

# Mental Health Policy Alliance Response to Draft Programme for Government 2024-2027



The Mental Health Policy Alliance is a coalition of leading mental health organisations dedicated to transforming mental health outcomes in Northern Ireland. We exist to drive strategic policy change, improve service delivery, and ensure that mental health is recognised as a public health priority. The Mental Health Policy Alliance welcomes the draft Programme for Government (PfG) 2024-2027 and commends the Northern Ireland Executive for recognising the critical importance of health and wellbeing. The PfG's focus on improving mental health, tackling health inequalities, and promoting early intervention represents significant progress in addressing some of the most pressing issues in our society. However, while we acknowledge these positive steps, we believe that the scale of the mental health crisis in Northern Ireland demands even greater ambition, backed by detailed, actionable commitments.

## **1. The Mental Health Crisis in Northern Ireland: A System at Breaking Point**

Northern Ireland continues to grapple with one of the worst mental health crises in the UK. The region's complex socio-political legacy, combined with deep-rooted socio-economic challenges, has contributed to a mental health landscape that is starkly different from the rest of the UK. The prevalence of mental health issues is higher here than anywhere else in the UK, and the impact is felt most acutely in the most deprived communities.

### **Prevalence of Mental Health Conditions**

According to the Northern Ireland Health Survey<sup>1</sup>, mental health prevalence in Northern Ireland provides insight into both adult and youth mental health conditions. According to the 2022/23 Northern Ireland Health Survey, approximately 32% of respondents reported concerns about their own mental health within the past year, with around 21% scoring high on the GHQ-12 scale (General Health Questionnaire), indicating probable mental health problems. This prevalence is consistent with pre-pandemic levels of mental health concerns in the region, though it remains a serious concern given the enduring impacts of socio-economic hardship and the legacy of conflict on mental wellbeing in Northern Ireland.

### **Suicide Rates: A Public Health Emergency**

Suicide rates in Northern Ireland remain alarmingly high. In 2022, 203 people died by suicide, with men making up 76.8% of these deaths. While this represents a slight decrease from the previous year, it is still disproportionately high, particularly in comparison to other parts of the UK. Suicide disproportionately affects young men and those living in socio-economically deprived areas, with those in the most deprived communities being up to three times more likely to die by suicide than those in wealthier areas.

The Mental Health Foundation's research<sup>2</sup> found that mental health problems cost the Northern Ireland economy at least £3.4 billion per year. Economic growth is intrinsically linked to mental wellbeing. Any policy designed to boost the economy must factor in mental health support to ensure the workforce remains resilient and productive. Employers must develop mental health-focused policies, such as workplace mental health support initiatives, to retain employees and boost productivity.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/news/health-survey-northern-ireland-first-results-202122>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/about-us/news/mental-health-problems-cost-northern-ireland-economy-least-gbp-34-billion-year-new-research>

## **CAMHS and Adult Mental Health Waiting Lists**

The strain on Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) and adult mental health services is another key indicator of the system's struggles. As of 31 December 2023, there were 2,095 total waits for a Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS) assessment in Northern Ireland, and of which 1,104 were waiting for more than nine weeks (53%).<sup>3</sup> The adult mental health system is similarly overwhelmed, with lengthy waiting lists for psychological therapies and specialist support.

Despite the current backlog of patients in need of services, we must note the absence of accurate data from Health and Social Care Trusts (HSCTs) regarding mental health service waiting times, except for the limited data available on CAMHS. This lack of data hinders accountability and progress in reducing waiting lists, a situation that is simply unacceptable. In contrast, physical health waiting lists are tracked and reported. We call on the Executive to treat mental health with the same level of urgency as physical health.

This shortage of timely access to care exacerbates mental health conditions, pushing individuals towards crisis points. These delays not only increase the burden on families but also place unsustainable pressure on acute services, as more people require emergency intervention.

Moreover, prolonged waiting times for mental health services can have serious, long-term effects on young people. Without timely intervention, mental health issues may worsen, leading to feelings of isolation and increasing the risk of self-harm or suicide. Investing in prevention at this critical stage can significantly reduce future costs, both emotionally and financially. As Professor Siobhán O'Neill highlights, early intervention not only alleviates suffering but also delivers long-term savings by preventing a wave of complex and costly mental health conditions in adulthood.<sup>4</sup>

## **2. Welcoming Key Commitments in the PfG: A Foundation to Build On**

The Mental Health Policy Alliance acknowledges the important steps laid out in the draft PfG, which lay the groundwork for addressing the current mental health crisis. The focus on wellbeing, early intervention, and cross-departmental collaboration is especially welcome, and these commitments align with our vision for a transformed mental health landscape in Northern Ireland.

### **Commitment to Health and Wellbeing as a Core Theme**

The recognition of health and wellbeing as a central pillar of the PfG signals the Executive's understanding of the interconnectedness of mental and physical health. We welcome the emphasis on improving mental health outcomes and reducing health inequalities, particularly

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/news/camhs-waiting-time-statistics-northern-ireland-december-2023>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.mentalhealthchampion-ni.org.uk/news/professor-siobhan-oneill-speaks-mental-health-services-struggling-waiting-lists-grow>

as Northern Ireland's most vulnerable populations—those living in poverty, experiencing homelessness, or facing unemployment—are disproportionately affected by mental ill health.

It is also encouraging to see a commitment to safer communities, where trauma-informed systems will be embedded across government, and collaboration with community organisations is prioritised. However, this approach must go beyond trauma related to the post-conflict context and also consider other forms of trauma, such as those experienced by victims of crime, refugees, asylum seekers and those in our criminal justice system. The PfG should include measurable outcomes for the implementation of these trauma-informed systems.

Moreover, carers are invaluable partners in mental health, often carrying a significant emotional and practical load with limited direct support. We urge the PfG to prioritise explicit advocacy for carers, ensuring their voices shape mental health policy, and to commit to targeted measures that support their wellbeing, including mental health support, financial assistance, respite, and peer support services. Recognising carers as key stakeholders is not only compassionate but essential to building a resilient and sustainable mental health system in Northern Ireland.

### **Focus on Early Intervention and Prevention**

The PfG's commitment to early intervention and prevention is a significant and much-needed step forward. Early intervention, particularly in childhood and adolescence, can significantly reduce the long-term impact of mental health problems. We strongly support the PfG's emphasis on promoting resilience and wellbeing among children and young people, which can prevent the escalation of mental health issues and reduce the burden on acute services later in life.

However, more detail is required on how these early intervention strategies will be funded, implemented, and measured. The PfG must clarify how it plans to expand access to CAMHS and other early intervention services, ensuring that no child or young person is left waiting for essential care. The Children and Young People's Emotional Health and Wellbeing Framework, alongside Protect Life 2 and the Substance Use Strategy, must be more prominently recognised in the PfG.

### **Cross-Departmental Collaboration: A Holistic Approach to Mental Health**

The recognition that mental health must be addressed across multiple sectors is critical. Mental health is influenced by a range of factors, including education, housing, employment, and social care. The PfG's call for cross-departmental collaboration is therefore a welcome step towards a more holistic approach to mental health.

However, to ensure that this collaboration leads to real-world change, it is essential that the PfG includes clear accountability mechanisms and measurable outcomes for each department involved. Without these, there is a risk that cross-departmental collaboration will become an aspiration rather than a reality.

### **3. Expanding Commitments: Turning Vision into Reality**

While we welcome the commitments in the PfG, we believe that they must be expanded to address the scale and complexity of Northern Ireland's mental health crisis. The following areas require further action and investment to ensure that the vision laid out in the PfG is realised.

## **A. Fully Fund and Implement the Mental Health Strategy 2021-2031**

The Mental Health Strategy 2021-2031 provides a comprehensive framework for transforming mental health services in Northern Ireland. However, without full and sustained funding, this strategy will remain a paper exercise. The PfG must include specific commitments to allocate a ring-fenced budget for the full implementation of the strategy, with a particular focus on expanding prevention and early intervention services, enhancing community-based care, and addressing workforce shortages.

Recommendations:

- Ensure ring-fenced funding for the Mental Health Strategy, with a focus on:
  - Early intervention and prevention services, including CAMHS and youth services.
  - Community-based mental health services framed in a human rights approach, providing accessible care close to home, reducing reliance on acute care.
  - Workforce development, ensuring that the mental health sector has the staffing levels and skills needed to meet demand.
- Develop a clear implementation timeline with measurable targets for the delivery of key elements of the strategy.

## **B. Full Funding and Implementation of the Protect Life 2 Suicide Prevention Strategy**

The Protect Life 2 Strategy is essential for reducing suicide rates, particularly in Northern Ireland's most deprived areas and among high-risk groups such as young men. The PfG must commit to fully funding this strategy, with a focus on community-based prevention, crisis intervention, and postvention support for those affected by suicide.

Recommendations:

- Expand suicide prevention initiatives in socio-economically deprived areas, ensuring that support is available where it is needed most.
- Provide ongoing suicide prevention training for frontline workers across sectors, including health, education, and law enforcement.
- Ensure crisis intervention services are available 24/7 and accessible in rural and underserved areas, with specific focus on high-risk demographics.

## **C. Addressing the Social Determinants of Mental Health**

Poverty, housing instability, unemployment and discrimination are significant drivers of poor mental health outcomes. The PfG must recognise the importance of addressing these social determinants if it is to reduce mental health inequalities.

Recommendations:

- Introduce anti-poverty measures that directly address the link between poverty and poor mental health outcomes. This should include increasing access to affordable housing, expanding social protection schemes, and improving financial support for those in need.

- Increase investment in affordable housing and ensure that housing services are equipped to meet the mental health needs of tenants, particularly those with complex mental health issues.
- Develop targeted employment support programmes for individuals with mental health conditions, providing tailored pathways into stable employment and addressing barriers such as stigma and discrimination in the workplace.

The Anti-Poverty Strategy should be prioritised, as poverty is a significant driver of mental health issues. The PfG must make explicit commitments to addressing child poverty and social exclusion. Similarly, the Integration Strategy and Anti-Racism Strategy, both of which have stalled, must be finalised and implemented with urgency. Racism and discrimination are significant stressors that negatively affect the mental health of our communities, and addressing these systemic issues is essential for promoting mental wellbeing.

#### **4. Empowering the Community and Voluntary Sector: A Crucial Partner in Mental Health Delivery**

The community and voluntary sector is a vital partner in delivering mental health services across Northern Ireland. Organisations in this sector provide critical support to individuals and families, particularly in hard-to-reach communities. However, many of these organisations operate on insecure funding, limiting their ability to plan and deliver services sustainably.

The PfG must recognise the essential role of the community and voluntary sector and commit to long-term financial support to ensure that these organisations can continue to provide high-quality mental health care.

Recommendations:

- Commit to multi-year funding for community-based mental health organisations, ensuring that they can plan for the future and deliver sustainable services.
- Ensure that the community and voluntary sector is involved as an equal partner in the design, development, and delivery of mental health services, drawing on their expertise and community knowledge to inform policy and practice.

#### **5. Conclusion: Building a Path to a Healthier Northern Ireland**

The draft PfG sets out an ambitious vision for improving health and wellbeing, but to truly transform mental health outcomes, we need to see more detailed, fully-funded commitments that address the scale and complexity of the challenges we face. The Mental Health Policy Alliance urges the Executive to take decisive action by embedding mental health as a cross-cutting priority across all departments, fully funding key strategies, and addressing the social determinants of mental health.

Only through a coordinated and adequately resourced response can we deliver lasting change for the people of Northern Ireland, ensuring that mental health becomes a priority for all.

## **About the Mental Health Policy Alliance**

The Mental Health Policy Alliance is a coalition of leading mental health organisations dedicated to transforming mental health outcomes in Northern Ireland. We exist to drive strategic policy change, improve service delivery, and ensure that mental health is recognised as a public health priority.

Our members include:

- Samaritans Northern (Co-Chair) : Focused on suicide prevention and crisis support.
- Mental Health Foundation (Co-Chair): Committed to promoting good mental health for all through research and advocacy.
- Action Mental Health: Providing vocational training and support to individuals with mental health conditions.
- Aware NI: Offering support for individuals affected by depression and anxiety.
- Cause: Supporting carers of people with severe and enduring mental illness.
- Epilepsy Action NI: Supports individuals living with epilepsy by offering advice, advocacy, and resources to manage both the physical and mental health challenges associated with the condition.
- Inspire: Delivering mental health, learning disability, and addiction services.
- Lighthouse: Providing crisis intervention and bereavement support for families affected by suicide.
- 'MindWise: Supporting people affected by mental health issues to live their best lives.
- Nexus: Provides specialised counselling and support services for those affected by sexual violence, helping individuals recover from trauma and improve their mental health. They also manage the domestic and sexual abuse helpline providing support for those affected by abusive relationships/domestic abuse.
- PIPS Suicide Prevention Ireland : Offering suicide prevention and bereavement services across Northern Ireland.
- Start360: Delivering holistic support for young people, adults, and families affected by mental health challenges.