



As we approach World Mental Health Day 2021, I am asking you, as political party leaders, to make a promise to the population of Northern Ireland that you represent. The theme of World Mental Health Day this year is inequalities, and we know that the high rates of mental ill health in Northern Ireland are related to the social and economic inequalities that exist here, the trauma of the Troubles, and the legacy of childhood adversities. The COVID 19 pandemic has led to unprecedented demand for mental health services, and staff are under pressure like never before. In Northern Ireland prior to the pandemic, one in eight children had an emotional or mental health problem, this was higher than neighbouring regions<sup>1</sup>. There is worrying evidence that our mental health has deteriorated as a result of the pandemic<sup>2,3,4</sup>, and evidence of an increase in the proportions of people reporting suicidal thoughts<sup>4</sup>. Mental illness is a preventable and treatable cause of death and suffering; and it is unacceptable that so many people in Northern Ireland are unable to access the treatments and services that they need and deserve.

Despite the pressure of the pandemic, the Department of Health developed, in conjunction with people with lived experience, carers, campaigners and health care providers, a new 10-year Mental Health Strategy, which is the road map for reforming our mental health services. It sets out an ambitious, but achievable vision to improve services and provide the specialist treatments that we know based on strong research evidence, can eliminate avoidable harm, and transform and save lives. Importantly, the Strategy recognises the need to prioritise early intervention and the prevention of mental illness, particularly in high-risk groups.

The Mental Health Strategy's funding plan indicates a need for an additional £1.2 billion over the next 10 years, and Government Departments need to work together to ensure that this funding is made available. However, in this context it is important to note that poor mental health is not solely a 'health' issue but is a result of many overlapping social determinants and preventable adversities. Our expenditure on mental health services is currently significantly lower than neighbouring regions (27% lower than England and 20% lower than the Republic of Ireland). The additional funding required to remedy this (approximately 34% more than the current budget), should therefore be viewed as compensating for the ongoing shortfall. In addition, our Protect Life 2 Suicide Prevention Strategy (which currently receives funding of £10 million per year) requires an increase of between 10% and 26% over the next three years.

Full funding of both these the Strategies should be viewed as investments that will pay dividends for current and future generations; and allow our population to thrive. Mental ill-health is the largest cause of disability in the UK, contributing up to 22.8% of the total burden (compared to 15.9% for cancer and 16.2% for cardiovascular disease)<sup>5</sup>. There are compelling arguments to support investment in mental health and suicide prevention; including the protection of human rights, improved physical health, mortality and educational outcomes, a reduction in crime, and enhanced economic productivity and efficiency<sup>6,7</sup>. There are also numerous evidence-based treatment and management

strategies that not only reduce human suffering, but also reduce costs and increase productivity<sup>5</sup>. Inaction and underinvestment will only serve to increase the economic burden of mental health here and amplify existing inequalities.

Mental health is an issue that your Parties claim to support, and the Executive have also demonstrated their commitment to improving the mental health of everyone in the province by supporting the establishment of an Independent Mental Health Champion to be a voice for people who suffer from debilitating, but treatable mental health problems. On World Mental Health Day 2021, I am asking you to make a clear commitment in your forthcoming manifesto, to provide the necessary funding to fully implement the Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Strategies. This is what people on the ground need and want; and the implementation of the Strategies will help secure a happier and healthier Northern Ireland, not only for those who suffer right now, but for future generations.

Yours sincerely,



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**Mental Health Champion for Northern Ireland**

#### References

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