



**The Psychological Society of Ireland**

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**Re: Meeting the Psychological Need Arising from COVID-19**

To All Political Party Leaders,

The Government has been largely guided in the response to COVID-19 by the advice and recommendations of the World Health Organisation (WHO).

The Psychological Society of Ireland (PSI) is asking that the Government, and all political parties, would also heed the advice and warnings from both the United Nations (UN) and the WHO. Both have highlighted that there must be a planned and coordinated response to the psychological impact arising from COVID-19.

UN Secretary-General António Guterres stated that: *“After decades of neglect and underinvestment in mental health services, the COVID-19 pandemic is now hitting families and communities with additional mental stress.”* As you will be aware, only 6% of the annual health budget is spent on mental health, significantly less than the recommended 10%. Considering the impact of COVID-19, we must not only reach this 10% level but significantly exceed it.

There have been many reports published in the past number of years that were positive in their intent, but unfortunately were largely aspirational. Such reports include A Vision for Change and the Report of the Youth Mental Health Taskforce. What has been missing from these reports is the necessary allocation of sufficient funding to make recommendations a reality.

We require a radically different approach to how we protect our nation’s psychological well-being. We need to move away from slow, cumbersome, and outdated models of how we deliver effective and accessible psychological and mental health supports.

In January 2020, the PSI published a [Manifesto for a Psychologically Healthier Ireland](#). The recommendations in that Manifesto are even more relevant now in the era of COVID-19.

A new programme for Government needs to include changes to the current service delivery model so that social and psychological interventions are the first line of treatment considered when a person presents with psychological distress/mental health difficulties.

Directors: Mark Smyth (President), Megan Gaffney (President Elect), Ian O’Grady (Past President),  
Vincent Mc Darby (Honorary Secretary), Michael Stoker (Honorary Treasurer), Dean McDonnell (Membership Secretary)



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Improved and more cost-effective health outcomes are being achieved internationally where the centrality of psychological and social issues in the development and maintenance of mental health difficulties are meaningfully acknowledged.

Ideally from the first contact with health services, people should be offered evidence-based interventions which should be psycho-social, collaborative, and person-centred. Increased staffing is needed across physical and mental health services so that early intervention can be delivered to those with, or at risk of developing, psychological difficulties.

While many excellent services presently exist, the current waiting time to access psychological assessment and intervention in many areas is unacceptable and could be greatly improved. Psychological services are going to be more in demand in the months and years to come as a result of COVID-19 and significant investment is needed to help children, adults, and families at risk, or in distress, to access the psychological supports they need.

The huge cost saving of early intervention regarding psychological difficulties across the lifespan is widely understood. Intervening at the early stages, while a difficulty is mild or before the difficulties have become entrenched, is common sense and cost effective.

In any programme for Government talks, there will understandably be a variety of competing interests regarding how money should be allocated, even more so amid a recession. There will be calls for more roads, buildings, and rail. However, alongside this we need to invest in the most crucial infrastructure project of all, the psychological well-being of our nation. Mental health funding has never been a vote-defining issue. Given the impact that COVID-19 has had on us all, the response of political parties to meeting the psychological need that is now arising will become vote-defining.

Mitigating against the impact of isolation, loneliness, job losses, stress and uncertainty requires a cross-departmental approach in conjunction with professional representative bodies.

The PSI is calling for:

1. A commitment to increase the mental health budget to at least the recommended 10% of the overall health budget in a clearly defined timeframe.
2. The immediate creation of a cross-departmental task force with professional representative bodies to plan for how to meet the psychological and mental health impact of COVID-19. The PSI will work with all parties to achieve this.

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3. An urgent investment in mental health staffing and service provision to reduce the unacceptable current waiting time for psychological assessment and intervention. A significant increase in the Primary Care Psychology resources is key to meeting early intervention targets.
4. The undertaking of workforce planning and training to ensure a skilled future workforce to deliver essential and timely interventions to those most in need. This planning should include the provision of funding to the Doctorates in Counselling and Educational Psychology training programmes, alongside an expansion of the number of funded places in Doctorate in Clinical Psychology training programme places.
5. The provision of a highly skilled front-line workforce which requires sufficient posts at Senior Psychologist level to facilitate supervision of early career psychologists to deliver high-quality psychological care to those who urgently require it.
6. National Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) on outcomes and not just wait times, ensuring that outcomes are person-centred and monitored.
7. The difficulties to be addressed regarding recruitment and retention of front-line psychology professionals. This is required to ensure consistent, equitable and timely access across the country to much needed psychological assessment and interventions.

The PSI asks that, as the leader of your party, you will commit to ensuring that the psychological well-being of our nation will be to the fore in programme for Government discussions, in Government or from the opposition benches.

Strong leadership will be required to effectively meet the psychological need that is to come and as the representative body for Psychologists in Ireland, the PSI will work with you and your party to plan how to meet this need.

Yours sincerely,

Mark Smyth  
President  
The Psychological Society of Ireland

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