



**Samaritans Ireland**

**Submission on Ireland 2040 -Issues and Choices**

**March 2017**

## **About Samaritans**

Samaritans' vision is that fewer people die by suicide. We work to achieve this by making it our mission to alleviate emotional distress and reduce the incidence of suicidal feelings and suicidal behaviour. We do this by being available 24 hours a day to provide emotional support, reaching out to high risk groups and communities, working in partnership with other organisations and influencing public policy and raising awareness. Our service is guided by our values of listening, confidentiality, people making their own decisions, being non-judgemental and offering people human contact.

Samaritans has 20 branches on the island of Ireland and 13 in the Republic, run by over 2,000 volunteers across the country. In 2015, Samaritans in the Republic of Ireland answered a total of 639,652 contacts, by phone, email, text message, and face-to-face.

## **Introduction**

Samaritans welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Ireland 2040- Our Plan, Issues and Choices document and to share initial views on the priorities for the National Planning Framework (NPF).

As an organisation with branches in communities across the country and which works in the area of suicide reduction and emotional wellbeing, we believe that the new NPF has the potential to prioritise outputs which can contribute to improved mental wellbeing across the country. The framework can also address some of the challenges to growth and wellbeing which Ireland faces.

The main points we wish to make are summarised here:

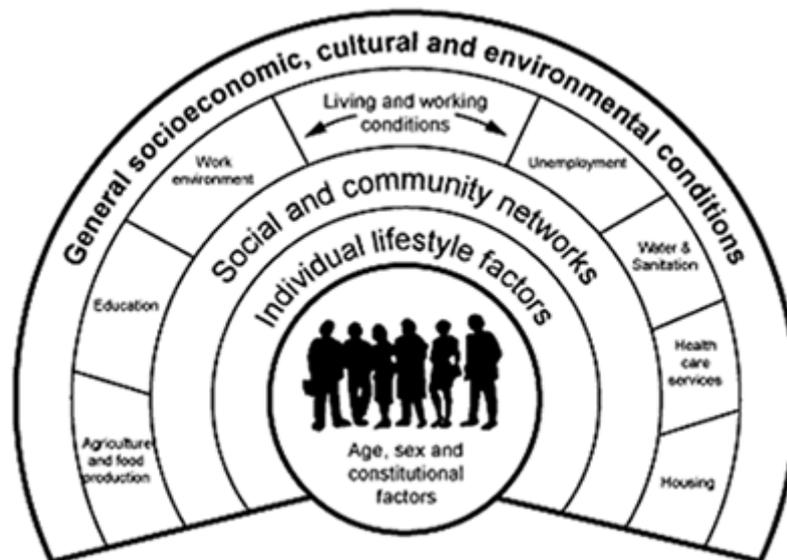
- The NPF should adopt a broad definition of health and wellbeing and address the social determinants which affect health status
- The NPF should align its health and wellbeing outputs with the Healthy Ireland Framework- the national policy framework for improving health and wellbeing in Ireland
- The World Health Organization's Healthy Cities project checklist provides useful outputs which can be incorporated into the NPF
- Access to leisure and sports facilities, especially for low income groups should be supported by the NPF
- Safe and well maintained open spaces provide valuable opportunities for stress relief, socialisation and social cohesion. The NPF should support the development and maintenance of such spaces
- Community and voluntary organisations play an important role in civil society and provide valuable support many of the most vulnerable in society. The NPF should recognise the important role which the community and voluntary sector can play in society and in local and national planning.

- Areas with weak community infrastructure should be supported to strengthen equity across the region.
- Rural isolation is a major challenge and the NPF must address the challenges faced by people living in rural areas.
- To be effective, the NPF must adopt a cross-sectoral approach to promoting health and wellbeing.
- Suicide has a devastating impact on communities and towns across Ireland. Reducing suicide and suicide risk should be a priority for the NPF.
- Inequality adversely impacts mental health and is an important factor in suicide risk. Suicide rates are two to three times higher in areas of deprivation compared to affluent areas.
- The NPF can address several of the areas where inequality exists by ensuring universal high quality public service provision in health, education, and housing.
- The NPF should support local action plans to reduce suicide in line with the Connecting for Life, national suicide reduction strategy.
- High frequency locations for suicide exist in many areas across Ireland. The NPF should promote measures to reduce access to these locations and to encourage help-seeking.

## People's Health and Well-Being

### Social determinants approach to health

The WHO defines health as being 'more than the absence of physical disease, it is a state of complete physical, mental and social wellbeing.' There are a range of social determinants which influence the health status of individuals and groups. These social determinants are the conditions in which people are born, grow, live, work and age, including the health system.



**Figure 1. Dahlgren and Whitehead Social Determinants Model<sup>1</sup>**

The conditions in which people live and work and their environment are important determinants of health and wellbeing. The NPF should recognise the important role which these conditions play and adopt an approach which ensures that living and working conditions encourage healthy choices.

Healthy Ireland<sup>2</sup>, the national framework to improve the health and wellbeing, takes a whole-of-Government and whole-of-society approach to improving health and wellbeing and the quality of people's lives. The NPF should adopt a similar approach and work closely with the Healthy Ireland Framework.

Action 2.3 of the Healthy Ireland framework states *that health and wellbeing impacts will be assessed locally and an integrated Social Impact Assessment approach at the local level will be mandated. Tools and supports for local authorities will be developed, to assist them in working across sectors at national and at county level in undertaking health and wellbeing assessments.*

<sup>1</sup> Dahlgren G, Whitehead M. 1991. Policies and Strategies to Promote Social Equity in Health. Stockholm, Sweden: Institute for Futures Studies.

<sup>2</sup> Department of Health. 2013. Healthy Ireland- A Framework for Improved Health and Wellbeing <http://health.gov.ie/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/HealthyIrelandBrochureWA2.pdf>

These impact assessments and tools should be incorporated into the NPF.

Healthy Ireland also acknowledges the existence of health inequalities among groups in society and the need to address the determinants of health which cause these inequalities and it is important that the NPF takes these inequalities into account.

#### Fostering health promoting communities

Much can be learned from the Healthy Cities project which is a global World Health Organization (WHO) movement. It involves Local Authorities working to improve health and wellbeing through political commitment, working in partnership with local stakeholders and supporting innovative projects. Cork, Waterford and Galway are all designated Healthy Cities.

The WHO checklist for Healthy Cities provides us with outputs for the NPF to work towards. These outputs could also be applied to smaller towns:

- a clean, safe physical environment of high quality (including housing quality);
- an ecosystem that is stable now and sustainable in the long term;
- a strong, mutually supportive and non-exploitative community;
- a high degree of participation in and control by the citizens over the decisions affecting their lives, health and well-being;
- the meeting of basic needs (food, water, shelter, income, safety and work) for all the city's people;
- access by the people to a wide variety of experiences and resources, with the chance for a wide variety of contact, interaction and communication;
- a diverse, vital and innovative economy;
- connectedness with the past, with the cultural and biological heritage of city dwellers and with other groups and individuals;
- a form that is compatible with and enhances the preceding characteristics;
- an optimum level of appropriate public health and sickness care services, accessible to all; and
- high health status (high levels of positive health and low levels of disease).

There are several priorities for the NPF to adopt in order that makes our communities places which encourage healthy lifestyles.

Ensuring access to affordable leisure and sports facilities supports healthy lifestyles and helps promotes wellbeing. The NPF should support sports development and encourage easy access to sports and leisure facilities, especially for lower income groups.

Safe and well maintained parks and open space offer stress relief, opportunities for relaxation and exercise and places for socialising, which contribute in particular to mental wellbeing and communities with a sense of social cohesion and resilience. The NPF should support and develop parks, local green spaces and community gardens and prioritise maintenance and safety

Protecting and strengthening community services can support people in difficult times and ensure that people receive support at the lowest level of complexity. Many community and voluntary groups provide services which play an important role in protecting the most in need in society. Recognising the experiences of these organisations and what they contribute to local planning is important.

Areas with weak community infrastructure should be supported to strengthen equity across the country. Particular consideration must be given to rural communities which are experiencing isolation and a loss of social connectedness.

Cross-sectoral approaches to promoting health and wellbeing are important and advocated for by Healthy Ireland and Connecting for Life. This approach will be vital for the NPF to be effective.

### Suicide Reduction

Over 450 lives are lost to suicide in Ireland each year. This has a devastating impact on communities across the country. Reducing suicide and decreasing suicide risk should be a health and wellbeing priority for the NPF.

We know that inequality can adversely impact mental health and is an important factor in suicide risk. Research commissioned by Samaritans<sup>3</sup> has found that there is a strong association between area-level deprivation and suicidal behaviour: as area-level deprivation increases, so does suicidal behaviour.

Suicide rates are two to three times higher in the most deprived neighbourhoods compared to the most affluent.

Admissions to hospital following self-harm are two times higher in the most deprived neighbourhoods compared to the most affluent.

The health of people in a neighbourhood, town, region or country is shaped by the nature of the place itself, including the economic, social, cultural and physical environment. Several contextual factors are likely to increase the risk of suicidal behaviour in areas of socioeconomic deprivation, including: physical (e.g., poor housing conditions); cultural (e.g., attitudes which might encourage suicide or accept it as inevitable); political (e.g., adverse public policy which increases stigma in vulnerable groups); economic (e.g., lack of job opportunities); social (e.g., weak social capital); history (e.g., high incidence of suicidal behaviour within the community); infrastructure (e.g., poor quality, accessibility and acceptability of services); health and wellbeing (e.g., high rates of poor physical and mental

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<sup>3</sup> Samaritans. 2017. Dying from Inequality, Socioeconomic disadvantage and suicidal behaviour <http://www.samaritans.org/sites/default/files/kcfinder/files/Samaritans%20Dying%20from%20inequality%20report%20-%20summary%281%29.pdf>

health). The NPF can address several of these factors by ensuring universal high quality public service provision in health, education, and housing.

*Connecting for Life- the national suicide reduction framework*<sup>4</sup> outlines local cross-sectoral implementation structures to produce local area plans and community-level response reflecting national actions. Every local area should have a suicide prevention plan in place which can address the priorities in that area.

‘Priority places’ in the community (such as hospitals, custody suites, job centres, food banks), especially those in areas of highest deprivation, should be a key part of these plans, potentially providing appropriate services or fostering ties with relevant agencies. The NPF should play a role in strengthening local suicide prevention plans.

Unfortunately, there are many high-frequency locations for suicide across Ireland. High-frequency locations are public places which are used for suicides and suicide attempts. They provide the “means or opportunity” for suicide (Cox et al., 2013, p.1), “easy access”, and “gain a reputation and media attention as a place for suicide” (Beautrais, 2007, p.59).

Research shows that restricting access to high-frequency locations, for example, through barriers, is the most effective intervention to reduce suicide rates. Other promising interventions include encouraging help seeking and increasing the chances of intervention by a third party. Every local suicide prevention group should analyse local suicide data to identify local high frequency locations and put in place actions to improve safety measures as part of its local suicide prevention action plan.

The building design and construction industry should be required to address suicide risk and practical steps should be taken to reduce access and risk. This requirement could be developed alongside the process of applying for planning permission process.

**For more information, please contact:**

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<sup>4</sup> Department of Health. 2015. *Connecting for Life- Ireland’s National Strategy to Reduce Suicide 2015-2020*  
<https://www.healthpromotion.ie/hp-files/docs/HME00945.pdf>