

High Level Taskforce to consider Mental Health and Addiction Challenges

The overall report and recommendations of the High Level Task Force established to consider the mental health and addiction challenges of those who come into contact with the criminal justice sector (HLTF) were published in September 2022.

It is recognised that the report and the recommendations are ambitious and this is what is required to significantly reform the way in which our criminal justice and health systems support and accommodate people with mental health and addiction challenges. It is also recognised that in light of the cross-cutting nature of the recommendations, cross-Government commitment is crucial to successful implementation.

The Department of Justice is committed to working with colleagues in the Department of Health to advance these reforms.

The implementation plan published alongside the final report, assigns ownership for each of the recommendations and their expected delivery time-frames. The plan recognises that some recommendations can be achieved quickly (within the next 18 months), while others require a longer lead-in time and are accordingly allocated medium-term (within the next 3 years) or long-term (within the next 5 years).

A Steering Committee (co-chaired by senior officials from the Department of Justice and the Department of Health) is overseeing progress on the recommendations. The Committee held its first meeting in December 2022. As the Steering Committee progresses its work, it will reach out to other key stakeholders.

The key actions within the report include:

- Progressive and empathic approach by Gardaí to dealing with offenders with mental health and addiction challenges, informed by mental health and addiction awareness training for Gardaí.
- Efficient and effective means of implementing an appropriate prosecution avoidance policy when Garda members come in contact with adults with mental illness and addiction, through the adult caution scheme.

- The establishment of a pilot specialist dual diagnosis service to support prisoners with a mental health condition and substance misuse in a prison, to inform roll-out across the entire prison estate.
- Access to tiered mental health supports that are recovery oriented for every person with mental health difficulties coming into contact with the forensic system.
- Reducing attrition by maintaining engagement and motivation at the point of release, including through the use of community agreed discharge plans for prisoners (identifying multi-agency supports required).
- Building on existing best practice to ensure there is adequate provision of services and sufficient safeguards in place to support rehabilitation and throughcare from custody to community.
- Continuing to build capacity within the Probation Service (at regional and national level) in the assessment of mental health within pre-sanction reports prepared for the Criminal Courts.

Many of the recommendations of the Task Force relate to improving on, or creating better alignment of, existing services for those with mental health and addiction issues in the criminal justice system.

While these may have additional costs, it is expected that some recommendations can be delivered from within existing resources, with others being factored into future budgetary planning for 2023 onwards and addressed through that process. It should also be noted that, as a number of the recommendations align with the objectives of the *Sharing the Vision* policy, budgetary provision will be made through that funding stream.

In addition to the work of the HLTF, the commitment to better mental care within the criminal justice system was reflected in the provision of over €2m in additional funding under Budget 2022 for the Prison Service to improve mental health services.