

**Royal College of Psychiatrists NI (RCPsych NI) Response to:
DoH Consultation on Policy underpinning the Public Health Bill
(Northern Ireland)**

1.0 Introduction about RCPsych NI:

The Royal College of Psychiatrists (RCPsych) is the statutory body responsible for the supervision of the training and accreditation of Psychiatrists in the UK and for providing guidelines and advice regarding the treatment, care, and prevention of mental and behavioural disorders. Among its principal aims are to improve the outcomes for those with mental illness and to improve the mental health of individuals, families and communities.

The College has approximately 450 Members in Northern Ireland (including Doctors in training) who provide the backbone of the local Psychiatric service, offering acute and community treatment, as well as specialist care and consultation across a large range of settings.

This response is submitted on behalf of the Devolved Council of the Royal College of Psychiatrists in Northern Ireland.

2.0 Substantive Response/Comments:

We welcome the updating of the Public Health Act (Northern Ireland) 1967.

We are limiting our response to issues that deal with mental health and mental illness.

It is very striking that neither in the Consultation of 2015 nor in the final Report of the Review in 2016 was mental health addressed in any significant way.

We know from our experience of the Covid pandemic that this was a significant issue and currently an ongoing issue especially among children. However, despite this there is no mention of mental health in this Consultation document. This suggests that there is a lack of awareness or a lack of learning from our recent experience with Covid. We do not need to wait until the final Covid report.

It makes sense that the focus of the updated Bill is expanded to “All Hazards Approach”, which not only includes infections but also hazards with biological, chemical and radiological origins, which is in keeping with the rest of the United Kingdom.

Although mental health issues and mental illness will not be “Hazards” as described in the proposed legislation, they will have very significant impacts which need to be acknowledged in the legislation and planning. This impact can be due to the direct effects of the range of potential hazards on the brain resulting directly in mental illness and cognitive impairment, the stress that could lead to stress reactions such as anxiety and depression and the stress precipitating a severe mental illness. This has to be recognised in the planning of responses and provision of services including mental health services in this context.

In addition, there has been no recognition of the needs of people who have a Learning Disability. It must be clearly stated in legislation that there must be no discriminatory practice, especially with regards quality of life decisions, when a person with a Learning Disability is affected by a potential “Hazard”.

There also needs to be recognition of the stress and emotional effects on family members, staff working in the public services and the general public in the context of a public health emergency. There needs to be the availability of support and general education on how to deal with feelings and when to and how to access help.

Ensuring appropriate response to emotional stresses and mental health disorders should be included in the Statement of Intent for the proposed Public Health Bill. The aim of the Statement of Intent is to mitigate the risks of a Public Health emergency and there should be a specific section addressing mental health and mental disorder in both the Bill and in the Explanatory Memorandum.

In Theme 2 Recommendation 7, there should be clarity of responsibilities at Department of Health level and at HSC Trust level with regard to the provision of mental health services in the context of a Public Health Emergency. This needs to be stated in this Bill as it has not been stated in previous legislation. The response needs to not only include the statutory services and primary care, but also the C&V sector.

The section dealing with the “Duties on a Registered Medical Practitioner” and “Medical Examination”, should also include a Capacity assessment - as it may determine the legislation and action that may be followed both now and especially when the Mental Capacity Act (NI) 2016 is fully introduced.

When a child is affected either directly or indirectly through a member of the family being affected, the experience and learning from the Covid pandemic needs to be applied, especially from the mental health and maturational aspects. This is especially if the child cannot attend school.

The lack of holistic focus on the individual child in this Consultation is concerning.

Overall, it is very striking and concerning that mental health, mental illness and Learning Disability are not mentioned in this Consultation, despite the knowledge already gained from all that happened during the Covid pandemic.

The RCPsych(NI) appreciates having been consulted and would welcome further involvement please in this important Bill.

Dated: 27 September 2024

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Julie Anderson', with a horizontal line extending to the left.

**Dr Julie Anderson Chair RCPsych NI & Vice President RCPsych
- on behalf of RCPsych NI**

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