



Arts Council of Northern Ireland

Response to the Department of Health

Consultation on the Draft Mental Health Strategy (2021 to 2031)

Friday 26th March 2021

The Arts Council of Northern Ireland welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Department of Health's Draft Mental Health strategy.

By responding, we advocate for the value of arts and culture and the contribution that our sector makes to this policy area and to ensure that government understands and recognises the role the sector can play in supporting this vital work.

1.1 About Arts Council of Northern Ireland

The Arts Council of Northern Ireland is the development agency for the arts. Our mission is to 'place the arts at the heart of our social, economic and creative life' and we work to achieve this by championing, developing and investing in arts and cultural experiences that enrich people's lives. We are committed to working in partnership with government to deliver its Programme for Government (PfG) priorities, including those relating to mental health and wellbeing, which feature so prominently in the current draft Programme for Government framework.

The Arts Council's five-year strategic framework; *Inspire, Connect, Lead* (2019 – 2024) sets out its commitment to placing the work of our artists and arts organisations at the heart of our social, economic and creative life.

Inspire, Connect, Lead represents a commitment to thinking creatively, offering fresh solutions to the uncertainties facing wider Northern Ireland society, particularly in light of the COVID-19 pandemic and the UK's transition out of the European Union.

We recognise the contribution culture and the arts can bring to a healthy and health-creating society and actively encourage the artists and organisation we fund to work within this important area. To enable this, we have devised four complementary policy areas: arts in health, disability arts and voluntary arts and community arts.

1.2 Core Mental Health Strategy Proposals

- Northern Ireland has the highest prevalence of mental health problems in the UK, with a 25% higher overall prevalence of mental health problems than England. Deprivation and high rates of mental and physical illness co-occur in the areas most impacted by the legacy of the Troubles.
- Mental illness and suicide are severely impacting our communities, limiting the life chances of our young people and constraining our potential across society.
- The draft Strategy intends to provide a clear direction of travel to support and promote good mental health, provide early intervention to prevent serious mental illness, and to provide the right response when a person needs specialist help and support.
- To drive the strategic change needed, the draft Strategy sets out 29 key, high-level actions under three overarching themes: Promoting Wellbeing and Resilience through Prevention and Early Intervention; Providing the Right Support at the Right Time and New Ways of Working.
- Associated with the delivery of the 29 actions, there will be a rolling action plan for mental health promotion. This will entail identifying and agree actions that can help to support positive mental health across our community, and prevent mental illness developing.

- The draft strategy proposes better integration between statutory and community and voluntary sectors in order to harness the experience, skills and expertise within the community and voluntary sector to complement and supplement statutory support.
- It is highly likely that Northern Ireland will see increased levels of need for mental health services for a number of years as a result of the ongoing impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. It is vital we have a system that works to prevent or delay the onset of mental health problems, and that truly meets the needs of its users.

1.3 Building on a strong base: the Arts Council's work relating to mental health and wellbeing

Arts and culture plays an important role in helping people to stay well, recover faster, and meet major challenges facing health and social care, including mental health.

The Arts Council has experience of delivering large scale, innovative mental health and wellbeing programmes in partnership with statutory agencies, including the Public Health Agency and the Education Authority.

We are continually investing in our most valuable resources: our artists, and have, in collaboration with the Safeguarding Board NI delivered Level 1 and Level 2 Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACES) Training for artist working in the community. One of our leading arts and health organisations, ArtsCare, also delivers training annually to clinicians, medical students and nursing teams on how arts based approaches can enhance patient care.

Of particular success in promoting awareness and support of mental health in recent years has been NI theatre companies who have staged productions which address the stigma of suicide and other societal issues such as Paramilitarism, relationship abuse, addiction, domestic violence and racism. Much of this work, which has been developed by socially engaged theatre companies working directly with communities and supported by specialist mental health organisations, has produced hugely positive outcomes.

Some of our best creative talent has engaged with leading arts organisations, working in close collaboration with local communities and specialist mental health organisations to deliver a range of large scale programmes, targeted at particularly vulnerable groups within Northern Ireland society. These are summarised below.

1.3.1 ARTiculate: a mental health and wellbeing programme for children and young people

ARTiculate is a young people and wellbeing pilot programme that ran in collaboration with the Public Health Agency between 2016 and 2019. Forty nine projects were funded over the four years and a total of 2,839 young people supported.

It focused on the use of artist-led approaches to empower and build the resilience of young people, who themselves were involved in the design of their respective projects. This generated a greater sense of ownership and led to the creation of 'safe spaces' where participants were free to express themselves in non-judgemental environments. 87% of young people involved said that taking part in the project had helped them in some way to feel better about themselves, improve their self-confidence and mood.

Learning through the programme has led to increased collaboration between the arts sector and specialist mental health organisations, enhancing practice and strengthening the mental health outcome for young people.

The comments below are taken from the young people who participated in the programmes evaluation and illustrate the impact it has had on their mental health and wellbeing:

The ability to articulate feeling and emotion:

"We all wrote poems that helped me to say what I wanted to say, it's easier in a poem, it's not like just saying ordinary words."

"It's non-judgemental (here)..... I would never have been able to express my feelings and read them out in front of people before."

Feeling less isolated:

"And listening to other people's stories and telling mine made me feel less alone, it's not just me who feels like this."

"I'm able to talk to them as they're in the same situation as me. My other friends don't know what it's like."

Developing coping strategies:

"I get depressed easily and I was on anti-depressants. But I am getting to know more about mental health through these projects and I'm beginning to feel better. I've just come off the tablets and I'm starting a job next week."

"For me, if I can figure out a way of getting my emotions from my mind onto a page, I can figure out how to cope with it and if I can figure out how to cope with it I know which steps to take. Now I am able to get my issues out of my head and onto paper."

1.3.2 The Arts and Older People Programme

The Arts & Older People Programme (AOPP) is now in its twelfth year of operation and is supported financially by the Public Health Agency. Its primary objective is to reduce the isolation and loneliness felt by this vulnerable group via project based activity designed to increase wellbeing and self-esteem. To date, AOPP has supported more than 28,000 older people across Northern Ireland in a range of care settings.

Evidence collected through a standardised measurement framework¹ since 2012 demonstrates a positive experience for participants, indicating an overall improvement in health and mental wellbeing as well as a reduction in the proportion of participants who were lonely, between the start and end of the projects.² Arts participation enhances brain function, improving resilience to dementia and is an area our core-funded arts organisations have been particularly active in recently.

¹ Based on use of the Seven Point Warwick–Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scale

² Devine P and K Lloyd, (2019). [Analysis and interpretation of quantitative data generated from the Arts and Older People Programme](#). ARK.

1.3.3 The Creative Schools Programme

The Arts Council's Creative Schools programme is part of the Urban Villages Initiative and is a headline action within the NI Executive's Together: Building a United Community (TBUC) Strategy. To date, artists and arts organisations have worked with 1,239 children and young people in 13 schools developing projects that are designed to deliver a range of outcomes, including improved mental health and wellbeing.

This programme is of particular relevance at the moment given the mental health problems facing young people as they return to schools and as the impact of disparities in the quality of home learning, and loss of learning habits becomes clear. The arts have a valuable role to play in supporting schools engage with these challenges through a process of creative learning.

The quotes below are those of children and teachers engaged in arts-led programming associated with the Creative Schools Programme

"You get to talk as the character. You can say what you want without being judged because it is your character saying it. You can say things that you might not be brave enough to speak out. You can be open and talk about how suicide affects families. You get to see different sides. You get to see the families and how they are affected. You get to see the person."

Teacher, supporting the delivery of a forum theatre based project

"I really do think it will have an effect. Knowing my family will see this. It will change their perspective of young people. If we as young people have a voice about mental health it will open them up to seeing that young people aren't just going out drinking. That young people have problems."

Participant

2. Our response to the draft strategy

2.1 Theme 1: Promoting wellbeing and resilience through prevention and early intervention

We know that around a quarter of mental health problems are preventable through early intervention during childhood and adolescence, providing opportunities for considerable cost savings and leading to significant difference in the quality of life of many young adults.

The Arts Council fully endorses the emphasis placed on this preventative approach and hopes it can be adopted more widely across the health care sector. This will diminish the long-term impacts of poor mental health, particularly within our most deprived communities and lead to cost savings which we hope can be re-invested to support innovation in creative projects and programme design. We would advocate for the arts to be taken more seriously as a form of prevention and early intervention, as part of a responsive and humane health service.

To reduce the burden placed on GPs, and in line with the emphasis on prevention and early intervention, the Arts Council would encourage greater investment in the social prescribing model

which aims to address the broader causes of ill health by seeking solutions beyond the clinical environment.

Social prescribing is fast becoming a national priority in NHS England. Over 400 general practices in England regularly refer their patients to take part in activities in the community, often with a focus on prevention and early intervention.³ Contributing towards the cross-cutting priority of ‘better mental health’ is also central within the Arts Council Wales Operational plan⁴ who aim to support the Welsh Government and Health Boards with social prescribing and other relevant initiatives under the key deliverable “*Our aim is to improve health and wellbeing in Wales, for individuals, families and communities... and to shift our approach from wellbeing to prevention*”.

This approach fits well with the many community based arts group we, as a funder, support and who are well placed to provide the agile and targeted support needed to address the wide range of conditions, including depression and anxiety, so prevalent in Northern Ireland today, particularly amongst young people. We think this approach is particularly well suited to engaging BAME groups who are less likely to access support services for their mental health needs.⁵

Arts for Good Health: a partnership, referral project, with Aware Defeat Depression

Based in the Bogside area of Derry~Londonderry, Eden Place Arts provides open access visual arts courses, tailored in-house and outreach projects for local residents. It also runs an annual exhibition programme which showcases local emerging talent, participants work and touring exhibitions on social justice themes.

EPA’s projects specifically engage with individuals with wide-ranging physical disabilities, special needs and mental health conditions and is inclusive of older people (aged 55+), children and young people and the LGBT community.

Arts for Good Health is a partnership project with Aware Defeat Depression which takes referrals from GP's, Mental Health Practitioner's and Social workers. The project is delivered on a course basis with classes in weaving, printing, mosaics and painting techniques.

The project is aimed at individuals who suffer from mental and physical ill health and would benefit from some time out to express themselves creatively and learnt new art skills in the company of others. It is just as much focused on the social as on the art and no artistic experience is necessary.

³ All-Party Parliamentary Group on Arts, Health and Wellbeing Inquiry Creative Health: The Arts for Health and Wellbeing 2017

⁴ [Operational Plan 2019-20.indd \(arts.wales\)](#)

⁵ [5 Least known factors about people suffering from mental health issues from BAME communities – CANS – Counselling All Nations](#)

Theme 2: Providing the right support at the right time

As the programme example provided at the start of this response testifies, the Arts Council has developed a range of specialist interventions to support the mental health and wellbeing across the lifespan and covering the spectrum of need, from children with need for mental health support through to support for older people with mental ill health such as dementia.

There is an important role under this theme too for social prescribing by providing support prior to and after specialist mental health service support. There is also an opportunity to build on the social connection generated as a response to COVID-19 by making the most of the cultural assets that now exist within our communities.

We would advocate strongly for the importance of person-centred care, and in particular the role of the arts that enables people to live full and meaningful lives. This is particularly relevant when working with older people in care home settings. The best care homes are flexible and responsive to people's individual needs, finding creative ways to enable older people to live fuller lives. The system needs to enable this by encouraging care homes providers to engage more directly with the creative sector, drawing on the expanding portfolio of evidence we have developed to demonstrate the impact arts and culture can have on the mental health and wellbeing of residents, staff, carers and their families.

Ageility NI (2020 – 2023) is a social circus project designed to engage with older adults across Northern Ireland

The project is funded by the Lottery's 'People and Communities' fund and designed and delivered by Streetwise Community Circus (SCC). The project provides circus skills workshops that address specific areas of need relevant to older people, with particular focus on loneliness, social isolation and other aspects of wellbeing. The proposed impacts for this project are based on supporting evidence from academic research into the arts as a therapeutic tool generally and in particular the efficacy of using circus skills.

Social circus is based on the belief that learning new skills – such as juggling, acrobatics, balancing or aerial skills – can have positive effects on those who participate in a social circus programme.

The positive benefits that participants generally experience are not restricted to the acquisition of a new skill; instead, social circus practitioners refer to concepts of improved wellbeing – physically, emotionally, cognitively and socially. As such, social circus is distinct from other forms of circus such as traditional tented or theatre-based circus shows; or hobbyist organisations such as juggling clubs or fitness acrobatic classes.

In order to ensure children and young people receive the right support at the right time, it is important the services receive adequate funding. We are concerned that the proposed 10 per cent increase in funding for Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) is insufficient to reduce the waiting time for counselling support and to create the capacity needed to address the increase in demand for the services following the COVID-19 Pandemic.

2.2 Theme 3: New ways of working

The Draft Strategy recognises there are weaknesses around commissioning arrangements and that the organisational boundaries get in the way of improving quality and efficiency.

The timely commissioning and provision of children's and adolescents' mental health services is an important aspect underpinning this theme. In order to ensure the engagement of service providers in a timely and seamless way, the Arts Council would encourage the Department for Health to adopt an enabling approach to its commissioning processes which should include a strong cultural presence.

We would recommend that commissioning arrangements in Northern Ireland are reviewed to take into account the invaluable contribution the arts sector can make to the delivery of the Mental Health Strategy. This includes incorporating arts on prescription into commissioning plans and cultural provision into care pathways for specific groups of patients

The Arts Council of Northern Ireland would encourage a joined-up, cross-government approach to delivering the strategy, one that recognises the contribution that culture, art, sport, health, education and local government can bring to the challenges facing mental health provision. This approach is consistent with the one proposed under the Draft Programme for Government (2021).

We would suggest the development of a Prevention Concordat (similar to the one developed in England) to ensure an evidence-based approach is taken in the planning and commissioning of services to increase impact and reduce health inequalities.

We welcome the intention to continue the capital works programme to ensure inpatient infrastructure is modern and responsive to need. As part of this provision, we would encourage the integration of artwork schemes at the design stage of these builds. This would enhance the clinical environment and enable arts related activity to be delivered by artists and arts organisations in a suitable environment.

The new Acute Mental Health Inpatient Centre at Belfast City Hospital (previously provided at the Mater and Knockbracken sites) is an excellent design example of a purpose-built, modern facility which includes areas for patients to participate in arts activities to support their recovery.

3. Conclusion and Summary

Our specific recommendations are modest and well considered.

The essential need we identify is culture change, where the arts and the arts sector is recognised as a key partner in delivering the actions set out in the draft strategy. Increased collaboration between health service providers and the arts and culture sector has the potential to create the step change in support advocated.

In summary:

- To reduce the burden placed on GPs, and in line with the emphasis on prevention and early intervention, the Arts Council would encourage greater investment in, and use of, the social prescribing model. This would include arts provision as a central resource.
- We would advocate for person-centred care and in particular the role of the arts to enables people to live full and meaningful lives. This resonates particularly strongly in support for older people in care home settings.
- We are concerned that the proposed 10 per cent increase in funding, proposed for Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) is insufficient to meet increased demand, especially in light of the COVID-19 pandemic.
- In order to ensure the engagement of service providers in a timely and seamless way, the Arts Council would encourage the Department for Health to adopt an ‘enabling’ approach to its commissioning processes, including a strong cultural presence
- We would encourage a joined-up, cross-government approach to delivering the strategy; one that recognises the contribution that culture, art, sport, health, education and local government can bring to the challenges facing mental health provision.