

Mr. Richard Pengelly  
Permanent Secretary  
Department of Health  
C5.11  
Castle Buildings  
Stormont  
Belfast BT4 3SQ

11 March 2019

Dear Mr. Pengelly

We write to you following our participation in the '**Counselling – A Vital Tool in Equipping GPs with Mental Health Expertise**' launch held in the Long Gallery, Stormont on 30<sup>th</sup> January 2019, sponsored by the APPG on Suicide Prevention and organised by the #123GP campaign. **We are calling on you to take urgent action to ensure that all those who require counselling within primary care services can access it in a timely and appropriate manner.**

**It is widely accepted that we are in the midst of an escalating mental health crisis.** The number of people dying by suicide sadly continues to rise. In 2017 alone 305 lost their lives to suicide and that figure is predicted to have risen for 2018. Levels of mental ill-health in our society are much higher than in other jurisdictions, yet our mental health budget trails far behind.

**We know that for people struggling with their mental health, getting the right help at the right time is vitally important.** This is both for improving a person's recovery and in preventing their mental health from deteriorating, with all the ensuing costs to the individual, their family and to wider society. **Over 90% of people with mental health problems will be seen first by their GP, with approximately 40% of GP appointments being related to mental health. It is critical therefore that GPs are equipped with mental health expertise.**

**For many people, counselling offers a low-cost, effective form of treatment, on its own or alongside medication.** It can equip people with the tools and support they need before their symptoms become acute, thereby ensuring that fewer people end up needing crisis care services. **However, a new research report '[Counselling – A Vital Tool in Equipping GPs with Mental Health Expertise](#)' published by the #123GP campaign, presents disturbing evidence of the failure by the Department of Health to ensure equal and appropriate access to counselling for all who need it.** Only two thirds of GP practices have an in-house counsellor, patients wait up to 7 months to be seen and are limited to a maximum of 6 sessions. No official waiting time targets exist and some Trusts do not monitor waiting times. Funding

provided by the HSCB for GP practice based counselling is entirely inadequate, averaging at £2.29 per patient if there was full uptake by all patients who could benefit from it. The budget allocated to in-house provision of counselling has increased only nominally (4%) over the last 4 years, despite the fact that it is increasingly overspent year on year.

**We are calling on you as the Permanent Secretary for the Department of Health to urgently address this issue, by taking the following steps:**

- To re-allocate any end of year under-spend to immediately double the current funding for LES GP practice based funding in order to tackle the waiting lists
- To work with the HSCB to ensure a review of the existing funding model is undertaken, so that funding is allocated on the basis of need, in a transparent manner and on a recurrent basis.
- To introduce a waiting time target of 28 days from GP referral to first counselling appointment.

We will be supporting #123GP throughout 2019 to monitor change against the two human rights indicators they have selected i.e. 1) an increase in the number of GP practices with an in-house counsellor and 2) a decrease in appointment waiting times. **We ask that the Department of Health commits to co-operating with this monitoring initiative.**

Ensuring that everyone who needs it can access counselling in a timely way with adequate provision, is not only vitally important for those people impacted, but is also a preventative and cost effective measure for the Department of Health.

Given the urgency of this issue we would appreciate a response at your earliest convenience.

Yours sincerely

Ms. Orlaithi Flynn MLA (Sinn Féin) APPG Chairperson

Mr. Pat Catney MLA (SDLP) APPG Vice-Chair

Mr. Robbie Butler MLA (UUP) APPG Secretary

Ms. Paula Bradley MLA (DUP) APPG member

Ms. Paula Bradshaw (Alliance) MLA APPG member

Ms. Stephen Agnew MLA (Green Party) APPG member