

Witness Name: Kerry Anthony

Statement No.: 1

Exhibits: 2

Dated: 24th September 2025

UK COVID-19 INQUIRY – MODULE 10

WITNESS STATEMENT OF KERRY ANTHONY, CEO, INSPIRE WELLBEING

I, Kerry Anthony of Lombard House, 10-20 Lombard Street, Belfast, BT1 1RD (Inspire Wellbeing), will say as follows: -

1. Background

1.1 Inspire is a charity and social enterprise and our mission is wellbeing for all. In the UK we work in Northern Ireland alongside people living with mental ill health, intellectual disability, autism and addictions. We ensure that they live with dignity and realise their full potential. We campaign to create a community free from stigma and discrimination, and a culture of compassion that focuses on people and their abilities.

1.2 Our Mental Health and Addiction Services focus on inclusion by providing recovery-based support in communities and include: day support, supported housing, floating support & advocacy, counselling, social support, training, Mutual Aid Partnership and over 50's specific support. There are 62 mental health and addictions services across Northern Ireland.

1.3 Our Intellectual Disability and Autism Services are built around the people we support and empower people to live independently as part of their community and include; residential services, day support services, outreach services, supported living, floating support, respite and family support services.

1.4 Through our social enterprise Lena by Inspire, we provide a range of wellbeing support services, training and interventions that help organisation, employees and students to thrive including counselling, trauma informed therapeutic support, training,

information, digital wellbeing services, and specialist support projects, coaching and mentoring.

1.5 Our Insight, Engagement and Innovation team aims to amplify the voices of the people who use our services to inform and shape wider society through campaigning, research and the development of new services and include: engagement of the people who use our services and their families and carers, volunteering, fundraising and community development, campaigning and communication, research, early intervention, prevention and self-help services and innovation.

1.6 During the pandemic the relationship between Inspire and Government fell into two main categories. Firstly, we maintained our service focused relationships with our statutory sector service commissioners. This relationship switched to becoming more focused ensuring open lines of communication on key issues such as infection control to ensure we took the correct decisions to allow our services to remain open. No Inspire services closed during the pandemic. Secondly, our public information role became enhanced as we worked closely with the Department for Social Development (represented on the Voluntary Sector Emergencies Leadership Group) and the silver command structure in Department for Health Mental Health and Wellbeing Surge Cell. Inspire were commissioned by both departments referred to above to co-ordinate the wellbeing element of the voluntary and community sector and public messaging response to the pandemic in Northern Ireland. This resulted in the CovidWellbeing NI project launched by the then Minister for Health, Robin Swann on 12th June 2020 as **“a key part of the Covid Mental Health Response Plan I announced two weeks ago. I would encourage people to use this unique and impressive resource created as a direct response to the emotional impact Covid-19 is having on our society and featured in the [NI Executive Office Covid Daily Update of the same day](#).**

(KA1/INQ000214938)

1.7 Covidwellbeing NI was a unique partnership of Northern Ireland's leading mental health charities, the Public Health Agency, the Department for Communities and the Department for Health.

Wellbeing and Covid-19 Project Structure

Action Mental Health
Cause
Nexus
Aware
MindWise
Cruse
Barnardo's
SPRING Social Prescribing
Relate
Praxis
Rainbow
Age NI
Inspire
Addiction NI
TAMHI
Rural Support
Healthy Living Centre Alliance
Community Development & Health Network
Public Health Agency
Department for Health
Department for Communities



It aimed to provide reliable, co-ordination and unified mental health information and support to the public in Northern Ireland via:

- A fully functioning online wellbeing hub.
- A strong partner campaign with weekly messaging linking to the Covid Wellbeing NI website.
- A wider well-being community of practice to disseminate information to people communities across NI.

2 Impact on the General Population

2.1 Inspire data collection is focused on the mental health and wellbeing of the people using our social care and so Inspire does not have any data on the impact of the pandemic on the general public, because it has not undertaken such studies/does not hold data that is categorised in such a manner.

2.2 However, while it was live, the covidwellbeingni online hub (as referenced above at 1.7) collected and analysed data on the types of mental health information and support accessed by the members of the public in Northern Ireland. According to Inspire data analytics and media monitoring service 2,500 people visited the hub on the day it was launched, in the first four weeks 5,110 people had accessed the hub with 15,091 page views. From June 2020 to March 2021 the covidwellbeingni hub had 56,879 unique visitors, our social media messaging reached 10,533,225 people and our press and media reached 1,881,355.

2.3 The Community of Practice, defined as wider community supporters as opposed to official partners, had 157 members directly and indirectly reaching a further 95,562 people across NI with each weekly newsletter.

With some minor fluctuations the most accessed topics people sought information on consistently remained:

- Stress
- Your Wellbeing
- Anxiety
- Relationships
- Stress Self Help Section Programme

3 Impact on mental health services

3.1 Inspire does not have any data on the impact of the pandemic on key workers because it has not undertaken such studies/does not hold data that is categorised in such a manner. Inspire is primarily concerned with the mental health and wellbeing of the people who use our services, so we do not collect specific data on the impact on wider mental health service provision over and above the published waiting list and service demand modelling from government and academic sources. As no Inspire services closed during the pandemic the people already engaged in our services continued to receive mental health support through the pandemic and beyond. In 2021 we carried out a Rapid Review and Lessons Learned Report (KA2/INQ000652259) into how Inspire services were responding to the new challenges presented by the pandemic. The key emerging themes were:

- The importance of communication and leadership
- How adaptable and flexible our services were able to be.
- The significance of our people and the environments they work in
- Connectivity and the value of working together.

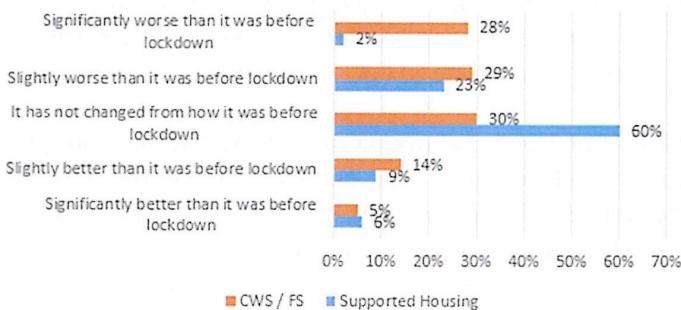
3.2 Specifically in terms of service provision, the lessons learned report highlighted the key positive development of being able to transfer some services such as support groups and counselling online. In our residential services we noted how new procedures in regard to infection control impacted on service delivery and the continued dedication to delivering high quality services to the people we support emerged as a paramount principle across the organisation.

3.3 Early in the pandemic (July 2020) we carried out a survey of the people who use our services to assess the impact of the initial wave of pandemic and restrictions on their mental health and wellbeing. (KA2/INQ000652259). In our addiction services we

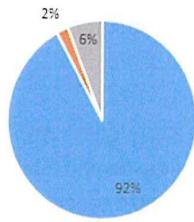
found that 37% of respondents had seen their alcohol or other drug use increase in the previous 4 weeks. For the other 63%, where usage had decreased or stayed the same, the comments suggested that their involvement with the online support groups was a significant contributing factor to this. 89% felt Inspire services had responded well in terms of support offered during lockdown.

3.4 The results from the report KA2/INQ000652259 which focused on our mental health services are presented below. 60% of people living in Inspire supported living accommodation did not feel any change to their mental health because of lockdown while 23% of people in supported living felt their mental health was slightly worse. These figures are significantly different for people receiving community wellbeing support who saw a much more negative impact on their mental health. From an Inspire perspective we understood this difference to be because our Community Wellbeing (day support) Services experienced the most disruption and change including moving services online, moving support groups to outside venues, reducing the size of group support and offering phone and text support.

How has your mental health been in the last 4 weeks?



Do you feel you have received support to help you cope with your mental health since the start of lockdown?



95% of all respondents to the survey KA2/INQ000652259 overall felt Inspire had responded to the situation well so far in terms of support.

"The staff were very supportive to me during lockdown and at present, it has helped keep me out of hospital having their support.

4 Innovations, societal strengths and lessons to be learned

4.1 In terms of the mental health of the people who use Inspires services we are very clear that continuity or service delivery with minimal disruption was key to ensuring their mental health and wellbeing. In future pandemics we would recommend a careful risk assessment of the long-term mental health implication of reducing or withdrawing services against other priorities. We know from the people who use our services that continued social connections, access to therapeutic support staff and family and community connections were vital to protecting their mental health during the pandemic. Careful consideration should be given to any measures that increase isolation, remove support networks or disrupt wellbeing eco-systems for people living with mental health and addictions.

4.2 As a service provider our staff team showed inspiring flexibility and resilience that allowed us to maintain service delivery during each wave of the pandemic. Services that could be moved online did so rapidly and post pandemic we still offer a certain level of online group support meetings and counselling. We envisage this will be part of the Inspire offer well into the future however an overwhelming majority of our services returned to in person support as soon as it was safe to do.

4.3 The online covidwellbeingni hub (see 1.7 above) created as part of the emergency Covid response is still operational and popular. Post pandemic it has rebranded to Communitywellbeingni and the online hub and monthly community of practice e-zine have been mainstreamed into Inspire's wellbeing offering to the public in Northern Ireland. Support from a corporate partner offered the resources to embed translation technology in the hub and we created new homepages in 15 languages enabling people who do not have English as a first language to access the information and support the hub provided. Based on our knowledge of the key wellbeing concerns members of the public sought online advice for, post pandemic we created the Healthy Restart Programme. This was funded by a time limited grant from a corporate partner, and it allowed us to offer mental health and wellbeing training to the public in communities across Northern Ireland on a range of post-pandemic issues.

4.4 From 2022-2024, the Healthy Restart Programme delivered mental health and wellbeing awareness sessions to 2,789 attendees, via 200 sessions delivered across 109 organisations. Topics were built around the Public Health Agency accredited '5 Steps to Wellbeing' approach and covered a range of areas such as, 'The Importance of Sleep', 'Managing Stress & Anxiety' and 'Alcohol & Other Drugs'. Using a place-based approach, we partnered with local community and voluntary organisations who promoted the training to their members. This allowed us to raise awareness and build knowledge and understanding across communities. By connecting with people via a trusted provider, be

that their housing association, foodbank or local men's shed we were able to reach areas that would be typically less likely to be able to avail of this sort of support.

4.5 Healthy Restart was a small but impactful response to post-pandemic concerns developed by Inspire as a response to the lack of a coordinated government led post-pandemic support. While the rush to return to 'normal' and the focus on economic and physical recovery is understandable, in future pandemics or emergencies we would recommend more attention is paid to a more purposeful approach to helping people, families and communities process and recover psychologically from the impact of lockdowns, restrictions and the generalised anxiety caused by such life changing global events.

4.6 The single most important factor that enabled Inspire to continue to deliver mental health services during the pandemic was our staff team. Our team of social care workers showed inspirational levels of resilience, flexibility and determination, often putting themselves and their families at risk to ensure the people who use our services remain at the heart of all we do.

Statement of Truth

I believe that the facts stated in this witness statement are true. I understand that proceedings may be brought against anyone who makes, or causes to be made, a false statement in a document verified by a statement of truth without an honest belief of its truth.

Signed

Personal Data

Dated: 24-09-25

