

Melanie McGinnis
Economic Policy Unit
OFMDFM
By email to: pfgbudget@nicos.gov.uk

6 January 2008

Dear Ms McGinnis

Re: Mental health services - draft Programme for Government

I am a 35 year old woman with bipolar disorder. I am currently living in England but plan to return to my home town of Belfast this year in order to start a family with my new husband.

Obviously I am very concerned about the quality of mental health services in Northern Ireland. I understand that liaison between psychiatric and obstetric services is being improved, yet there are no plans for a Mother and Baby psychiatric unit. This would ensure that women like me, who are at risk of serious mental health problems after birth, have the reassurance of knowing they will not be separated from their baby if they do develop problems. With spending on mental health so limited, it seems unlikely that even small albeit significant investments for someone people like me could be accommodated. *Women with mental illness should have the same rights to support to start families as other groups.*

I am also concerned about the lack of talking therapies available in Northern Ireland. There is more and more evidence that these therapies are as effective as drugs in managing depression and anxiety, but also help to manage bipolar disorder. Anyone who has had to take a lot of psychiatric medication knows the side effects are horrible and the drugs only work as long as you keep taking them. Psychotherapy can have a much longer-term effect, and so can be very cost effective. It can also help people keep their lives together, whether it be staying in work or living a full family life.

Here in England there is a huge investment programme in psychotherapy, and I hope there will be similar investment in Northern Ireland, where there seems to be a higher level of mental health problems.

Yours sincerely

Sara Vicente