



Psychological Society of Ireland (PSI)

Opening Statement to the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Education, Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science

Roundtable Discussion on Mental Health Supports in Schools and Tertiary Education

Chairperson and members of the Committee,

I am Mark Smyth, past president (2020) of the Psychological Society of Ireland, which is the learned and professional body for psychology and psychologists in the Republic of Ireland.

On behalf of the Psychological Society of Ireland (PSI), I would like to thank you for the opportunity today to address the Joint Committee on Education, Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science. The PSI is grateful to the Joint Committee for the invitation to make a submission, as part of the Committee's examination of mental health supports in schools and tertiary education.

One in three young people in Ireland are at risk of experiencing a mental disorder by the age of 13. This also coincides with when children make the often-challenging transition from primary to secondary education and when their bodies are undergoing significant physiological and emotional changes. According to *My World Survey 2* study carried out by the University College Dublin (UCD) School of Psychology, the top three stressors in an Irish adolescent's life are school, exams, and homework.

Sharing the Vision recommends a stepped approach to care that would focus on promotion, prevention, early intervention, recovery, and participation. Over time, this should reduce the need for more expensive acute and crisis response services. In this context, strategic investment in primary care services should be viewed as an investment rather than a cost.

However, the current reality is that as of August 2022, over 11,000 children were waiting for access to Community Primary Care Psychology services with almost 4,000 children waiting more than a year for an appointment. That is 4,000 young lives prevented from accessing the supports that would see their difficulties reduced and overcome by spending over a year waiting for those supports. The additional investment in primary care psychology and mental health as part of the 2022 Waiting List Action Plan was welcomed but there are not enough psychologists trained or available for sustained meaningful reductions in waiting lists.

The National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) supports the personal, social, and educational development of children in schools. This can be complex work that requires psychologists to become deeply involved in building trusting relationships with school communities.

The PSI welcomes the announcement in Budget 2023 that NEPS will receive funding for an additional 54 psychologists to provide services to special schools and special classes. While this is a positive development there will continue to be shortages of NEPS psychologists in schools due to there being no provision for cover for maternity leave. In a predominantly female dominated profession, the impact of a lack of cover for maternity leave places additional unnecessary strains on psychological services to schools. In addition, inexplicably the situation continues that trainee educational psychologists are expected to train for free for three years and pay thousands in fees each year. This is a direct impediment to attracting candidates to the profession as it is in direct contrast to other psychology professional training courses.

In contrast to the successful roll out of the assistant psychologist (AP) grade in primary care psychology services there is no current provision for employment of APs with NEPS. Employing APs could enhance NEPS service provision by freeing up qualified educational psychologists to complete the more complex work that they have been trained to do.

A clear causal line can be established between oversubscribed specialist Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) and the failure to resource primary care psychology services to the extent required in providing evidence based early intervention for children with mild to moderate mental health difficulties in school settings and in the community.

Mental health support to staff, students, and other members of the education community can help to reduce the frequency, length and impact of mental health difficulties that young people experience.

The successful adaptation and implementation of increased psychological supports within schools is constrained by several factors, with one factor predominating.

Ireland does not have enough places on professional training programmes to meet current or future demands. Even if significant additional government funding was to be provided to increase the numbers of psychologists in primary care psychology and NEPS posts, the reality is that we are not training enough psychologists to fill those posts.

The Health Service Executive (HSE) *Report of the National Psychology Project Team* estimated a need for an additional 322 psychologists in mental health services alone. Each year approximately 100 psychologists enter professional training programmes.

The key to the delivery of high-quality psychological services at a primary care level, including in our schools, is the sufficient availability of skilled and trained personnel.

However, there are significant shortfalls in the provision of psychological services due to inadequate staffing levels resulting in long waiting lists and significant difficulties in both the recruitment and retention of trained staff. One of the critical factors is the insufficient number of funded postgraduate training places.

In 2000, under the leadership of the then Minister for Health Mr Micheál Martin, the Department of Health and Children responded swiftly to the requirement for the provision of extra training places by approving funding for a total of 30 additional trainee posts each year for three years.

The PSI called upon the Government and the Taoiseach in Budget 2023 to show the quality of leadership shown in 2000, and respond just as swiftly in 2023 to provide multi-annual funding to address the significant gaps in our psychological workforce.

Specifically, the PSI continues to call on the Government to:

- Fund an additional 50 trainee psychologist posts across all the professional doctoral programmes each year for a five-year period which would necessitate an additional €2.45 million in funding per year, €12.25 million over the five years.

In psychology there is the principle of Occams razor which posits that the simplest explanation is often the most correct. In the instance of why we have such wholly unacceptable waiting lists for children and young people the answer is that we have failed to train enough professional psychologists to meet the previously predicted demand and this crisis in access will remain the case until additional funded training places are provided.

Thank you.

Representing the Psychological Society of Ireland at the Joint Committee on Education, Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science Roundtable Discussion on Mental Health Supports in Schools and Tertiary Education is Mark Smyth (PSI past president 2020)

Meeting details: Tuesday, 15 November 2022 at 11.00 am, in Committee Room 2, LH2000, Leinster House.