



Cumann Síceolaithe Éireann

The Psychological Society of Ireland Manifesto for a Psychologically Healthier Ireland

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The Psychological Society of Ireland

Manifesto for a Psychologically Healthier Ireland

Ireland will elect a new Government in February 2020. This is an opportunity for each political grouping in Ireland to have, at the core of their manifestos, policies that will work towards achieving a Psychologically Healthier Ireland. In so doing, they will follow the lead of Icelandic Government whose Prime Minister (PM), Katrín Jakobsdóttir, recently urged world governments to prioritise environmental and family-friendly policies over those of economic growth figures. President Jakobsdóttir's calls echo those of Scottish First Minister Nicola Sturgeon and New Zealand's PM Jacinda Ardern for government-led global well-being agendas.

The Psychological Society of Ireland (PSI) fully supports the existing *Healthy Ireland* initiative of the Irish Government, though it believes that a Psychologically Healthier Ireland initiative needs to prioritise and include other areas not embedded within the existing initiative. The PSI calls on the different political parties to consider placing these recommendations at the core of their political manifestos and programmes for Government. These policies are informed and shaped by extensive psychological evidence and expertise that seek to improve the everyday lives of the citizens of Ireland.

Housing / Homelessness

- The relationship between housing and mental health exists, though it is complicated.
- Housing and/or reliable shelter is accepted as a fundamental human need (Maslow, 1962), providing safety so that other higher order needs can be fulfilled.
- Those living with housing issues are at an increased risk of developing mental health problems, with evidence suggesting children are particularly vulnerable.
- Mental illness can be both a cause and consequence of homelessness.
- Unresolved housing issues are likely to result in increased mental health needs, placing a greater burden on already under-resourced mental health services.

Education

- International research identifies household educational attainment as predictive of child and adolescent mental health problems (Thompson et al., 2017).
- Irish longitudinal research by Power *et al.* (2015) found that young people not in education, employment or training had a sevenfold increased risk of current suicidal ideation, a fourfold increased odds of being diagnosed with a mental disorder in childhood or early adolescence, a threefold increased risk of any mental health disorder, and a threefold

increased odds of suicide attempts over their lifetime, compared with their educationally and economically active peers.

- The most important factor when it comes to predicting a child's future education level is parental education (OECD Education at a Glance, 2017).
- Ireland compares favourably with international counterparts (4th out of 25 OECD countries) on the rates of 25-34 year olds having achieved a tertiary education in 2018 (OECD, 2019).
- Having a third level of education has a material benefit for future income earnings and is associated with reduced rates of developing mental health problems.
- The continuation of state support towards maintaining free third level education is a critical component of this strategy.
- Given Ireland's comparatively low rate of enrolment in technical and vocational training (2nd lowest out of 36 OECD countries), future Governments may wish to invest in this strand of education and training for those at risk of early departure from the general educational system.

Access to Psychological Care

- 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. 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. These issues include:
 - trauma,
 - poverty;
 - family problems;
 - relationships;
 - social inequality;
 - exclusion.

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 exist presently the current waiting time to access psychological assessment and intervention in many areas is unacceptable and could be greatly improved. 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 with regard to 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. To achieve this, we need a commitment to:

- Invest urgently in mental health staffing and service provision in order to reduce the unacceptable current waiting time for psychological assessment and intervention;
- Address the difficulties in recruitment and retention of front-line psychology professionals to ensure consistent, equitable and timely access across the country to much needed psychological assessment and interventions;
- Undertake workforce planning and training in order 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;
- Provide 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 require it as soon as possible.

Climate Change

- 2019 was a year that succeeded in putting climate change and an impending climate crisis on global political agendas.
- In November 2019, 11,000 world scientists published a collective statement in the journal *BioScience*, declaring “clearly and unequivocally” that planet Earth is facing a climate emergency requiring major and radical transformations to the way we live our lives and allow our societies to function, if we are to live sustainably.
- Government policies must tackle fossil fuel use, prioritise renewable energy sources, restore forests and mangroves that absorb CO₂, balance agricultural activity with plant-based alternatives, shift economic goals away from a flawed and limited GDP focus, and further prioritise sustainable population health.
- Poor mental health is associated with three different forms of climate-related events:
 - acute events such as hurricanes, floods, and wildfires;
 - subacute or long-term changes such as drought and heat stress; and
 - the existential threat of long-lasting changes, including higher temperatures, rising sea levels and a permanently altered and potentially uninhabitable physical environment.
- Depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress are the most common impacts.
- Impacts represent both direct and indirect consequences of global climate change.
- Children and residents of low and middle-income countries are especially vulnerable.
- Understanding impact scope and scale is critical for prevention and treatment.

Direct Provision

- A new Government needs to propose an evidence-based and humane alternative to the current process of Direct Provision. Our colleagues in the Irish Refugee Council have concluded that Direct Provision is currently characterised by:
 - Families and young people living in overcrowded and unsafe living environments;
 - A lack of appropriate and nutritious food;
 - High levels of poverty and exclusion;
 - Limited opportunities for play, development and education.
- Irish people understand the importance of basic human rights and the practices of the past are no longer acceptable in modern Irish society. We are a welcoming country and understand that there are better ways to include, educate and nurture those seeking to call Ireland their home and input to Irish society.

Sport & Exercise

- Irish people have always been considered passionate about, and united in, their love of sport. Irish athletes and teams competing on the world-stage regularly capture the nation's imagination and support.
- The physical and psychological benefits of taking part in such sporting endeavours, indeed any form of regular exercise, are well documented (Mugford & Cremades, 2019; World Health Organisation, 2010). However, large sectors of Irish society continue to ignore these benefits and sedentary lifestyles have become the norm for many individuals, especially within the past three decades. According to Dr Donal O'Shea (RTE, 2018 - Ecoeye), Ireland remains on-course to become the most obese country in the EU by 2030. This will place an unnecessary and costly strain on an already in-crisis healthcare system.
- A new Government needs to actively address all of these important issues by maintaining the current support, and providing additional funding, to help all sectors of Irish society to engage in and enjoy physical / sport activities. A pledge to meet the following would be very welcomed:
 - Continued and increased monetary support for local and national physical activity initiatives, such as the Bicycle and Park Run schemes, to help address the obesity crisis;
 - Research funding for the development of new, creative, educational initiatives, to encourage more people from the most at-risk, vulnerable and disadvantaged sectors of Irish society, to engage in and benefit, physically and mentally, from sport participation.