



Oifig an Stiúrthóra Náisiúnta Cúnta
Oibríochtaí Meabhairshláinte

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Deputy Catherine Connolly,
Dail Eireann,
Kildare Street, Dublin 2.

June 13th, 2024

Dear Deputy Connolly,

The Health Service Executive (HSE) has been requested to reply directly to the parliamentary questions outlined below, all pertaining to an online mental health service provider currently contracted by the HSE.

PQ numbers and wording

25078/24

To ask the Minister for Health the length of time that a service provider (details supplied) has been providing online mental health supports in Ireland; to detail the services they provide; and if he will make a statement on the matter.

25079/24

To ask the Minister for Health the total annual cost to the exchequer for the provision of services by a provider (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter.

25080/24

To ask the Minister for Health to detail the procurement process involved in the appointment of a provider (details supplied) for the provision of online mental health supports; and if he will make a statement on the matter.

25081/24

To ask the Minister for Health to outline the skills requirements for those working for a provider (details supplied) who provide online mental health services to the public; if the HSE undertakes vetting of these providers; and if he will make a statement on the matter.

25082/24

To ask the Minister for Health the number of people referred to a provider (details supplied) since it began providing online mental health supports to-date in 2024; the number of people who have engaged with the platform; the number of hours of service provided; and if he will make a statement on the matter.

25083/24

To ask the Minister for Health to provide the business case on which the decision was taken to provide online mental health supports; and if he will make a statement on the matter.



I have collated the relevant information in response to these questions and this is set out sequentially below.

25078/24

The service provider (details supplied) was established in Ireland in 2012 and first provided services to the HSE in 2018 as part of a wider Digital Mental Health Supports service improvement project. This project included four strands of service improvement, the additional strands involving: Enhanced online mental health content (through yourmentalhealth.ie); a mental health information and signposting phone service; and, an active listening / text support service, which developed into text50808 or *Text About It*. The online mental health service provider in question specializes in the provision of online cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT).

On review of the initial pilot of online CBT across the HSE, the key learning was that, while service users experienced mental health improvements, the HSE was not resourced to provide the dedicated supporters required for the service to sufficiently scale. This was largely due to the turnover experienced at Psychology Assistant grade. In order to scale up this service and facilitate further evaluation based on a greater number of service users, a second pilot phase was commenced in April 2021. In this phase, the online mental health service provider facilitated both the online CBT platform and the supporter function. Following a positive evaluation, the HSE commenced an EU Tender competition in 2022 (detailed below).

The service provider currently offers four programmes on behalf of the HSE to individuals aged 18 years and over. These include:

- Space from Anxiety
- Space from Depression
- Space from Depression and Anxiety
- Space from Generalised Anxiety Disorder

Clients accessing this service are referred from GPs, Primary Care Psychology, Counselling in Primary Care, Community Mental Health Teams and Jigsaw. Individuals accepted to the service are offered a clinically supported eight-week programme, with self-guided access thereafter for one year.

All individuals referred to the programmes are clinically assessed to establish suitability for the service through the established assessment built into the registration process. The service is overseen by a panel of clinical supervisors who are responsible for risk occurrences, which is assessed by the clinical team on a case-by-case basis. Upon referral, supporters work with clients to support them to make changes.



25079/24

The total annual cost of this online CBT service to the HSE in 2022 was just under €1.44m and in 2023 this increased to €1.58m. The increase in cost is directly related to increased demand and service activity. The service is provided based on a fee per each individual license and in 2023, nearly 8,000 people accessed the online CBT service. There is a likelihood that demand will exceed available budget in 2024 and discussions are underway with the service provider regarding pricing, referrer education and other possible strategies to continually improve the quality of referrals.

25080/24

In order to mainstream provision of the online CBT service for a period of time and building on a successful second pilot phase, an [‘Invitation to Tender – OJEU Open Procedure’](#) was published in May of 2022 with a deadline for submissions of July 1st 2022. The HSE Health Business Services (HBS) procurement service supported this process. The service provider in question was subsequently awarded the contract by a Procurement Evaluation Group (PEG) responsible for scoring the submissions received based on set criteria. Two proposals were received and the successful service provider was awarded a considerably higher overall score by the PEG. Following completion of the procurement process, a three-year contract was agreed in line with the HSE’s standard terms and conditions and factoring in data privacy, clinical oversight and the management of risk.

25081/24

The online CBT service is guided by a designated ‘supporter’ whose role is to review service users’ engagement with the programme content, to motivate and support through weekly written reviews and to escalate any concerning content or risks to clinical supervisors.

In accordance with the service level agreement, all supporters have a minimum qualification of a primary degree in psychology, mental health nursing, occupational therapy, social work, social care, psychotherapy or counselling from a recognised third level university. In addition, all supporters have (i) training and qualifications in CBT programmes or (ii) hold or be working towards a Master’s degree and/or a PhD/Doctorate in the field of psychology, mental health nursing, occupational therapy, social work, social care, psychotherapy or counselling. Furthermore, supporters will all be eligible for membership of an applicable recognised professional body in Ireland.

There are 26 supporters involved in service provision currently. All of these supporters have a primary degree as above. Twenty-one of these supporters have completed postgraduate qualifications, with 5 in the process of completing postgraduate qualifications. The range of qualifications includes MA Psychotherapy; MA Applied Psychology; M.Sc. Clinical Psychology; M. Sc. Psychotherapy; Doctorate Counselling Psychology; and, Doctorate Health Psychology. In addition, supporters receive 20 hours of induction and training in the first two weeks, followed by two hours of clinical supervision per month from a Clinical Supervisor. The role of the Clinical Supervisor involves risk assessment, risk management and clinical supervision of Supporters. The Clinical Supervisors employed by the service provider are fully qualified and registered psychologists / psychotherapists with extensive qualifications and experience.



The service provider ensures that supporters for all programmes have adequate supervision and have undergone background checks, in accordance with their standard organisation policies. This is in line with statutory and mandatory requirements for Irish health service providers to undertake this work, including, but not limited to child protection and adult safeguarding requirements.

25082/24

In relation to the number of referrals to the online service provider in 2024, from January 1st to May 10th there were:

- 8,018 referrals to the service
- 3,638 activations, demonstrating an activation rate of 58% (activation stats to end of April)

Of these referrals, most are from GPs (89%). In addition, referrals also come from Primary Care Psychology (3%), Counselling in Primary Care (4%), Jigsaw (1%) and Community Mental Health Teams (3%). As there is a naturally a time gap between referral and activation, the referrals in the year to date will likely result in a higher activation rate, the average rate in the milestone report on the first 10,000 service users (August 2023) confirms an activation rate of 68%. According to the same report, users spend an average of 4.9 hours on the platform and receive an average of seven supporter reviews. Positive mental health outcome is reported overall: 49% of those in moderate to severe ranges (clinical ranges of depression) show reliable improvement in their depression; and, 59% of those in the moderate to severe ranges (clinical levels of anxiety) show reliable improvement in their anxiety symptoms.

25083/24

The provision of online CBT builds on the 2018 HSE service improvement project 'Developing Digital Mental Health Supports in Ireland'. As referenced in the response to PQ 25078/24 (see above) online CBT was one of five digital mental health supports progressed through this initiative. The project formed part of a wider mental health service improvement programme, overseen by a HSE Change Board and directed by national mental health policy. The Change Board consisted of senior managers from each of the nine Community Health Organisations and from HSE National Mental Health. All initiatives that formed part of this improvement programme were progressed applying structured and evidence based project management methodologies.

The learning from the initial pilot phase of online CBT was that the service was resulting in improved mental health outcomes for service users but there were challenges in scaling up to reach sufficient numbers of people. Based on the learning from phase one and with input from service providers, including HSE referrers, a second pilot phase was initiated to trial the outsourcing of the supporter role. A positive evaluation of this phase, in terms of the process but also based on mental health outcome for service users, initiated the EU procurement process and request for tenders detailed above in response to PQ 25080/24.



In summary, the HSE's engagement with the online CBT service provider has developed over seven years from initial involvement as one element of a project in a wider portfolio of service improvement projects. The service has scaled up through modification of the service model and a three-year contract is now in place following an open procurement process. This contract will run to the end of 2025. Based on regular feedback from referrers and on client outcome data, this service has developed as an important offering in the overall range of mental health supports, particularly from a primary care / early intervention perspective. At the same time, the service requires a considerable portion of the digital mental health budget currently available. An oversight group comprised of relevant HSE staff and representatives of referrer groups is reviewing medium and long-term options with regard to the future provision of guided online CBT in Ireland.

I hope that this clarifies the position and I would be happy to provide any additional information requested,

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Derek Chambers".

Derek Chambers
General Manager (Policy Implementation)
HSE National Mental Health