



Mental Health Reform

Promoting Improved Mental Health Services

Submission to the Seanad Public Consultation on Travellers Towards a more equitable Ireland post recognition 14th June 2019

Introduction

Mental Health Reform (MHR) welcomes this opportunity to make a submission to the Seanad public consultation on Travellers towards a more equitable Ireland post recognition. MHR is Ireland's leading national coalition on mental health. With over 70 member organisations, we work together to drive progressive reform of mental health services and supports in Ireland.

In its manifesto, *Guiding A Vision for Change* (2012) Mental Health Reform identified that community mental health services have a duty to meet the mental health needs of all members of the community, including those in the Traveller community. MHR also highlighted that the particular challenges of some minority and marginalised groups such as people from the Traveller community, lead to social exclusion and increased mental health difficulties.

Since then, MHR has published a position paper on ethnic minorities and mental health (2014) which documents the challenges such individuals, including those from the Traveller community experience in accessing appropriate mental health services. In 2016, MHR developed guidelines for mental health services and staff on working with people from ethnic minority communities, including the Traveller community, in partnership with the Mental Health Commission.

MHR makes this submission under Theme 2 Dialogue and Traveller Social Inclusion: addressing the stigma, prejudice, discrimination, racism, social exclusion and identity erosion experienced by Travellers. In order to enhance the social inclusion of the Traveller community in all areas of society it is imperative that mental health services and supports are developed to ensure direct access to culturally sensitive mental health services among Traveller children, young people and adults.

Prevalence of mental health difficulties among the Traveller community

There is some research in Ireland on the mental health needs of members of the Irish Traveller community which is consistent with international research on higher risk of suicide. *The All Ireland Traveller Health Study – Our Geels* (2010) found that instances of suicide are six times higher in the Traveller community than in the general population. This accounts for approximately 11% of all Traveller deaths. When disaggregated by gender and age, this rate was seven times higher for men and most common in young Traveller men aged 15-25. It was five times higher for Traveller women.¹

¹ Quirke, B. (2010) Selected Findings and Recommendations from the All-Ireland Traveller Health Study - Our Geels, Dublin: Pavee Point

This study also gave an indication of the self-reported psychological needs of Irish Travellers.

- 62.7 % of Irish Traveller women said that their mental health was not good for one or more of the last 30 days compared to 19.9% of females with medical cards.
- Among Irish Traveller men 59.4% said that their mental health was not good for one or more of the last 30 days.

Policy context

The Government's mental health policy *A Vision for Change* (2006) recognises that mental health services should be inclusive of all the people in Irish society and should be delivered in a culturally appropriate way. Specifically, it recommends that:

“Mental Health Services should be provided in a culturally sensitive manner. Training should be made available for mental health professionals in this regard and mental health services should be resourced to provide services to other ethnic groups including provision for interpreters (Recommendation 4.8).”²

It is anticipated that the revised mental health policy, due to be published later this year will have a greater focus on developing mental health services for particular groups of people, including those from the Traveller community.

Connecting for Life, Ireland's suicide reduction strategy, recognises that people from ethnic minority groups, including members of the Traveller community are at increased risk of suicide and self-harm and includes a specific goal to target approaches to reduce suicidal behaviour and improve mental health among this group of individuals. The strategy also aims to reduce stigmatising attitudes to mental health and suicidal behaviour within priority groups.

The National Intercultural Health Strategy 2007- 2012 acknowledged that the health of people from ethnic minority groups is important and stated that enhancing access to mental health services should be a priority.

Finally, the *National Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy 2017-2021* makes a number of recommendations in terms of improving the mental health outcomes of the Traveller community, including that:

- The HSE should ensure that the new mental health clinical programme to tackle dual diagnosis will take account of the needs of Travellers and Roma with co-morbid mental health and substance abuse problems.

² Department of Health and Children. (2006). *A Vision for Change: Report of the Expert Group on Mental Health Policy*. Dublin: The Stationery Office, p.41.

- The HSE should develop and implement a detailed action plan, based on the findings of the All Ireland Traveller Health Study, to continue to address the specific health needs of Travellers, using a social determinants approach.
- Health services should be delivered and developed in a way that is culturally appropriate.
- The rate of suicide and mental health difficulties within the Traveller and Roma communities should be reduced and positive mental health initiatives should be put in place.
- A review by the National Office for Suicide Prevention of its funding of Traveller projects should assess the effectiveness of existing programmes and provide guidance in relation to future initiatives.
- The National Office for Suicide Prevention, in consultation with Traveller organisations should conduct research on suicide and self-harm in the Traveller community, as part of the implementation of *Connecting for Life*, Ireland's National Strategy to Reduce Suicide 2015 – 2020.
- The Department of Justice and Equality should review the Traveller Counselling Service with a view to supporting its continuation.

Of note, the Joint Oireachtas Committee on the Future of Mental Health Care acknowledged that clearly there is a mental health crisis in the Traveller community, and that mental health services are failing Traveller people the most. In their October 2018 final report, the committee recommended that:

- The Department of Health carry out a study to identify the causative factors [of mental health difficulties], to include a priority focus on the Traveller Community, and how they can be addressed. This should be repeated over time and revalidated which will assist in identifying trends.
- More resources and funding in mental health should be targeted at the areas of highest need with particular attention to the Traveller Community and towards addressing suicide.
- A portion of the recommended increase of 10% of the total health budget to mental health, in Sláintecare, should be ring-fenced for a National Traveller Mental Health Strategy.³

Barriers to accessing mental health services and supports

The *All Ireland Traveller Health Study* reported on access and use of health services by the Traveller community. It found that 90% of Travellers said they had not used mental health services in the previous twelve months. It was also reported that Travellers perceived mental health services to be inadequate. In particular, the study found that Travellers tended not to use available counselling services due to a lack of culturally appropriate provision and social stigma.⁴

³ Houses of the Oireachtas. (2018). *Joint Committee on the Future of Mental Health Care. Final Report.*

⁴ All Ireland Traveller health study. (2010).

The study also reported a number of barriers to accessing general health services among the Traveller community including waiting lists (62.7%), embarrassment (47.8%), difficulty in getting to services (25%), health settings (22%) and being refused service (15%).

As outlined in Mental Health Reform's Ethnic Minorities and Mental Health position paper⁵, there are several barriers that prevent members of the Traveller community from accessing mental health services. From meetings with representatives of Traveller groups such as Pavee Point and the Travelling Counselling Service, the following issues were raised:

- The quality of GPs' responses to people from the Traveller community varies across the country. It also seems that in some areas GPs do not refer people from the Traveller community to mental health services.
- The group identified discrimination as an issue. Representatives of Traveller groups expressed that there is a view among Travellers that service providers want to deal with them as quickly as possible. Other representatives reported that some GPs issue repeat prescriptions to Travellers so that the GP can avoid seeing them.
- Representatives reported an over-reliance on medication in response to the mental health needs of people from ethnic minority groups, including people from the Traveller community. They felt that GPs readily prescribe anti-depressants and one representative commented that a lot of people are just provided with prescriptions rather than any other types of mental health supports.
- It was reported that Travellers' experience of shame affects their help-seeking behaviour and this may be a contributing factor to the high rate of suicide among Travellers.
- The negative expectations people had of mental health services based on their negative past experience of discrimination.
- Some Travellers find it difficult to communicate with their GP, to understand the language used by doctors and to understand the diagnosis they are given and the purpose of medication prescribed.
- Mistrust is a barrier to accessing mental healthcare, with research showing that members of the Traveller community were less likely to trust service providers.
- Lack of knowledge about services is a barrier to accessing mental health care. In the All Ireland Traveller Health Study lack of information was reported as being a barrier for 37.3% of participants.
- Cost of care was shown to be an issue for the Irish Traveller community with 31% citing cost as a barrier in relation to health services generally.

⁵ Mental Health Reform. (2014). Ethnic Minorities and Mental Health: A position paper.

Recommendations

In its guidelines on ethnic minorities and mental health, Mental Health Reform and the Mental Health Commission make the following recommendations on developing culturally sensitive mental health services:

- Mental health staff should understand and be knowledgeable of the role that cultural health beliefs and practices play in their own lives as well as the lives of individuals seeking services. This should be facilitated through training opportunities and self-reflective practice on personal and organisational culture.
- Mental health services and staff should ensure that cultural concepts and beliefs are reflected in the development and delivery of individual care/recovery planning.
- Mental health professionals should determine the communication and language assistance needs of individuals from ethnic minority communities, including members of the Traveller community.
- Mental health services should provide easy to understand materials and deliver information in a manner that is accessible.
- Services should provide individuals with assurances that disrespect or discrimination of any kind by staff will not be tolerated. Specific measures for reducing discrimination in mental health services should be implemented, for example, by employing individuals from ethnic minority communities and educating local communities to target stigma and discrimination.
- Mental health staff working with people with mental health difficulties should be trained in the area of anti-discrimination and cultural sensitivity.
- Mental health services should ensure that they recognise the importance of advocacy supports in improving accessibility to mental health services for people from ethnic minority communities, including members of the Traveller community.
- Mental health services and staff should ensure that individuals from ethnic minority groups, as well as carers, family members and communities are involved in the design, development, delivery and evaluation of mental health programmes and services on an ongoing basis.

Further details on MHR's recommendations can be found at

<https://www.mentalhealthreform.ie/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/EthnicMinorityGuidelines.pdf>.

Conclusion

Mental Health Reform is available to discuss the above content and recommendations. Please contact Kate Mitchell, Senior Policy and Research Officer at 01 874 9468 or via email at kmitchell@mentalhealthreform.ie for further information.