Covid-19 but is now greater as many young people have been significantly impacted by the pandemic.

One of the positive indicators in Ireland is our growing youth population. Census 2016 shows that the number of young people aged between ten to 24 will grow by 4.6% between 2020 and 2025. Although this is a positive development, it will also create challenges. With adequate resources, voluntary youth work organisations are well placed to support young people to reach their potential and make Ireland the best country in the world.

We acknowledge that youth work funding has increased in the last number of years. However, it is important to state that the sector endured very steep cuts in the 2008 to 2014 period. In that seven-year period, investment in youth work services from Government decreased by 31.8%, from €73.1 million in 2008 to €49.8 million in 2014. Since then, the investment from Government has increased - in 2021 it stood at €66.8 million. However, this means that financial support for youth work is still €6.3 million, or over 8%, below that of more than a dozen years ago, which does not take into account inflation in that period or the increased number of young people in our population and the need for youth services.

Increased support is needed in mental health promotion by providing funding to support the roll-out of the specialist certificate in youth mental health promotion. Support is also needed for young people to build their skill set and confidence to cope not only with their own mental health concerns but to support their peers, where appropriate, taking account of their own

competence and capacity. For example, while the applied suicide intervention skills training, ASIST, training is available to youth workers and provides them with a framework to support someone with suicidal ideation, there is a gap in relation to supporting the young person in building their own capacity to support their peers to a level commensurate with age and experience. This support system could be developed either online, or as a training programme, which could be accessed directly by young people. A support structure and enhanced self-care for workers experiencing second-hand trauma through their work with vulnerable young people is also a need.

Last, funding should be provided to the national youth health programme to employ a dedicated mental health promotion officer, MHPO. In 2016-2017, a mental health promotion officer was employed to support the youth sector. This allowed for the redevelopment and delivery of the MindOut training I spoke about earlier and the development of an online mental health signposting tool. Providing the funding for this position, again, would allow for the provision of more training for the youth sector such as dealing with challenging behaviours, ASIST, understanding self-harm and mental health first aid. In addition, it would allow the health programme to continue to work in partnership with the HSE and the National Office for Suicide Prevention and other relevant stakeholders to address the mental health need within the youth sector. Finally, I am pleased to answer any questions.

**Chairman:** I thank Ms Treanor for her very thorough presentation. I invite Mr. Ian Power to make his opening remarks.

**Mr. Ian Power:** I thank the Chairman for the opportunity to present to the committee today. For the benefit of members, *Spunout.ie* is Ireland's youth information website. We are run by young people for young people. Around 180,000 young people visit the site every month looking for information about everything ranging from mental health to sexual health, employment and education.

Last June, we launched the free crisis text service 50808. That has given us quite an insight into the enormous strain on young people's mental health during the pandemic. The 50808 service is targeted at young people aged 16 to 34 but it is open to all ages. We have seen people younger than 16 years, children and people in their 60s and 70s reaching out to us. Last year, we had 33,000 support conversations, the vast majority of which, or 29,000, took place between mid-June and December after the service was publically launched. We spoke to young people about everything ranging from anxiety and depression to self-harm and suicide. Around one in five texters told us that they had thoughts of suicide. Last year, we had to engage the National Ambulance Service on behalf of over 400 people who were in a place of real, active and imminent danger.

Each of us has had our own personal experience of the pandemic. While it has been a shared struggle, those with fewer resources and weaker support structures have borne the heaviest burden. This was borne out through a piece of research we did with the then Department of Children and Youth Affairs that we published in October 2020. It showed that 20% of the 2,000 young people who responded to the research said that they could not name anything positive to come from the pandemic. In our work, we must remember and keep those 10% of young people who are the most vulnerable to the fore of our minds.

The pandemic has only highlighted what has always been the case, which is that meeting people's basic need for security, whether in housing, healthcare, income or education, is the best long-term protective factor for their mental well-being. 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, activities, sports and friendships, and to ensure access to a childhood where adversity is the exception rather than the norm.

We cannot forget that this is the second time in a decade that young people have been transformatively impacted by global circumstances that are far outside of their control. Many of today's young people were children when their parents lost their jobs in the great financial crisis. Today, these young people are facing 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 of crisis succeeding crisis, is a sure-fire recipe for a mental health disaster. We must invest in the mental health supports that young people are going to need. We must also take care of the basics of housing security for our younger citizens, access to good quality jobs on which a life can be built, and freedom from discrimination based on ethnicity, sexuality or gender identity.

In tackling these issues there can be no substitute for authentic driven leadership by the Government and 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 the political system has a role to play in housing, health, justice, education, youth affairs and of course in the allocation of public resources. Coming out of Covid will give us all a chance to do things differently and bring new focus to areas where progress has been allowed to stall. I am thinking, for instance, of the excellent Pathfinder proposal that would redefine, at little cost, our entire administration of young mental health policy. Pathfinder is a blueprint for a whole-of-government approach and it is ready to go right now. However, we have seen more than three years of inexplicable and inexcusable delay as the report and proposal gather dust in the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform. We need Pathfinder just as we need a national lead for youth mental health within the HSE and a regional lead in each community healthcare organisation to co-ordinate, collaborate and target the 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 objective. 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. However, what is missing is the will and drive to bring it all together and tie the work of mental health services into a broader societal plan to address the insecurities at heart of the crises that we have outlined today.

I would, therefore, urge the committee not to see its role in isolation but to adopt a broad societal approach to the interconnected issues of mental health, inequality and insecurity. I urge the committee to support the National Youth Council of Ireland's call for a youth employment task force, for instance, as well as other measures that treat the causes of mental health crises, as well as those that address the symptoms. Ultimately, young people have never been more reliant on us to deliver in the area of mental health. What we require is investment, leadership, structures of accountability and, above all, the big picture vision to ensure their needs are met.

I thank the committee for the invitation to speak. I look forward to engaging with the members and answering questions.

**Chairman:** I thank Mr. Power for his presentation. We have four members here. The first to speak is Deputy Mark Ward. He will be followed by Senator Martin Conway, Deputy Gino Kenny and Senator Aisling Dolan.

**Deputy Mark Ward:** I have noted the comprehensive statements by the witnesses. I thank them for giving a good insight to how young people are being affected by the pandemic and in terms of some services. Mr. Power hit the nail on the head when he mentioned legislation. There is not a debate that happens in the Dáil that does not have an impact on people's mental health. As he said, there is not a decision made at the Cabinet table that does not have an impact on people's mental health, particularly around housing. I remember my time on South Dublin County Council when we were in the really dark times of the homeless crisis, and I am well aware that we are nowhere near out of it at the moment. I used to allow people to go into my office and use my telephone because they had no credit. The parents rang numerous hotels trying to get somewhere for themselves and their children to stay at night-time. They did their best to keep any anxiety away from their children. I saw them shield, mind and protect their children, as all parents do, but one could see every time that the parent put down the telephone there was a look of helplessness on the young person's face looking at his or her mother to see if a room had been secured for the night. It is those pieces that are not picked up generally when we talk about young people's mental health. I refer to the holistic view that the decisions of every single Department have an impact on people's mental health, and not just negatively. When a good decision is made at a departmental level, whether it is housing, health, education or employment, it has a really positive impact on people's mental health. I know we tend to go down the negative side but we have opportunities here to make things better.

Everybody has been affected by the pandemic but my heart goes out to young people because they have been adversely impacted by the restrictions. It is in the nature of young people to get out into their community and into the big wide world to explore. It is a time when they make mistakes and learn from them. It is a time when they spend time with peers and hang around together. That is the kind of stuff that I did as a young person and I have no doubt these are things that most people on this call did as young people. All of that has been ripped away from young people. If they do go out and are not social distancing or are engaging in behaviour that is seen as being outside the public health guidelines, the negativity that is shown to those young people is really difficult for them to deal with. I have seen it in my own park, where a group of young people were having a kick-around or a game of ball. They kept their distance as best they could and I saw them being publically challenged by older people. I felt sorry for those young people because they were not doing any harm.

They The college experience has been difficult. I am a father of three. I have one child in primary school, secondary school and third level education so I have seen how difficult the challenges have been for each of them, especially the college experience. I believe that in particular, the experience of first and second year in college has been taken away from people. They really are missing out and have been adversely affected by that. That experience has been taken away from them and they are really missing out. They have been adversely affected by that.

People contact us about young people meeting or congregating and so on. I have a good relationship with the community gardaí and we would have had a conversation around this. One made the point that he knows these young people. He said it is fine to tell them to go home but he knows these young people and their families and he knows when home is not a safe place for them; he has to be mindful of that too.

Addiction and drug use were mentioned. The services, especially for those under-18 years, are not there. Deputy Kenny and I are from Dublin Mid-West. It has the highest youth population in the State and will only grow as key housing developments come in the area. We have



no under-18 drugs or addiction service in the area, despite the drugs task force doing its best trying to get one in. As someone said earlier, its funding has been cut to the bone. I am not talking so much about addiction, but early experimentation or drug use that is giving people an opportunity to escape the reality of the poverty they are living in and the ability to escape the adverse impacts of Covid and of their situation. Help at an early stage stops that progressing into addiction. Early intervention is key. That is one issue in our area.

Ms Treanor spoke about the services the youth services are providing. When I see Cross-care in my area, they seem like the only group I know that can manage to be in two places at the same time. I really do not know how they manage. They provide a really good service and an open door for young people when a lot of doors are being closed. I commend them on that.

I wanted to ask about funding. Many witnesses have told the sub-committee that we will see an influx of people coming to services with mental health issues as restrictions are lifted, with a sort of post-traumatic stress. It has been stated that the funding has been cut and is 8% lower than it was 12 years ago. Will funding alone help youth organisations? I have been listening and the word “burnout” is coming into my head. With the amount of work youth services are doing, there is an awful fear that staff could be burned out. Is there fear that staff retention could be a problem or that attracting staff to youth work could be a problem?

Mr. Power mentioned the 400 people SpunOut referred to the ambulance services. Was there any follow-up with those young people and how they felt it was for them to go into the public services? I presume they were taken to emergency departments. Our experience, and the sub-committee has heard this many times, is that people, young or otherwise, do not get the service they need at that level. We had a meeting here two weeks ago where a Garda superintendent mentioned a pilot project which will be implemented in Limerick. A de-escalation team including a mental health nurse, ambulance driver and, where needed, a member of An Garda Síochána will deal with more acute mental health episodes in the community. Is that something that would benefit SpunOut?

Finally, a national directive for mental health is something we have been crying out for. In fairness to the Minister of State, the language that has come back to me in reply to questions has softened so it looks like it is under consideration whereas when she started in office, it seemed to be a no-go. We really need governance and accountability in the HSE at that level because it is not there now. Any organisation seeking HSE funding needs key performance indicators, service level agreements and every single penny coming into the organisation accounted for. The same governance oversight needs to apply to the HSE too. I will get off my soapbox and allow the witnesses to respond.

**Ms Rachael Treanor:** I will take this. Funding for the youth sector has reduced over the years. It now stands at €66.8 million, which is less than it was ten years ago, at a time when the youth population has grown in size. For the youth organisations to support the number of young people coming into their services, they would need increased funding and capacity. Youth organisations spend a lot of their time supporting young people to build core competencies that they need in life, skills such as communications and decision making, and providing education on their sexual health. The funding goes to support that work and trying to keep the young people in a place where they are making the best decision for them. It also gives them a safe space, a place to go if they have nothing else to do. There is also detached youth work on the street where youth workers are on the ground in the community engaging with their young people, having the ability to direct them to a service in their area. Those are the things one hopes that funding would go towards. It is really about those people being able to build their

key skills.

On staffing and burnout, the youth sector is grossly understaffed. From conversations we have with youth workers they are at a place where they are completely burned out. Young people are interacting with them constantly because they are easily accessible; because everything has moved online the young person expects an instant message reply. If they come across some difficulty they try to contact the youth workers who feel they need to reply. They have not really managed the work-life balance yet. There is a gap that we have tried to bridge where youth workers are doing so much to support the young people and forgetting they need to support themselves. As a result of being so grossly understaffed, they are being stretched beyond their limits. They are doing a lot that they would not have done before such as trying to engage with the parents, and deliver activity packs. They are constantly trying to engage with young people with whom they might have engaged before but have lost because everything has gone online. Everything has kind of doubled. There was relief that youth work was deemed an essential service and they are starting to go back in groups of 15, respecting all social distancing and public health measures, but there is still concern that they do not really get a break. The next thing will come and there may be some anxiety around groups coming back together again and meeting. Young people might be worried about bringing something home to their parents or grandparents. There is still all that worry there.

**Ms Louise Monaghan:** One other thing is the lack of specialist services and access to counselling. Mr. Power's crisis text line has been a godsend for us when we are delivering mental health training. We can point to a service that one can access on a wide basis. There will be a smaller number of young people who need specialist intervention and those services are missing at present. That is a major gap. As with anything in life, early intervention will help serve things a great deal more quickly in the longer term.

**Chairman:** Does Mr. Power wish to speak on this?

**Mr. Ian Power:** Yes. I thank the Deputy for his question. I will speak a little on his earlier points about young people and providing latitude to them during the pandemic. Many young people have found the period really difficult. We must remember that 18 months of one's life, by the time this is over, is a big proportion when one is 18, 21 or 25 years of age. It is a period during which there are a number of different transitions, and we know transitions are real. There are opportunities for young people and their development, but there are also risky periods in the context of young people's mental health. It is very important for young people to feel progression and purpose. In particular, there is a feeling of being left behind, having to study and learn from home, often from one's bedroom which is one's only space. For many young people it is not an individual space if they share bedrooms with younger brothers or sisters. It is a long time of the day to spend in a bedroom. For many young people, having to move back in with parents felt and feels like a step backwards. It is a difficult thing. Many people in older age groups forget that when one is a young person one does not have control over one's space or over what one eats in many cases. There are many different aspects of life that are controlled for the young person. That has been a difficult thing for young people to come to terms with.

The Deputy's point about the community gardaí in his local area is well made, in that home is not a safe place for every young person. Just sending every young person home from public spaces is not the answer either. We know from the text service that there has been a lot of family conflict between young people and parents, in particular. There often is. We know that it happens during adolescence. It is a natural part of life in many ways, but the pandemic has exacerbated that for many young people and it has been very difficult to cope with. That is be-

fore we get into the space of domestic violence, coercion, emotional abuse and neglect which we have seen a significant minority of young people experience.

On the point about our engagement with the National Ambulance Service, the purpose of our 24-7 texting service is to de-escalate and to support young people to keep themselves safe. The emergency department is not an appropriate environment for anybody going through a mental health crisis. We welcome the opportunity for mental health cafés to be developed. We do not necessarily like the term “crisis café”, but a mental health café is where young people, and old people, could go in a mental health emergency or when they need support. It is an appropriate environment for people in that situation.

Our aim is to keep people safe at home. However, we know from young people that when they have to access emergency services it is not always satisfactory. In many cases, a risk assessment is performed and they are sent back home. They are not able to access the types of services Ms Monaghan mentioned that intervene in a positive way and are going to help somebody on the road to recovery, rather than exacerbating their situation. We would love to see a more appropriate service developed for people in that situation.

Deputy Ward spoke about the mental health practitioner co-located with gardaí. We have seen that in some jurisdictions in the US, and it has been found to be helpful in de-escalating situations where police respond to conflict in which mental health is the driver. The reason we engaged with the National Ambulance Service when we started our service is that we wanted to engage with a medical situation. Rather than engaging policing in mental health we believe that mental health is a health issue, first and foremost. We fully support that initiative. We have seen high-profile situations where people who are in a mental health crisis are responded to by gardaí in quite a heavy-handed way. That is not appropriate in that moment. What is appropriate is de-escalation and trying to take the heat out of it, rather than ramping up the temperature. We fully support that proposal.

**Chairman:** Thank you. I call Senator Conway.

**Senator Martin Conway:** The opening statements from Mr. Power and Ms Treanor were very powerful in giving a snapshot of the effects this pandemic has had on young people and their mental health. It is striking to hear about the figure for funding that was provided in 2008 and to see what is there today, although it is better than what was there a couple of years ago. I have a specific question and then a general question.

Specifically, did the witnesses receive any additional funding during the last 12 or 13 months to help to equip them for what was obviously an avalanche of increased demand on their services? Did they make a request and how did they get on with that request?

As regards the work this sub-committee is doing, we have been having these engagements for the last number of months. Some extraordinary witnesses have appeared before the sub-committee and given us some fantastic ideas and suggestions. In an ideal world, what structure would the witnesses like to see? Have they seen something internationally which they think could and would work here? From their experience and their engagements with colleagues in other countries, particularly youth colleagues, is there anything abroad that they wish was available in Ireland? These are the types of things we need to hear. We have to hear about good examples from other areas and good ideas from the witnesses from their lived experience and the pressures, pre-pandemic and during the pandemic, so we can build a proper mental health structure after the pandemic that will respond in real time to people’s needs. Deputy Ward

spoke about co-locating mental health practitioners. It is an excellent idea. We need to start making these things happen. Where there are good examples we have to be able to use them and roll them out.

I am from rural Ireland. There is a significant mental health challenge for young people living in rural communities because for the last 13 months or so they have been confined for most of the time to a 5 km space at home. The natural instinct of people to go and explore and see the big, bad world, as Deputy Ward said, is being hemmed in. I have tremendous sympathy for first year college students. I speak to them all the time. They have not set foot on the campus. They are still on the family farm, doing their courses online. They have not got to know friends or had any socialising. They have not been involved in freshers' weeks or anything. It is dreadful.

My question on funding is whether there was a request and if the request was even half met. Then, what are the witnesses' ideas for building a proper structure for the future?

**Chairman:** I will call on Mr. Power first and Ms Treanor can respond after him, if she wishes.

**Mr. Ian Power:** I will take the structural question first. We know from international examples of best practice that ensuring young people have access to primary care services and to lower-level to moderate services early means the situation and experiences of young people's mental health do not exacerbate over time. One in four people are going to experience mental health difficulties in terms of a significant challenge to one's mental health in one's lifetime. Some 75% of people first experience it between the ages of 15 and 25. We have to try to ensure we are developing primary care, youth-focused, youth-led services at an early stage. We have a wonderful resource in Ireland, in Jigsaw, but it is still not available to all young people nationally. New services are being developed in counties Tipperary and Wicklow but Jigsaw should be supported to provide its service on a national basis. If there is a need to develop an additional service to cover the remaining areas of the country, that needs to be done in order that young people can get access to the services they need in a timely and quick fashion.

We mentioned the pathfinder proposal in our opening statement. The idea is to create cross-governmental unit, with officials from the Departments of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, Education and Health, and many other areas, staffed and led by a director recruited independently through the Public Appointments Service. This is a proposal of the Civil Service Management Board. It did not come from NGOs. We bought in to it because we believe it would be transformative. The Department of Health has been supportive of the initiative, even to the point that it has been willing to fund the entire initiative without necessarily needing investment from the other Departments. While that slightly defeats the purpose, we will take it if it gets the proposal over the line.

The initiative has been held up by the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform for the last three years. We wrote to the new Minister in July after the new Government was formed. We have still not received a reply to our letter asking what is causing the hold-up. It is an administrative hold-up that could be easily solved. It follows the same model as the Criminal Assets Bureau in using the Public Service Management Act to transfer money between Departments. That should not hold up this initiative, which could be transformative. We are saying that we need to pull together activity across a number of different areas. Mental health is not just the preserve of the Department of Health or solely its responsibility.

On the structural issue, there needs to be somebody at each CHO level whose responsibil-

ity it is to pull together leadership regarding young people's mental health and to bring all the services together to collaborate. All of the services do a great job. There is often commentary about duplication but unfortunately there is demand for all the available services. Young people deserve choice about access to services. That is not the issue, however. Rather, we need to have somebody to pull everything together and provide leadership at CHO level.

In response to the Deputy's question about requests for funding, we have made requests and normally do so in respect of youth work funding, through our representative body, the National Youth Council of Ireland, NYCI. The NYCI's pre-budget submissions in recent years have been comprehensive with regard to what the sector is asking. We received an overall increase of €5 million for youth work funding last year. As a national youth work organisation, we received a small uplift in funding, but it is not commensurate with the level of need and the demand for services. It cannot be a case of business as usual. I am thinking in particular of budget 2022. We have to have a dividend for young people, not only in making sure that they are supported to engage with society but also, as we mentioned in our opening statement, the youth work sector has always played a role in bringing young people closer to the labour market. We saw that in the Ballymun youth pilot guarantee in the early 2010s, where the local youth service, with employers and the local Intreo office, was able to engage young people with education, training and employment opportunities. I ask my colleague, Mr. Eustace, to speak about that and the employment task force initiative.

**Mr. Jack Eustace:** I thank Senator Conway for his questions. On the broad structure approach to youth unemployment, we are at risk of falling back into an assumption that when there is an unemployment crisis among young people, it is somehow young people's fault. At the start of any crisis, there is usually a recognition that the crisis is external and we are all doing our best to react and respond to it. That has been strong throughout the Covid pandemic so far but we are seeing some worrying signs in the discourse. People will have read a recent article that claimed that students were lying in bed and claiming benefits that they somehow should not have been entitled to when, in fact, many students expect to work through education and rely on the income they make in that way. Students are suffering from the joblessness rate just as much as people who are not students.

One important point to make when answering any question like this is that we need to maintain the idea that we are in a crisis and it is not the fault of the victims of the crisis that we are where we are. Rather than falling in to a narrative of blame, it is important to maintain an attitude towards the problem of youth unemployment that starts from a place of acknowledging that this has been visited upon young people and asking what we can do to work with and help young people. The further we get away from the events that brought us here and from the pandemic and start of lockdown, the more that narrative of blame may start to seep back in to discourse. I would certainly hope to see from all politicians, including members of this committee, a strong commitment to taking the view that it is fundamentally the role of government in any youth unemployment crisis to find solutions, not to apportion blame.

Regarding what can be done on a practical level, SpunOut welcomes the NYCI's call, which has been mentioned, for a national task force on youth employment. The figures are extraordinary. We have all seen them. Joblessness among young people is as high as 60%. We do not know where that figure will settle. It is affected by the pandemic unemployment payment but when those kinds of short to medium-term supports are withdrawn, we do not know quite where we will land. Youth unemployment was in the region of 12% before the current crisis began. It will come to settle somewhere a good deal higher than that. The headline figure cur-



rently, while potentially inflated, is more than twice the rate of joblessness among the cohort of young people during the last crisis at the beginning of the previous decade. The figures are extraordinarily high and require some big picture thinking. At a minimum, Departments should come together, set up a task force on getting young people back to work and, tying into what I said previously, approach the issue from the point of view that this is a problem on which the task force will work with young people by listening to their solutions and bringing them on board. We should not be overly prescriptive or fall into a trap we have seen before of coercing young people into forms of work or work experience that will not help them get into long-term employment, which always has to be the goal.

**Senator Martin Conway:** I thank Mr. Eustace.

**Ms Rachael Treanor:** I thank the Senator for his statements and questions. I agree with everything Mr. Power and Mr. Eustace said about the structure. The text line has been of great importance to us in letting youth workers know what is available. As Mr. Power said, having support in each CHO area or even each region would also be a major support because mental health is impacted by the area where we live, work and play. If young people are supported in their areas, it would be of great importance to them. Having that structure in place would allow those who work with young people to have a reference point in the context of services and everything else available in particular areas.

In response to the question on whether we looked abroad at what is working, our MindOut mental health promotion training is based on the principle of social and emotional learning, which is a model that was brought in from America and New Zealand. It is about the core competencies of the young person, so that they are gaining key skills. That structure is embedded within the schools in different countries. This year we have trained up a good proportion, but not all, of the school completion officers so that they can run this programme with the young people they are working with on a one-to-one basis. MindOut is within schools, but the specific programme for the youth sector is more tailored to the individual. School completion officers are getting training on it at the moment so that they can run it with small groups and individuals.

In response to the question on funding, when the pandemic came, we were quick to adapt and meet the needs of the health programme. We did ask for additional funding from the HSE and the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth for the development of the specialist certificate in youth mental health. We are lucky that the HSE agreed to support that funding every year from here on because we would not be able to run the programme without the funding. Jigsaw has very kindly matched funding with the HSE, so we have funding in place to run the programme from September onwards. It would be brilliant if we could get additional funding as well, but at the moment we have agreed funding from the HSE and Jigsaw for it. Ms Monaghan might have some other comments on structure.

**Ms Louise Monaghan:** I will make two very quick points. Regarding international practice, there is a new initiative rolling out in Dublin's north-east inner city called City Connects. It is very much about agencies coming together to identify young people who are in need of additional support. They include youth services, primary schools, post-primary schools and other voluntary and statutory services. The intention is to mirror the cross-departmental piece that Mr. Power has been talking about at the community level where one has an inter-agency approach.

Reference was made to young people in rural Ireland. That is something I can very much identify with. The reality is that most specialist services operate between 9 a.m. and 5 p.m.,

Monday to Friday. If one gets an appointment for 1 p.m. on a Monday, if one is 50 km away and there is no public transport, which there is unlikely to be, that is a full day getting there and getting back, if a person is able to get there, if someone can bring them. That is one other small point about the time that services are provided.

**Chairman:** I see Mr. Power has his hand up. I ask him to be brief as we are a bit pressed for time.

**Mr. Ian Power:** I have just a very brief point to make to respond more fully to Senator Conway's question. I spoke about youth work funding earlier. We made two asks to the HSE for both the *spunout.ie* service and also for the 50808 texting service for 2021 and both asks were fully provided for this year. We want to put that on the record and note the HSE's support. Our key message is that level of support is not just required this year, but it will be required next year and the following year as well.

**Senator Martin Conway:** I thank the witnesses very much. Where I was coming from with the question about additional funding is that we hear many calls for necessary support for the hospitality industry and every other industry as well. I wonder if the people who are providing vital services that save lives are getting additional supports. I totally agree that it is only a stopgap and it needs to continue on a more permanent basis.

I thank all four witnesses, Mr. Power, Ms Treanor and their two colleagues, for their detailed responses to my questions. I thank the Chair and say "Well done" to her. This has been an excellent engagement so far.

**Chairman:** I thank Senator Conway very much. We now have Senator Dolan, followed by Deputy Gino Kenny and Senator Hoey.

**Senator Aisling Dolan:** I welcome the witnesses. It is great to hear from Ms Treanor and the NYCI. I am very interested in the fact that the NYCI represents more than 50 organisations. It is amazing to look at the wide variety of groups involved, from Foróige to the Union of Students in Ireland. I know there are a lot of youth organisations for the political parties as well. The groups the NYCI represents are very interesting.

I am aware of *spunout.ie* and I know it does fantastic work. I was not aware that it ran the 50808 service, which is a phenomenal service that we have been promoting in the past year. Mr. Power indicated that 29,000 conversations have taken place on the service. That is phenomenal. I very much welcome his reference to the extra €5 million that has been allocated because the service has been in place based on the €1 billion that was allocated to mental health in last year's budget. I am aware that €38 million was allocated for new services. An extra €50 million was drawn down for mental health this year, specifically to deal with Covid and the pandemic, but as both speakers indicated in their presentations this morning, the impact on young people's mental health is phenomenal. I know that myself. I am from the east Galway-Roscommon area. Schools had to teach remotely when everything was closed down.

I am also a member of the education committee. I am conscious that the Education (Leaving Certificate) (Accredited Grades) Bill 2021 is due to be dealt with in the Seanad on Friday. At least the leaving certificate gives students options, which is welcome. From speaking to students in leaving certificate or junior certificate exam years, I know the fact that they have the option of doing the exams and the accredited grades system is very welcome. Another big issue is the fact that clubs, sports and hobbies were shut down and there was no access to them. There

has been a lack of social engagement with peers and there has even been an effect on part-time jobs. We know the pandemic has adversely impacted young people and even more so, young women, particularly those who had part-time jobs in retail or hospitality where predominantly more women are involved.

We had a discussion on bullying and self-harm at the education committee in recent days. Darkness into Light is happening this Friday. It is something we are promoting a lot locally in my area in Ballinasloe and in Roscommon. It is a charity that has had a significant impact. Pieta House does a great deal of work with people affected by self-harm and bulimia. That type of impact on young people is horrific. The Minister of State with responsibility for mental health, Deputy Butler, recently announced funding for services relating to eating disorders. That issue has cropped up. We had an update from the mental health services in the Galway, Mayo and Roscommon CHO about the significant increase in the incidence of eating disorders. I am curious as to what the witnesses have seen in that regard.

This question is for Ms Treanor. I am curious about the type of qualifications required for youth workers. I assume the majority of youth workers have a degree in sociology or psychology. The NYCI is dealing with more than 50 organisations and I think Ms Treanor mentioned there are approximately 1,200 staff working for them. Are all the staff youth workers? I am curious about the breakdown.

The apprenticeship programme is due to expand. The impact of the lack of employment has been mentioned. The Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, Deputy Harris, added a further 2,000 or so college places last year and that extra allocation will remain in place this year. It is planned to increase apprenticeships from 6,000 to 10,000 this year. This offers other supports for learners of all ages, not just young people. Is there an opportunity for apprenticeships to support youth workers, especially when they are dealing with issues such as burnout?

Ms Treanor gave a detailed presentation. What are the top three issues for young people, particularly as we emerge from Covid? Is the certificate course in youth mental health at NUIG a pilot? Could it be rolled out to other universities and colleges?

Has *SpunOut.ie* seen a difference between young men and young women? I have pointed to one or two issues that I believe have more of an impact on women. Will Mr. Power comment on this in the context of the 29,000 conversations that *SpunOut.ie* has been having?

I thank the witnesses very much for their contributions.

**Mr. Ian Power:** I thank Senator Dolan for her questions. To clarify, *SpunOut.ie* has had more than 50,000 conversations since we started the service. We had 33,000 conversations last year and 15,000 so far this year. We see a lot of bullying, especially in adolescents and workplace environments. We have seen it throughout the pandemic with online stuff. Bullying is insidious in its nature and it really has a detrimental and devastating impact on the young people it affects. We welcome the education committee's focus on it and support initiatives to create supportive, whole-school communities where bullying is not tolerated.

We very much welcome the commitment to fully resource the eating disorder programme in the HSE this year and spend the full allocation of €4 million. It is very important that young people have access to these specialist services, as Ms Monaghan mentioned earlier, especially as we emerge from the pandemic. Through the text service, we have seen that many young

people are impacted by the lack of routine. Young people who live with and suffer from eating disorders struggle when their routine is impacted. Routine is a hugely important aspect of the coping mechanism and journey towards recovery for persons who have an eating disorder. Young people have been really struggling with this issue and that has been compounded by them not being able to access specialist services or inpatient treatment.

The Senator made an important point about apprenticeships. We saw a large increase in college places last year to deal with the expanded numbers of young people going into higher education. The supply issue was also dealt with, which is very positive. It must be remembered, however, that coming out of this pandemic, and even before the crisis, there are young people who are furthest from the labour market and are suffering from problems such as social anxiety that prevent them from engaging with opportunities. The youth work sector plays an important role in helping to bridge the gap by helping young people with low confidence and low self-esteem get access to those opportunities. This is why we support the multidisciplinary and multi-agency approach. It will not be only one Department that will be able to engage with those young people. A number of different types of responses will be needed.

We also welcome the changes to the leaving certificate and the options. My brother is doing his leaving certificate this year and he very much welcomes the option to do both. Last year, this issue was a significant driver of anxiety for young people. Many young people texted us about it, even when the decision was being made for 2021. Having certainty about that and some sort of solution as early as we did was very welcome in managing the anxieties of young people.

The last point in our opening statement is very important with regard to mental health funding. We need to expand the numbers of trainees in key positions in our mental health system. For many of them, the lead-in time is four or five years, be it for mental health nurses, psychiatrists or psychologists. We need to fund all of the different places equally. At the moment, clinical psychology trainees are funded but counselling psychology and educational psychology trainees are not funded. This keeps people who could make excellent practitioners out of those services. The main point is that we need to expand those places now so that we see the payback in four or five years' time. The longer we leave that, the longer it will take to resolve the issues we have.

The Senator asked about differences between young men and young women. Among those in crisis, we have seen higher rates of intensity among young women over the past year in particular. From our research, including the How's Your Head: Young Voices During Covid-19 consultation, younger men seemed to have been a little more relaxed as we settled into restrictions, whereas the opposite was the case for young women. We are, however, seeing more and more young men struggling with eating and body image. It is not necessarily quite at parity yet but this is definitely a significant problem for young men as well. I flag that as an issue too.

**Ms Rachael Treanor:** I thank the Senator for her questions. I will start and then pass over to my colleague, Ms Monaghan, to answer one of them as there were a lot of questions.

On the issue of bullying and self-harm, the National Youth Council found, even before Covid, that bullying often occurred online. When Covid impacted, young people were probably isolated in their rooms doing school work and homework and they were inundated with texts, Snapchat messages and so on. There is a high level of prevalence there. It is about supporting the young person to gain competencies for dealing with this in the online space. It might not necessarily be texts or words; it could be sexting and so on. In the pandemic we tried to

come up with a support structure for youth workers setting out what they should do when this happens. We made a resource available to them and it is available for everyone to use. This will not answer all of the questions but it provided a starting point to enable us to deal with that aspect for young people.

On self-harm, we were lucky to be able to provide training facilitated by the National Office for Suicide Prevention, NOSP. This training develops skills for youth workers to enable them to start a conversation with young people. Unfortunately with Covid, it did not translate well online. NOSP spent time trying to get the training working online and is rolling it out online now. Hopefully within the next couple of weeks or months, we will be able to restart the process.

Similarly, we have been inundated with requests for ASIST. However, the training does not work online either because it is such an intense two-day course. NOSP has put in place a separate training programme, LivingWorks Start, which is not as intense as ASIST but still gives participating youth workers the confidence to ask a young person about suicidal ideation if they notice something.

Mr. Power spoke about eating disorders. We would not necessarily have much information on eating disorders but we know what is happening. The health programme would signpost people to BodyWhys or similar organisations. Young men are also experiencing eating disorders in the context of bulking up and muscle gain, which we need to keep an eye on.

On youth worker qualifications, the National Youth Council of Ireland has 51 member organisations, which includes some 40,000 volunteers and 15,000 staff. The youth work sector is built on volunteers. Youth workers have qualifications through degree programmes with various universities, many of which fall under social care. People need to complete a degree programme to qualify to become a youth worker and work with young people. However, many volunteers also work with young people and many youth services are built on volunteers and do not have many paid youth workers. It should be kept in mind that a lot of this is volunteer-led. As to the question on the certificate with the National University of Ireland, Galway, NUIG, and Jigsaw, that university is the health promotion research base here in Ireland. We collaborated with it because it has enormous expertise in the area of youth mental health. I refer especially to Professor Margaret Barry. As the university offers a specialist certificate as part of its programme on general health promotion, we approached it with regard to a certificate on youth mental health. The pilot scheme begins in September but it will continue on. The aim is to build the capacity of those working with young people to support mental health needs. It will teach them to look at the issues holistically within the environments in which they work. If people work within a youth organisation, it will encourage them to look at that organisation to identify what they can do at the macro level to support the mental health needs not only of the young people, but also of the people who work there, both staff and volunteers. This will bring about an environment that supports the health and well-being of everyone involved in that organisation. It is a pilot programme this year. We are developing the content but we are confident that, with the expertise involved, we will be able to grow this programme with NUIG and Jigsaw every year. Perhaps Ms Monaghan may wish to address the question of the top three impacts.

**Chairman:** I see both Ms Monaghan and Mr. Eustace want to come in. We will need to keep our answers short. We are a little bit under pressure for time.

**Senator Aisling Dolan:** I am also open to people coming back with their answers later if



we are under pressure with time. I am happy with whatever is easiest for the Chair.

**Ms Louise Monaghan:** I would summarise the top three issues as anxiety, isolation and the future. By anxiety, I mean anxiety about everything that has happened. By isolation, I mean the isolation that has been experienced in addition to the anxiety related to now coming out of isolation. By the future, I mean the future with regard to education, employment and what things will look like in general. I will keep my answer that short and sweet.

**Mr. Jack Eustace:** I will also do my best to keep my reply very short. On Senator Dolan's point about the gendered experiences of where we find ourselves, looking through the How's Your Head report Mr. Power referenced earlier, one sees some very worrying areas. We got responses from young women telling us they were struggling a lot more than young men in certain areas. To be brief, young women were approximately ten percentage points more likely to say they were struggling with their education. It was the same case with health and they were approximately five percentage points more likely to be struggling with loneliness during the lockdown. With regard to their view of the future, 43% of young men told us they were feeling optimistic about the future, as opposed to only 32% of young women, which again represents a gap of about ten percentage points. There were areas in which young men were finding more difficulty than women but, generally speaking, young women reported that they were finding things harder.

**Chairman:** Is Senator Dolan happy enough?

**Senator Aisling Dolan:** Yes. I thank the Chair. It was very much appreciated.

**Deputy Gino Kenny:** I thank everybody for coming in today. Their contributions have been very insightful. I do not have a particular question but I will raise an issue. I am not sure anyone here is qualified to provide an answer but I will give my own thoughts on the issue. It relates to a report issued this week by the College of Psychiatrists of Ireland on cannabis use among young people. What I am really looking for is the witnesses' observations from working with young people. Have they noticed an increase in the use of cannabis? The College of Psychiatrists of Ireland made a number of quite concerning observations. Some of these are not new but, in the college's words "Cannabis represents the gravest threat to the mental health of young people in Ireland". I have my own thoughts on that. We are getting into a wider debate around regulation, decriminalisation and so forth. This situation is a consequence of driving it underground. Is cannabis used widely among young people? A minority use cannabis, while a minority of that minority use it on a daily basis, which is not good for anybody's general well-being. An additional dimension to this is that some young people will use drugs to escape, just as some use alcohol. They use it to escape from many things in their lives. Obviously, the pandemic has not helped in any way.

It is useful that the psychiatrists have brought this issue to public attention because it is a public health issue. Again, I have my own views with regard to how to tackle drug use and drug abuse, particularly among young people. The system we have at the moment alienates people and does not work. Criminalising people just does not work. I would like the views or observations of the witnesses on the particular critique of these psychiatrists with regard to cannabis use among young people. Is it on the increase? Is it decreasing? Perhaps the witnesses will share their thoughts.

**Mr. Ian Power:** I thank the Deputy for the question because it is an important debate to have. Any research or evidence we have seen shows that there is an increase in cannabis use

among young people and an increase in the regularity with which some young people are using cannabis. As the Deputy says, young people use alcohol and drugs as a coping mechanism and as a social lubricant. We need to support young people to develop healthier coping mechanisms. That should be part of the education process. In respect of this week's debate, we need a balanced and calm conversation. I do not agree with the assessment of the College of Psychiatrists of Ireland. I have great respect for people like Professor Mary Cannon who has done an enormous amount of research in this space. It shows the stronger potency of some of the cannabis used by young people, and of cannabis generally. The results also depend on the young people themselves. Some are going to be more vulnerable to things like psychosis and other really damaging mental health effects.

It is not fair to dismiss the concerns out of hand. There is significant evidence showing that some young people are being significantly adversely affected. These are mental health disorders. They are things that have the potential to impact young people for quite some time. We should not, however, come at it from an alarmist perspective. We should have a reasonable, balanced and calm conversation about the issue. Prohibition does not work. We know that. We also know that telling young people not to do something is a sure-fire way to switch them off from the conversation. We also believe that we should not criminalise young people any further than they already are being criminalised. The system in Ireland is very well established. We try to divert young people from engagement with drugs as much as is possible because we know that is best and creates the best outcomes for young people. We know that young people's brains continue to develop until at least 25 years of age, if not beyond. Their concept of risk is different and develops over time. We have a great deal of respect for the college and for the researchers I have mentioned. While we are concerned about the impact on young people and the reasons they are turning to and using cannabis, we hope for and encourage a more calm and balanced conversation and debate about the issue. I thank the Deputy.

**Ms Louise Monaghan:** I would reiterate everything Mr. Power has said. Our experience is that youth workers are reporting an increased level of use. There is more normalisation and cannabis use has become much more acceptable. I absolutely concur with everything Mr. Power said in that we need to move away from the alarmist approach to one involving more information and research. We must approach this in a measured way.

**Chairman:** On that issue, is there any information that the representatives could send us? It would be very helpful.

**Mr. Ian Power:** Absolutely. We can put something together and send it on for circulation to the members.

**Chairman:** That would be great.

**Deputy Gino Kenny:** I wish to make a very brief point. I completely concur with what Mr. Power said. There were concerns over the report. There was some very unhelpful commentary in it, particularly the view that the mental health system will be overrun because of cannabis use. That is just not helpful. Some of the terminology does not help in the discourse on this issue. We probably need to have a wider debate on drug use and decriminalisation. We are all adults and want the best for our young people. Every drug, whether legal or not, will be used so we need to have a more mature conversation on drug use than the one we have been having over the years. Stigmatising and marginalising people just does not work; in fact, it is counter-productive. We want a system involving harm reduction and education. Telling people to simply say no to drugs does not work. We want a system in which the facts on every drug in

society, whether it is bought on the street or in the pharmacy, are given to people. When people are given facts, without preaching to them, there are better outcomes for everybody. The current system just does not work. Again, it is a matter for a wider debate, which we will probably have in the future.

**Deputy Mark Ward:** Deputy Gino Kenny is bang-on in that there is definitely a debate to be had on cannabis use, particularly among young people. I read the report during the week. I worked in my local addiction centre in Clondalkin, the Clondalkin Addiction Support Programme, for numerous years. Over the years in Clondalkin, we saw polydrug use. We saw many people who were more entrenched in addiction, basically taking whatever was available, be it crack cocaine, heroin, tablets or whatever else was on the street. I then changed jobs and moved to a part of Dublin 8 that I will not name because I do not want to stigmatise an area. Deputy Gino Kenny is correct in this regard. The service to which I moved was new. The only people coming into the service when I was there were young males between 16 and 24 and some young females, all on account of problematic cannabis use. I am referring to weed, not the hash that was available years ago when I was growing up. The young people had reached the stage of problematic drug use. I was encountering young people who had stopped engaging with schools and youth services. They had started engaging in crime because of drug debts that had accumulated. They had got into trouble with the Garda. Among these young people, I basically encountered all the things we would have seen in the 1980s and early 1990s when the heroin epidemic hit our area. It was an eye-opener for me because I was not expecting it, even though I came from an area that saw a lot of drug use over the years. The young people in question comprised a very small cohort of cannabis users who had got to the problematic stage. Interventions need to be made. Much of it is about education, not about preaching, as Deputy Gino Kenny was saying. It is about education to prevent people from moving from the recreational stage to the problematic stage. That is where the intervention is required.

We worked on a reduce-the-use programme. If we tell a group of young people that they should stop smoking cannabis tomorrow, we might as well be talking to a wall because we would not get any response. We should work on measures that enable the youths to reduce their cannabis use and, in tandem, bring some benefits back into their lives, even if these benefits just involve going for a walk, going to the gym or going back into education. The youths I was dealing with were replacing activity resulting in adverse effects with activity that would be beneficial.

A dedicated treatment centre was set up in the Naul to address cannabis use among young people. It was inundated with people trying to access it. There is a cohort who can get caught up in cannabis addiction. I have done a lot of research on this and could send some material on, including on the fact that the brain is not fully developed until the age of 25, as Mr. Power mentioned. A lot of research was carried out indicating that sustained overuse of cannabis at a very young age can bring out underlying psychosis that might not otherwise present. It also indicates that where it does present, it is not as acute if cannabis is not a factor. Those are some of the issues we face.

A debate needs to be had. I have seen at first hand what is happening and I have worked in this area. I have seen the problematic side of drug use but I have also seen, and have known, many young people whose recreational use would not reach the problematic stage. If we can work in this space in regard to harm reduction, it would help. I thank Deputy Gino Kenny for raising the matter.

**Mr. Ian Power:** To respond to both Deputies' points, I really welcome the college highlight-

ing the issue. As Deputy Gino Kenny said, I do not believe young people are aware of some of the devastating effects cannabis can have on those predisposed to psychosis or other conditions, as mentioned by Deputy Ward. Young people should have the facts but we feel the approach is not productive. We need to have a more mature conversation with young people about this.

**Chairman:** It is definitely a subject on which we need to have a deeper discussion.

**Senator Annie Hoey:** I thank the witnesses. This was really interesting. I say every week at meetings of this committee that I could sit and listen for hours. I really find that I learn so much from this. It feels almost like I am taking up too much time even by asking questions.

The last time we had a recession, when things went a little askew, to put it politely and mildly, there was a Europe-wide youth guarantee and a Europe-wide campaign to try to support young people. Do the witnesses have any reflections on how successful that was, perhaps among young people they came across? What do we need to do this time around? The circumstances now are not dissimilar to those during the recession in that there are young people who have lost jobs. There is a really high rate of youth unemployment in Ireland and, undoubtedly, across the rest of Europe. What can be taken from what was done before? What needs to be done that is different? Do we need to rethink that altogether? Do the witnesses believe anything like that will even be done this time?

There is a lot of talk about the Covid anxiety of re-entering, or readjusting to, normal life. Many of us do not want to go back to normal; we want a new normal. On that anxiety about reintegrating into society, young people very unfairly acquired a bad reputation during the pandemic. Mr. Eustace referred to the appalling comments made about young people lying in bed getting the pandemic unemployment payment. That would simply never be said about any other working cohort. Young people were scoffed at and I am horrified by those comments. Will the negative press portrayal of young people increase anxiety about reintegration and re-entering society? Is there any anecdotal evidence around that?

I know of a number of young people who are very stressed about going into college or trying to find work. This is all very overwhelming and some of them have said they feel that people will think they were doing nothing and having a great time. Do the witnesses have any thoughts on that? Will the portrayal of young people in this unnecessarily unsympathetic way create additional pressure?

**Ms Louise Monaghan:** As regards Covid anxiety, it will depend on circumstances. The experts are saying that, as human beings, we are very adaptable. Whenever the new normal comes, the vast majority of us will settle back in after a few weeks. For young people who have had a negative experience during Covid, where they have seen negative messaging online, people have approach them on the street and given out to them and that kind of thing, it will most definitely increase their anxiety about going out in future. This highlights the need for young people, and everyone else, to have safe spaces to say they are terrified about going back to school, college or their jobs, talk about those fears and anxieties and get them out, experience the solidarity that comes with hearing that others are feeling the same, and then learn some simple techniques to help them cope with the anxiety generated in those moments. The big positive we have heard from experts is our ability to adapt as human beings and our natural resilience so, hopefully, those will come into play as we move forward.

**Mr. Ian Power:** I will address Covid anxiety and then Mr. Eustace might talk about the youth guarantee in more detail. As regards anxiousness, we definitely saw through the texting

service that anxiety and stress peaked as we went into restrictions. We learned in the first few lockdowns that it started to creep up and increase as we emerged from restrictions as well. It should be remembered that some young people will be reticent about re-engaging. There is some good in that because this has been something of a shared experience, many more real conversations have been taking place between friends. We have seen a higher rate of seeking help, more talking and a reduction in stigma around mental health issues. Certainly, as we come out of this, we will have to remember that people will re-engage at different paces. There will be different supports required for different young people to re-engage. I also take Ms Monaghan's point on young people's resilience and the amount of resilience they have built up through this experience as well.

On perceptions of young people, Mr. Eustace said it very well in terms of the statements made during the week. We will have to re-examine the social contract and intergenerational fairness because young people will come out of this and will remember what has been said. In order to ensure social cohesion in the future, we will have to address some of these issues and talk about what will be the deal for young people in the future.

In respect of the youth guarantee, we talked about employment so much today because of the importance of purpose for young people as a protective factor for their mental health. The reinforced youth guarantee is in place but from my perspective, the previous youth guarantee did not really happen. It was used to fund existing labour market activation measures. While that is all well and good, there was nothing additional layered on top of that to provide support to young people. It was a missed opportunity to connect young people into the labour market by using the youth guarantee pilot, and the learning from it, throughout the country to create spaces where employers, local Intreo offices and youth workers come together to support young people and provide lasting outcomes. That was a missed opportunity but it would be great if it could be reignited and revived. The youth employment task force could provide a space for doing that. Mr. Eustace will speak on that.

**Mr. Jack Eustace:** I thank Senator Hoey for the question. Everything Mr. Power said is correct. The youth guarantee was, and remains, a fantastic idea but it was somewhat misinterpreted and misapplied in the past. An assumption can be made that its purpose is just to get people into work or training, at whatever cost and no matter what kind of training is available, and that, in the short term, as many young people as possible should be doing whatever we can find for them to do. If one looks at places where the youth guarantee has taken off and been properly implemented, it is much more focused on the long-term employment needs of the individual in question. It will not be a surprise to hear that has been done quite successfully in places like Sweden and Finland which have implemented the guarantee very well.

I mention Sweden and Finland in particular because their model has been found to be very effective, particularly for people who have become unemployed at very short notice due to a systemic shock, rather than speaking about long-term unemployment, which has its own challenges. We could definitely draw on those systems given the position in which we now find ourselves, where many young people who have no long-term challenges in finding work in a so-called normal labour market now find themselves in very difficult situations.

It would be worthwhile to look into the Ballymun youth guarantee pilot scheme introduced during the previous crisis - I cannot remember in which year. There were some very good learnings from that which were not necessarily taken into account in policymaking. I found, in particular, just how important it was for the youth guarantee to operate off a partnership approach model so the services it provides are not just being determined by the State or an individual



employer who can provide an internship or whatever. It should genuinely bring together locally-based employment services, training providers, businesses, trade unions and a wide range of organisations to design these programmes. Of course, there should be direct involvement by young people as well. One criticism of our attempt to implement the youth guarantee in this country was that it started with consultation, but that consultation faded away as time went on. It became much more of a top-down, Government-led or Government-only programme.

There is a very interesting Eurofound survey, which we can share, of countries that attempted to implement the youth guarantee. It identified the key elements of what made the youth guarantee a success in those countries where it was a success. These included stakeholder engagement, a one-stop shop for support and a personalised pathway for each individual taking up the service. Sadly, Ireland was one of the countries where virtually none of the best practice elements were implemented. Most countries had implemented two, three or four; Ireland was found to have implemented only one or two. There is definitely a huge amount that remains to be done. The youth guarantee remains a great idea and one that we should not kid ourselves that we have fully tried. It is fully still available as a policy option for us to try properly.

**Senator Aisling Dolan:** The youth guarantee and the activation measures have been put in place. At the moment they are being expanded from age 25 up to under 30. Also, consideration is being given to putting over 100 coaches in place in the Intreo centres. Can Mr. Eustace outline any experience and feedback on those measures?

**Mr. Jack Eustace:** I do not have any proper feedback on measures that are happening in the current environment. The implementation that I am referring to is more stuff that happened when the rate of youth unemployment was particularly high pre-2016. Any steps to implement more training and direct mentorship or coaching is very welcome. Any investment in the system is very welcome. In general, it is worth bearing in mind that many elements of the programme, as originally attempted to be introduced in Ireland ten years ago, were not properly tried. It is definitely good news if we are moving towards a focus on the actual individual needs of young jobseekers.

**Senator Aisling Dolan:** I would hope so. I understand that youth unemployment was roughly 11% prior to Covid. Now, the Government includes people who are in receipt of PUP whereas previously students were not, which changes the figures that we are looking at now. The bandwidth is being increased so the age profile is being expanded from 25 years to under 30 years. Consideration is also being given to increasing measures for employers. Is it worth €7,500 to an employer if somebody has been unemployed for four months? Increasing that to €10,000 is being considered. There are measures, along with an number of places for the apprenticeship programme and the college places, to support young people, which is welcome. When one adjusts the figures the percentage is roughly 15%. I thank the witnesses for the feedback.

**Mr. Ian Power:** The Senator has asked a great question. From what we have seen with some interventions and those engaging on the Intreo side, it is the taking an interest in a person's desires, interests and work goals rather than, as Mr. Eustace mentioned, slotting people into schemes and training places just for the sake of it. We know that if we can match young people with opportunities that they want to do then they are much more likely to stick and be successful.

As the Senator has pointed out, we do not yet know where the rate of youth unemployment will land as we emerge from the crisis. What we do know is that the 11% or 12%, to which

the Senator referred to, was sticky so there was a higher proportion of young people who were long-term unemployed over 12 months and over 18 months. It is that cohort of young people who we are most concerned about and we think that the youth guarantee can be most effective for them. Many young people will navigate their way out of this crisis themselves through accessing the increased availability of training and education places. It is the young people who are furthest away from the labour market that we need to provide with more intense support. The youth work sector is a really well placed sector to bring those young people on and engage with them. We do get feedback regarding those with whom they engage, and it is remotely online at the moment. In terms of personnel within the Intreo offices, sometimes it is not necessarily a personalised or empathetic approach or an approach that takes cognisance of where a young person is coming from and going to.

**Senator Aisling Dolan:** I am curious to know the feedback that all of the witnesses have received from organisations. The apprenticeship scheme has 60 programmes and will bring on another 18 programmes. In addition, consideration is being given to including public authorities or public sector, the healthcare sector and the green economy. Can some of the organisations that the NYCI and *SpunOut.ie* work with take on apprenticeships to train and lead people as mentioned earlier? Perhaps the witnesses would like to answer my question separately. Can they say now whether the organisations have engaged with the apprenticeship programme? What other programmes would they like included? The apprenticeship programme is extremely broad and there is something for everyone be it a laboratory technician, the pharmaceutical side, hairdressing and mechanics. We are looking to widen the scheme even more.

**Chairman:** Is there much interaction between the Traveller community and direct provision community? Have the organisations present received many calls from them?

**Ms Rachael Treanor:** The National Youth Council of Ireland has an equality and intercultural programme, which works very closely with direct provision centres and the youth workers who work with the Traveller community. Similar to what we have said, they pretty much engage with them every single day. The needs and issues that arise for those communities are similar to what we have already spoken about.

In terms of direct provision centres and the need there in terms of the restrictions, when the restrictions were implemented, the area in which they were and the living arrangements were all massive issues. We can get the information from that team and forward it to the Chairman so she knows what they saw over the past year.

**Chairman:** That would be great.

**Mr. Ian Power:** My organisation has a system called action panels that enables us to engage with young people across the country. Recently, two new panels were established. One was for young Travellers and the other panel was for a group of young people who have identified themselves as the BAME youth action panel, which is the black, Asian and minority ethnic action panel.

For young Travellers, we have partnered with Pavee Point on a project that will be launched soon on young Traveller mental health. The number one issue for them is access to quality accommodation and services. We know for a long time that local authorities have not been spending the budgets that were available to them for Traveller housing and accommodation. To refer back to what we spoke about earlier, which is true for all young people, in order to have good mental health one needs to have basic needs met and housing is one of them.

We have also partnered with Pavee Point on the text service. It created a Traveller culture and awareness education programme for all of the volunteers of the texting service. So all volunteers had to complete the education programme before we launched the partnership with Pavee Point. Now Pavee Point advertises the texting service to young Travellers across the country. We have created some resources around that so we can send those on.

Finally, in terms of young people in direct provision, we welcome the commitment by the Government to dismantle the current system of direct provision. We know that it harms young people's mental health from a basic needs perspective, freedom and independence. That has come through from the young people who have been involved in the BAME action panel. Young people have also written about their experiences for *SpunOut.ie* and they have been published on our website for people to read.

I thank the Chair for raising the matter. We need to ensure that the concept of basic needs relates to all young people, including the most vulnerable. The way that Ireland addresses the needs of young people from those communities is far below the level that we would expect for them.

**Chairman:** I thank everyone most sincerely for their fantastic presentations. It was wonderful listening to them and I thank everyone for the brilliant work they are all doing. I remind members that the sub-committee will meet in private session on Monday next to discuss its work programme.

The sub-committee adjourned at 11.31 a.m. until 9.30 a.m. on Thursday, 13 May 2021.