



Irish Rural Link
Nasc Tuaithe na hÉireann

Irish Rural Link Submission to National Office for Suicide Prevention

New National Framework for Suicide Prevention

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1. Introduction

Irish Rural Link welcomes the opportunity to make this submission on a new National Strategic Framework for Suicide Prevention and recognises the committed work of the National Office of Suicide Prevention towards reducing the high suicide rate in Ireland. The opportunity to contribute is widely welcomed as the last strategy was published nearly a decade ago and it is fair to say that Ireland has experienced significant economic and social change since 2005. Suicide and mental health issues have emerged as a real problem in world society not just Ireland. Suicide is now among the top leading causes of deaths globally for all age groups. Unofficially in Ireland on average there are now 10 deaths by suicide a week or 526 in 2013 while officially the CSO stated there were 554 deaths by suicide in 2011. In the period from 1st of January to 31st of December 2012, the registry recorded 12,010 deliberate self presentations to hospital¹. The reason behind listing these statistics is to emphasise the need for action to combat the high level of deaths by suicide in Ireland.

With 57 per cent of Ireland's population now living in rural areas², it is vital to have the opinions of a national rural organisation like Irish Rural Link in the consultation process. As an organisation, Irish Rural Link has long been concerned about the high level of suicides and people suffering from mental health. To address this issue, IRL hosted a mental health seminar last autumn with the aim of exploring the causes of suicide and how to tackle the high suicide rate in Ireland as well as examining specific factors that are unique to rural Ireland. To follow on from the seminar last autumn, IRL in coordination with the European Parliament's Information Office in Dublin hosted two successful seminars on rural isolation in Ennis and Ballybofey with the issues of suicide and mental health very much at the forefront of discussions.

The purpose of these seminars was to highlight the issues that affect people arising from rural isolation. It looked at the current data that describes it and with the help of everybody involved examined the problem in terms of proposing new or improved solutions. All of these events were not only well attended by the general public but also by representatives from the National Office of Suicide Prevention, Pieta House, Console, Samaritans either as speakers or as part of an expert panel. Irish Rural Link have recently released a report based

¹ National Office for Suicide Prevention- Annual Report 2012

² Commission for the Economic Development of Rural Areas (2013) Energising Ireland's Rural Economy

on the opinions expressed at these events, these opinions ranged from the causes of rural isolation to the possible solutions that could be implemented at both local and national level.

Using IRL's experience of working with rural groups and its consultation with members, this submission will set out what they believe are the factors contributing to the high levels of suicides and mental health issues. The main focus of this submission will be possible actions and policy that could be introduced to influence suicide levels. It is believed that the first steps in the introduction of a new national framework for suicide prevention needs to identify the key stakeholders who can make a real impact at local level and a clear set of objectives to adhere to, a list of which will be conveyed later. This submission will look to both prevent and respond to death by suicide. The last section of this paper will concentrate on areas of further research that could be explored to gain an understanding of the reason behind why people take their own lives.

2-Factors that contribute to Suicide

It is important to say from the outset that there is no one single cause of suicide but that there is a variety of causes that contribute. This section aims to use IRL's report on rural isolation as well as other academic sources to explore the factors that contribute to suicide.

2.1 Social Exclusion- Definition

Social exclusion was identified in both IRL's report and other academic sources as a major factor contributing to suicide. Social exclusion can take many forms, defined as the process whereby certain groups are pushed to the margins of society and prevented from participating fully by virtue of their poverty, low education or inadequate life skills. This distances them from job, income and education opportunities as well as social and community networks. They have little access to power and decision-making bodies and little chance of influencing decisions or policies that affect them, or of bettering their standard of living.

What are the factors of social exclusion?

- Lack of money or other resources
- Living in isolated geographical areas
- Working alone, particularly on farms or related self employment businesses

- Discrimination against particular groups or categories of people e.g. Gay, Lesbian, race or cultural related origins
- "Physical" barriers such as a lack of transport or the absence of services/facilities in an area
- Lack of confidence to participate in society
- Lack of skills/qualifications which may be needed for social and economic participation
- Living alone or confined to home because of disability or similar limiting factors
- Poverty
- Declining villages and issues related to housing

Other definitions.

“People are living in poverty if their income and resources (material, cultural and social) are so inadequate as to preclude them from having a standard of living which is regarded as acceptable by Irish society generally. As a result of inadequate income and resources people may be excluded and marginalised from participating in activities which are considered the norm for other people in society.” Government Definition 1997.

2.1.1- Rural Isolation

At its core the effects of rural isolation can lead to searing loneliness, depression and in some cases suicide. It describes the breakdown of communities and a disconnectedness that encourages a feeling of being forgotten. An attractive aspect of living in rural areas is that it is quiet and isolated compared to urban life but this isolation also causes feelings of exclusion, loneliness and solitude. People living outside cities or large towns face increased pressures both financial and social. By the nature of a rural setting, residents are marginalized in terms of services that urban residents can take for granted. The task of going to the local shop for a carton of milk is a far easier task in urban areas where people can walk around the corner while in rural areas this involves getting into a car and travelling a distance. In many cases this is not possible because many rural residents do not drive due to age and availability of a car. The lack of transport remains the biggest pressure on rural residents as it affects their ability to access services and employment. The lack of public transport in rural areas has a hugely negative effect on people’s social life and their mental health due to their isolation.

As a nation, Ireland’s population is ageing at an alarming rate due to improvements in health; people are living longer while the average age is increasing due to mass emigration of our youth because of the soar in unemployment. The issue of migration is felt at all age levels, older people lose children or grandchildren who might have regularly visited them while

younger people have lost siblings or friends. Migration has also devastated community groups as they can no longer function due to a lack of participants. When this happens there is a feeling of disappointment and even sadness. It is not just that hurling or football teams cannot be assembled, it is the wider fear of losing the youth and the belief that an ageing population will be vulnerable as the years pass by. Mass migration of our youth has left the remaining population with feelings of isolation and solitude.

2.2 Poverty and Unemployment

For many researchers such as Cleary et al (2012)³, lower socio economic groups are more likely to be linked to suicidal decisions. These lower socio economic groups are characterised by low educational attainment, limited job opportunities, multiple job histories, marginal farming and dependency on social welfare payments. Unemployment and poverty are prominent areas of concerns in rural areas. According to the CEDRA report unemployment rose by 192 per cent in rural areas during the economic crisis compared to 114 per cent in urban areas while the number of people living in poverty is said to double that of their urban counterparts⁴. This can be explained by the increasing numbers of farmers relying on non-farm income and farmers tend to be employed at the lower skilled end of the employment spectrum which further exacerbates their exposure to the economic downturn.⁵ Data shows that farmers that work outside of the farm are typically employed in the sectors most affected by the recent economic slowdown such as construction.

Unemployment is seen as one of the main pressures of living outside a major town or city. Unemployment in rural regions is 2 per cent higher than the national average of 12 % according to the Border, Midlands and Western Regional Assembly⁶ but this can be significantly higher in some areas while youth unemployment can be as high as 79 per cent. Agriculture remains the largest industry but it is vastly dependant on subsidies due to large costs in production. The average agricultural wage was €25,483 in 2012 while the average industrial wage was €36,278 in 2012. In categories such as tillage, sheep, beef this income is

³ Cleary, A., Feeney, M. and Macken- Walsh, A. (2012) Pain and Distress in Rural Ireland- A qualitative study of suicidal behaviour among men in rural areas.

⁴ Commission for the Economic Development of Rural Areas (2013) Energising Ireland's Rural Economy

⁵ Teagasc (2008), "An examination of the contribution of off-farm income to the viability and sustainability of farm households and the productivity of farm businesses",

<http://www.agresearch.teagasc.ie/rerc/downloads/Final%20Report.pdf>

⁶ Border, Midlands and Western Assembly (2010) Socio Economic Data. Available on website- <http://www.bmwassembly.ie/region/indicators.html>

circa €8,000 per year. Farm families are relying on off-farm employment and subsidies to survive which has greatly reduced due to the decline in the construction sector where the majority of farmers were employed. With the average wage lower in rural areas this means that rural residents have a lower standard of living. Rural residents also face higher travel costs when it comes to services such as health and education.

Rural Poverty as has been stated by numerous studies is often invisible in comparison to obvious urban decay, which can demonstrate obvious signs of low income levels. The cost of living in rural households is generally €100 per week higher than their urban counterparts (Vincentian partnership and Irish Rural Link Study 2010). The Teagasc farm income survey continuously shows that average farm income which ranges from as low as low as €17k to 23€ per annum, is a long way behind the average industrial income of €34k

2.3- Loss of Services

Closure of public services and businesses in rural areas has left rural communities disconnected from many services that other areas take for granted. The closure of post offices, schools, pubs and Garda stations forces people to travel greater distances which is just not feasible for many people due to lack of public transport. The closure of post offices affects the most vulnerable in society the unemployed and pensioners, both groups who don't have the capacity to travel further to receive their payments. The post office like the local pub also has a social aspect, it is a place where people meet and their weekly visit to the post office might be their sole interaction during the week. The centralization of services cannot continue as it is having a hugely negative effect on the quality of life in rural areas. The economic viability of public services has seen priority over their social importance in the past few years due to the economic crisis but this is a trend that cannot continue.

3-Recommendations

Using the structure of the previous national suicide prevention framework, IRL offer recommendations to be considered on behalf of their membership. These recommendations will be divided into policy that can be implemented at national level and what can be done at community level by targeting certain groups to address suicide levels. An aspect of suicide that can sometimes be forgotten is responding after there is a death by suicide. This is an area

that needs to be examined in more detail as the families and friends of those who take their own lives need support. While the final section of the recommendations will focus on areas of further research, IRL believe that the framework should set out clear objectives that acknowledge the magnitude of the problem and the scale of the task at hand. It is believed that a valuable suicide prevention strategy's objectives should be entwined to achieve its maximum potential.

Objectives

- Increase the awareness about the enormity of the problem and raise the profile of the services that are available
- Reduce the number of suicide and incidents of self harming
- Tackle the causes of suicide by further research
- Address the stigma attached to mental health problems especially in rural areas where traditionally attitudes can remain
- Improve data collection on the incidence of both suicide and attempted suicide
- Address the drink culture in Ireland especially among young people
- Improve research and evaluation of effective interventions

A suicide prevention strategy should have specified financial and human resources, a time frame for implementation, as well as short to medium and long-term objectives.

3.1- National Policy/ Guidance

To tackle suicide in Ireland there needs to be a cohesive strategy between national and local organisations. It is clear that there are many individuals and community groups who are willing to contribute to finding solutions but these groups and individuals need guidance and financial support from national level.

3.1.1-Community Programmes

IRL recommend the consideration of a specific community based information programme. Such a programme would include the training of mentors who would co-ordinate information programmes among all of the community organisations on a region or county basis. The mentor would also act as a liaison point between families affected by suicide and the

services⁷. Similar programmes such as Community Alert and more specifically the IRL Farm Safety Mentoring Programme and the TV Switch Over Programme, 2012, which reached a total of 85,000 households in 4 months.

3.1.2- Media

As a topic suicide is very sensitive in nature, many families have lost loved ones but to tackle the problem it needs to be discussed. Through media awareness campaigns the traditional attitudes to suicide and mental health can be dealt with. It is only through discussions and awareness campaigns that the issue of suicide prevention can truly be tackled. Suicide prevention can be compared to the road safety campaigns which address the number of deaths on Irish roads. In 2013, 190 people died on Irish roads⁸ while 526 people took their own lives. There is a clear gap in the amount of media coverage and funding given to mental health issues compared to road safety. IRL understands that it is a very sensitive issue but believes that increased awareness can save lives. It is felt that the best method of raising awareness is by building a story around the statistics of suicide, when people hear statistics they can be forgotten very quickly in contrast to a real life story because behind every figure is a story of pain and suffering. Through the bravery of people like Conor Cusack, and Alan O'Mara who have spoken out about their depression, mental health awareness has benefitted while also tackling traditional attitudes. Media awareness can and does save lives by letting people suffering know that there are people in similar situations while also making them aware of the support services available.

3.1.3- SafeTALK/ A.S.I.S.T.

One of the most successful initiatives to be introduced by the National Office of Suicide Prevention is the safeTALK and A.S.I.S.T training courses. It is believed that there is potential to expand these courses to reach a larger percentage of the population. IRL believe that every club, association and community group should be firstly made aware of it and that organisations with more than 100 members in receipt of any funding should be required to send a member for the training per year. The membership number could be lowered each

⁷ Carnegie UK Trust Rural Programme (2009) A Manifesto for Rural Communications.

⁸ <http://www.garda.ie/Controller.aspx?Page=10816&Lang=1>

year; resulting in the majority of organisations having at least one member with suicide alertness skills.

3.1.4- Transport

As stated earlier a lack of public transport remains a long term problem for rural areas while contributing to rural isolation. A strategy that could be used here is increased funding for the rural transport scheme. The Rural Transport Scheme acts as a life line for many rural residents especially the elderly. The scheme offers the best value for money when it comes to reducing rural isolation; it also provides the participants with a sense of independence allowing them to remain in their homes and not having to ask their family for transport. The scheme allows participants to meet people in a similar situation who otherwise might not see someone from one end of the week to the next. For many rural communities the local pub can be the focal socialising point but in more recent times many rural pubs have closed. With the changes in the drink driving laws many rural residents can no longer socialize because of the lack of public transport resulting in them feeling isolated. Local Area Hackney Licence is seen as a positive and creative policy introduced to address this rural transport problem. Rural communities welcome policy like this but warn that these new policies need to be advertised at a larger scale so as to reach their full potential. The Local Area Hackney Licence is welcomed as it has the potential to tackle rural isolation by providing people with transport to social events, GAA, church etc as well as the prospect of creating employment. IRL is calling on the National Transport Authority to raise awareness of this initiative to increase participant numbers.

3.1.5- Alcohol Abuse

As a nation Ireland is well known for its drinking culture which in some ways gives licence for the misuse of alcohol among all groups. In rural areas especially the local pub is the only place to socialise, leading to a dependency on alcohol. In many cases alcohol can act as a socially acceptable coping mechanism for dealing with mental health problems. With a lack of alternative socialising opportunities in towns and villages, there is immense pressure placed on young males especially to become part of the local drinking culture and reduces the likelihood of them seeking support. According to Canetto and Cleary (2012)⁹, this is an

⁹ Canetto, S.S. and Cleary, A. (2012) Editorial: Men, masculinities and suicidal behaviour. *Social Science & Medicine*, 74(4):1-5

important explanatory pathway for male suicide. Alcohol abuse along with mental health issues are a combination for disaster. As a state, Ireland needs to address its drinking culture with young people being the primary concern. Education around alcohol should be largely aimed at young people at secondary school level, as there is a large culture of underage drinking in Ireland. Drinking habits and attitudes are picked up at very young age when people can be influenced by their peers.

3.2- Targeted Groups

As stated previously IRL would like to commend the work of the National Office of Suicide Prevention for the delivery of the safeTALK and Applied Suicide Intervention Skills Training (A.S.I.S.T). There is a large network of people across the country that has been trained in suicide prevention skills. Over 26,000 people have been trained in A.S.I.S.T. and over 16,000 have been trained in safeTALK to date. IRL believe that the training needs to be targeted at individuals dealing with the most vulnerable groups of death by suicide. These groups include the unemployed, school children, college students, young men and older people. The individuals dealing with these groups on a daily basis should be properly trained in identifying of people with thoughts of suicide. By targeting the training at these community groups the training will reach the most vulnerable people and provide immediate support.

Irish Rural Link as an organisation has a wealth of experience delivering training to rural communities through the Benefit computer training program. With a membership of 600 community groups nationally, IRL is in the prime position to gain access to the most isolated and marginalised people in rural areas. IRL co-ordinated the computer training through their offices in Moate, organising the venues, trainers and participants of the training course. With this in mind, IRL is in a position to facilitate delivery of the safeTalk and A.S.I.S.T training.

3.3. Responding to Suicide

Central to a national strategy for suicide prevention is responding to deaths by suicide. This is an issue that is not often considered when you think of suicide prevention but can be of vital importance. Death by suicide in a small community like a school can sometimes cause a chain like effect leading to more deaths if sufficient support is not offered to the group. When a community sample of young men (aged 18-34 years) were asked about whether or not they

knew someone who had died by suicide, 78% said 'yes', 42% knew 'more than one person', while 17% knew 'a close friend' who died by suicide (Begley et al, 2004)¹⁰. With such a large proportion of the population experiencing a death by suicide it is vital that counselling for these individuals is offered.

Suicide has a devastating effect on families and communities leaving them looking for answers behind their loved one taking their life. These people need support services that are readily available; with a large proportion of deaths by suicide occurring in rural areas there is a case for a moving of services to rural regions. The continued supports of counselling and phone services need to be maintained so that anyone in distress get the assistance they need.

3.4. Possible Areas of Further Research

Levels of suicide and self harming have significantly risen since the 1980's; further research needs to be conducted to investigate the reasons behind this. According to the most recent research from the CSO the high risk age groups are men between 20-29 and 40-49 years old while women aged 50-59 are most at risk. What issues are people experiencing in these age categories to make them consider suicide or self harming? An in-depth study is needed to investigate the relationship between age and likelihood to take their lives or commit an act of self harm.

Central to suicide prevention strategies is traditional attitudes to mental health and personal awareness. The safeTALK and A.S.I.S.T are vitally important incentives but suicidal thoughts are inherently personal feelings that only the individual knows. People need to be able to identify signs of mental health and seek help from services in their area. Traditional attitudes and the stigma of suffering from mental health issues can prevent people especially men from talking to someone. Research needs to be conducted around traditional attitudes and to examine how the public's perspective of mental health can be altered.

4. Conclusion

Ireland has the sixth lowest overall population rate for suicide but one death by suicide is too much never mind 526, last year's figure. In society today there is a tendency to focus on statistics but behind every figure there is a human life gone and a family left in turmoil. In

¹⁰ Begley M, Chambers D, Corcoran P, Gallagher J. The Male Perspective: young men's outlook on life. Mid-Western Health Board, National Suicide Research Foundation and National Suicide Review Group, 2004.

rural areas especially, there seems to be a number of factors that contribute to suicide and self harming that needs to be examined in more detail. From two seminars hosted by Irish Rural Link regarding rural isolation it is clear that there are many groups and individuals who are concerned and willing to contribute but these people need direction provided through a National Suicide Prevention Strategy. This new suicide prevention strategy needs to set out clear medium and long targets which are both ambitious but yet achievable. The monitoring and evaluation of the targets will be important as it will provide accountability because these figures cannot continue to rise.

Suicide and self harming are two increasing problematic issues that need urgent attention; a national strategy needs commitment from the government to support the policies and initiatives that are suggested by the National Office of Suicide Prevention through their consultation process.

Irish Rural Link- the Organisation

Irish Rural Link (IRL), formed in 1991, is a national network of organisations and individuals campaigning for sustainable rural development in Ireland and Europe. IRL, a non-profit organisation, has grown significantly since its inception and now directly represents over 300 community groups with a combined membership of 25,000.

The network provides a structure through which rural groups and individuals, representing disadvantaged rural communities, can articulate their common needs and priorities, share their experiences and present their case to policy-makers at local, national and European Level.

Irish Rural Link is the only group represented at the national social partnership talks solely representing rural communities' interests.

'Our vision is of vibrant, inclusive and sustainable rural communities that contribute to an equitable and just society'

Irish Rural Link's aims are:

- To articulate and facilitate the voices of rural communities in local, regional, national and European policy arenas, especially those experiencing poverty, social exclusion and the challenge of change in the 21st century.
- To promote local and community development in rural communities in order to strengthen and build the capacity of rural community groups to act as primary movers through practical assistance and advice.
- To research, critique and disseminate policies relating to rural communities including issues such as sustainability, social exclusion, equality and poverty

'Our mission is to influence and inform local, regional, national and European development policies and programmes in favour of rural communities especially those who are marginalised as a result of poverty and social exclusion in rural areas.'

