



*Green Party Position Paper*

# **Mental Health**

*A Position Paper on Mental Health*

## Introduction:

### Community-based care

The Green Party's Health Policy is based on a comprehensive primary health care strategy, which emphasises preventative medicine and early detection and intervention. Such an approach is required across a range of health services, including the greatly neglected area of mental health. Despite a number of Government plans and strategies over the years - including last year's 'A Vision for Change' - very little reform has been implemented. A recent report from the Inspector of Mental Services indicates that only one in 16 catchment areas are able to offer a wide range of multi-disciplinary services to people in the community with mental health problems.

The system of delivering mental healthcare must change radically. General Practitioners are currently the backbone of primary mental health services and mental health problems surface in one in four GP consultations. But in deprived areas, where mental health needs are greatest, GP services are often unavailable. Therefore even this basic provision is missing.

The Green Party's health strategy will focus on bolstering this front-line GP care: we will establish primary health care centres in our communities, consisting of multi-disciplinary teams: e.g. psychiatrists, nutritionists, therapists and social workers, as well as GPs and nurses. Such an approach to healthcare, including mental healthcare, is long overdue. It is also a goal in mental health to switch treatments from drug therapy - (GPs have tended to rely on medication as treatment) -- towards counselling and psychological services which are often more efficacious and cost-effective.

Mental health has long been the neglected area of Irish healthcare and matters are no better in today's prosperous Ireland. Indeed, twenty years ago the proportion of the health budget devoted to mental health was almost double what it is today and there are now great regional disparities in the resources given to mental care.

**The Green Party has pledged in Government to ensure a minimum of 12% of the health budget will go towards mental health** (it's currently less than 7%). This funding will go in part towards:

- Developing community mental health teams, with 7-days a week emergency cover;
- Significantly increasing the number of postgraduate training places for clinical psychologists and enhanced training for other mental healthcare practitioners;
- Putting in place the necessary infrastructure to shift from reliance on institutional care in traditional mental hospitals to an era of community care in more appropriate accommodation and facilities.

## Human Rights and Mental Health

The neglect in Ireland of those with mental illness has not only been reflected in the inadequate funding to the area. Shamefully, a number of those with mental illness have been subjected to major human rights abuses, particularly in State institutions. The level of involuntary detentions in psychiatric hospitals - 10 % of overall admissions - is still significantly higher than the levels in many of our EU neighbours, although the introduction of mental health tribunals in November 2006 should start to bring these numbers down. A Mental Health Commission report earlier this year, highlighted by Schizophrenia Ireland, supported many of the complaints made by patients' relatives concerning the Central Mental Hospital in Dundrum. Patients' rights and dignity were infringed by the standard of clinical care available to them. There was unnecessary and unsupervised use of seclusion and restraint in the hospital.

Additional concerns must also be raised about the method whereby traditional mental hospitals are closed down and patients transferred to 'community facilities'. Properly implementing a community-based strategy must involve far more than merely creating 'mini-institutes' or shifting patients to ill-suited nursing homes at community level. For instance, in 2005, 23 long stay patients were moved from St. Ita's hospital to the now infamous Leas Cross Nursing Home, where a number of abuses were chronicled and exposed by RTE's Primetime programme.

The Irish Government is legally obliged under international treaties to work towards the highest attainable standard of mental health for everyone. Issues of social exclusion and problems with access to education, housing and employment have to all be addressed. The mental health services must be directed to the full recovery of the individual concerned. The Green Party in Government would initiate a media campaign on mental health to endeavour to remove the stigma of mental illness in Irish society. Our plans for community-based strategies will also assist in this process.

We regard this Government's plans to re-locate the Central Mental Hospital to a site alongside the planned Thornton Prison as being totally unacceptable. Such a move will accentuate the stigma and isolation/social exclusion of the mentally ill.

# Focus on Children

An indication of the state of our society's mental health is the rising suicide rate in Ireland, particularly among our young people.

With prevention and early intervention being key components for the Green Party's Health Policy, we would see a focus on healthcare for our children as being of immense importance to improving mental health overall. Our Children's Policy emphasises early supports to parents concerning their children's health and emotional needs and assists parents in detecting early signs of any condition/impairment requiring specialists' attention (early intervention).

Child and adolescent mental health services are grossly under-resourced and under-developed. Irish youth suicide rates are the fifth highest in the EU. There are urgent needs in this area. But children have been inappropriately treated in adult units and those with behavioural and mental health problems detained in prisons and places of detention when their behavioural and mental health problems should have been properly treated within the health service.

## The Green Party in Government will:

- Encourage school-based preventive mental health interventions that work in liaison with parents in early detection of mental health problems; This will be assisted by the establishment of 20 Integrated Resources Mobile Units (IRMUs) to assess children in primary schools. Each unit will include staff such as speech therapists, social workers, educational psychologists and public health nurses working together to provide an enhanced 'one-stop shop' assessment and pre- assessment service for primary school children. The IRMUs will operate in addition to, but in liaison with, existing structures and will be used to enhance the current service. Staff from each regional IRMU will work closely with senior school staff (including Home School and Community Liaison Officers) and Education Welfare Officers to ensure that all children are assessed within a reasonable time period.
- Institute comprehensive data collection systems to determine the uptake of mental health services by children, waiting list figures, etc., to facilitate the better provision of services and planning;
- Introduce mental health education, dealing with a range of issues from depression to bullying, to the secondary school curriculum;
- Provide specialist treatment in dedicated facilities for those with eating disorders and ensure that primary schools educate children about the dangers of aspiring to extreme thinness
- Increase the children's mental health staff numbers

via innovative training programmes (as advocated by the World Health Organisation and Amnesty International);

- Ensure that within every health board area there is an inpatient psychiatric treatment unit for young people;
- Support a Constitutional amendment enhancing the rights of children and the supremacy of the welfare of the child, and allowing children to access support services independently of adults;
- Fully support the newly launched National Office for Suicide Prevention, and assure the agency is adequately resourced to engage in mental health promotion across a range of organisations and targeted vulnerable groups;
- Establish free and confidential health centres around the country for young people under 25, such as piloted by the Cork-based Youth Health Service.
- Ensure specialist services for those with intellectual disabilities are well resourced and funded. (This group is at higher than average risk of developing mental illness and proper supports must be put in place)
- implement the recommendations of the Task Force on Suicide's report on suicide and the Task Force on Alcohol;

**Our juvenile justice system** must also be addressed within a mental health framework. Many of the children appearing before the Children's Court present with mental health issues, behavioural problems, substance and alcohol abuse. The complexities of these problems are rarely addressed by the Courts. A new Youth Justice Service is to now operate within the strategic environment of the Office of the Minister for Children. But this service will only have a real impact if there is a strong emphasis on education, rehabilitation, and comprehensive mental health assessments. The Green Party will support and expand programmes such as the ISPC Schoolmate Drug and Alcohol pilot prevention programme, which provides a direct-access support service to vulnerable young people at risk of early school leaving due to drug and substance misuse, and addresses the devastating impact that multigenerational drug and alcohol abuse can have on children and families. Implementation of the Children's Act 2001, which provides a wide range of measures to counter anti-social and criminal behaviour, would also be of tremendous assistance.

It is not surprising, given the fault-lines in Ireland's juvenile justice system and in our preventative healthcare, that research shows our prisons to be filled with individuals with psychiatric illness. Not only are more mental health workers needed in our prisons but responsibility for these ill prisoners should be with the Department of Health.

# Conclusion

Over 25 years ago, a blueprint for the mental health services - 'Planning for the Future' - was launched. That Report promised the closing of old psychiatric institutions, to be replaced by community-based care. That promise never came about, and a generation of those with mental illness suffered as a result. 'A Vision for Change', launched over a year ago, has also been criticised by such groups as the Irish Psychiatrists Association for lack of action and progress up to now. This blueprint envisages an additional 1800 staff for mental health services over the next ten years, yet the Government has had a cap in place for the hiring of mental health practitioners.

The Green Party is committed to implementing a rights-based community-based approach to mental illness. More funding, more staffing, are all required for such a policy to succeed. What is needed is a 'sea change in thinking' and a determination to provide the appropriate mental health services, early on and in the right manner. The Government has the money to help this most vulnerable and dependent sector of our society. The Green Party in Government will ensure that the funding is put in place and that mental health is no longer a neglected area of Government.