Comhar policy bulletin special edition – Mental Health Awareness Week – May 2020

To mark Mental Health Awareness Week (MHAW) we have put together a special edition of our Comhar policy bulletin. This week also saw the launch of our Mental Health and Wellbeing Charter, which details Irish in Britain's commitment and roadmap for a cohesive community response to evidence of high rates of suicide and common mental health issues among the Irish population in Britain.

This year MHAW comes at a point of huge significance as we all continue to experience the effects of the coronavirus lockdown. Leading mental health professionals and providers have warned that the crisis is having a profound effect on people's mental health and that it will represent the next public health emergency beyond the current lockdown. Paul Farmer, chief executive of Mind, has said that "the pandemic is as much a mental health crisis as it is a physical one."

- **Mental health data during the lockdown**
- **Accessing services**
- **Government funding**
- **Best practice for returning to work**
- **Irish in Britain Mental Health and Wellbeing Charter**
- **Our resources**

Mental health data during the lockdown

This section provides some key statistics that have emerged so far about mental health in the UK during the two months of lockdown.

The Office of National Statistics survey in April reported some alarming data in relation to stress and anxiety:

- Over 4 in 5 adults in Britain (84.2 percent) said they were very worried or somewhat worried about the effect that the coronavirus is having on their life right now.
- Nearly half of adults (46.9 percent) reported high levels of anxiety.
- Staying in touch with friends and family remotely was the most common action that is helping people cope with staying at home (76.9 percent).

A YoungMinds survey reported that 83 percent of young people said their mental health had worsened during the crisis.

The disproportionate number of coronavirus cases among Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) groups is well attested. To mark Mental Health Awareness Week, the BAMEStream alliance have launched a survey to investigate mental health and BAME communities during the pandemic, which is available here.

The Zero Suicide Alliance says that during the lockdown over half a million people have completed its online course, which aims to spot the signs that a person needs help.

The Mental Health Foundation is working with researchers at several universities on a long-term study entitled *Coronavirus: Mental Health in the Pandemic*. The project has undertaken regular surveys since the outbreak in March:

- The first survey in mid-March, found that 62 percent of UK adults surveyed have felt anxious or worried; this was highest among students (74 percent) and women (71 percent)

- On a more positive note, in the second survey in early April, half (49 percent) of adults felt they could make a positive contribution to efforts to limit the spread and impact of the pandemic.
- The most recent survey in late April found that more people used outside walks (60 percent) and hobbies (44 percent) to help them cope.

The theme of this year's Mental Health Awareness Week is kindness and, while there are some startling figures in the data surrounding mental health during the coronavirus, it is reassuring to note that almost three-quarters (72 percent) of UK adults said it is important we learn from the pandemic to be more kind as a society.

Accessing services

The lockdown has made it more difficult to access support services and many GP centres have changed how they are operating. Carers can still visit homes, but they should follow social distancing guidelines as much as possible. As a result of the difficulty in accessing NHS services, charities and community groups are facing a huge increase in demand.

The pandemic has led to fewer people getting the help they need for a range of conditions, including support for mental health problems. A survey by Mind published on 7 May found that nearly a quarter of people had not been able to access mental health services in the previous two weeks, with many facing cancelled appointments, being turned away by crisis services and issues with accessing digital alternatives. The NHS's Every Mind Matters page has key contacts for those in need of urgent mental health support.

Some innovative responses to increasing access to mental health support during the lockdown include the Samaritans' new Self Help app. Our friends at icap have created a new one-to-one phone service for staff members, teams and managers working in the Irish community who may have been dealing with highly stressful situations and distressed clients, while many may be facing the same issues themselves. A survey found that half of health workers felt their mental health had worsened during the lockdown. icap also have another free confidential helpline to offer support to Irish people struggling as a result of the pandemic.

Government funding

In late March, the government announced a £5m Coronavirus Mental Health Response Fund (CMHRF) to be administered by Mind and used for services such as helplines and online support services. Due to high demand, the applications are currently paused. Funding requests totalled more than £30m. While the £5m fund was welcome, it is clear that the government must take immediate further action to support mental health services.

A smaller fund within the CMHRF is being administered by the National Survivor User Network (NSUN) to support user-led organisations and smaller, unconstituted community groups in England. Grants of up to £1,000 are available.

You can read about other grants available for projects tackling the effects of the coronavirus on our website.

Best practice for returning to work

1. It is essential that employers continue to base any plans for returning to the workplace on up-to-date government and public health guidance in relation to the virus.
2. Implement safety protocols and put in place risk assessments in line with government guidelines.
3. Communicate the practical measures you are taking to staff on a regular basis to help reassure them that their health, wellbeing and safety is your top priority.
4. Make sure employees are clear about what rules and procedures they should follow both in the workplace and at home, especially if they begin to feel unwell.
5. Pre-empt and plan for concerns from people who may be anxious to return to work, those who no longer have access to childcare or may have carer responsibilities.

6. Provide up-to-date communication regarding operational developments. Many organisations have had to change their operations model, so clearly communicate operational and strategic changes.

7. Encourage and support line managers to have one-to-one return meetings with every employee, where a key focus will be on health, safety and well-being.

8. Consider mental health awareness training for managers and staff. For more information on training contact health@irishinbritain.org.

9. Finally, it will be important for every employer to ensure that their organisation's culture is inclusive and that every employee feels they are returning to a supportive and caring environment. The pandemic has had an unequal impact across the workforce in many ways, as different groups of employees and individuals will have been affected in diverse ways according to their job role and individual circumstances.

Irish in Britain Mental Health and Wellbeing Charter

Irish in Britain's Mental Health and Wellbeing Charter is accessible here. The aim of the Charter is to build an Irish community alliance of partners to promote positive mental health and wellbeing for staff, volunteers and the communities they serve.

Our CEO Brian Dalton said: "Irish in Britain is proud to champion the conversation around mental health in the Irish community. By promoting a positive and listening culture we can harness the best characteristics of our community – kinship, relatedness and care – fostering an empowered and resilient diaspora."

Our resources

To accommodate for social distancing restrictions, we have delivered a number of online mental health and wellbeing trainings for our member organisations and community partners. In addition, there are several resources available on our website:

- a list of steps to take to protect your mental health during the pandemic.

- our coronavirus information page with information and resources on finance and funding, governance and tips about working from home.

- our recent webinars on mental health and stress awareness are on the members' section of our website.

In the current climate, protecting our mental health and wellbeing is of heightened importance with the psychological and social impact likely to have long-term consequences for individuals and communities. As we rebuild in the months ahead, we must recognise that we have an invaluable opportunity to promote better understanding and awareness of mental health issues.

Ruairí Cullen
Policy and Public Affairs Officer
policy@irishinbritain.org

Marie Dillon
Health and Wellbeing Officer
health@irishinbritain.org