



Mind wise

**Response to the Department of
Health Budget 2023/24 Equality
Impact Assessment**

Introduction

MindWise appreciates the opportunity to respond to the public consultation on the Department of Health's Equality Impact Assessment (EQIA) of the 2023/24 Budget Outcome.

MindWise is a leading membership-based mental health charity in Northern Ireland. We have been working with and for people of all ages directly affected by mental health issues as well as families, carers, employers and teachers for over 50 years.

Northern Ireland has the highest prevalence of mental health problems in the UK, with a 25% higher overall prevalence than England and our services are needed now more than ever.

In 2021/22 we managed 32 services supporting 15,993 people throughout the year. These services include Advocacy and Money Advice, the Northern Ireland Appropriate Adult Scheme, Children and Families (including Beyond Bricks, Bloom and a Wellness Service for parents and children), Day Care and in the Community Care for social contact, housing, talking therapies and Carer and Family support services.

MindWise is demonstrably committed to ensuring that we support and empower people affected by mental health issues to live their best lives, no matter what age they are. Our services are underpinned by a trauma informed life cycle approach where we support people from birth to end of life.

Having adopted this approach we are deeply concerned about the implications of the 2023-24 budget announcement, the removal of Core Grant funding and potential future savings measures on the lives of the people we support through our range of services.

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Passion



Respect



Empathy



Togetherness



Openness & Transparency



As a charity we acknowledge the difficulties caused by the lack of a functioning Assembly and Executive and appreciate the Department having raised its concerns with the Department of Finance and the Northern Ireland Office in regard to the 'recurrent funding necessary to maintain service provision and provide a basis for the sustainable rebuild of health services.' We strongly believe that reform in the shape of future legislative measures must be put in place to ensure that no single party has a veto to collapse the Assembly over political issues which should be debated and resolved in a parliamentary setting.



While this consultation is not about reform of governance structures in Northern Ireland, our concerns as a voluntary sector organisation must be considered and understood in the broader context of how this budget came to be announced by the Secretary of State rather than the Executive in the first place.



The dysfunctional nature of government in Northern Ireland was starkly highlighted in research carried out at the end of last year by FactCheckNI which stated '... between 2 December 1999 and 2 December 2004, the Executive was in operation for 937 days and down for 890 (48.7 per cent). And between 8 November 2017 and 8 November 2022, the Executive has been up for 755 days and suspended for 1071 days (58.7 per cent). So the most recent five years of Executive operation has in fact been worse than the first five years of its existence.' (1)



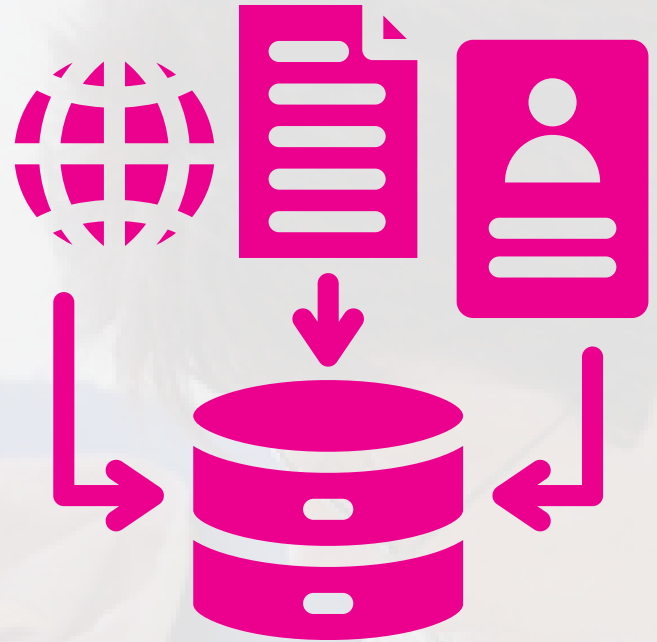
Given that over nine months have elapsed since these calculations were produced the statistics make for increasingly grim reading. This is especially true for the most vulnerable in society, including those with severe mental illnesses, who will be cruelly impacted by the lack of an Assembly or Executive and the implications of the spending cuts announced in the budget.

MindWise also notes that there remain significant gaps in research and data gathering on our mental health needs and that without this information we as a society are unable to fully determine and subsequently deliver services effectively to meet those needs.


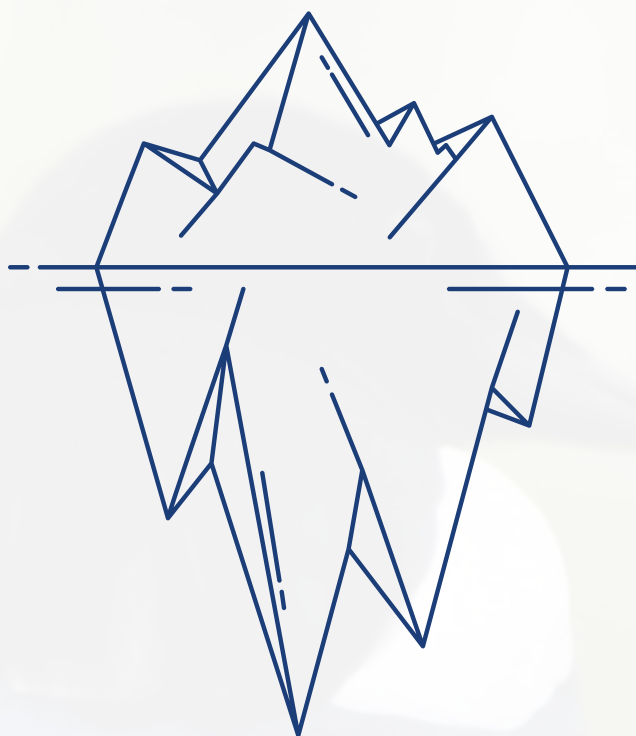
Essentially we are only on the tip of the iceberg in terms of what we actually know about the current wide-ranging needs of those living with mental ill health in Northern Ireland.

A key concern of MindWise is that by imposing cuts in the present not enough is being done to prevent the inevitable proliferation of mental health issues in the future. Prevention and early intervention minimise the prevalence and incidence of poor mental health and the severity of the lifetime impact of mental health issues.

Short-term measures to patch over deficits will only lead to gaping wounds in the long-term. Prevention and early intervention must be adequately funded and embedded across society in Northern Ireland. This cannot be done in the context of Core Grant Funding being limited or removed completely.



This consultation response addresses some of the issues and scenarios outlined in the Department's Equality Impact Assessment of the 2023-24 Budget Outcome and relates them to MindWise as an organisation and mental health issues more broadly in Northern Ireland. Specifically MindWise is concerned at the impact that the loss of Core Grant funding will have for us an organisation from October 2023 up to and including March 2024; it is also speculated what the likely impact would be for our services if the scheme was cut entirely.



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Housing and Community Services



MindWise have proven that with the right housing related support, people with mental ill health and complex needs can maintain their tenancies, improve their quality of life and reduce social isolation.

In terms of the 'Potential Impact of Savings Measures Not Yet Taken' MindWise is concerned about the proposed 'Reduction in payments for support services provided by the Community and Voluntary Sector' involving as it does the 're-negotiation of contracts for the community support services for looked after children, children in need, older people, mental health and learning disability and physical disability clients.'

The Department's Mental Health Strategy 2021-2031 highlighted that future mental health service focus will be on the community to ensure that those who most need help are able to access it. Point 123 of the strategy stated,

In practice this means co-designing local pathways of care across primary and secondary care and across the range of available Community and Voluntary sector resources in local areas. It will mean involvement of all actors in the deliver of mental health: GPs, Trusts, the Community and Voluntary sector and other services such as community pharmacists. It will also mean including people with lived experience, their family and carers in the co-design process. (2)

In terms of the outcomes of this new vision Point 127 of the strategy stated,

The effect of this will be noticeable for all. It is expected that this will reduce waiting times, that it will ensure timely access to services from primary and secondary care and the community and voluntary sector and that it will improve user satisfaction with access to services. (3)



MindWise have proven that with the right housing related support, people with mental ill health and complex needs can maintain their tenancies, improve their quality of life and reduce social isolation.

Some of our housing services are partially funded through Health and Social Care Trusts. This is a vital source of financial support that ensures that tenants provided with housing (funded through this source) by MindWise are able to live their best lives while receiving the care and peer support that fits their specific needs.

These testimonies from two of our tenants underline the importance of our housing and the positive and welcoming atmosphere that it fosters for people experiencing mental ill health.




I have friends here who take an interest in my writing and wellbeing.

Tenant, Abbesside Supported Housing - Antrim



When I moved in I bottled things up and didn't talk to anyone about my problems, now I know I can talk to any member of staff and they will help me.

Tenant, The Haven - Belfast



The Department's Equality Impact Assessment document states that the contracts which are being considered for re-negotiation in the scenario outlined 'have been set up to prevent hospital admission and to support clients living in the community.' Any reduction in funding for these services would run contrary to the following statement in Section 1 which declares that

It is the Department's mission to improve the health and social well-being of the people of Northern Ireland and the Department has a statutory responsibility to promote an integrated system of health and social care designed to secure improvement in the physical and mental health of people in Northern Ireland, the prevention, diagnosis and treatment of illness, and the social wellbeing of the people in Northern Ireland. (4)

Abbeyside tenants have access to a staff team as and when they require it and have access to a full range of services through Community Mental Health Teams and community/day services, which is integrated into the service delivery.

Tenants are supported to achieve their individually chosen goals. Within Abbeyside, there are plenty of opportunities to support tenants towards having a more independent lifestyle. There are also opportunities for tenants to cook, shop, do laundry, look after their own room and improve their existing daily skills.

If a tenant chooses to, they can be supported to become involved in volunteering, work or social activities.

The 24-hour intensive supported housing service has a dedicated staff team, and the referral process supports the discharge planning process for those in hospital or those who may be in danger of unnecessary hospital readmission. Support and care is offered to them to achieve as much independence as possible.

It is therefore crucial that the Department does everything in its power to ensure that there are no reductions in payments for support services delivered through HSCT and managed by MindWise. If payments were reduced it would have a highly adverse effect on the stability and wellbeing of our tenants and could potentially lead to an increase in unnecessary hospital admissions.



We are also concerned of the effects that spending cuts could have on our resource centres in Belfast, Downpatrick and Ballyclare and our community care and support service/community floating support.

These resource centres and support networks are peer-led and offer drop-in support across the weekly sessions for people referred to the service. Staff are available for one to one support and signposting to other relevant services and agencies.

There is focus on promoting recovery, empowerment, independence, social belonging and social inclusion through facilitating group work activities.

As with our housing services MindWise community resources offer people experiencing poor mental health a safe space where they can engage in activities and conversations in an empathetic and caring environment which suits their specific needs.

Older People




MindWise runs a range of services for elderly people (those aged 65 and over). Ben Crom in Kilkeel supports those over 65 who are experiencing problems associated with advancing age; frailty mild- moderate dementia and/or mental health difficulties.

The aim of the service is to continue to promote independence and inclusion in the local community, and support its tenants to live fulfilling and meaningful lives, while reducing the stigma associated with being older or having mental ill health.

Ben Crom is a recovery based service. Each tenant has their own apartment with their own front door.

We offer support between the hours of 8am - 8pm Monday - Sunday each week. We also have an on call system in place for when staff are not on site. In addition to this, there is a Fold Telecare system active in cases of emergency. Tenants have pull cords in all rooms and can pull them to get through to someone in the Fold Telecare services centre who will assist in contacting emergency services and staff on call.




Structured support is offered to all tenants. Tenants are supported via 1:1 or group activity, key-work sessions, person centered support plans and reviews.

Ben Crom tenants enjoy tea / coffee mornings in the Common Room, arts and crafts activities and seasonal activities. Staff encourage participation in local activities in the community where possible.

Tenants have their say in 1:1 and group situations, use of suggestion boxes, monthly tenants meetings and Service Advisory Groups.

Staff support tenants in their apartments to complete daily living tasks, budgeting (where necessary), attending appointments and prompting to take medications, if they need it.


One tenant told us,



Since I have moved in I feel much happier and very safe living here, knowing there is 24hr CCTV and staff on site from 8am - 8pm, there is also a on-call service when staff leave the premises. The staff in Ben Crom are absolutely excellent, they are always going above and beyond to support me with my everyday living skills. I have a key worker and we sit down together to set support goals for during the year, I always try and reach my goals as it gives me something to focus on. I am very grateful for the staff as they assist me with going to hospital appointments when I am unable to go alone.

On the beginning of every month there is a tenants meeting, this is a great way of discussing complains/issues and discussing any other business, there is also activities on numerous times per week and tea mornings every week, this gives me and other tenants a great chance to get involved in activities and socialize with each other.

I never feel lonely or isolated living here; the staff are great company and are always very approachable whenever I want or need to chat with them



While Ben Crom is funded through the NI Housing Executive's Supporting People Programme, referrals are made through older people's services such as Integrated Care Teams or Floating Support, as well as mental health Support and Recovery Teams in the Southern Trust. Assessed care needs are provided through the SHSCT domiciliary care provision.


Any reduction in spending by the Department affecting our organisation would in turn have a significant negative impact on clients and tenants of facilities such as Ben Crom.

This needs to be understood in the context of the following observation from the Department's Mental Health Strategy, which stated that 'Mental health services for older adults in Northern Ireland have not kept up with the changing demand. Old age psychiatry still largely operates on an outdated concept of health and aging, with a cut-of at the age of 65.'

Through Ben Crom and the assistance received from the SHSCT domiciliary care provision MindWise can ensure that older people living with mental illness are catered for in an environment where their condition is understood and managed by staff who are trained. Point 117 of the Mental Health Strategy states,

Respect for personal autonomy and human rights should be central tenets in ensuring the needs of older people are identified [sic] and met. When circumstances arise whereby older people require treatment or assessment for mental health, they themselves should play an active role in the decision-making process. Including people over 65 in adult mental health services should not mean a reduction of services, but rather it will ensure that they will be able to access the same expertise as those under 65.

Any reduction in spending would run contrary to the action identified above.



Children and Young People

MindWise offers a Wellness Service which works with children and families using WRAP (Wellness Action Recovery Planning) to build emotional resilience and develop new coping skills. This service has two strands: the Family Wellness Service and the Mums Wellness Service.

The Family Wellness Service aims to enhance the emotional health and wellbeing of children aged 5 - 12 who are at risk of developing significant mental health difficulties if early intervention measures are not identified and addressed, with a view to reducing their need for more intensive or long-term support from statutory/other services.

This service covers the Western Health and Social Care Trust (Fermanagh & Omagh) & Southern Health and Social Care Trust and is funded by the Department through the Community Foundation. Children can be referred through Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services or their GP by the Early Intervention Family Support Hubs (FSH) in both the WHSCT & SHSCT. Parents are welcome to self-refer through their local Family Support Hubs, and professionals involved in the child's life may also refer through the Hub.

The Mums Wellness Service aims to meet the maternal mental health needs at the perinatal stage and reduce need for referral to statutory adult community mental health services.

The project works in partnership with the local Family Support Hub, healthcare professionals including GPs, Health Visitors, Midwives and other community/voluntary groups.

This service covers the Western Health and Social Care Trust (Fermanagh) and is funded by the Department through the Community Foundation. The project adopts a holistic person and family centered approach which helps families to better support their children, understand and manage their circumstances, to be part of the community they live in and to experience less stigma and discrimination.

Any further reductions to the budget would have a detrimental impact on the shape and scope of these important services.

Scan the QR code to watch a short film about how we're supporting new mums and families to develop their resilience:



In section 15 and 16 it is stated that £35.8 million of the Capital Budget will be allocated for Flagship Projects including a Mother and Children's flagship project providing a new Regional Children's Hospital delivering integrated and contemporary paediatric healthcare services as well as a new Maternity Hospital which will provide care for over 6,000 births per year and will replace existing facilities.

While this is a positive move MindWise is still very concerned at the lack of progress being made on a specialist Mother and Baby Perinatal Mental Health Unit. It has been over 15 years since the Bamford Review of Mental Health outlined grave concerns over perinatal mental health issues in Northern Ireland.

The Department's Mental Health Strategy 2021 - 2031 included renewed calls for a mother and baby unit. However, nothing can be done until an Executive is reformed or a positive intervention is made by Westminster. In the context of cuts and reduced spending the outlook is very grim. Among the 6,000 births per year projected for the new Maternity Hospital there will be many women who will experience perinatal mental health issues during and after pregnancy.

According to the Maternal Mental Health Alliance more than 1 in 10 women develop a mental illness during pregnancy or within the first year after having a baby. While there has been positive movement in relation to the development and delivery of Specialist Perinatal Mental Health Services for new mothers with severe mental illness, the lack of a bespoke unit is allowing a perinatal mental health crisis to grow.

Conclusions

The issues outlined in this response once again bring the Department's Mental Health Strategy into sharp relief. Action 17 unambiguously made a recommendation to 'Fully integrate (the) community and voluntary sector in mental health service delivery with a lifespan approach including the development of a protocol to make maximum use of the sector's expertise.' (5)

Given the current lack of an Assembly or Executive there has been no movement on many of the recommendations made in the Department's strategy. This means that the strategy's intention to 'harness the skills and experience that exist in this sector (community and voluntary) to ensure that this is used to benefit people with mental ill health' is tantalisingly close to becoming a reality, but excruciatingly intangible in terms of a firm timetable for its implementation.

MindWise is one of many community and voluntary organisations that now find themselves locked into a frustrating cycle with no hope of a positive outcome in the short-term.

NICVA's July 2023 report on the cost of living crisis included feedback from staff across the community and voluntary sector which demonstrated the low morale and pressures coming to bear on many organisations. It outlined how there is now increased pressure on the sector which is, in turn, having an effect on staff and volunteer retention. (6) While more people need the services offered by organisations like MindWise there is a lack of long term and substantial funding meaning that it is extremely difficult to forward plan.

This will affect the growing number of people experiencing mental health issues, some of which have been created and exacerbated by the cost of living crisis and the inability of our devolved institutions to make legislative change.

We note that this logjam has been a source of frustration for the Mental Health Champion, Prof. Siobhan O'Neill who in her end of year one update on the Mental Health Strategy stated that 'We need funding allocated for the full implementation of the Mental Health Strategy for the transformation that is necessary, to reduce the suffering and create a better Northern Ireland for everyone.' (7)

Organisationally MindWise will be detrimentally affected by the loss of the Core Grant and potential future savings measures. We offer a range of services that are interventional in nature.

As outlined previously our Housing and Wellness services offer help to those who might otherwise end up in hospital, further putting pressure on already stretched NHS resources.

Other services such as Talking Therapies, which offers a range of psychological interventions which support recovery journeys and initiate personal discovery, will be affected.

MindWise also offer Beyond Bricks and Bloom, two school-based programmes which support the mental health of young children and teenagers.

The budget's short-term and potential long-term impact could be devastating for MindWise's goal to support and empower people affected by mental health issues to live their best lives.

As an organisation in the community and voluntary sector we can only do so much to act as a bulkhead while politics isn't working. The reality is that we are removing vital support mechanisms for those affected by mental health issues in the present while creating a mental health crisis for the next generation. Our political leaders need to ensure that this does not happen.

References

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2 - Department of Health, 'Mental Health Strategy 2021 - 2031' <https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/health/doh-mhs-strategy-2021-2031.pdf>

3 - Department of Health, 'Mental Health Strategy 2021 - 2031' <https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/health/doh-mhs-strategy-2021-2031.pdf>

4 - Department of Health, 'Budget 2023-24 Equality Impact Assessment', 22 May 2023 - <https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/consultations/health/doh-budget-eqia-cons.pdf>

5 - Department of Health, 'Mental Health Strategy 2021 - 2031' <https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/health/doh-mhs-strategy-2021-2031.pdf>

6 - NICVA, 'The Cost-of-Living Crisis - Tough Times, Smart Solutions', 2 August 2023 - <https://www.nicva.org/resource/the-cost-of-living-crisis-and-the-impact-on-ni-charities>

7 - Prof. Siobhan O'Neill, 'The End of Year One of Northern Ireland's Mental Health Strategy', 15 Mar. 2023 <https://www.mentalhealthchampion-ni.org.uk/publications/end-year-one-northern-irelands-mental-health-strategy>

Our Mission

Supporting and empowering people affected by mental health issues to live their best lives.



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