



Submission to the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection on the Pathways to Work Strategy

September 2019



St Patrick's Mental Health Services (SPMHS) is Ireland's largest independent, not-for-profit mental health service provider. St Patrick's Mental Health Services' vision is a society where all citizens are given the opportunity to live mentally healthy lives. SPMHS works to provide the highest quality mental healthcare, to promote mental wellbeing and mental health awareness, and to advocate for the rights of those experiencing mental health difficulties. SPMHS achieves this through a human rights-based approach, through the enhancement of evidence-based knowledge, and by striving to be at the cutting edge of new initiatives and advances in the field.

SPMHS is committed to furthering the development of the competencies of those choosing to work in mental health and of the organisations providing mental health care services, and to enhancing partnership with service users. Our strategic plan for 2018-2022 – 'Changing Minds. Changing Lives', is firmly rooted in these principles and commitments ⁽¹⁾.

SPMHS welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection's consultation on the Pathways to Work Strategy. This submission will focus on issues pertinent to employment in the context of mental health difficulties and related needs, and in relation to four pertinent areas: 1) The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, 2) Addressing mental health stigma and discrimination, 3) Long-term unemployment and mental health difficulties, and 4) The needs of marginalised groups.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD)

Since the drafting of the *Pathways to Work Strategy 2016-2020* ⁽²⁾ the State has ratified the UNCRPD ⁽³⁾. SPMHS advocates that our obligations under the Convention should be a key influence on informing the strategic development of the revised Strategy and the delivery of public employment services as regards the needs of people with disabilities, including mental health difficulties. For example, both job-seekers and employers may benefit from increased awareness and understanding of the role of reasonable accommodations in enabling employment for people with mental health difficulties, and of their rights and protections, and obligations, respectively.

Addressing mental health stigma and discrimination

The 2018 *Disability and Discrimination in Ireland* report noted as a key finding that "when people with disabilities are looking for work, or in the workplace, the odds of experiencing work-related discrimination was twice as high compared to those without disabilities" ⁽⁴⁾. The report highlights mental health discrimination in the context of employment as a significant and complex problem, and notes that more generally for people with disabilities "discrimination – or the fear of discrimination – discourages people with disabilities from seeking work or remaining in employment after the onset of disability" ⁽⁵⁾.



The persistence of mental health stigma and discrimination within the world of work is further evidenced by findings from the 2018 annual *Mental Health Attitudes Survey* carried out by St Patrick's Mental Health Services (6). The survey found that 39% of respondents (from a representative sample of 500) would not feel comfortable informing their boss if they needed time off due to a mental health difficulty, while 33% did not believe someone who experienced panic attacks could be head of a company.

SPMHS advocate for an end to mental health stigma and discrimination and recognise the importance of meaningful productive roles and occupations to mental health recovery, and thus asserts that robust strategies are included within the revised Strategy to tackle stigma and discrimination, and to ensure employers and job-seekers are informed of obligations, rights and protections in this respect via their engagement with employment services.

Long-term unemployment and mental health needs

The risk of a negative impact of protracted unemployment on mental health has been well-evidenced (7), and the potential for individuals who are long-term unemployed and experiencing mental health difficulties to face a 'double stigma' has been highlighted within research (8). The opportunity to support people engaging with employment services in relation to their mental health needs should be considered within the revised Strategy. For example, ensuring availability of accessible information on mental health promotion, services and supports, related mental health awareness training for frontline staff, and improved interagency collaboration in response to needs arising could be explored.

The needs of marginalised groups

SPMHS supports the attention to the needs of particular groups within the revision of the Strategy as outlined in the call for submissions, namely people with disabilities, and jobseekers from migrant or traveller backgrounds, and the expression of intent to attend further to 'increasing labour market participation – particularly among under-represented groups'. Heightened rates of mental health difficulties and a need for greater responsiveness among marginalised groups in society continue to be evidenced, and mirror other inequalities concurrently experienced such as socioeconomic status (9)(10)(11). Robust strategies to tackle such inequalities within the revised Strategy would align with the Public Sector Equality and Human Rights Duty (12), and further reflects central tenets of the 'Economy of Wellbeing' policy approach which recognises people's wellbeing and economic growth as interdependent and mutually reinforcing and which may be a valuable touchpoint in revising the Strategy (13).

END

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References

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- ² Department of Social Protection (2016) *Pathways to Work 2016-2020*. Available online at: <https://www.welfare.ie/en/downloads/PathwaysToWork2016-2020.pdf>
- ³ UN General Assembly *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities*, 24 January 2007, A/RES/61/106
- ⁴ Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission; Economic & Social Research Institute (2018. p. x) *Disability and Discrimination in Ireland: Evidence from the QNHS Equality Modules 2004, 2010, 2014*. Available online at: <https://www.ihrec.ie/app/uploads/2018/09/Disability-and-Discrimination.pdf>
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