

From the Deputy Secretary, Social Services Policy Group/
Chief Social Work Officer
Seán Holland



Department of
Health

An Roinn Sláinte

Máinnystrie O Poustie

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Via email

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Dear Colleagues

MESSAGE FROM SEAN HOLLAND, CHIEF SOCIAL WORK OFFICER

Purpose

I am writing to you as I am acutely aware what being on the frontline helping vulnerable people to keep safe and to maintain their social wellbeing will entail and the worry and stress this may cause for you and your loved ones. Looking after your wellbeing and keeping yourself safe in the days and weeks to come will be vitally important. This message outlines how we are all working together to support you to do so. It also gives me the opportunity to put on record my deep gratitude for the supportive and positive response of the social work family and to thank each of you for your individual contribution. Together we can make a difference.

Crisis

Coronavirus poses probably the biggest threat any of us have ever seen in our lifetime. The word crisis barely seems adequate to describe what is happening. There is immense pressure to act, to give assurance and answers when much remains unknown and uncertain. And the reality is no-one has all the answers. Most people have had to begin to tackle the problem before having a solid grasp of what's happening. The situation is changing daily. One thing does look certain though. It will get worse before it gets better.

Choices

We have to make choices about what to prioritise. These are not easy decisions. In many cases it will feel that we are trying to find the least worst choice. It may be that when we look back, with the luxury of hindsight, we would make different choices. But today we have to make our choices in good faith using the expert advice and intelligence available to us. Things will change as the crisis unfolds and we all need to be prepared for decisions to change as the reality of what we are dealing with becomes clearer.

Leadership

This is not the time for division or rivalry, professional or organisational self-interest. This is the time for everyone to pull together and support each other for the common good. It's the time for leadership at all levels and for all to be prepared to take on responsibility for decision making. Everyone has a part to play. And I know that each of you is playing your part, helping to shoulder the burden, doing all you can to prepare for the full impact of COVID-19: to secure the additional resources needed to care for the ill and vulnerable; to protect those providing that care; and to maintain essential services to the most vulnerable in the community, some of whom will face the additional threat of abuse or violence in what should be the safety of their own home.

Response

I am impressed and so grateful, but not at all surprised, at how you, the social work profession, has responded. I have had the privilege of working with many social workers over the years, including the years of conflict in NI. Social workers stepped up then just as you are stepping up now. Your values drive you to help. Your skills equip you to be flexible and to adapt. Your experience has taught you to be pragmatic, solution focussed and innovative. Importantly, it has taught you to cope with uncertainty and the unexpected. You are re-organising your working lives and being redeployed to ensure essential services for those who rely on you are maintained. You are identifying where new pressures will arise and planning how social work can respond. You are thinking creatively about how to care for, support and protect those for whom you have statutory responsibility.

Safety

The first priority of government in this crisis is to help everyone keep safe and well and to preserve life. To do this, it is vitally important to slow the spread of the infection and 'shield' the most vulnerable. This will reduce the demand for acute hospital care. The first guidance we produced was therefore purposefully generic and targeted at the general population and at all staff in HSC about how to protect themselves from COVID-19. More specific guidance for staff, including social workers in different settings, is being developed and posted on the DOH and PHA websites as it becomes available.

Policy

To alleviate pressure on social workers during this time, we are amending legislation, policies and standards. We are also working with the NISCC, employers and the universities to fast track this year's social work graduates into employment and inviting retired social workers and social work students to express their interest in helping out in the significant challenge ahead. Many thanks to those of you, including social work students, who have already registered your interest. We are working with employers and partner agencies to ensure the training and support needs of returning or new staff will be met and ensure they are prepared and fit to practise in whatever role they are assigned, including the discharge of statutory functions.

Protection

The nature of social work and social care means there are situations where it is impossible to keep a safe physical distance from individuals who need help but who are infected or showing symptoms. Whilst there is currently stock available for appropriate use of PPE, you will also be aware of the difficulties in sourcing sufficient equipment to protect staff. I can assure you everything is being done to source the right protective equipment for everyone in these circumstances and to ensure plans are in place to manage self-isolation in different contexts, including group living. Your employers, and in particular the Directors of Social Work, are working together to make contingency plans, ensure regular communication and consistent messages and respond to operational issues.

Decisions

It is vital that urgent operational decisions are not delayed because senior staff may not be available and managers will be expected to make decisions particularly where there is an immediate threat to people's health or safety. As social workers you already have the experience and skills to make professional judgements about complex situations, particularly carrying out statutory responsibilities. You know the importance of balancing the rights and best interests of individuals with your duty to protect them from harming themselves or others. In the context of this public health crisis this will include balancing the rights of a potentially infectious individual with the need to protect staff and wider society. New emergency powers have been fast-tracked in relation to public protection and potentially infectious people to equip you to act quickly in these situations. These powers should only be used as the last resort. Upholding and protecting people's human rights is an important professional responsibility even in times of crisis.

Wellbeing

All of this is a big ask and I understand you may be apprehensive and fearful about what is ahead. Our lives have changed dramatically in the last couple of weeks and we are all adjusting to different ways of living and working. We are having to think and behave in ways that are unfamiliar. It's important we all try to avoid becoming overwhelmed and stressed. One way we can help ourselves is by making time to look after our social wellbeing and I would strongly encourage you to do so and have attached some suggestions to help you.

Legacy

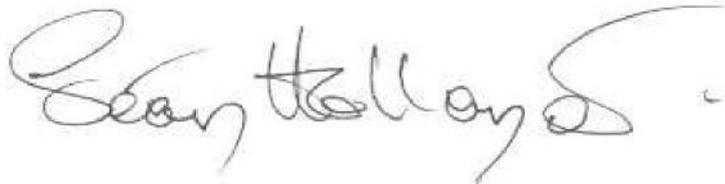
None of us knows exactly how things will have changed when this is all over. And one day this will be over. How we act now as a profession will become part of that history. We know from history that what is remembered and talked about long after the crisis is over are the people behind the stories. Their selflessness and personal sacrifice, generosity of spirit, acts of kindness, quiet heroism. Their humanity and compassion and respect for people's rights.

Gratitude

And you will be one of those people that history remembers. But I don't want to wait until it's over to thank you. I want to thank you now for your solidarity as a profession working together to ensure the most vulnerable are protected, helping to divert and alleviate the pressure on the HSC system for the common good. Have no doubt about the value of your contribution and your potential to make a difference. Together we will get through this. Together we will make a difference.

Look after yourself, your families and each other.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Sean Holland". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

SEAN HOLLAND

Chief Social Work Officer/Deputy Secretary

COVID-19: LOOKING AFTER YOUR SOCIAL WELL-BEING

The response to this pandemic will most certainly be a marathon not a sprint. More than ever, we will be susceptible to stress and worry, so it's important to look after ourselves, each other and our social well-being.



RELATIONSHIPS & BELONGING

- Be kind to yourself and others, acts of kindness connect us to others and reduce the sense of powerlessness and isolation
- Keep connected to family, friends, colleagues and your line manager; use technology to share a coffee, virtual lunch or team de-brief
- Reduce stress through humour and laughter; show appreciation of others
- Offer and seek support to and from others including your colleagues and line manager; keep up to date with what's happening in people's lives and at work

INDEPENDENCE & RESPONSIBILITY



- Be responsible, use and share only credible sources of information on COVID-19
- Keep expectations of yourself realistic and manageable; focus on what is in your control
- Working patterns will change and emails and notifications may come from colleagues who have different daily patterns to you. don't expect to give or receive immediate responses
- Things may feel overwhelming; talk about how you're feeling and seek support

QUALITY OF LIFE SELF-WORTH

- Focus on your values and what gives your life purpose and meaning; let them be your guide
- Be creative as you adapt to new ways of living, working and being; be open to learning and trying new things; establish new routines
- Record your thoughts and feelings; for reflection and sense making when this time is over
- Be proud of yourself and what you are doing to help; look for positives; focus on the strengths and what is working well

- Stay informed but avoid spending too much time on social media or following the news
- Use technology responsibly; keep yourself safe online and maintain confidentiality
- Use official guidance to protect yourself/others from COVID-19; discuss any concerns about your health and safety with your line-manager
- Take time off; do the things that help you feel relaxed and happy. Set boundaries between work and personal life; get sufficient sleep, nutrition, exercise, and social support. Try to stay calm and maintain a positive mind-set



PURPOSE & MEANING



SAFE & WELL

Keeping yourself well is the most responsible thing you can do; for you and for others.



