



inspire

wellbeing, ability, recovery

“It Doesn’t Have To Be Like This. Let’s Change It.”

Response to the Northern
Ireland Executive’s draft
Programme for Government

November 2024

INTRODUCTION

The recent publication of the Northern Ireland Executive's draft Programme for Government, *Our Plan: Doing What Matters Most*, is a positive step towards responsible governance.

The people of Northern Ireland demand a government that works. In fact, this is the least that they are owed. Ambition must ally with competent delivery.

We commend the Executive for placing wellbeing at the core of its Programme for Government. It is long overdue. We believe that the priorities described in the Programme for Government, even without details of spending commitments, are recognisable and connected to day-to-day challenges affecting all levels of society.

In 2022, we began hosting large-scale roundtable conversations with service users and colleagues, people who are keenly aware of the intersection between holistic, high-level decision making and ensuring wellbeing for all. These Ideas Generator events have afforded them the chance to participate actively in the Inspire community and approximately 450 attendees have already used their own stories to enhance our work.

Those contributions shaped Inspire's organisational response to the cost-of-living crisis, via the Release the Pressure campaign, and Inspire 20Four, our general election manifesto. Few issues are too big to tackle.

This response, entitled "It Doesn't Have To Be Like This. Let's Change It", represents views expressed during that two-year period of engagement. It amplifies the collective voice of individuals in every one of our services, a principal tenet of Inspire's strategic plan. In fact, much of it has been formulated by answers to two specific questions routinely posed during our workshops: 'What things are important to you?' and 'What do you want politicians to know about your lives?'

The feedback, which is quoted throughout this document, together with the invaluable input of our Service User Reference Forum (comprising people from across our services), has allowed us to pinpoint five policies most salient to those we support, policies that should feature within a ratified Programme for Government. These are:

1. A fully funded Mental Health Strategy and Substance Use Strategy
2. Better pay and conditions for the health and social care workforce
3. An anti-poverty strategy, along with a review of Personal Independence Payment (PIP) assessments and the immediate restoration of the Winter Fuel Payment for all
4. Access to affordable and appropriate housing
5. An integrated, affordable and accessible community transport system for those who need it

We commend the inclusion of wellbeing at the heart of the Programme for Government and we are committed to measuring progress, on behalf of our service users, against the indicators that the Executive applies to the actions specified above.

This is their plan. This is our plan.



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FULLY FUNDED MENTAL HEALTH STRATEGY AND SUBSTANCE USE STRATEGY

In March 2021, Inspire furnished its response – entitled No Broken Promises – to the Department of Health’s draft 10-year Mental Health Strategy. This was the product of an extensive internal consultation exercise involving two groups: the people who use our services and our colleagues.

We hosted discussion workshops and received hundreds of service user contributions. Letters, poems and case studies came in from across Inspire: specialist, condition-based services; floating support; advocates and patients; community-based services, counsellors and psychiatrists; the addiction team; supported-living staff and residents; human resources; and professional development. The material produced by this dialogue proved invaluable, granting us a rich source of information.

Our intention was to convey the respective voices of lived experience to decision makers and No Broken Promises was very much part of that guarantee. It was built on the insights and ideas supplied by the individuals who make up Inspire.

The final Strategy appeared to take account of our submission. We were confident that the Executive was at last ready to direct time and resources towards the transformation of mental health services in Northern Ireland, which, with its high prevalence of psychological conditions and socio-economic problems, continues to be confronted by one of the worst mental health crises in the United Kingdom.



The most recent Health Survey Northern Ireland found that an estimated 40% of people here have dealt with mental illness during their lives. In England, that figure is 25%. This creates adverse consequences for every part of society, from education, employment and criminal justice to the performance of the economy. The Minister of Health, Mike Nesbitt, has vowed to address such health inequalities and enjoys our full backing in that regard.

Indeed, when briefing the Northern Ireland Assembly's Committee for Health last month, the Minister said that the region's legacy of political violence speaks to the undeniable importance of mental health provision.

We are dismayed, therefore, to note that the Strategy is not listed in the Programme for Government's nine priorities, earning only a single mention on page 68. This illustrates a distinct lack of ambition when the scale of task is so large. We echo the "significant concerns" of the Mental Health Champion, Professor Siobhán O'Neill, who recently pointed to the present underfunding of the Strategy, for this year and next. Professor O'Neill has said that a tenfold increase in related spending is required if the objectives of £1.2bn Strategy are to be properly achieved. We agree with this assessment.

In June, the Assembly's Public Accounts Committee published a report on mental health services. It suggested that sustained shortfalls would lead to the Strategy becoming 'outdated'. We, too, are frustrated by this sluggishness and contend that a much more prominent position in the Programme for Government would show the Strategy's delivery to be an indispensable policy goal. A ring-fenced budget and a precise, measurable implementation timeline are the principal components of new momentum.

People everywhere are crying out for what was pledged: progressive prevention and early treatment efforts; a regional, unified and individual-first system; community-based services; better designed in-patient units; additional hospital beds, specialist supports and talking therapies; crisis interventions instead of visits to emergency departments; and much more besides. It is up to the Executive to make that happen.

Mental health needs to be taken seriously. No broken promises. Invest in services now. A price should not be put on a person's wellbeing.

In light of the ever-increasing rates of co-occurring mental illness and addictive behaviours, we cannot separate a fully funded and implemented Mental Health Strategy from a similarly delivered Substance Use Strategy, Preventing Harm, Empowering Recovery. There are indisputable overlaps between these two areas and it is impossible to address one without the other.

Inspire was encouraged by the release of Preventing Harm, Empowering Recovery in September 2021, which appeared to present fresh ideas about addiction services after decades of underinvestment. In answering the related consultation, we stated that the Department should concentrate on understanding the influence of alcohol and other drugs, providing services for people with complex and co-occurring diagnoses, reducing stigma through campaigns and compassionate care, developing community-led recovery pathways and removing barriers to treatment.

A plan for mutual aid will boost recovery. Structured social support can assist in stabilising relationships, finances, housing and health. Elsewhere, practical considerations around needle exchanges and the availability of naloxone form realistic approaches to intravenous drug use.

The gravity of the moment is clear. According to the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency, 154 drug-related deaths were registered in 2022. For the year 2022-2023, the Substance Misuse Database recorded 2,960 clients as having referred themselves to services.

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Nobody should be refused access to mental health services because of their addiction.
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In spite of the publication last year of the Substance Use Strategic Commissioning and Implementation Plan, little progress has been achieved on this front.

That has to change. The Executive must advance the Substance Use Strategy as a matter of urgency.



BETTER PAY AND CONDITIONS FOR THE HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE WORKFORCE

When we host our Ideas Generators, better pay for health and social care personnel – omitted from the draft Programme for Government – consistently emerges as a major theme. These are our friends, family and neighbours. Inspire’s service users know this. They appreciate their value and will attest that project workers keep them well, in good times and bad.

It is becoming increasingly difficult to attract people to jobs in social care. Poor pay and a dearth of recognition feed low morale, discouraging career development and, potentially, severing the deep connections between support staff and the individuals they help every day. This represents a serious hindrance to building a labour force responsive to the present and the future.

Social care workers are key to transforming the health system. They help people to live in their communities, freeing up spaces in hospitals and other settings, and improve the quality of life for all. Unfortunately, this tends to be regarded as an add-on in our health and social care system. Until this mentality is altered, the dilemma in social care recruitment and talent retention will continue.



We need pay increases for staff and improved care for service users.

A motivated workforce, recognised for its outstanding contribution to the wellbeing of others, and compensated accordingly, will have an obvious and positive impact. Workforce planning and development – in addition to the commissioning processes for mental health, addiction and learning disability services – are crucial. Government contracts should offer remuneration reflecting the skilled nature of the work.

In short, the Northern Ireland Executive must prioritise pay and conditions that recognise the indispensable role played by health and social care staff, in every sector. It is obliged to lead the way in championing this cause.



ANTI-POVERTY STRATEGY, REVIEW OF PERSONAL INDEPENDENCE PAYMENT (PIP) ASSESSMENTS AND RESTORATION OF THE WINTER FUEL PAYMENT

Section 28E (1) of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 requires the adoption of a strategy aimed at reducing poverty, social exclusion and patterns of deprivation. In January 2020, the New Decade, New Approach agreement committed to an anti-poverty strategy in a subsequent Programme for Government. While the Covid-19 crisis quickly came to dominate all Executive functions that year, the demands for a high-level, cross-departmental blueprint for confronting these problems have only become more pronounced in the time since.

Poverty is a threat to public health. A measure designed to break the links between deprivation, mental ill health and addiction should not be absent from the draft Programme for Government.

The overlaps between these things are well documented and anti-poverty initiatives can address social imbalances as a major driver of mental illness. Pockets of high deprivation are invariably marked by high levels of mental and emotional distress. The percentage of suicides in 2022 from Northern Ireland's most disadvantaged areas (31%) was over three times that of the least disadvantaged areas (9.4%).

A mix of uncertainty and precariousness combines to produce unwelcome results, pushing people towards alcohol and other drugs. In Northern Ireland, high levels of mental ill health are underlined by our UK-leading anti-depressant prescription rates.

When people aren't able to make ends meet, to put food on their table or keep a roof over their heads, their mental health can be badly affected. Personal finances, social security and the cost of living are cited regularly in our conversations with Inspire service users.

More recently, as we head into the cold future months, the prospect of a drastically reduced winter fuel payment (WFP), introduced by the new administration at Westminster, has alarmed many in this group.

The social security system is one of our greatest investments. However, changes made by the previous UK Government created genuine anxiety. Almost without exception, those service users who have moved from Disability Living Allowance to PIP reported feeling uneasy about the transfer. “We have to fight for everything,” says one person. “It’s got to the stage where you are dreading the postman,” says another.

A recent Inspire survey respondent labelled PIP assessments stressful and demeaning: “Benefit reviews for those with mental ill health need to be re-examined. I am made to feel like I am lying about my condition. I always feel sick around this time and my mental health deteriorates.”

We need a system that supports you and recognises when you can't work. It also needs to make you feel less trapped and not make you feel scared to do other things in case they mess with your benefits.

This is unacceptable in an advanced, first-world economy and it is a sad indictment of the value placed by society and government on good mental health.

People using our services routinely report a general dearth of mental health awareness within the PIP assessment process, a process that does not account for the fact that mental illness often exists as a fluid state. Periods of good health are punctuated by debilitating spells of despair, depression and worse. PIP evaluations require a considerable overhaul if they are to accommodate those living with mental ill health.

A cross-cutting anti-poverty strategy would ideally sit next to specific policies. Supportive, evidence-led and knowledge-based assessments – underpinned by extensive mental health training and education – will spare people the ordeal of constantly having to prove their qualifications for assistance. And protecting the WFP would immediately allay fears stemming from its potential restriction.



ACCESS TO AFFORDABLE AND APPROPRIATE HOUSING

The ‘basic right to a good home’ is one worth pursuing, particularly considering the unacceptable situation in which spiking housing waiting lists and high levels of housing stress are giving rise to negative health outcomes everywhere. As such, we are glad to see this theme placed within the Programme for Government’s nine priorities.

Inspire is a leading provider of supported housing throughout Northern Ireland and we are encouraged by the explicit commitment to Supporting People, an essential funding partner.

Supporting People has transformed many lives, helping people across Northern Ireland to live independently. It also continues to generate significant value for money. A 2021 Northern Ireland Housing Executive study found that the programme delivers £5.71 in social benefit for every pound of investment.

Now that the Executive is providing housing with the attention it deserves, we not only urge it to fund Supporting People adequately but to go further and grow the programme by ensuring that it is robust enough to meet the growing demand for supporting living.

“We need more schemes where people have their own homes and space. They are managing themselves but with support available.”

Housing remains a popular topic during our Ideas Generator sessions. We are well aware of how pressure on supply intersects with the complex requirements of those who use our services.

For individuals living with mental ill health and intellectual disabilities, this is an extremely pressing subject. They want to thrive in safe environments, which adapt to their recovery journeys. They have told us, more than once, that a home, an income and a connection with community are vital to their wellbeing.

Security and affordability are integral to staying well. A built environment that prioritises these things – accompanied by aesthetic excellence – is imperative. From Inspire’s perspective, high-quality housing is a foundational element of the healthy, people-centred communities we strive to create.

As far as we are concerned, there are simply not enough homes for life. This is critical, given some service users’ ordeals in the private rental market. Instead, they will often feel happier when they have a place to call their own.

If the Executive is going to effect a housing supply strategy, it must do so in the context of the Department of Health’s Mental Health Strategy 2021-2031 and the long-outstanding anti-poverty strategy, using lived experience to shape solutions.



INTEGRATED, AFFORDABLE AND ACCESSIBLE COMMUNITY TRANSPORT

The people who use our services frequently talk about the friends and peers that they have met through Inspire. These relationships are, they say, hugely important to their mental health.

For some, a visit to the nearest Inspire community wellbeing service may be the only human contact they have during the week. Getting out of their homes to explore the world is a true lifeline. They look forward to moments of connection, inclusion and independence, and being ready for whatever life brings with it.

From visiting interesting places and attending cultural events to shopping trips, cinema outings, medical appointments and social opportunities, community transport is the backbone of that mission. It connects them with one another, mitigating the cost of loneliness and isolation.

Unfortunately, the freedom to stay well is threatened by an under-resourced community transport network and the threat of funding cuts to existing options. In place of adequate alternatives, people rely on a patchwork of family members, neighbours, private vehicles, taxis and often irregular bus and train timetables.

These obstacles exist everywhere, even in cities and large towns, but they are especially problematic in the parts of Northern Ireland where our services cover many square miles. We heard recently from one lady who lives in a rural area. She said that the potential loss of transport to and from her local Inspire scheme was a concern for the next 12 months.

We need access to transport that is affordable and regular.

An accessible, integrated and fully funded community transport system would empower the people it was designed to help, allowing them to prosper.



WELLBEING IN THE DRAFT PROGRAMME FOR GOVERNMENT

The central role of wellbeing in the Programme for Government is a progressive step. After all, organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development member states are increasingly utilising wellbeing frameworks in governance. New Zealand first introduced a wellbeing budget in 2019. Applying evidence and statistical analysis, it was founded on the idea that financial prosperity alone is not a sufficient gauge of life quality.

The Scottish Government is concentrating on the transition to a wellbeing economy, an economy it describes as fair, green and growing: ‘Our economic transformation aims to fundamentally reshape our economy, delivering a just transition to a net zero, nature-positive economy based on the principles of equality, prosperity and resilience.’ Scotland’s National Performance Framework forms the basis of that wellbeing ethos and is augmented by a comprehensive and easy-to-use interface.

In contrast, its Northern Ireland equivalent lags behind. While we acknowledge that the current dashboard is still a prototype, relating to a Programme for Government that is not yet finalised, it is far from obvious that the design is geared towards accessibility. How widely will this tool be publicised? Is the average person going to know where to find it?

We welcome the decision to publish the data available on the dashboard – it points to an eagerness for accountability. However, we do not believe that it provides the public with a coherent understanding of how these statistics track progress or relate to the various domains.

Meanwhile, the domains listed on the dashboard appear to relate to the headings in the Executive’s draft Outcomes Framework, launched in 2021, rather than to the priorities set out in the Programme for Government. We have no issue with the domains connecting to these outcomes but, given the almost total absence of cross-references to the Outcomes Framework in the Programme for Government, this seems arbitrary and confusing. All of these elements are most impactful when they form a coherent unit. At the moment, they feel siloed and disjointed.

The five policies we have identified are varied and achievable. The Mental Health Strategy and housing are clearly already high on the Executive agenda. An anti-poverty strategy has already been promised. Improved terms and conditions for the voluntary sector is surely a target for any government aiming to transform health and social care. The benefits of enhancing the community transport network are beyond doubt.

If these reforms are to be realised, all citizens must be able to hold government to account in an effective and transparent way. They need to trust, and see, that change is possible.

It is the responsibility of the Executive to match these expectations and to design a system containing relevant, usable and digestible analyses of what is really happening on the ground and why it is significant: more data, better data, clearer data.



WHO WE ARE

Inspire is an all-island charity and social enterprise, and our aim is wellbeing for all.

We work alongside people living with mental ill health, intellectual disability, autism and addictions.

We ensure that they live with dignity and realise their full potential, campaigning to create a society free from stigma and a culture of compassion that focuses on individuals and their abilities.

Our Vision

Wellbeing for all

Our Values

We are Inclusive

We are Passionate

We are Determined

We are Kind

We are Honest

We are Innovative





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#TeamInspire

For more information about our services, visit:
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