



The  
British  
Psychological  
Society

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### A Healthier Future: A Twenty Year Vision for Health and Wellbeing in Northern Ireland.

This response has been prepared by Dr Liam O'Hare, School of Psychology, Queen's University on behalf of the British Psychological Society's Northern Ireland Branch. The British Psychological Society represents the interests of over 42,000 psychologists across the United Kingdom, while locally the Northern Ireland Branch maintains a membership of over 1,500. This number includes those working in professional areas such as clinical, educational, occupational, forensic, exercise and health psychology.

Defined as the systematic study of mind and behaviour, psychology has a central contribution to make to a great many aspects of community and public life, including education, health, the economy, industry and social justice. The Northern Ireland Branch of the British Psychological Society is committed to playing an active role in policy development within the region and with this in mind, we thank you for continuing to include the Branch on your list of consultees and would welcome sight of any future public consultation documents that may be produced.

The Society is pleased to be able to make a response to this important document and in particular to be able to highlight the significant role that the discipline can and should play in the ongoing promotion of health and well-being among the population. The Society welcomes the broad vision as outlined in the document, but at the same time does feel that the role that psychology can play alongside other health sciences could be given even greater emphasis in the document. We would welcome an opportunity to make clear how this may be achieved. Indications of the scope of this enhanced role are given below.

Psychological research and practice should have a crucial role in the future of healthcare in Northern Ireland and in particular, there are three areas where psychology can directly improve care provision. The first is in the treatment of people with mental health problems. The Society's Northern Ireland Branch is well placed to inform these developments and to provide a link with local activities and expertise. For example, within Northern Ireland significant clinical research is currently being carried out on schizophrenia, depression, autism, Asperger's syndrome, dementia and Parkinson's disease. As you will be aware there is also a clinical psychology doctorate programme in Queen's university that trains 8-12 clinical psychologists per year. However, the demand for clinical psychology services far outweighs supply and at the present time people with mental health problems may be waiting up to two years to see a specialist. As with physical health problems a person's mental health can deteriorate while waiting for such long periods for treatment.

The second area where psychology can make an impact on health and well-being is where the individual's psychological state can influence their behaviour, which may in turn have a resultant affect on their health. These behaviours can be both detrimental and beneficial to a person's health. This area is related to the first described above in that mental health problems such as depression and anxiety disorders can lead to increased use of drugs and alcohol. Other behaviours such as smoking, exercise and eating will also impact on a person's health. There is a significant amount of research being carried out in this area in Northern Ireland and this should inform future policy development.

The last area where psychology should make an impact is in assessing and improving the functionality of the health services in general. Psychologists' expertise can be utilised to investigate and improve upon many of the activities carried out in the health service. Examples of psychological based research being carried out in this area locally include.

- Communication of risk between health professionals and patients
- Decision making by consultant medics
- Enhancement of critical thinking in medical students

In conclusion, psychology has a great deal to offer to every facet of the health service, from investigating particular disorders to the effective treatment of a wide range of health problems. Crucially, psychology has huge potential in providing preventative solutions in healthcare, which is a key goal of the consultation document and a future goal of all health services.

Dr Liam O'Hare