

The Impact of COVID-19 on Mental Health Reform's Coalition Members



Background

Although the COVID-19 pandemic is first and foremost a physical health emergency, there is broad recognition of the significant mental health impact of the pandemic. The United Nations (UN) has warned that the COVID-19 pandemic “risks sparking a major global mental health crisis”,¹ while the World Health Organisation (WHO) has identified that “the isolation, fear, uncertainty, and the economic turmoil [of the current pandemic] could cause psychological distress, and we could expect to see an upsurge in the severity of mental illness, including among children, young people and healthcare workers”.² Indeed, research has found that decreased psychological well-being and increased anxiety, depression and stress are common psychological reactions to the COVID-19 pandemic.^{3,4} Similarly, research examining the impact of the pandemic on the Irish population showed that one-third of people in the population are experiencing serious mental health difficulties during the COVID-19 pandemic.⁵

The pandemic has presented significant challenges to the mental health services and non-governmental organisations working in the mental health sector. Measures introduced to control the spread of COVID-19 (e.g. restrictions on movement and social distancing guidelines) have changed how many services and supports are provided to those in need. Organisations working in the mental health sector are therefore faced with the substantial challenge of attempting (as far as is possible) to meet the growing demand for services and supports under unprecedented conditions. The situation is further compounded by what the UN refers to as “historic underinvestment in mental health need”.⁶

As the leading coalition on mental health in Ireland, Mental Health Reform is well placed to provide unique insight into the challenges faced by the sector during this crisis. With 75 member organisations, Mental Health Reform’s membership is diverse and represents a broad range of interests. Not only does our membership include organisations specifically focused on mental health, it also includes organisations across different sectors but who regularly encounter mental health related issues as part of their work, e.g. housing and homelessness, children’s rights, cultural and ethnic minority rights, etc. Throughout this

¹ RTE News. (2020, May 14). UN warns of global mental health crisis due to Covid-19 pandemic. RTE News, Retrieved from <https://www.rte.ie/news/world/2020/0515/1138301-pandemic-mental-health-crisis/>

² Rourke, A. (2020, May 14). Global report: WHO says Covid-19 'may never go away' and warns of mental health crisis. The Guardian, Retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/may/14/global-report-who-says-covid-19-may-never-go-and-warns-of-mental-health-crisis>

³ Rajkumar, R.P. (2020). COVID-19 and mental health: A review of the existing literature. *Asian Journal of Psychiatry*, 52, p.1-5. doi.org/10.1016/j.ajp.2020.102066

⁴ Vindegaard, N. & Bernos, M.E. (2020). COVID-19 pandemic and mental health consequences: Systematic review of the current evidence. *Brain, Behavior, and Immunity*. doi.org/10.1016/j.bbi.2020.05.048

⁵ Hyland, P. et al. (2020). Anxiety and depression in the Republic of Ireland during the COVID-19 pandemic. Retrieved from <https://psyarxiv.com/8yqxr/>

⁶ United Nations. (2020). Policy Brief: COVID-19 and the Need for Action on Mental Health. UN. p. 3. Retrieved from https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/un_policy_brief-covid_and_mental_health_final.pdf



crisis, Mental Health Reform have engaged with our membership to identify the COVID-19 related issues affecting our members and the mental health sector more broadly. As part of this ongoing consultation process and to ensure that that all members have the opportunity to contribute, Mental Health Reform carried out an online survey of our membership. The aim of the survey was to examine what impact the COVID-19 pandemic and associated restrictions have had on our members. Key findings from this survey are outlined below.

About the Survey and Participants

The survey was designed based on issues raised at a series of online consultation meetings with Mental Health Reforms membership (carried out between the 7th and 29th of April) and a review of similar surveys carried out in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. It underwent a rapid internal and external review process before a final draft was agreed. The survey included questions relating to funding, service provision, staffing, and satisfaction with the information provided by Government and its agencies. The survey also included an open ended question which invited all participating member organisations to raise any COVID-19 related issues.

All 75 Mental Health Reform member organisations were invited to complete the survey online. Data were collected via an online survey over approximately 5 weeks, between the 21st of May and the 26th of June. The survey was completed by 42 member organisations (response rate: 56%). A descriptive analysis was carried out. Valid percentages⁷ are reported throughout and all figures are rounded to the nearest whole number. Illustrative qualitative quotes were selected from the responses to the open-ended question and are included alongside the key findings listed below.

⁷ Valid percent is the percent when all missing cases are excluded from calculations. For example, if 40 participating members answered a question and two did not, the two missing cases would be excluded and the 40 responses would equal 100%.



Key Findings

Please note, all quotes are presented as written by participants and are therefore authentic to the writer.

General Impact:

- 48% reported that the COVID-19 pandemic has had a negative impact on their organisation in the month prior to completing the survey. 38% reported little or no impact and 14% reported a positive impact.

Funding

- 55% had to cancel fundraising events and/or the delivery of services that generate income for their organisation. A further 10% expected to do so in the near future.⁸
- Reflecting this, 33% reported that the COVID-19 pandemic had a negative impact on their fundraising/income generating activities in the month prior to completing the survey.⁹
- On average members expected a decline of 28% in fundraising/earned income if current trends were to continue.¹⁰ There was considerable variation in this regard, with some organisations reporting expected declines of up to 100% and others expecting little or no change.
- 48% of members who receive state funding¹¹ had not received assurances from the relevant department(s) and or agency (or agencies) that their funding would remain in place for the remainder of the funding grant. A further 26% reported that they had received assurances from some relevant departments and agencies only.

“Assurances should be given to the NGO [non-governmental organisation] partners re SLA [service level agreement] funding who are providing services and fear funding will be cut into the future”

Service Provision

- 76% had to withdraw services they normally provide due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

⁸ When organisations that receive 80% or more of their funding from the state are excluded (leaving those who are more reliant on fundraising and income generating activities; n=24), 74% reported having to cancel fundraising events and/or income generating activities.

⁹ When organisations that receive 80% or more of their funding from the state are excluded, this figure increases to 52%.

¹⁰ When organisations that receive 80% or more of their funding from the state are excluded, this figure increases to 33%.

¹¹ 67% (n=28) reported that they receive state funding of some kind. For these members, state funding accounted for 74% of their overall income on average. However, this varied considerably, ranging from 5% to 100%.



- Members who reported that they had withdrawn services due to COVID-19 were asked to estimate the proportion of their services they had withdrawn. On average, 41% of the services they normally provide had been withdrawn.
- 47% reported that demand for their services had increased in the month prior to completing the survey, while just 5% reported a decrease in demand for their services.
- 79% expected demand for their services to increase further going forward.

“There is a predicted increase in mental ill health during and post pandemic so there will be an increased demand upon all of our services- the government needs to invest in the sector and think long term”

- The challenges most commonly experienced by members when delivering/attempting to deliver services during the pandemic were restrictions on providing face-to-face services (74%), staffing issues (29%; including reduced staff hours, re-deployment of staff, etc.), and a lack of funding (17%).
- 73% of members who provided face-to-face services pre-COVID¹² reported that they were able to switch to providing most or all of these services remotely.

“We have adapted services to remote delivery very quickly leveraging existing technologies that were already in place securely. For one group programme a switch to 1:1 phone support was required due to digital literacy/access to technology challenges within the group”

- The challenges most commonly experienced by members (who provided face-to-face services pre-COVID) when making the switch from traditional face-to-face service provision to remote service provision were the following:
 - ▢ 61% considered remote provision inappropriate for use with their client group.

“For a large number of people with long term and enduring mental health difficulties they do not feel comfortable using on line channels or even the mobile phone for ongoing support”

“It's important to acknowledge the 'digital divide' that can limit or negate the possibility of effective remote provision of services for some, especially older adults”

- ▢ 52% were concerned about the quality of remote services relative to traditional face-to-face provision.
- ▢ 52% reported a lack of necessary IT knowledge/expertise.
- ▢ 39% reported a lack of necessary equipment.
- ▢ 30% reported that the financial costs associated with making the switch were challenging.

¹² 79% (n=33) of all participating members reported that they provided face-to-face services and supports pre-COVID.



“Increase in funding is a necessity if we are to move forward with remote services for our client group”

Staffing

- 26% either had experienced or expected to experience staffing issues as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, including a reduction in staff hours, staff lay-offs and/or the re-deployment of staff.
- 85% were able to facilitate remote working/working from home for all or most of their staff.
- 31% of members who use/rely on volunteers¹³ reported a decrease in the number of people volunteering with them in the month prior to completing the survey.

“[we are] Unable to use volunteer skills so risk of losing newly recruited and trained volunteers”

- When asked if there were any COVID-19 related issues and/or concerns they consider important, a number of participating members raised concerns for their staff’s physical and mental well-being.

“The impact of C-19 on staff and volunteers ... will have an impact on future issues within our organisations. Smaller organisations do not have employment assistance programmes in place and need support offering appropriate employee programmes”

“This period has placed a strain on many people including staff who are trying to support service users remotely, and for some staff they have been trying to work whilst child-rearing which has been a challenge”

Information from Government and its Agencies

- 63% reported high levels of satisfaction with the COVID-19 related information received from the Department of Health (29% moderate; 9% low).
- 60% reported high levels of satisfaction with the COVID-19 related information received from the Health Service Executive (HSE) (34% moderate; 6% low).
- 33% reported high levels of satisfaction with the COVID-19 related information received from other relevant Government departments and agencies, e.g. Pobal, Túsla, etc. (58% moderate; 9% low).

¹³ When asked to what extent their organisation used/relied on volunteers, 94% (n=31) of respondents who answered this question reported using/relying on volunteers to varying degrees, ranging from “a little” to “a great deal”.



Views on the Government's response

- 74% disagreed that the Government has done enough to address the mental health impact of the COVID-19 pandemic (21% neither agreed nor disagreed; 5% agreed).
- 92% agreed that the mental health services require additional resources to deal with the mental health impact of the COVID-19 pandemic (3% neither agreed nor disagreed; 5% agreed).
- 92% also agreed that charity and voluntary organisations require additional resources to deal with the mental health impact of the COVID-19 pandemic (5% neither agreed nor disagreed; 3% agreed).

“They [services users] are experiencing exacerbated isolation, loneliness, fear of public transport and breakdown in routine and significant supportive therapeutic relationships due to Covid. This will cause them to require a longer period of recovery than is positive and will necessitate expenditure and commitment from MH [Mental Health] services and our Government”

Summary

Almost half of participating members described the overall impact of the pandemic on their organisation as negative. This is unsurprising given the significant challenges faced by organisations working in the mental health sector during the current crisis. As the leading coalition on mental health in Ireland and through consultation with its membership, Mental Health Reform is well placed to provide unique insight into the challenges faced by the sector during this crisis.

Many organisations nationwide have been unable to hold fundraising events or carry out income generating activities due to the restrictions put in place as a result of COVID-19. Findings indicate this is certainly the case for organisations working in the mental health sector. More than half of participating member organisations reported that they had cancelled fundraising events and/or income generating activities as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, while one in three described the impact of the crisis on these activities as negative. In fact, on average participating members expected a decline in fundraising/earned income of approximately one-third for the year. Perhaps unsurprisingly, findings suggest the impact may be even greater for organisations who rely less on state funding and more on fundraising and income generating activities.

Similarly, COVID-19 related restrictions have resulted in significant challenges for members in terms of the delivery of services and supports to their clients. A large majority of participating members (three in every four) reported having to withdraw services as a result of COVID-19. On average, these members had withdrawn more than one-third of the services and supports they had provided pre-COVID. Not only has this left many without the services and supports they may need, coupled with evidence indicating that people with



pre-existing mental health difficulties are less likely to seek help during the COVID-19 pandemic,¹⁴ it suggests considerable pent up demand for services and supports, which will place increased strain on mental health services going forward.

At a time when the COVID-19 pandemic has forced many members to withdraw services and negatively affected their fundraising/income generating activities, almost half reported an increase in the demand for their services, while a large majority (approximately eight in every 10) expect demand for their services to increase further going forward. The situation is further compounded by the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the mental health and well-being of the general population. Recent systematic reviews of existing research indicate that decreased psychological well-being and increased anxiety, depression and stress are common psychological reactions to the COVID-19 pandemic.^{15,16} Similarly, research examining the impact of the pandemic on the Irish population showed that one-third of people in the population are experiencing serious mental health difficulties during the COVID-19 pandemic.¹⁷

Our findings indicate that the mental health sector faces a significant challenge in meeting increased demand for services and supports extreme conditions. However, members have shown considerable adaptability in their efforts to ensure that their clients have access to the services and supports they need. Many organisations have faced significant difficulties when attempting to switch from traditional face-to-face service provision to remote service provision. These include a lack of necessary equipment and IT knowledge, as well as substantial financial costs. Despite this, a majority of members (approximately three in every four) have been able to switch to providing most or all of their services remotely. However, it is important to note that many members are concerned about the quality and suitability (e.g. for ethnic minorities, older people, etc.) of remote service provision, issues that must be examined in more detail if the sector is to increasingly rely on these methods.

One in every four member organisations reported experiencing staffing issues as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, including losing staff to re-deployment and/or having to lay off staff or reduce their hours. Similarly, one in every three member organisations who use/rely on volunteers reported a decrease in the number of people volunteering with their organisation. On a related point, some members expressed concern about the impact of the

¹⁴ E.g. from a GP, community mental health services, charity and voluntary organisations and/or an emergency department. For more detail, see Mental Health Reform (2020). Responding to the mental health impact of COVID-19: Public views on the Government's response and insights from lived experience. Retrieved from <https://www.mentalhealthreform.ie/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Responding-to-the-Mental-Health-Impact-of-COVID-19-Report-July-2020.pdf>

¹⁵Rajkumar, R.P. (2020). COVID-19 and mental health: A review of the existing literature. *Asian Journal of Psychiatry*, 52, p.1-5. doi.org/10.1016/j.ajp.2020.102066

¹⁶ Vindegaard, N. & Bernos, M.E. (2020). COVID-19 pandemic and mental health consequences: Systematic review of the current evidence. *Brain, Behavior, and Immunity*. doi.org/10.1016/j.bbi.2020.05.048

¹⁷Hyland, P. et al. (2020). Anxiety and depression in the Republic of Ireland during the COVID-19 pandemic. Retrieved from <https://psyarxiv.com/8vqxr/>



pandemic on the health and well-being of their staff. However, members again showed remarkable flexibility under challenging conditions, such that a large majority (more than eight in every 10) reported that they were able to facilitate remote working/working from home for all or most of their staff.

For the most part, members were satisfied with the COVID-19 related information they received from Government and its agencies. Encouragingly, most members reported high levels of satisfaction with the information they had received from the Department of Health and the HSE. However, only one-third of members reported high levels of satisfaction with the information received from other relevant government departments and agencies. Also, approximately half of members had not received assurances from the relevant department(s) and or agency (or agencies) that their funding would remain in place for the remainder of the funding period. This has likely added to the uncertainty experienced by members at this time and should be addressed without delay.

As was the case in recent research examining the views of the general population towards the Government's response to the mental health impact of the pandemic,¹⁸ findings show that among members there is broad support for greater action from Government and its agencies to manage the mental health impact of the pandemic. Unsurprisingly, given the significant challenges faced by the sector as a result of the current crisis, almost all members agreed that the mental health services and charity and voluntary organisations working in the sector require additional resources to deal with the mental health impact of the pandemic. This echoes recent calls from the UN for greater investment in mental health services in response to this crisis. UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres spoke of the historic underinvestment in mental health needs, which is being further confounded by the current crisis, while a recent UN policy brief stated that "investments [in mental health services] now will reduce the mental health impact of COVID-19 and will help ensure that countries are better prepared to help their populations to stay mentally healthy, emergency or not".¹⁹ However, very few members (one in every 20) agreed that the Government has done enough to address the mental health impact of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Mental Health Reform is available to discuss the above content. Please contact Dr. Pádraig Ó Féich at 01 874 9468 or via email at pofeich@mentalhealthreform.ie for further information.

¹⁸ Mental Health Reform (2020). Responding to the mental health impact of COVID-19: Public views on the Government's response and insights from lived experience. Retrieved from <https://www.mentalhealthreform.ie/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Responding-to-the-Mental-Health-Impact-of-COVID-19-Report-July-2020.pdf>

¹⁹ United Nations. (2020). Policy Brief: COVID-19 and the Need for Action on Mental Health. UN. p. 16. Retrieved from https://www.un.org/sites/un2.un.org/files/un_policy_brief-covid_and_mental_health_final.pdf



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Mental Health Reform would like to thank all of our members for engaging with our COVID consultations to date, either by attending our online consultation meetings and by completing this survey. Your contribution is extremely valuable and as always. Mental Health Reform will strive to ensure that your views are heard.



Mental Health Reform Governing Members

Mental Health Reform Associate Members



Mental Health Reform is Ireland's leading national coalition on mental health.

With over 75 member organisations we work together to drive progressive reform of mental health services and supports in Ireland.

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