

High Level Taskforce to consider Mental Health and Addiction Challenges

The Taskforce already had nine plenary meetings and has established three subgroups on diversion, capacity issues in the Prison Service and National Forensic Mental Health Services, and community issues, including care after release. Each of the subgroups comprises of relevant experts, chaired by high ranking officials from the criminal justice sector, with the health leads represented and contributing to all. Each of these groups have met on at least ten occasions.

The Taskforce has engaged with a large number of relevant bodies and civil society actors, including meeting with the Mental Health Commission on 2 December and, more recently, met with the Chairperson of the National Prison Visiting Committees Chairpersons Group and with the Inspector of Prisons. The Taskforce has also received presentations from relevant stakeholders including the Mental Health Commission, the Office of the Inspector of Prisons, the IPRT and Crowe Consulting on the comprehensive Health Needs Assessment embarked on by the Prison Service.

The Taskforce submitted its interim report on 22 November. The Minister also met the group before Christmas to get an update on their work. The work of the Taskforce is continuing apace and the aim is to finalise a report, including a high level implementation plan assigning responsibility and timelines for its recommendations, in early Quarter 2. A meeting with the relevant Ministers was scheduled to take place on 30 March but had to be cancelled due to the unavailability of some of the junior Ministers involved in the project. A future date is yet to be confirmed.

In addition to the work of the Task Force, this commitment is reflected in the provision of over €2m in additional funding for the Service to improve mental health services under Budget 2022. This includes just over €1m for psychologists and specialist mental health nurses in prisons who can work with prisoners to address mental health issues for all categories of offender. Decisions regarding placement of these additional psychologists are currently being considered and will be based on the mental health needs and overall psychologist-to-prisoner ratio across the estate. To this end, it is intended to recruit additional psychologists throughout 2022.

In addition, this year, the Service intends to increase the mental health qualifications and skills within the Service's nursing workforce through recruitment, training and development.