



ASSOCIATION FOR INFANT MENTAL HEALTH (NORTHERN IRELAND)

Robin Swann MLA
Minister of Health
Department of Health
Castle Buildings
Stormont
Belfast, BT4 3SQ

19th May 2021

Dear Minister

RE: Infant Mental Health in Northern Ireland

We are writing to you as a collective of organisations with a shared belief in the importance of the First 1001 Days to the development of children and future adult generations in Northern Ireland. **This period, from pregnancy to age 2 years, lays the foundations for both physical and mental wellbeing throughout the lifespan.** The evidence is clear that investing in the early years is the most efficient and cost-effective way of transforming both short and long-term outcomes for children. It is therefore imperative that the needs of infants and their families are specifically recognised and addressed in strategy, policy and service delivery.

The ambition of the draft Mental Health Strategy 2021-2031 is commendable. It represents a positive step towards establishing a renewed, high-level approach to mental wellbeing in Northern Ireland. We value the explicit focus within the draft Strategy on prevention and early intervention throughout the whole life of the person, and the recognition of the importance of the perinatal period and early years. Many of the organisations represented in this correspondence have provided submissions to the consultation.

AIMH(NI)
c/o Parent and Infant Project
5 Crescent Business Park,
Lisburn, BT28 2GN
admin@surestartsb.org

Charity Registration No: XT28021



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We are united in belief that the Mental Health Strategy and associated action plans must include an explicit commitment to promoting and improving infant mental health and, particularly, to identifying and addressing the needs of the most vulnerable babies and young children. We would welcome your assurance that such commitments will be included when the Mental Health Strategy is published.

Your leadership is needed to build momentum, consensus, and action to address the wellbeing and mental health needs of infants in Northern Ireland. We need to ensure the whole system works for babies, parents/carers and families. **At the heart of this is the need for well-resourced, universal care supported by evidence-based targeted interventions, together with specialist infant mental services for babies and young children at most risk.** Achieving this will require investment in services and in upskilling of the Infant Mental Health Workforce. This is critical to giving babies the best possible start in life, which has become even more imperative in light of the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic.

While we write to you in your capacity as Minister of Health, we acknowledge and recognise that **meaningfully addressing infant mental health will require interdepartmental, joined-up government approaches. It will also require collaboration across statutory, voluntary and community sectors** in order to have the greatest impact for those babies, young children and families most in need of support. There is a critical opportunity to reinforce the foundations that will drive this work forward within your Department's work in planning the outworking of the new Mental Health Strategy.

Each year 'Infant Mental Health Awareness Week' provides the opportunity to advance and reinforce key messages about the importance of the First 1001 Days. We would ask you to join us in promoting this year's theme, which is **'including infants in children and young people's mental health'**. **We will be adopting a coordinated approach to build momentum during Infant Mental Health Awareness Week, taking place on 7-13 June 2021.**

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We would welcome your participation in the week, and in particular a clear commitment that children and young people's mental health services in Northern Ireland should provide support for infants and toddlers, as part of a comprehensive 0-19 offer.

We look forward to ongoing engagement with you and your Department in the future development of policy and provision on infant mental health. If your officials wish to discuss any of the issues highlighted in our correspondence, we would ask that they please make contact at their earliest convenience with roberta.marshall@barnardos.org.uk.

Yours sincerely

Roberta Marshall

Chair, Association of Infant Mental Health Northern Ireland

On behalf of agencies listed below as signatories.

CC

Colm Gildernew MLA, Chair of the Health Committee

Chris Lyttle MLA, Chair of the APGs on Children & Young People and on Early Education & Childcare

Mark Durkan MLA, Chair of the APG on Mental Health

Órlaithí Flynn, Chair of APGs on Suicide Prevention and on Women's Health

Maurice Meehan, Head of Health & Social Wellbeing Improvement, PHA

Deirdre Webb, Assistant Director of Nursing, PHA

Paul Millar, Commissioner for Emotional Health & CAMHS, HSCB

Sean Holland, Chief Social Work Officer, Department of Health

Charlotte McArdle, Chief Nursing Officer, Department of Health

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