The role of the Third Sector in eMental health innovation and service provision in Ireland

A Briefing Document
Prepared by the eMEN team
at Mental Health Reform

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The eMEN (Ireland) Briefings Series

This is the second in a series of eMEN project Briefings on aspects of the eMental health ecosystem in Ireland. eMEN is a project part-funded under the Interreg North-West Europe programme, with a focus on supporting development and deployment of user-facing eMental health to help address challenges confronting mental healthcare systems in Europe. Mental Health Reform is the Irish partner in the project, with HSE providing the co-financing alongside the Interreg part-funding. eMEN also has partners from the Netherlands, Belgium, UK, France, and Germany, with involvement of a mix of mental health service providers, eMental health developers, researchers and other organisations.

The Irish eMEN briefings aim to provide useful information and analysis on the opportunities and potential demand for eMental health in different settings. The data and analysis draw extensively on a compilation of statistics and other information about the Irish eMental health ecosystem prepared for the eMEN project by WRC research consultancy. This covered three main sectors/settings: general population, and associated public, private and third sector services; employment-related settings – employees & unemployed, employer & employment services; and third level education – students and student support services.

This second briefing was prepared as a follow-up to the eMEN international seminar on 'eMental health: Opportunities for the Third Sector?' held in Dublin on 18th February, 2020. The third sector plays an important role in the Irish ecosystem of mental health service and supports, and is also an important source of innovation in development and utilization of eMental health.

eMental health

A recent Irish review of the eMental health field has suggested a broad definition of eMental health - *'technology-supported provision of mental health services and supports'.*[1] Relevant technologies include telecommunications (phone, video, online); online and computer-based programmes; mobile apps; virtual reality; gaming; social media; data analytics; and many more. This state-of-the-art report organises and discusses the field around a number of important application domains (Exhibit 1). These have relevance across the different components of the overall mental healthcare and support ecosystem, including formal mental health services, third sector and peer support organisations, and self-help activity by people with mental health issues.

Exhibit 1. lists a number of important application domains

Exhibit 1.

- TeleMental health (enabling consultations at a distance)
- eTherapy (online therapeutic programmes)
- Ongoing support for enduring mental health difficulty (e.g. for medication management)
- Other innovative additions to the treatment toolkit (e.g. virtual reality, serious gaming)
- Crisis support and suicide prevention (e.g. crisis text services)
- Information and psycho-education (online self-help)
- Peer support (online groups and other applications of social media).

A spectrum of applications

'TeleMental health' includes telepsychiatry applications to provide improved access to specialists in primary care settings and emergency departments, and telepsychology/counselling arrangements enabling remote client-practitioner therapy sessions. Emerging communication modes, such as instant chat, are increasingly employed to reach and engage with the demographic groups that favour these. 'eTherapy' applications, combining online self-directed usage with varying levels of therapist assistance, are beginning to be available in programmes providing psychological therapies at scale for common conditions such as mild/moderate depression and anxiety. Mobile applications show promise in supporting ongoing care management and self-management for people with enduring/severe mental health conditions. Gaming applications are used to support treatment provision and engagement for young people, and virtual reality has important application in the treatment of phobias and other conditions. Online platforms are providing organised repositories of mental health information and psycho-education modules, as well as peer support fora and other group-based applications.

1. Cullen K (2018) eMental health: State-of-the-Art and Opportunities for Ireland. https://www.mentalhealthreform.ie/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/eMental-Health-State-of-the-art-Opportunities-for-Ireland-Full-Report.pdf

The eMEN project focuses especially on eMental health applications that can provide increased access to supports for the large numbers of people with common mental health conditions, such as anxiety and depression. Of particular interest are supported/blended approaches that combine self-directed usage of online programmes with human support from a therapist or other trained supporter. It is also supporting development and piloting of eMental health tools for post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), game-based approaches in child and adolescent psychology, and population-based suicide prevention programmes.

Many benefits, as well as some new challenges and issues

eMental health developments can offer many benefits, but also pose some new challenges and issues.

Exhibit 2. presents an overview of some of the potential benefits of eMental health

Exhibit 2.

- Wider reach of mental health services and access to these; including reaching people reluctant to utilise more traditional forms of service
- Cost-efficiencies in delivering high-volume services
- Treatment innovation and enhancement
- More user involvement and empowerment
- Expansion of self-help and access to peer support

"..eMental health applications can help to empower people with mental health conditions to engage more effectively in their recovery through self-help, access to peer support, and new ways to participate in jointly managing treatment and recovery pathways with clinicians.."

Current evidence and practice suggest that eMental health offers considerable potential, and some fields of application are already quite mature. eMental health applications can help to empower people with mental health conditions to engage more effectively in their recovery through self-help, access to peer support, and new ways to participate in jointly managing treatment and recovery pathways with clinicians. They can also help mental health services to address the large treatment gaps that prevail for common mental health conditions, as well as the current limitations on effective continuity of care for people with enduring conditions. For some hard-to-reach groups reluctant to utilise traditional mental health services, eMental health may offer a more acceptable way to access support.

Despite the undoubted opportunities presented by eMental health, it is not a simple 'plug-and-play' game-changer or panacea. Face-to-face therapy and in-person support will continue to remain centrally important. eMental health is not a replacement for these forms of support, but provides opportunities for innovation and service improvement. Ensuring user choice is important - some may prefer to access services in eMental health mode, others will prefer more traditional approaches; and provision of services through eMental health must target it towards those for whom it is clinically appropriate. Service providers must also remember that many people are not online or have limited digital skills, and levels of health and mental health literacy vary widely across the population. The emergence of eMental health also presents some new challenges, including data protection and privacy. Quality assurance is also essential, especially with the burgeoning array of mental health apps and other eMental health products becoming available daily, many developed for commercial purposes.
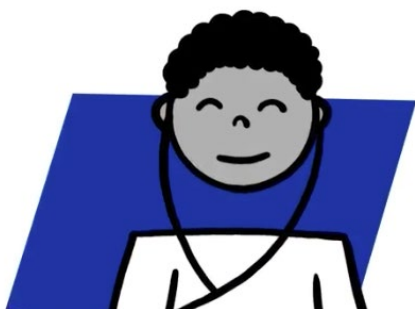
Third sector - an important provider of mental health services and supports

The third sector is an important component of the mental health service and support ecosystem in Ireland. Many organisations are active across the country - large and small, national and local – providing a range of services and supports, and addressing a spectrum of needs across a wide variety of user groups. Structurally, the public mental health system recognizes the role and contribution of the sector as an integral part of the ecosystem. Exhibit 3 provides an illustrative example of this for mental health services for children and adolescents (CAMHS).

Exhibit 3. *An illustrative example of this for mental health services for children and adolescents (CAMHS).*

Exhibit 3.

Services for very few
- Requires referral from Tier 2
- Highly specialist
- May have a legal component, e.g. MHA
- Significant risk to self and/or others

Tier 3

Intensive inpatient services for young people who have complex or severe mental health problems and are at high risk of harm. Typically statutory services.
- Inpatient CAMHS & Adult Mental Health
- Addiction Tier 4
- Residential Youth Justice Services
- Special Care Units
- Eating Disorder Units - Residential

Services for few
- Specialist services
- Usually require referral from a Tier 1 service

Tier 2

Community services for young people who present with moderate to severe mental health problems that require a range of specialist skills, disciplines or perspectives. Typically statutory services.
- Community CAMHS
- Community Mental Health Teams
- CAMHS Day Services

Services for Some
Formalised contact with:
- Mental Health
- Primary Care
- Community Support

Tier 1

Statutory and NGO services for young people who present with mild to moderate difficulties that require structured, formalised therapeutic, medical and/or psychosocial interventions. Intervention is directly provided by a trained mental health worker and typically includes assessment and case management. May provide a crisis response. Work is typically time limited with the objective of restoring personal and social functioning or identification of need for Tier 2 services.
- GP, Primary Care Teams, Addictions Services
- Community Psychology, Counselling, NEPS, NBSS, University Counselling Services
- Youth Friendly Mental Health Services
- Some Target group Intervention Services

Services for all
General Information
Informal Contact

NGO and statutory services for young people with a mental wellbeing focus. Characterised by self directed help seeking, universally accessible, give general advice, information and structured support or guidance. Signpost to other services as appropriate.
- Help lines & Target Group self help and facilitated support services
- Funded Websites and resources
- Advocacy Services

Mental Health Promotion

Population based promotion of positive mental health and resilience including HSE H&W, Tusla (including FRCs), Education, NYCI and Youth Services, CYPSCs and LCDCs.

Source: this is one of a number of variants of the HSE's elaboration of a tiered model of CAMHS services developed in recent years, with varying degrees of detail and specificity for the different tiers.

Exhibit 4. identifies some key areas of third sector contribution that have relevance for both offline and online modes of service and support provision

Exhibit 4.

- Information and sign-posting
- Mental health promotion
- Supporting self-help
- Peer support
- Provision of 'Tier 1' structured interventions for mild to moderate difficulties
- Targeted supports for particular groups, including hard to reach and marginalized
- Crisis supports
- Recovery supports for people with severe/enduring mental health difficulties.

Health legislation provides a basis for the HSE to fund third sector organisations, both to provide services on its behalf and for provision of other services ancillary to the main statutory services. This mechanism provides a portion of the funding for some third sector mental health organisations, but many rely primarily on other fund-raising efforts. National Office for Suicide Prevention (NOSP) also provides a funding contribution to a range of established third sector organisations.

It is likely that more systematic funding/commissioning of the third sector will develop as part of the evolution of the Sláintecare vision of a more universal healthcare system for Ireland. The work of the Independent Review Group examining the role of Voluntary Organisations is also likely to have relevance. Developments may include enhanced support for the sector both as a provider of services and supports ancillary or complementary to the public system, and as a direct provider of mainstream services for the public through partnership or commissioning arrangements. The latter may include services for targeted groups as well as more generic low-intensity interventions at scale for the large numbers of people needing support for common mental health difficulties (such as mild to moderate anxiety and depression).

An innovation leader in mental (and eMental) health

The third sector has also been an important source of innovation in provision of mental health services and supports in Ireland. This includes innovation in development and delivery of both offline and online/technology-supported approaches (Exhibit 5).

In the offline world, the third sector has been active in developing and supporting innovation in design, development and delivery of recovery supports for people with severe and enduring mental health conditions. Examples include housing and tenancy support[2] and user-led peer support initiatives such as Gateway and Aras Folláin[3]. They have also led development and delivery of psycho-educational programmes[4] and low intensity interventions at scale for adults[5] and young people[6], as well as programmes to support hard-to-reach or marginalized groups such as homeless persons[7] and victims of severe trauma.[8] Other examples include innovation in supports for specific target groups, such as eating disorders[9] or psychoses.[10]

Exhibit 5. presents some examples of Third sector led innovation

Exhibit 5.

Offline
– New forms of recovery support for people with severe and enduring mental health issues
– Peer-led initiatives and involvement of people with lived experience in service design/delivery
– Psycho-educational programmes for mental health promotion and positive mental health
– Intervention programmes at scale for mild/moderate common mental health conditions
– New approaches to reach and support specific needs, including marginalised groups

Online / technology-supported
– Online information provision, including through social media
– 24/7 crisis lines (phone, instant chat, text)
– Online CBT-based programmes supported by trained volunteers
– Online counselling services
– Mental health wellness and self-help apps
– Innovative therapeutic tools

2. e.g. HAIL's floating tenancy support - http://www.hail.ie/
3. Gateway - https://rathminespartnership. wordpress.com/gateway-mental-health-project-2/; Aras Follain - https://www.facebook. com/aras.follain
4. e.g. Mental Health Ireland's Mental Health & Wellbeing in the Community programme - https://www.mentalhealthireland.ie/; AWARE's Support & Self Care Groups - https://www. aware.ie/support/support-groups/
5. e.g. MyMind - https://mymind.org/online
6. e.g. JigSaw - https://www.jigsaw.ie/
7. e.g. Dublin Simon's Sure Steps counselling service - https://www.dubsimon.ie/what-we-do/ treatment/simon-counselling-service/
8. e.g. Spirasi - https://spirasi.ie/
9. e.g. Bohywhys - https://www.bodywhys.ie/
10. e.g. Shine - https://www.shine.ie/; Hearing Voices Ireland - http://www.voicesireland.com/

The third sector has also been to the fore in developing and deploying eMental health within their programmes. Examples include one-to-one counselling and group support (video, text)[11], online CBT-based psycho-education programmes[12], crisis lines using instant chat[13], and online supports targeting young people.[14] In addition to early adoption of eMental health within their portfolios of support for their own user base, they are also playing an important role within the wider eMental health innovation ecosystem in Ireland. These 'bottom-up' third sector innovations have been central in supporting 'top-down' efforts to pilot and deploy digital mental health within the mainstream HSE mental health services (Exhibit 6). Examples include online counselling[15] and the new crisis text service.[16]

Exhibit 6. *shows eMental health innovation and deployment through bottom-up and top-down synergies*

Exhibit 6.

'Top-down'
• Department of Health
• HSE Digital Mental Health programme
• eHealth Strategy
• Sláintecare?

Needs & changing demand
• Access to 'talking therapies'
• Self-help
• Peer support (recovery)
• 'Digital generation'

Mental health services
• Not enough clinicians/therapists
• Service improvement/innovation
• Scale of unmet demand
• Hard to reach groups
• Integrated & seamless pathways

'Bottom-up'
• Mental health service providers using eMental Health (NGOs, private, etc)
• eMental health product development (universities, SMEs, social enterprises, etc)
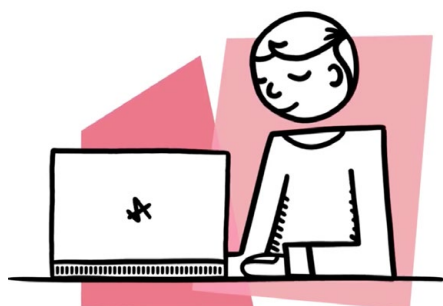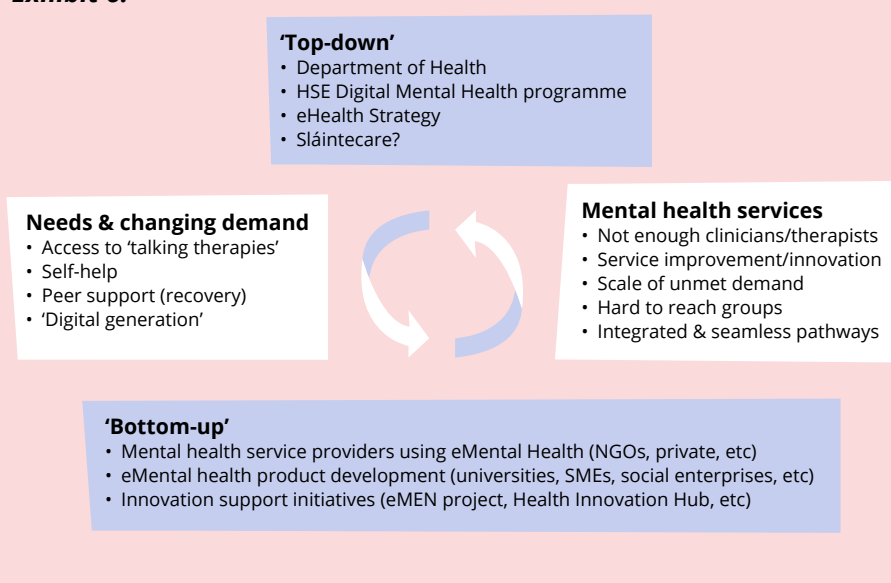• Innovation support initiatives (eMEN project, Health Innovation Hub, etc)

Social enterprise and tech-for-good sectors

The broad 'social enterprise' sector shares considerable common ground with the traditional third sector, and is also very relevant in the eMental health field. One component is university-based innovation and development of eMental health products, with spin-off and implementation of these through non-profit ventures. An Irish example of this is a product using serious gaming as an in-session tool to support delivery of CBT for children and adolescents.[17]

The related 'tech-for-good' sector overlaps with the social enterprise sector, but also includes for-profit businesses addressing socially important issues.[18] This sector is important from a public innovation funding perspective because of the 'win-win-win' potential of health innovations – simultaneously providing benefits for health service users, health system efficiencies, and economic benefits through new business and employment. The Health Innovation Hub Ireland is one source of support in this field, focusing on health (and mental) health technology innovation to simultaneously support better healthcare and new business opportunities.[19]

11. e.g. MyMind - https://mymind.org/; Helplink - http://helplink.ie/; Turn2Me - https://www.turn2me.ie/; Bodywhys - https://www.bodywhys.ie/recovery-support-treatment/online-support-groups/
12. e.g. Aware - Lifeskills Online - https://www.aware.ie/education/life-skills-online-programme/
13. e.g. Childline's online chat - https://www.childline.ie/
14. e.g. the pioneering work of Spunout - https://spunout.ie/health/category/mental-health; JigSaw's developing portfolio of digital supports - https://jigsawonline.ie/
15. For example, pilots utilising MyMind and Turn2Me
16. Operated by Spunout
17. Pesky Gnats, developed in UCD by psychology and computer science faculty and offered by Handaxe, a Community Interest Company - http://peskygnats.com/
18. KeepAppy mental health app is an Irish example of a product developed and offered through this model
19. Health Innovation Hub Ireland - https://hih.ie/

Many opportunities for further innovation involving the third sector

The third sector has a potentially pivotal role to play in future eMental health innovation in Ireland. Exhibit 7 lists just some of the ways that this could be further developed. This includes an enhanced role in eMental health technology innovation, more deployment of eMental health within the sector itself, capitalizing on eMental health opportunities to facilitate seamless and integrated access to supports and care pathways, and greater leveraging of the eMental health skills and capacity of the third sector by the formal mental health system.

Exhibit 7. outlines potential areas for further innovation involving the third sector

Exhibit 7.

Enhanced role in eMental health technology innovation
  − Structural supports – active targeting of third sector in publicly-funded tech innovation
  − Encouraging collaboration between third sector, universities, tech-for-good companies

Promoting useful deployment of eMental health within the third sector
  − Learning and technology transfer within the Irish third sector
  − Technology watch, learning and technology transfer from international developments

Development of seamless and integrated access to supports and care pathways
  − Within and across the third sector
  − Linkages with the formal mental healthcare system

Greater leveraging of the third sector by the formal mental health system
  − Delivering low intensity therapies at scale for common mental health conditions
  − Developing and implementing new supports for people with severe and enduring difficulties

Enhanced role in eMental health technology innovation

The initiative already taken by a number of third sector organisations to develop new eMental health services shows the sector has the motivation to take an active and leading role in eMental health innovation. Having a clear, mission-focused rationale for continuous innovation to better support their target groups in affordable and sustainable ways is an important motivator for the sector, and a range of applications of eMental health have proven useful in this regard. The sector has a wealth of experience, knowledge, and expertise in many aspects of mental healthcare, including specialist knowledge of issues and required solutions for a diverse range of client groups. However, various factors can inhibit the realization of the potential the sector offers in this area. One key barrier is the challenge often faced to

allocate resources (time and money) for service development purposes as the sector generally operates on limited budgets and lack access to sources of funding for innovation.

This barrier is also an issue for non-profit-focused roll-out of university-based eMental health innovation. The eMEN work in Ireland found this sector can face significant disadvantages in finding funding to bring useful eMental health innovations to a level of polish (e.g. in form and presentation) commensurate with those achieved by (possibly inferior) commercial products developed with support from public and/or private venture capital. An additional challenge is in accessing the sometimes-substantial funding required for clinical trials and other forms of applied research necessary to satisfy the standards and expectations of the formal health system and clinicians.

There would be considerable value in targeting structural supports towards eMental health innovation by the third sector (in the traditional sense), in addition to the wider social enterprise and 'tech-for-good' sectors that more frequently tend to make the tech innovation headlines. The former is often less visible, but can have an especially strong depth of experience and expertise on client group needs as well as the operational structures to put innovations into useful and wide-scale usage.

One action to progress this would be active targeting of third sector eMental health innovation in publicly-funded, health tech innovation support programmes. This should ensure sufficient levels of funding for the sector to bring innovations to a level where they can be put to wide-scale good use and enable the sector to operate on a level playing field with for-profit ventures supported by private capital funds.

The third sector is also a key conduit for user involvement in design and development of eMental health services. It is essential that people with lived experience of mental health difficulties, and end-user groups more generally, are actively involved in innovation activities in this field. Third sector organisations have much experience in involving people with lived experience in development and provision of services, and are well-placed to support this dimension of eMental health innovation.

Encouraging useful deployment of eMental health within the sector

Although some third sector organisations have been to the fore in eMental health innovation in Ireland, wider awareness of the possibilities and greater deployment of useful innovations across the entire sector could be helpful A third sector technology watch and knowledge sharing platform would be very useful in this regard, perhaps a revamping and expansion of the initiative taken by the Technology and Mental Health Network (TMHN) in the recent past. This could also help the sector to take a measured perspective on eMental health and avoid un-critical acceptance of the 'hype' that often

accompanies technological innovations. Innovations appearing on the market may not always be positive for the sector and its client groups and goals, and quality can vary considerably. A quality assurance and clearing house function to guide third sector organisations might be useful in this context.

In addition to sharing knowledge and good practice amongst Irish organisations, such a platform could also have an international technology watch function to identify relevant innovations from other countries and bring these to the attention of the Irish third sector. Of particular value may be examples of actual implementation and usage (proof-of-concept) of eMental health innovations in similar sectors or contexts in other countries. For example, the eMEN project team has identified opportunities for bringing innovative eMental health applications for post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) to Ireland, with potential to support high risk groups such as asylum seekers, homeless persons and prisoners.

Development of seamless and integrated access to supports and care pathways

As well as encouraging more take up of available eMental health innovations, it is also important to recognise the potential eMental health offers to support more seamless and integrated access to mental health supports and navigation of care pathways. One of the features of the Irish mental health ecosystem, offline and online, is the large number of organisations offering a broad variety of forms and levels of support and operating across a range of positions within the overall care system and care pathways/stages. This can make navigation of the system difficult for potential users, especially in finding the right service or support at the right time, as well as in seamless hand-over or progression through relevant services and components of the overall system as required.

The third sector is very well placed to play a key role in this aspect within various parts of the mental health system, particularly those parts where it has a recognized role and especially important contribution. This includes information and sign-posting, mental health promotion, supporting self-help and peer support, provision of 'Tier 1' structured interventions for mild to moderate difficulties, targeted supports for particular groups, including hard to reach and marginalized; crisis supports; and longer-term recovery support.

As well as its role in intervention delivery, eMental health applications offer good potential to support navigation of services and supports, more seamless and effective care pathways and referral routes, and other core logistical components of the mental health support ecosystem. There would be considerable value in funding a collaborative pathfinder exercise between the HSE/NOSP and the third sector, to map the components and players in the system and identify opportunities to establish a more seamless and integrated overall user experience and pathway.

Greater leveraging of the third sector by the formal mental health system

Finally, the third sector is already a relatively large provider of structured mental health services and supports for common mental health conditions, people with severe and enduring mental health difficulties, and a range of hard-to-reach, marginalized or otherwise under-served client groups. The early adoption of eMental health by some third sector organisations has enhanced their scalability and potential reach in cost-effective ways. Already, available data suggests that eMental health is enabling a small number of third sector innovators in this field to provide a similar or even greater volume of low intensity interventions as the public Counselling in Primary Care (CIPC) service.[20]

This shows there are significant opportunities for greater leveraging of the third sector by the formal mental health care system, with relevance both for achievement of the mental health component of the Sláintecare vision for healthcare in Ireland and for further progress to achieve the volume and quality targets that have been set for the public mental healthcare system in a Vision for Change. Effective mobilization of the third sector, and much greater inter-working between the sector and the public mental healthcare, is crucial in developing and sustaining a universal, high quality mental healthcare system in Ireland. eMental health can not only be an important component of such as system, but also provide major opportunities for system innovation in the journey towards this vision.

20. Calculations by the eMEN team based on available date sources