

Championing Mental Health



Are you 'Championing the Mental Health Champion'?

In June 2016 the Assembly achieved a cross party consensus to call for the Minister for Health (Michelle O'Neill MLA), to explore the potential role and remit of a Mental Health Champion for Northern Ireland. Politicians from across various parties challenged the Minister to be ambitious and non-tokenistic in this task; six months was described as a reasonable period to report back to the Assembly. The period (as noted) will bring us up to December 2016.

This 'Together for You' briefing document details the rationale as to why we need a Mental Health Champion, and proposes parameters for the potential role and remit.

The decision of the newly elected Assembly to debate mental health before the summer recess, focussed attention on mental health in a way not seen since the Bamford Review a decade ago. The determined mood of the 2016 intake of MLAs to create meaningful change on their watch has been strengthened by: 29% of MLAs being newly elected, the first Opposition since the Belfast Agreement, and the outcomes-focussed Programme for Change. Now is the moment of opportunity for a Mental Health Champion to drive the transformation of mental health for all.

Why What will the Mental Health Champion achieve?

Statistics about the catastrophic levels of mental distress in Northern Ireland illustrate the human and economic costs of not addressing mental health. Northern Ireland has specific challenges around mental health and distress: the legacy of the conflict (now transgenerational); the high levels of disadvantage, inequality and poverty; and the consequences of institutional abuse.

Mental health is an asset for our society. Mentally healthy people contribute to family and community life and the economy; they achieve more in their education, training and work; and realise their full potential.

We cannot afford not to act. In the current challenging economic context, we need to mobilise all the resources of our public, voluntary, community and private sectors to address this common cause: we all have mental health, and we have all been impacted by mental distress.

'Together for You' is creating a movement for mental health through which we all can contribute to change for ourselves, our families, our communities. The Executive and Assembly can catalyse this movement by supporting a Mental Health Champion.



Key Statistics

- 1 in 5 people are experiencing a mental health problem at any one time.
- We have 25% higher overall prevalence of mental health problems than England.
- We have the highest rates of incidences and annual presentation for self-harm in the UK.
- We have the highest suicide rate in the UK: 16.4 per 100,000 population compared to 10.3 in England, 9.2 in Wales and 14.5 in Scotland in 2014. Just over three quarters were males; and more suicides occurred in the most deprived areas.
- 60% of respondents to the Northern Ireland Study of Health and Stress reported at least one traumatic event during their lifetime, 19.5% of these were conflict related, and 16.9% related to witnessing death or serious injury.
- Mental health is the leading cause of absence accounting for 31.9% of all working days lost. Mental health reasons account for 39.1% of long-term sickness leave.
- 26% of 16 year olds responding to the Young Life and Times Survey had serious personal emotional or mental health problems; the figure was 43% for those from 'not well off backgrounds'.
- 80% of women have no access to specialist maternal mental health services compared to 40% in Scotland and England, and 70% in Wales.
- There was a 20% increase in prescription rates for mood and anxiety disorders 2009-2013.
- Prescription costs per head of population for depression are £1.71 compared to £0.41 in Scotland, £0.26 in Wales.
- Prescription rates for mood and anxiety disorders were 66% higher for women than men; and twice as high in the most deprived areas than the least deprived areas in 2013.

(Mental Health Foundation's Fundamental Facts for Northern Ireland, October 2016)



What will the Mental Health Champion Achieve?

The Mental Health Champion will be:

- **A public advocate** for mental health, communicating the collective voices of people with lived experience, their families and carers, and communities impacted by mental health inequalities.
- **A governmental advocate** to help and support the functions of DOH, the Minister for Health and the Health Committee. The champion will support the day to day functions of government and act as a positive conduit between government and service delivery.
- **A consensus builder**, working across Government to integrate mental health into all policies.
- **An adviser** to senior stakeholders in Government, Departments, public bodies and wider society.
- **A connector**, ensuring that all people with a role in progressing mental health in Northern Ireland, including leaders across the UK and internationally, are networked into a movement for mental health.

In order to ensure transparency and independence, the Mental Health Champion could be recruited through:

- the public appointments process
- by the current Health Minister and Health Committee
- through an existing Non-Departmental Public Body i.e. the Equality Commission.

The term of the Mental Health Champion could be initially for the current Assembly term until 2020; with the term running to October 2020. This would ensure that the Mental Health Champion is in post to brief the new Executive and Assembly; and give the incoming Executive and Assembly the opportunity to assess whether it would be valuable to continue to role for a further Assembly term.



The Health Minister and Committee will have primary oversight of this role and the Mental Health Champion will report regularly to the Minister for Health and Health Committee. The Mental Health Champion will submit an annual report to the Assembly on delivery of this role including progress against agreed outcomes, indicators and measures. This report will form the basis of an annual Assembly mental health debate.

The Mental Health Champion is a time-limited public role. It is not a standing office established by statute akin to other public bodies such as the Commissioners. Therefore, the resource allocated to the Mental Health Champion will be used to fund: firstly, the salaries, expenses and offices of the Mental Health Champion, a small staff team (no more than 3 people with research/policy, communications and administrative functions); and secondly, a resource that can be used to deliver the Mental Health Champion's outcomes detailed in a work programme with indicators and measures.

During the Assembly debate, the Mental Health Champion was described as: "An impartial professional with the track record and drive to radically alter the mental health and wellbeing of our people and communities."

"That this Assembly notes that more than one in four of the population is affected by poor mental health and well-being; further notes the significant social and economic implications that this is having on society; expresses deep concerns that, per capita, we have one of the worst records of poor mental health and wellbeing in the world; accepts that our shocking rates have been impacted directly by decades of conflict, and more recently by austerity and the resulting increased levels of unemployment and homelessness and that the issue is now intergenerational; and calls on the Minister of Health to explore the role and remit of a mental health champion to protect and promote the interests of those suffering poor mental health and well-being."
[Hansard, Tuesday 28 June 2016]

Is progress being made?

Within weeks of her appointment, Minister O'Neill MLA declared that she is: "*honoured to be the Executive's mental health champion*". As befits parliamentary scrutiny of the Executive, the Chair of the Health Committee, Paula Bradley MLA, committed that they would: "*not let the issue slip off the agenda or let the minister drop the ball*".

However, there are worrying signs that this agenda is already slipping. The Protect Life 2 consultation makes no mention of a substantial mental health strategy; and the Mental Health Promotion Strategy committed to in the Public Health Strategy 'Fit and Well' (for delivery by 2015) has been downgraded to an Action Plan under the



proposed Protect Life 2. The Minister has committed to a number of agendas (maternal mental health, access to psychological therapies, recovery focused provision, eating disorders and the findings of the Bamford evaluation). Whilst welcome, this clutch of issues does not represent a comprehensive and transformative mental health strategy. Together for You has developed a framework for a comprehensive ten year strategy.

This slippage already seen since June exemplifies the necessity of a Mental Health Champion to ensure that mental health remains front and centre of the Executive's agenda.

How can you Champion the Mental Health Champion?

Whilst the mental health champion will have a leadership role, we can all be inspired by those in public life who have championed mental health for many years. We must ensure that we continue to have mental health champions in every community, school, work place, government department and council. The appointment of a Mental Health Champion does not mean that we step back and expect them to deliver solo. Instead we must all step up: MLAs and constituents, stand alongside them and advocate for mental health together – for our families, communities and generations to come.

Mental Health in Northern Ireland needs a focal point, an accessible person to drive collaboration across government, the voluntary and community sectors, and public services.

At present there is a clear disconnect between people with lived experience and decision makers within mental health policy. People's voices need to be heard!

Government needs help! An advocate can support government and aid the Executive to ensure mental health policy across all departments is implemented effectively and makes best use of public money.

People want to feel that someone is fighting their corner in relation to mental health. People with lived experience want someone to relate to, to help fight stigma and provide comfort for those feeling isolated.

You can advocate for a publicly appointed Mental Health Champion with the ability to deliver real change by supporting the [change.org](https://www.change.org/p/northern-ireland-executive-mental-health-in-northern-ireland-needs-a-champion-it-s-time-to-act) petition:

'Mental Health in Northern Ireland needs a Champion - it's time to act!' (<https://www.change.org/p/northern-ireland-executive-mental-health-in-northern-ireland-needs-a-champion-it-s-time-to-act>) and tweeting #championaMHchampion.



Together For You

Together For You is a partnership project funded by the Big Lottery Fund involving nine leading mental health charities from Northern Ireland. Led by Action Mental Health, the partnership includes Aware, CAUSE, Cruse Bereavement Care, MindWise, Nexus, Praxis Care, Relate NI and The Rainbow Project. Despite an end to services through the project, the partners continue to work together to share knowledge and expertise with key stakeholders in order to improve mental health service provision in Northern Ireland.

For further information on Together For You visit www.togetherforyou.org.uk



Mental Health
Foundation

