

IMO Submission to the Joint Committee on Education, Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science on *School Bullying and The Impact on Mental Health.*

The rise in incidences of mental health disorders in children and adolescents is concerning. A recent report by UNICEF¹ shows that Ireland ranked highly among 38 OECD/EU countries for child wellbeing but shows young people here are struggling with their mental health.

A report² on the mental health of young people by the Department of Health and Children noted that young people felt bullying had a negative impact on their mental health. A separate study carried out by the National Suicide Research Foundation³ found that bullying was associated with higher levels of anxiety and depressive symptoms, suicidal intentions and suicide attempts. Adolescents who had been bullied were 6.6 times more likely to report having attempted suicide compared to their peers.

Schools provide the perfect opportunity for the development of good mental health and wellbeing. Anti-bullying procedures for primary and post-primary schools were introduced in September 2013, which provide clarity about bullying and an overarching national approach to tackling bullying at a local level in schools. Between 2013 – 2018, the Irish Government have published a series of policy documents to tackle bullying and promote wellbeing in schools. However, research by the DCU's National Anti-Bullying Centre (ABC) has shown that these policy developments need to be matched by resources that support schools to develop adequate responses to tackle bullying and promote mental health awareness among children and young people.

Cyberbullying is also having a significant emotional impact on the young people of Ireland. Online victimisation in Ireland was found to range from 9-14% in primary and post primary schools. A preliminary report shows Irish children have experienced one of the highest rates of cyberbullying in Europe during the COVID-19 pandemic, with a 20% increase in cyberbullying victimisation during lockdown⁴. Social media organisations have a duty to protect young people from dangerous content, exploitation and cyber bullying. Strict measures are needed in legislation to protect children from online material that promotes,

¹ Unicef Innocenti Report Card 16 – Worlds of influence, Understanding what shapes child well-being in rich countries (2020)

² What helps and what hurts? Report on the outcomes of consultations with teenagers on Mental Health, Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, 2009

³ National Suicide Research Foundation - Young lives in Ireland, A school-based study of mental health and suicide prevention

⁴ DCU's National Anti-Bullying Centre (ABC)

bullying, self-harm or eating disorders. The IMO is calling for the publication of the new Online Safety and Media Regulation Bill as a matter of urgency.

Finally, young people require timely access to mental health care when necessary. The first point of call is General Practice, which requires resources and time to support parents and families who are suffering with their mental health. Access to psychological services in the community is required. However, young people with serious mental health and behavioural problems will often require an urgent assessment and support with the specialist child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS). We know that the funding for CAMHS remains poor and that significant waiting lists remain. It is completely unacceptable that over 2000 young people with serious mental health and behavioural problems are on a waiting list for an initial assessment by a CAMHS team.

The IMO recommends

- **Implement programmes in schools to raise awareness about cyberbullying and promote safety online**
- **Appropriately resource Anti-Bullying Procedures in schools and ensure supports are in place for those who are bullied or those who engage in bullying behaviour**
- **Appropriately resource of National Educational Psychological Services (NEPS) to support mental health and wellbeing**
- **Urgently publish the Online Safety and Media Regulation Bill with strict measures to protect children from on-line material that promotes, bullying, self-harm or eating disorders:**
- **Investment in publicly funded counselling and psychotherapy services and supports for young people in the community, accessible on GP referral;**
- **Appropriately resource specialist child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS) to ensure timely access for vulnerable young patients.**