



Press Release – Friday 12 August 2022

Psychological Society of Ireland advises on the importance of public health nurse home visits

Following the recent withdrawal of public health nurse developmental checks for babies by the Health Service Executive (HSE) in several areas around the country, the Psychological Society of Ireland is advising on the importance of public health nurse home visits. Rather than the standard early year developmental checks by a public health nurse, this system is moving to one of prioritisation in certain Community Healthcare Organisation (CHO) areas, meaning that only young children with proven medical risk or need will be seen.

PSI president Dr Vincent McDarby states: “The public health nurse system was a national service in Ireland but will move to a system of prioritisation where only those identified with a medical risk, or where a need was already identified, are seen. The absence of early detection and preventative interventions will lead to more serious difficulties being identified at a later period and, therefore, have a costly impact on baby, child, and family.”

The PSI’s Special Interest Group in Perinatal and Infant Mental Health (SIGPIMH) and Special Interest Group in Paediatric Psychology (SIGPeP) have put together the following information to outline and support the importance of public health nurse home visits in the early years.

- **What are public health nurse home visits and why are they important?**

Public health nurse (PHN) home visits are an essential community-based service to promote and protect the health of the population. PHNs usually meet families during the first three days at home to assess and provide advice for a range of difficulties including feeding, safe sleep, child safety, bonding, and connecting with your infant. PHNs are available at intervals for the first three and a half years of a child’s life to support the continued development, assess for developmental delay, and identify follow-up for any potential underlying conditions. PHNs also identify and provide information and advice to parents experiencing postnatal anxiety or depression and support parents in having confidence in their own parenting role.

- **Perinatal mental health**

It is known that women and men are at risk for postpartum depression and anxiety in the first year following the birth of their baby. PHN home visits provide an essential lifeline to

the emotional wellbeing of new parents, supporting them to understand if their mood difficulties are more than just 'baby blues' and advising them where to get help if needed.

- **Infant mental health**

PHN visits address practical and care concerns with a new baby but also highlight ways to connect and enhance the relationship between baby and parent. There is an established body of research that indicates that early relationships lay the foundation and template for later social and emotional development. Without these visits, new parents will not have important support from the PHN in those early days and weeks to support their new relationship with their infant.

- **Developmental assessments**

PHN developmental checks are a population-based service, designed to cast the net wide to identify the developmental needs of as many children as possible at the earliest point in time. The specific risks identified can include medical, physical, communication, learning, social, and emotional wellbeing concerns. This early identification paves the way for intervention to address and support the child and, if necessary, further detailed assessment to better understand the child's developmental profile. The removal of routine developmental checks and move towards a prioritisation system within PHN services is hugely concerning. This retrograde step will inevitably lead to later identification of developmental delay and consequent delayed access to intervention and further assessment.

- **Developmental assessments during COVID**

COVID-19 interrupted many cultural and societal norms related to welcoming a new baby into the world. Across Ireland, PHN checks have been a vital face of community health services. During COVID, over half the infants born in Ireland missed a developmental health check. In the United Kingdom, only 1 in 10 parents of children under two reported seeing a health visitor face-to-face during the pandemic. These developmental checks can be supportive and reassuring and are central to highlighting early intervention needs amongst infants to identify underlying conditions before difficulties become entrenched. This new reduction in service provision can only further compound the lack of public health nurse visits that were possible for families with young babies during COVID-19.

- **Impact of lack of early detection through the PHN home visit on health services**

Delays and derailments in one aspect of the system, such as the PHN service, have significant impacts elsewhere, such as waiting lists for paediatric hospital neurodevelopmental services, orthopaedic, and general paediatric hospital services. This removal of a population-based developmental service occurs at a time when our children and young people are already facing unacceptable delays in access to assessment and intervention with Child Disability Network Teams (CDNTs), primary care teams, and Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHs). Funding and recruitment of PHNs are cited as large contributing factors to the proposed change in PHN services. It creates

more of a burden on the delivery of timely healthcare in Irish society and these proposed changes will incur even more of a financial burden with potentially costly surgeries and interventions needed because of the interruption of this vital service.

- **What is the negative impact on babies, children, and parents?**

The aforementioned information contributes a significant burden and responsibility being placed on parents to identify impairments and difficulties. Given no two babies and no two children are the same in how and when they meet their developmental milestones, it is unrealistic to expect parents who may have no knowledge in this area to be able to identify delays or the need for intervention. It is a costly burden on the child and the family from a health and wellbeing perspective when needs and treatment are not provided earlier.

The inevitable outcomes of these funding and recruitment issues will be a failure to identify, assess, and support children with developmental, social, and emotional difficulties at the appropriate time and supporting parents during a major transition to becoming parents to these new babies and children into the world. This withdrawal of service will lead to more severity of illness and longer-term health conditions for these children and parents because of this delay.

Our children are our future and are a cohort most vulnerable to poverty and abuse; therefore, more rather than fewer resources should be invested in them. According to John Bowlby in a 1951 World Health Organization (WHO) report, 'If a community values its children, it must cherish their parents' - this PHN community service is one way to support parents in supporting their children.

ENDS.

For further information, or to arrange an interview please contact:

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Points to note:

- The information regarding only 1 in 10 parents of children in the UK under two reporting seeing a health visitor face-to-face during the pandemic was sourced from [Best Beginnings](#).
- The Psychological Society of Ireland (PSI) is the learned and professional body for the profession in the Republic of Ireland, with the primary object of advancing psychology as an applied science in Ireland and elsewhere.
- Connect with the PSI through [Twitter](#), [Facebook](#), [Instagram](#), [YouTube](#), and [LinkedIn](#).

- The Special Interest Group in Perinatal and Infant Mental Health (SIGPIMH) promotes the clinical practice, education, and research regarding the health and development of parents and infants from conception and pregnancy through to five years postpartum, within both the discipline of psychology in addition to interdisciplinary cooperation with other medical and allied health professions. Connect with SIGPIMH through social media accounts [Twitter](#), [Facebook](#), and [Instagram](#).
- The Special Interest Group in Paediatric Psychology (SIGPeP) was formed as a means of bringing together clinicians and researchers with an interest in paediatric psychology in Ireland. Connect with SIGPeP through social media accounts [Twitter](#) and [Instagram](#).