



Committee for Health

Roberta Marshall
Chairperson
Association for Infant Mental Health (Northern Ireland)

[by email: Roberta.marshall@barnardos.org.uk]

Our Ref.: C231/21

21 September 2021

Dear Roberta,

Re: Ministerial response – infant mental health in Northern Ireland

At its meeting on 10 June 2021 the Committee for Health considered your correspondence of 19 May 2021 regarding infant mental health in Northern Ireland.

Members agreed to forward the correspondence to the Minister asking for his comments on the issues raised.

The Minister's reply was considered by the Committee at its meeting on 16 September 2021, and Members agreed to forward this to you.

Please find enclosed this reply dated 25 August 2021.

Yours sincerely,

Keith McBride
Clerk
Committee for Health

Enc.

FROM THE MINISTER OF HEALTH



Mr Colm Gildernew MLA
Chair, Committee for Health
Room 410
Parliament Buildings
Stormont
BT4 3XX

Castle Buildings
Stormont Estate
BELFAST, BT4 3SQ
Tel: 028 9052 2556
Email: private.office@health-ni.gov.uk

Your Ref: C163/21
Our Ref: CORR/2044/2021
Date: 25th August 2021

Dear *Colm,*

Thank you for your letter dated 11 June 2021, highlighting the importance of infant mental health in Northern Ireland. **On 29 June I published the new Mental Health Strategy 2021-2031.** The Strategy has been co-produced with multi-disciplinary and multi-sectoral participation. It is evidence based and takes a whole life approach, is focussed on population need, is trauma informed and places the needs and experiences of the persons using the system, at its centre.

The consultation on the draft Mental Health Strategy concluded at the end of March this year, and in total 428 responses were received, with over 82% assessed as positive. My officials have worked to consider and analyse the responses from stakeholders, and through co-production the issues surrounding infant mental health services became clear. Many of the comments and suggestions received have been reflected in the final Strategy.

During the consultation it became clear that the lack of direct references to infant mental health was an unfortunate omission. This has been rectified in the final Strategy. Within the Strategy, there is recognition that early childhood experiences and the nature and quality of parenting relationships have a major impact on both the healthy physical development and positive mental health of children throughout their lives. The first 3 years of a child's life is the optimum time for brain development and there is a need to make sure this period is widely recognized as being crucially important and prioritised.

Two actions specifically reference infant mental health.

Action 11 in the Mental Health Strategy states that its aim is to ensure that the needs of infants are met in mental health services, and meet the needs of vulnerable children

and young people when developing and improving CAMHS, putting in place a 'no wrong door' approach.

Action 10 in the strategy is to increase the funding for CAMHS to 10% of adult mental health funding, and improve the delivery of the stepped care model to incorporate an inclusive health approach, and ensure it meets the needs of young people, their families and their support networks.

Thank you for taking the time to write. I assure you that infants' mental health is on the agenda, and that the needs of children under 3 are included in the development of mental health services and in the delivery of CAMHS.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Robin Swann', is positioned above the printed name.

Robin Swann MLA
Minister of Health



Committee for Health

Wendy Patterson
DALO
Department of Health

[by email]

Our Ref.: C163/21

11 June 2021

Dear Wendy,

Re: Association for Infant Mental Health (NI) correspondence

At the meeting on 10 June 2021 the Committee for Health considered correspondence received from Association for Infant Mental Health (NI) (AIMHNI) regarding infant mental health in Northern Ireland (enclosed for your information).

Members noted that this correspondence issued to the Minister of Health states that the Mental Health Strategy must include the commitment to promote and improve infant mental health to particularly address the needs of the most vulnerable infants and young people.

The Committee agreed to forward this correspondence, seeking the assurance of the Minister of Health that infants' mental health is included in the Mental Health Strategy.

I would appreciate the Minister's comments on this issue by 25 June 2021.

Yours sincerely,

Keith McBride
Clerk
Committee for Health

Enc.



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



ASSOCIATION FOR INFANT MENTAL HEALTH (NORTHERN IRELAND)

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.**

AIMH(NI)

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5 Crescent Business Park,
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ASSOCIATION FOR INFANT MENTAL HEALTH (NORTHERN IRELAND)

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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This Open Letter has been supported and endorsed by:

