
For Written Answer on : 03/06/2020
Question Number(s): 679 Question Reference(s): 9251/20
Department: Health
Asked by: Brendan Smith T.D.

QUESTION

To ask the Minister for Health when he will establish a mental health task force to ensure a coordinated approach to the provision of adequate supports in a timely manner to persons with mental health issues arising from the Covid-19 pandemic; and if he will make a statement on the matter.

REPLY

Work on a revised mental health policy has been on-going and final draft was agreed by cabinet Social Policy Committee in December 2019. The government must next review and approve the policy at which point the policy can then be published. This policy was developed following a process of research into international innovation and best practice in the field of mental health and an extensive national consultation of over 1,000 service users, family members, friends and carers, and other stakeholders. The revised policy contains an implementation roadmap that organises recommendations into short (0-6 months); medium (6-18 months) and long term (beyond 18 months) actions that will be costed within the various time frames allocated.

The revised policy recommends the establishment of a National Monitoring and Implementation Committee (NIMC) to oversee the implementation of the policy over the next ten years. In addition, the policy recommends that a national mental health and wellbeing strategy be developed by Healthy Ireland.

The Department of Health would consider that the process which led to the finalisation of the new policy was very comprehensive as regards research and consultation, including detailed engagement with the Oireachtas Committee on the Future of Mental Health and with many other stakeholders, and therefore a high-level taskforce is not warranted at this stage. Our focus now is on setting up a focussed comprehensive implementation process with the HSE, once the new policy is approved by Government.

However, in view of the recent requests, the Department of Health proposes that such a task force could be established as a sub-committee of the NIMC and work with the members of the Healthy Ireland mental health promotion strategy group to expand provision of existing Covid-19 interventions.

This approach maximises collaboration and efficiency and ensures a strong implementation focus while minimising duplication of work, given that the proposed taskforce would carry out similar work to developments already afoot. Additionally, as the same personnel who have been involved in the above developments are likely to be involved in future developments going forward, this avoids duplication and creates space for mental health plans to be created without risk of overlap. The development of such a structure would take account of priority needs identified during and following Covid-19.

With regards to the provision of mental health services during Covid-19, a planning Group (HSE, Department of Health, NGO sector) has been established to plan for additional current and/or anticipated needs as the crisis extends in duration. There are existing HSE guidelines, published in 2014, on 'Psychosocial and Mental Health Needs following Major Emergencies'. These guidelines recognise that prior to, during and following national emergencies there would be a need to support certain members of the population with their emotional, cognitive, social and physical needs.

The HSE is continuing to provide all community services, in so far as possible, while following Covid-19 guidelines to ensure the protection of patients and staff. At present, there is a range of existing services which offer online text and telephone supports to people seeking mental health information and advice. These include Samaritans, Pieta House, MyMind, Turn2Me; Aware, Crisis Text Ireland, Shine, BeLongTo, LGBT Ireland, Jigsaw, Bodywhys and Childline. The YourMentalHealth.ie website provides a 'one-stop-shop' portal for people seeking information, supports and services, including information on accessing urgent help and a mental health text messaging support service is available 24 hours a day, 7 days each week to connect people with trained volunteers. NGOs currently funded by the HSE are being supported and encouraged to develop updated responses to the Covid-19 outbreak. Details of these services are listed on the HSE website, [file:///C:/Users/flaherty/Desktop/www.yourmentalhealth.ie]www.yourmentalhealth.ie, and information on available services is also provided through the free mental health telephone information line, 1800 111888.

In order to respond to the anticipated additional needs of the population during this crisis, additional online services are being delivered to support the population, including online counselling, expanded crisis textline support and online life skills training, building on existing pilot schemes and developments in digital mental health in recent years.