

September the 10th is World Suicide Prevention Day, and I am writing to highlight that the current cost of living crisis is a suicide prevention issue, and to ask you, our elected representatives, to act urgently to mitigate the effect of this crisis and the mental health implications.

There is strong evidence demonstrating the association between recession, austerity and suicidal pain. Following the economic crisis in 2008, countries who did not put in place strong financial protections for those who were vulnerable, saw an increase in the number of suicides. Areas of England experiencing the greatest rises in unemployment experienced the largest increases in the number of suicides. In England the estimated increase in suicide (1000 additional deaths) must be viewed as the tip of an iceberg of emotional distress. Researchers estimate that there were between 30,000 and 40,000 additional suicide attempts during the first three years of the last recession in England¹. Similar data exists demonstrating the impact of the 2008 recession and austerity measures in the Republic of Ireland, which led to 476 more male and 85 more female deaths over five years; and 9000 additional hospital presentations for self-harm and attempted suicide².

Financial struggles, loss of home and debt are stressors which can lead to depression and suicide, particularly in men. In a 2015 study of over 1,600 suicides in Northern Ireland, financial crises was a contributory factor in about one in five suicides in middle aged men³. Unemployment and job loss accounted for just under half of the additional suicides in the last recession in England. Debt and the impact of austerity measures are likely to be other important contributors to the rise then¹. Worryingly the research shows that many of those who died by suicide in this demographic were not in contact with primary care or mental health services prior to their death^{1,3}.

Suicide is an avoidable death that causes shockwaves of suffering across families and communities. I am extremely concerned about the impact of the current situation on the Northern Ireland population, which may well be even worse than elsewhere. Prior to the pandemic almost one-in-five people in Northern Ireland lived in poverty, and over 100,000 of our children lived in poverty⁴. One in 14 households here experience food insecurity⁵. Furthermore, research from the estimates that over three quarters of the NI population will experience fuel poverty by January 2023⁶. Rates of mental health difficulties in Northern Ireland are already high, particularly among our young people, where the rates are around 25% higher than in the UK generally⁷. As Mental Health Champion I have heard first-hand the stories of how people who struggle with poor mental health and suicide loss are suffering financially. Many of the Community and Voluntary sector organisations who provide interventions and support on the frontline are at breaking point. I am concerned that the projected increases in the cost of living will plunge many more into a state of hopelessness and suicidal distress. This is an emergency and urgent action is needed.

I have worked with several Government Departments to develop policy supporting mental health and suicide prevention. My work has focused on the design and implementation of the Mental Health Strategy and the Protect Life 2 Suicide Prevention Strategy. These are strong plans and it is important that the funding gaps that currently exist are addressed, so that these strategies can be delivered in full. It is particularly concerning that the Protect Life 2 Suicide Prevention Strategy⁸ (which currently receives £10million in funding annually) requires an

increase of between 10% and 26% over the next three years. Again, this deficit needs to be addressed as a matter of urgency. There are around 200 deaths by suicide annually in NI, each one with a direct cost of £1 million. Mental illness generally costs the NI economy £3.4 billion annually⁹. Investment in suicide prevention and mental health will not only prevent avoidable deaths, but it also makes good economic sense.

In addition to full funding for the mental health and suicide prevention strategies I am also today calling on all MLAs to work together to provide a package of mitigations, focusing on the most vulnerable, the people who will suffer most as a result of the cost-of-living crisis. This needs to include an increase in Social Welfare benefits, additional payments for people who are disabled, and additional support for families to address the harmful impact of child poverty.

I am also calling on our elected representatives and all the Government Departments to provide additional support to address the mental health impact of the cost-of-living crisis, and a funding package for tailored support and interventions to reduce and treat the mental health impact of the current economic situation. This should include suicide prevention training for frontline workers who are providing advice and helping people manage the impact of economic crisis, including financial service providers, and those who work in benefits agencies and foodbanks. Likewise, staff who support those with mental health difficulties need to be equipped to direct people to sources of financial support and support to manage financial pressures. Advice agencies need to be provided with funding to support people who are in financial crisis and mitigate the mental health impact so that people are well enough to return to work and support economic recovery generally. Debt appears to be a potentially critical mediator of financial crisis on mental health, therefore (in addition to direct financial support) measures to support people to avoid debt and manage problem debt should be implemented urgently; and agencies who support people in managing problem debt appropriately resourced to meet the upcoming demand.

I remain hopeful that by working together, our elected representatives can provide important mitigations and support our strong community and voluntary sector, and the statutory and non-statutory agencies, to ease the inevitable burden the cost of living crisis will place on our mental health. There is no place for child poverty in Northern Ireland and one death by suicide is one preventable death too many. The time for action is now.

Yours sincerely



Siobhan O'Neill
Mental Health Champion for Northern Ireland

1. https://www.bristol.ac.uk/media-library/sites/policybristol/briefings-and-reports-pdfs/pre-2017-briefings--reports-pdfs/PolicyBristol_Report%202015_Suicide%20and%20the%20recession.pdf
2. <https://academic.oup.com/ije/article/44/3/969/631832>

3. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0165032714004662?via%3Dihub>
4. <https://factcheckni.org/topics/health/children-living-in-poverty-in-northern-ireland/>
5. <https://www.irf.org.uk/report/poverty-northern-ireland-2022>
6. <https://jonathanbradshaw.blogspot.com/2022/08/estimates-of-fuel-poverty-in-january.html>
7. <http://www.hscboard.hscni.net/our-work/social-care-and-children/youth-wellbeing-prevalencesurvey-2020/>
8. <https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/sites/default/files/publications/health/pl-strategy.PDF>
MHF Investing In Prevention FULLReport FINAL.pdf (mentalhealth.org.uk)