

Melanie McGinnis
Economic Policy Unit
OFMDFM
Room E5.22
Castle Buildings
Stormont Belfast
BT4 3SR
pfgbudget@nics.gov.uk

19 December 2007

Dear Ms McGinnis

Re: Mental Health Funding

As a retired psychiatrist, I am deeply concerned about the lack of provision for mental health in the draft Programme for Government. I am worried that the net effect of this draft budget will be a reduction in the overall funding provision for mental health and learning disability services.

I welcome the promise of moving mental health services into the community. An appropriate balance of hospital and community services is essential to build a world-class mental health service and to allow individuals with mental health problems to live full and active lives. However, the proper development of community services will require considerable short-term investment, and there is no room for this in the budget allocation for mental health.

Although the mental health need is greater in Northern Ireland than in the rest of the United Kingdom, the spend here is much lower. Mental health spend accounts for about 8% of the Health and Social Care budget in Northern Ireland, compared to 12% in England. Poor mental health is strongly associated with unemployment, poor education, low income or material standard of living, in addition to poor physical health and adverse life events.

In England there has been recognition of the need for coordinated Government action to address the impact of mental health on the lives of individuals, and also on their economic activity. Mental health problems cost the economy about £12 billion a year, and the Government's response to this has been an emphasis on helping people with mental illness to retain jobs or move back into the workforce, as well as a plan to increase investment in counselling and psychotherapeutic services from £5 million a year to £170 million a year by 2010.

The Northern Ireland Executive cannot afford to ignore what is happening elsewhere. The Sainsbury Centre for Mental Health has very recently calculated that the total cost to employers of mental health problems among their staff is equivalent to £1,035 for every employee in the UK workforce. Using the most recent workforce figures for Northern Ireland, this equates to a cost to Northern Ireland employers of more than £745 million.

We need the sort of forward, joined-up thinking currently seen in Scotland and increasingly in England, here in Northern Ireland. We need much more investment in mental health services as a proportion of total health spending.

I trust, therefore, that the Executive will increase the allocation to mental health services and look more seriously at mental health issues across government.

Yours sincerely

David J King, MD, FRCPsych, FRCPI, DPM
Emeritus Professor of Clinical Psychopharmacology
david.king86@btinternet.com