

Cabinet Secretary for Health and Social Care submission of 7 July 2022

PE1942/A: Encourage peer support programmes in public sector organisations

I am writing in response to the petition; *'Calling on the Scottish Parliament to urge the Scottish Government to promote the use of peer support programmes such as TRIM and STRAW in public sector workplaces to promote better mental health.'*

The petition covers a range of issues relating to the use of peer support programmes in public sector workplaces and mental health. I hope it is helpful if I outline some of the relevant work that the Scottish Government is taking forward to ensure we have a mental health system where the right help is available, in the right place, at the right time. This is especially critical given that we know the mental health impacts of the pandemic will continue to emerge and evolve over time. The help and support available, including in workplaces, must be similarly flexible and innovative to respond appropriately.

The petition contains a number of key themes relating to the provision of mental health support in the workplace, the key role of our NHS workforce, the wellbeing of our workforce, and the general benefits of peer support. I will lay out our approach to each of these issues in turn, which I trust will be useful to the Committee.

Mental Health Support in the Workplace

Early intervention and prevention are key priorities for the Scottish Government in taking forward our approach to mental health and wellbeing. Our aim is to support people to positively engage with their mental health at an early stage, promoting and supporting the conditions for good mental health and wellbeing at a population level.

We know that creating workplaces which support and promote good mental health benefit both individuals and employers. That is why, in our Mental Health Transition and Recovery Plan, we committed to working closely with stakeholders, including trade unions and employer groups, to promote mentally healthy workplaces where mental health and wellbeing is meaningfully discussed, supported, and where stigma and discrimination are addressed.

Working with these partners, we are developing an online platform for employers that streamlines access to a wide range of free and reputable mental health and wellbeing resources. We know that all organisations are different and are likely to be at different stages in creating a mentally healthy workplace. We are working to ensure that all employers have the support they need to promote the conditions that enable good mental health at work.

Trauma Training

Experience of trauma and adversity are more common than is often assumed and can bring significant additional challenges for employees in the workplace. Historical or current experiences such as childhood abuse or neglect, homelessness, domestic abuse, death of a loved one, or other circumstances exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic can affect how people feel about themselves, their environment and can interfere with their ability to do their jobs well. The Scottish Government has invested over £5 million since 2018 in a [National Trauma Training Programme](#). This programme is progressing a joint Scottish Government and COSLA ambition to develop trauma-informed workforces and services across Scotland. The Programme provides freely available, evidence-based [trauma training resources](#). NHS Education for Scotland (NES) have developed these resources to support all sectors of the workforce to understand the impacts of trauma, and respond in ways which support people's resilience and avoids further harm.

Workforce Wellbeing

The petition mentions findings relating to the mental health and wellbeing of nursing staff in our NHS.

We recognise that the pandemic has had an unprecedented impact on public health, NHS services and on the NHS workforce. The Scottish Government is hugely grateful for the efforts of all NHS workers as they have risen to the challenge of responding to the pandemic. We are committed to improving mental health and wellbeing, including that of nurses and other employees, and to ensuring that all employees are supported in an inclusive and fair workplace.

Our Mental Health Transition and Recovery Plan set out our response to the mental health effects of the Covid-19 pandemic, backed by an additional £120 million. As we work with Boards and other partners to improve the mental health and wellbeing of Scotland, we know that this can only be achieved with the right workforce capacity and capability – and with the wellbeing of staff at its heart.

It is critical that staff wellbeing is prioritised; and that staff are able to take the rest breaks and leave to which they are entitled, as well as being given time to access national and local wellbeing resources at work. In the financial year 2021/22, we made £12m available to support the wellbeing of the health and social care workforce. This includes £8m from the NHS Recovery Plan, alongside an additional £4m allocated to address winter pressures by providing practical support to aid their rest and recuperation. The wellbeing of our health and social care workforce will remain a key priority and we will overcome the challenges ahead if we look after this most valuable asset. Throughout the pandemic, we have emphasised to Boards, Health and Social Care Partners and Local Authorities the on-going need to promote the physical and the psychological wellbeing of everyone working in health and social care.

To complement the help available at a local level, we also have a range of resources including the National Wellbeing Hub, a 24/7 National Wellbeing Helpline, confidential mental health treatment through the Workforce Specialist Service and funding for additional local psychological support.

We are also mindful of the pressure on our other emergency responders. Lifelines Scotland is a project which supports the wellbeing – and recovery - of emergency responders in the “blue light” services (professional, voluntary and retired – and their families) who have had challenging or distressing experiences in the course of their work. We have provided support funding to Lifelines in recent years, complementing the funding they receive from Police Scotland, Scottish Ambulance Service, Scottish Fire and Rescue Service and the Fire Fighters Charity. Although based at NHS Lothian, the project provides support to emergency responders from across Scotland.

More generally, in May 2022 the Scottish Government also announced the launch of Mind to Mind, Scotland’s mental wellbeing website. Mind to Mind uses advice from people with lived experience of mental health challenges to highlight the practical things people from all walks of life can do to help them improve their mental wellbeing and resilience. The campaign focuses on five themes: anxiety and panic, sleep, stress, grief and loss and low mood

Suicide Prevention

The petition also references attempted suicides within the workforce.

Suicide prevention is a key priority for this Government. In August 2018, we published the Suicide Prevention Action Plan "[Every Life Matters](#)" and set up a National Suicide Prevention Leadership Group (NSPLG) - to harness the expertise, insight and contributions from Scotland’s key suicide prevention partners, academic community, public sector organisations, clinicians - and most importantly people with lived experience.

Looking to the future, the Scottish Government and COSLA will publish a new Suicide Prevention Strategy in September 2022, accompanied by an initial Action Plan. This Strategy will build on the learning from the current Action Plan, and will be outcomes-focussed. The development of the strategy is being directed by the voices of people with lived experience as well as data and evidence of what works. The Scottish Government has also committed to doubling the annual funding for suicide prevention by the end of this Parliamentary term, from £1.4m per annum to £2.8m per annum.

Scottish Recovery Network and Peer support

I commend the focus of the petition on peer support, and recognise the positive impact that this can have on the mental health and wellbeing of people across Scotland – both in the workplace, and beyond.

As part of the wider picture of promoting the concept of recovery from mental health problems, valuing lived experience and promoting peer support, the Scottish Government is responsible for funding and overseeing policy relating to the Scottish Recovery Network (SRN), an organisation that seeks to make mental health recovery a reality for everyone in Scotland. The work of SRN makes a valuable contribution to improving Scotland’s mental health in promoting a positive messages on recovery and peer support across communities in Scotland. SRN has established

a Peer Recovery Hub where people, communities and organisations seeking mental health support can connect with peer support as part of their recovery journey when and where they need it.

Through the peer recovery hub, people with lived experience have gained the skills and knowledge to positively impact outcomes for people experiencing mental health challenges. This initiative has also made learning and development opportunities available for Peer Supporters in different organisations across Scotland. SRN has developed the Peer2Peer Development Programme which brings together 12 organisations seeking to develop peer support opportunities and roles. The 12 organisations include small community groups as well as large national service providers. The Peer2Peer Development Programme offers individual support from the Scottish Recovery Network team and monthly sessions for participants to share experiences and learning.

In addition to the Peer2Peer Development Programme, SRN are working with a number of organisations to support them to adapt and deliver Peer2Peer for their particular needs. This includes ICU Steps who are developing a peer support project across Scotland.

Conclusion

I hope that this summary of our ongoing work reassures the Committee that this Government is committed to promoting and supporting good mental health. This includes ongoing work in respect of good mental health and wellbeing in the workplace (both in our public sector and beyond), in terms of the steps we are taking to build our health and social care workforce and ensure their wellbeing, and in terms of how peer support can have a central role in the help available to anyone who needs it.

We want to see a mental health system which responds appropriately whenever anyone asks for help – whether that involves clinical services, support at work, peer support, or community support.

Embedded within this must be a focus on early intervention to ensure that issues do not escalate into mental ill-health wherever possible. Employers across Scotland have a central role to play in this, and peer support can be an invaluable tool.

I hope this reply is helpful to the Committee.