



Submission to the Department of Climate, Energy and the Environment on Updating the Clean Air Strategy 2025

February 2026





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 empowered 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 2023-2027 – [‘The Future in Mind’](#), is firmly rooted in these principles and commitments.

SPMHS is a member of the Irish Climate and Health Alliance which published a position paper on air quality – [Clean Air, Healthier Ireland](#) in February 2026, highlighting comprehensive recommendations to achieve multiple health benefits within Ireland via ambitious and urgent air quality action. The following submission focuses primarily on air quality and mental health implications in the context of updating the Clean Air Strategy.

Is it doing what it should?

The Clean Air Strategy includes a welcome key commitment to meeting WHO Air Quality Guidelines¹ by 2040, with related interim targets and monitoring of progress towards same. However, air quality monitoring indicates air quality limits to protect health are not being met in many locations nationwide, and the current pace and implementation of the Strategy risks avoidable physical illness, mental health difficulties and deaths within the population.

What's working well?

There are many positives within the Strategy including the framework it provides to progress air quality, and the monitoring of that progress including publication of progress reports. Progress in improving air quality is recognised via the EPA's 2024 air quality figures which notes EU air quality requirements are being reached.² The expanded air monitoring system is also positive, enabling essential data to track air quality nationally. New public communications efforts to enhance awareness of the significance of air quality to health is very positive, for example availability of accessible information via [cleanair.ie](#) and the Irish Heart Foundation's development of materials.

What's not working well?

While EU legal air quality requirements are evidenced as being met by the EPA most recent reports, exceedances of the WHO Air Quality Guidelines persist with implications for adverse health outcomes.³ With increasing emerging evidence of the



mental and physical health impacts of air pollution⁴, the pace of implementation of the Clean Air Strategy does not match the scale of adverse health implications indicated by persistent air pollution, for example in relation to essential shifts to sustainable travel, and home heating and energy upgrades. There is insufficient integration of mental and physical health considerations into transport and other key policy areas.

How could it work better?

SPMHS would advocate for stronger centring of public health considerations within the implementation and ambition of the Strategy, and this must include mental health considerations. Earlier alignment with WHO air quality guidelines would yield major public health benefits and economic savings, and would ease the burden on Ireland's health services. Responsiveness to emerging research on health implications, in particular for vulnerable groups, is essential – infants and children, pregnant women, people living in socioeconomically deprived circumstances, people with existing non-communicable diseases including enduring neurological and mental health difficulties, and older adults.⁵ This could include, for example, increased targeted support for these groups via initiatives related to clean heat transition.

SPMHS would especially highlight the need for responsiveness to emerging mental health implications of air pollution within the Clean Air Strategy, and integration of air quality efforts within national and regional mental health promotion and prevention policy and efforts.⁶ Stronger national, and targeted, awareness-campaigns to inform the public on the links between air quality and physical and mental health would be beneficial and support the public to make more health-informed choices.

The WHO recognises air pollution as a determinant of mental health, which requires related action within and beyond health services.⁷ The WHO point to the need for cross-Governmental action to address air pollution to yield mental health benefits and prevent morbidity – “Since transport contributes very substantially to urban air pollution, collaborations between the environment and the urban and rural development sectors can bring benefits for mental health, and also help address inequalities. Established air quality actions include enforcing emission regulations, creating low emission zones to restrict heavy traffic in densely populated areas, relocating industrial zones away from residential areas, and increasing access to e-powered public transport and car-sharing programmes. Promoting active commuting by creating safe walking and biking paths also plays a key role.”⁸ Integration of mental and physical health considerations and impacts into transport and other key policy areas could include actions such as mandatory ‘Health Impact Assessments’ for transport projects. Prioritised and accelerated delivery of active and sustainable travel networks would yield air quality-related health benefits, as well as other co-benefits for mental health – as set out in the recent WHO Europe policy brief on active travel and mental health.⁹ Similarly the significance of nature-based approaches to air quality, will further yield co-benefits for mental health, with equitable access to green and natural



spaces, including in urban areas, well-evidenced as supportive of wellbeing.¹⁰ The work of the Interdepartmental Steering Group on Mental Health should align with the updated Strategy, and incorporate such cross-Government efforts on air quality.

Additionally, the Strategy would benefit from incorporating a greater focus on building institutional capacity to contribute to air quality efforts within health services. For example, routine education for health professionals on the significance of air quality for physical and mental health across the lifespan, and introduction of 'no- car idling' mandates for health service sites.

There is an increasing body of research indicating implications for mental health outcomes associated with exposure to air pollution from the earliest stages of development to later in life. SPMHS would advocate that updating of the Clean Air Strategy be informed by such mental health research. Research findings include:

- Association between prenatal exposure to higher levels of PM_{2.5} and increased odds for psychosis and depression in adolescence, and prenatal exposure to nitrogen dioxide and increased odds of anxiety in adolescence.¹¹
- Association between exposure to higher levels of NO₂ and PM₁₀ during mid-pregnancy and increased risk for persistent post-natal depression.¹²
- Residential air pollution exposure associated with increased mental health service use among people recently diagnosed with psychotic and mood disorders.¹³
- Impacts of improved air quality attributed as a causal link to suicide decline.¹⁴
- Increased risk for depression and anxiety amongst older adults in Ireland associated with air pollution exposure.¹⁵
- Attribution of air pollution as a modifiable cause of dementia.¹⁶

Per the 2024 Lancet Commission on Dementia Prevention finding that eliminating air pollution could see a 3% reduction in dementia cases – in Ireland, for indicative purposes and based on projected prevalence to 2045, this could equate to approximately 4500 cases of dementia prevented.¹⁷

End of Submission

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