

Mental Health Commission advises that a ‘National Mental Health Promotion and Support Plan’ be prioritised and implemented

Prioritising mental health has never been more critical than it is now

Sunday, October 11th: The Mental Health Commission has this week formally written to the Minister for Mental Health and Older Persons, Minister Butler TD advising the Government, to prioritise a ‘National Mental Health Promotion and Support Plan’ recommended in ‘Sharing the Vision’ and urgently implement it to assist people through the current pandemic.

One of the key recommendations of “Sharing the Vision” said Mental Health Commission Chief Executive, John Farrelly “is to develop a National Mental Health Promotion Plan. The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly impacted mental health services with both restricted access during lockdowns and the creation of increasing demand for services as people try to cope with the pandemic. Almost *everyone* is experiencing increased levels of uncertainty, stress, and anxiety as our confirmed cases of COVID-19 increase.”

Mr. Farrelly outlined “The Commission has formally advised as per its function under Section 33 of the Mental Health Act 2001, that given the current emergency, this national plan is prioritised and a public mental health campaign implemented to support through the current pandemic.”

“The Commission recognises the work of the National Public Health Emergency Team, and is acutely aware that restrictions are necessary to protect the physical health and life of the country’s citizens. However, it is also clear that as the pandemic progresses mental health also needs to be prioritised. As a country, we have an ethical imperative to protect and support people’s mental health and in doing this, at a community and primary care level, we, in turn, help protect our specialist psychiatric services. It is evident that restrictions, the effects of social distancing, lockdowns, loneliness, bereavement, loss of livelihoods, closures of businesses and the inevitable recession that lies ahead has a significant impact on the mental health and wellbeing of the population.

We have yet to reach the peak of the mental health crisis, and must continue to think long term. The lasting effects of this pandemic will be keenly felt by us all – those working on the frontline, people who haven’t had an opportunity to grieve, those who have spent months alone and lonely, young people who had their support network taken away overnight.

To that end the Commission has formally advised the Minister that the immediate delivery of a mental health promotion plan to support individuals and at-risk groups during restrictions, would be an appropriate and welcomed intervention at this time.”

The Commission observes that “Sharing the Vision” sets a goal that where the voluntary sector provides services aligned to national policy that this funding should be made secure and dependable. We believe ring-fenced targeted funding for these organisations at this time, would generate solidarity while also ensuring an integrated stepwise approach that can be swiftly implemented.”

Mr. Farrelly added “Any emergency mental health promotion and support campaign will need to leverage community organisations to support an understandably strained Health Service Executive.

We recognise the work of staff and management in our mental health services who have gone beyond the call of duty in the last eight months and protected the lives of many.

Acknowledging 'Sharing the Vision – a Mental Health Policy for Everyone', Mr. Farrelly said, "The Commission would like to reiterate our welcome for 'Sharing the Vision' and the proposed implementation group and roadmap announced this week."

Ends

Notes to the Editor:

About the Mental Health Commission

The Mental Health Commission is an independent statutory body. The primary functions of the Mental Health Commission are to foster and promote high standards of care and good practice in the delivery of mental health services and to ensure that the interests of those involuntarily admitted are protected, pursuant to the Mental Health Act 2001. The Mental Health Commission also has statutory responsibility for the Decision Support Service under the Assisted Decision-Making (Capacity) Act 2015.

Covid-19 and the Commission

Although the Commission had been in regular contact with the approved in-patient mental health units since the beginning of March in relation to plans to deal with the virus, it was requested by the Department of Health at the start of April to risk-rate these units, along with the (unregulated) 24-hour community residences. The Commission supported the HSE by identifying risks at these facilities to ensure that the health service was in possession of the correct information and could, if necessary, take immediate and effective action.

The Commission developed a standardised regulatory support framework and worked over the phone with all services to determine their risks in relation to staffing, equipment, premises and specialist support. If risk areas were identified, the Commission escalated those concerns to the highest levels of the HSE.

In addition, the Commission initiated a fast track registration scheme to enable immediate access to new and more suitable buildings. The Commission continues to monitor all residential mental health services in relation to the pandemic, and provides data to the Department of Health and the HSE on a weekly basis, with any identified issues escalated as appropriate.