

SEANAD PUBLIC CONSULTATION COMMITTEE

CHILDREN'S MENTAL HEALTH IN IRELAND

The Mental Health (Amendment) Bill 2016, if passed into law, will create a prohibition on the admission of children to adult psychiatric units. In advance of enacting the amendment, the Seanad Public Consultation Committee (SPCC) will analyse the reasons behind these admissions by highlighting the shortcomings in the existing Child and Adolescent Mental Health service (CAMHs) with a view to developing safeguards to prevent the admissions being made. The SPCC invites submissions from service users (including children and their parents), key civil society activists and service providers who have engaged or are presently engaging with mental health services in Ireland to enhance and educate the consultation process.

The Committee's objectives

The Committee hopes that, through its public consultation, it can –

1. highlight and provide details of the present situation whereby children are being placed into Adult Psychiatric Units. In order to do this, the present operation of the existing CAMHs system will be outlined; what catchment areas the CAMHs operates in and the admissions process for children who are referred to the CAMHs by their GP; and to examine the availability of inpatient care for children who need to be safe;
2. discuss the reality behind the process of child placement in adult units – a day in the life of the child who needs emergency help;
3. analyse the effect on providers of primary and secondary care who seek out-of-hours and weekend care and on children and families in distress;
4. discuss the waiting lists for initial assessment under the CAMHs service by reference to different CAMHs catchments;
5. identify reasons for unsustainable waiting lists in mental health services including:
 - (a) staffing shortfall in multidisciplinary primary care centres, and
 - (b) the role of child psychiatrists under the Mental Health Act 2001 and the reliance on assessments being approved by child psychiatrists;
6. look at best practice and the most successful models in mental health care for children and adolescents;
7. create proposals to decrease waiting lists and streamline inpatient care.

Context

Child Psychiatry in Ireland is lagging far behind its European counterpart in twenty first century medicine. One of the hallmarks of the deficient treatment of children in Irish psychiatry is their admission to adult units on an on-going basis each year. The Mental Health Commission, the oversight body set up under the Mental Health Act 2001, has reported on a yearly basis that this process must end. As far back as 2001, the Commission issued guidelines with a view to ending the process, yet 2015 witnessed the admission of 95 children to adult units. It is interesting to note that our UK counterpart has legislated against the admission of children to units which are not child appropriate.

The Inspector of Mental Health has described this practice as “inexcusable, counter-therapeutic and almost purely custodial in that clinical supervision is provided by teams unqualified in child and adolescent psychiatry” (Mental Health Commission, Annual Report, 2008, p. 29). Senator Joan Freeman has proposed a Bill which, when passed, would prohibit the Health Service Executive (HSE) from allowing these admissions to continue.

Although the Mental Health (Amendment) Bill 2016 does not propose a solution for the admission of children to adult units, it calls for safeguards to be implemented to prevent this “last resort” situation from arising. As always, prevention is better than cure. The admissions are tied to multiple shortfalls in the CAMH services. The primary focus of the Public Consultation process is to identify safeguards which can be put in place to end this practice. It is proposed to gather testimony from frontline workers and service users with a view to proposing safeguards that would prevent the necessity for such admissions.

2016 marked the 10 year anniversary of “A Vision for Change”. In 2017, A Vision for Change is being reviewed. It is suggested that it is now time to have a public understanding of why such admissions take place with a view to proposing ways in which the admissions can be avoided in advance of the enactment of the Mental Health (Amendment) Bill 2016.

The process

Interested organisations and individuals are invited to send written submissions to it on this issue. The Committee will review all submissions which meet the requirements set out below and will invite a number of the contributors to participate in a meeting with the Committee. The meeting will be held in the Seanad Chamber at Leinster House.

The Committee is particularly interested in hearing the views and/or experiences of –

1. providers, both public and private, of mental health care;
2. children and parents who rely on their services;
3. advocacy organisations;
4. third-level institutions.

The Committee will draft and publish a report in which it will make findings and recommendations. When its report has been published, the Committee will seek a debate with the Minister in the Seanad.

Submissions

Submissions should not exceed five pages and should contain the following information:

1. The name, postal address, e-mail address and telephone number of the organisation or person making the submission;
2. A brief introduction indicating any experience, expertise or background you may have in this area;
3. Factual information, observations or opinions that you believe will assist the Committee in drawing conclusions;
4. Changes that you believe need to be made to legislation or public policy.

Submissions will be circulated to all members of the Committee and may be published, in whole or in part, in the Committee's report and/or on the Committee's webpage. The Committee appreciates that some submissions may contain sensitive personal information which the contributor would prefer not to have published beyond the members and staff of the Committee. If you prefer not to have your submission published in the report or on the Committee's website, please indicate this clearly.

The Committee's Terms of Reference contain a number of conditions, set out below, which govern the content of submissions. Contributors are asked to bear these in mind:

"A submission is admissible unless it –

- (a) requests the Seanad to do anything other than the Seanad has power to do;*
- (b) does not comply with Standing Orders or is otherwise not in proper form;*
- (c) contains any matter which is sub judice within the meaning of Standing Order 47;*
- (d) comments on, criticises or makes charges against a person outside the House or an official, either by name or in such a way as to make him or her identifiable;*
- (e) contains language which is offensive or defamatory;*
- (f) is the same as, or in substantially similar terms to, a submission made by or on behalf of the same person or body during the lifetime of the Committee."*

Submissions must be received by the Clerk to the Committee not later than 4 p.m. on Friday, 5th May, 2017.

Receipt of submissions by e-mail, and in Microsoft Word format, is preferred. The e-mail address for submissions is: seanadpublicconsult@oireachtas.ie.

Submissions may also be sent by post to:

Bridget Doody,
Clerk to the Seanad Public Consultation Committee,
Seanad Office,
Leinster House,
Kildare Street,
Dublin 2.

The Clerk to the Committee may be contacted by telephone at 01 6183225.

Members of the Committee

Senator Paul Coghlan, Leas-Chathaoirleach of Seanad Éireann, is Chairman of the Seanad Public Consultation Committee.

The other members are Senators Catherine Ardagh, Jerry Buttimer, Maria Byrne, Martin Conway, Mark Daly, Máire Devine, Joan Freeman, Colette Kelleher, Denis Landy and Pádraig Ó Céidigh.

Senator Joan Freeman has been appointed as Rapporteur for the purpose of the Report on Children's Mental Health in Ireland.
