

**Department of Health  
Departmental Response  
to recommendations in the Northern  
Ireland Audit Office's Report  
Mental Health Services in Northern  
Ireland**

**Presented to the Northern Ireland Assembly  
by the Department of Health**

**10 July 2023**



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# **Glossary of Abbreviations**

<b>DoH</b>	Department of Health
<b>NIAO</b>	Northern Ireland Audit Office
<b>MHS</b>	Mental Health Strategy
<b>HSCNI</b>	Health and Social Care Northern Ireland

**DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH DEPARTMENTAL RESPONSE TO NORTHERN IRELAND AUDIT OFFICE (NIAO) RECOMMENDATIONS IN THE NIAO'S REPORT OF 23 MAY 2023 ON "MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES IN NORTHERN IRELAND"**

## **Department of Health**

### **Mental Health Services in Northern Ireland**

#### *Introduction*

The responses within this Departmental Response have been made at official level. Where specific recommendations relate to issues of policy these will require Ministerial decisions.

#### *NIAO Recommendation 1*

**The Department of Health's renewed focus on mental health through its mental health action plan and the development of a mental health strategy is welcomed. The 2021-31 strategy, in particular, provides a framework for improvements in mental health and mental health services going forward, although, because of a lack of confirmed funding, there is already evidence of delay in its implementation.**

**Without dedicated funding the pace of delivery and ultimate completion are uncertain. While the draft Executive Budget provides a positive signal of intent, the Department of Health, in conjunction with the Executive, needs to secure adequate and sustained funding for the implementation of the strategy over its lifetime. Failure to do so would jeopardise the achievement of its long-term vision for mental health and run the risk that, like Bamford before it, necessary reform and improvement is curtailed or delayed as a result of a lack of commitment to prioritise and adequately fund implementation. Security of funding would also support implementation plans beyond a single year.**

The Department of Health (DoH) accepts this recommendation in principle.

A mental health funding plan was published in June 2021 alongside the Mental Health Strategy (MHS) 2021-31 to identify the costs associated with implementing the Strategy in full. It identified an investment need over the next 10 years of £1.2bn. DoH will seek to secure additional recurrent funding to deliver the MHS, however our ability to secure this additional funding will be dependent on the funding made available to the NI Executive in future budgets.

The MHS is being implemented by way of annual delivery plans, the first of which was published in July 2022. The Delivery Plan sets out the detail of actions currently in progress and others prioritised for delivery. Delivery of this Plan is funded from within DoH's own resources.

Officials are currently finalising the MHS delivery plan for 2023-24. With an opening budget position confirmed for 2023-24, the delivery plan will set out key priorities that can be delivered within the available resources, as well as the preparatory work to allow DoH to implement other strategy actions should additional funding be made available from a future Executive budget.

#### *NIAO Recommendation 2*

**Mental health funding levels in Northern Ireland do not compare well with those elsewhere in the United Kingdom and Ireland. Bringing funding levels in Northern Ireland into line with those elsewhere, within a reasonable timeframe, will require a substantial increase in funding. This will be made more difficult by the additional pressures placed on service costs over the next number of years as a result of COVID-19 pandemic.**

**To do this will require a commitment towards sustained budget increases over the medium to long term. In this regard, and while acknowledging the intentions identified in its Mental Health Strategy Funding Plan, the Department of Health should establish an explicit long-term funding ambition for mental health services, together with stepped interim targets aimed towards its achievement.**

DoH accepts this recommendation in principle.

The MHS Funding Plan includes a high level funding and implementation profile over a 10 year period, setting out the level of funding required to fully deliver the Strategy and, in doing so, transform mental health services. However, full delivery of the Strategy will be subject to additional funding being made available to DoH.

Future budget availability will be within the context of wider Executive priorities but DoH will continue to make the case for full funding of the MHS and mental health services. In doing so, DoH will submit robust bids to secure additional capital and revenue funding for mental health provision, over multiple years in future spending reviews and budget exercises.

### *NIAO Recommendation 3*

**There is a clear need to improve data around mental health services, both to address significant information gaps and to improve the quality of data produced. There is also a need to improve data accessibility, making it easier for users to find and use the information currently available by putting more data into the public domain. To support decision making and better monitoring of the effectiveness of services in improving people’s mental health, there is a particular need to develop an appropriate outcomes measurement framework.**

**While the Department of Health has recognised the need for both a robust dataset across services and an outcomes framework, tackling the weaknesses in mental health data will involve substantial change and require investment in data systems (both human and technological resources). Consequently, the Department of Health should produce a data strategy setting out its aims for improving mental health data and how it intends to achieve them in line with the Office for Statistics Regulation’s recommendation.**

DoH partially accepts this recommendation.

DoH recognises the importance of having robust data systems in place to ensure that data is accessible, usable and can act as a strategic asset for decision making, policy development and to support the delivery of services. Reflecting this need, in 2022 DoH published a Data Strategy for Health and Social Care Northern Ireland (HSCNI) 2022-2030, which outlines the vision, mission and objectives for data and information for health and social care up to 2030. A copy of the Strategy is available on the publications section of the DoH website. Implementation of this Data Strategy, which is subject to resource availability, will help ensure development of robust datasets across health and social care, including for mental health services, and is aligned to the Office for Statistics Regulation’s recommendation which states that “*Data and statistics need to be recognised as a valuable public asset. Given the extent of changes needed to improve mental health statistics in NI, the Department of Health (NI) should consider whether a separate data strategy is required to support and deliver the ambitions set out in the Mental Health Strategy 2021-2031.*” On this basis, DoH does not consider that a separate data strategy for mental health is necessary as it is covered within the overall Data Strategy.

It is agreed, however, that there is a need for improvement in data capture in relation to mental health services. Action 34 of the MHS commits to the ‘development of a regional Outcomes Framework in collaboration with service users and professionals, to underpin and drive service development and delivery’. A proposals paper, setting out recommendations for the mental health outcomes framework, was approved by the former Health Minister in October 2022. Work is now underway on implementation of the Framework, which is aligned to the delivery of the Encompass project. Encompass is a HSCNI wide initiative that will introduce a digital integrated care record for everyone in Northern Ireland, with implementation to commence in Autumn 2023, initially in the South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust, before being rolled out on a regional basis. Encompass are working directly with the Outcomes Framework team to ensure effective reporting structures are incorporated in the system. Once fully implemented, the Outcomes Framework will help ensure that the collection of robust data to enable outcomes measurement is firmly embedded in the delivery of mental health services. In the interim, improvements are being taken forward to improve accessibility to mental health data, for example through more effective signposting of mental health information on the DoH website.