

PRESS RELEASE FROM SAM88 - FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

'Counselling Saves Lives - it is a vital tool for GPs in suicide prevention and mental health treatment – so why is it so hard to access it?'

Public Meeting and Call to Action on Tues 18 June 2019

The Bridewell, Church Street, Magheraelt BT45 6AN

For more info contact Christine Rocks SAM88 on 07845600231 or Sara Boyce PPR on 07710953270

A local suicide prevention charity, SAM88, is **organising a public meeting and a call to action in Magherafelt on Tuesday 18 June**, in response to the **spiralling mental health crisis and the difficulties people experience in trying to access timely and appropriate mental health treatment.**

For over 90% of people experiencing common mental health problems such as anxiety and depression, their GP is their first port of call, with approximately one in three GP appointments being for mental health. GPs have a vital role to play in the prevention, detection and treatment of mental ill health, as well as in the prevention of deaths by suicide. For many people who attend their GP with mental health problems, counselling offers an effective, low cost form of treatment.

But **new research** that SAM88 has been a part of, through the #123GP Campaign, has shone a light of the **huge difficulties people experience in trying to access counselling through their GP practice.**

#123GP research found that

- Only two thirds of GP practices provide access to counselling in their practice and the percentage has dropped in the past year.
- A quarter of patients **wait for 4 months or more** for an initial appointment with a counsellor in their GP practice.

- Official figures show that waiting times for access to counselling via the Primary Care Talking Therapy Hubs are even longer, with data from some Trusts revealing **waiting times of 7 months.**
- Patients **are limited to an average of 6 sessions only**, which they feel is inadequate to help improve their mental health
- **No official waiting time targets exist** and some Trusts, including the Northern Trust, do not monitor waiting times
- **Funding** provided by the Health and Social Care Board for GP practice based counselling is **entirely inadequate, averaging at £2.29** per patient if there was full uptake by all patients who could benefit from it.

In response to these findings, one of the meeting organisers, **Christine Rocks**, who lost her daughter Samantha to suicide 12 years ago, commented

“access to counselling through your GP practice is a vital treatment option for people with mental health problems or for those battling suicidal thoughts. But getting to see a counsellor is a post code lottery, it totally depends on where you live.

Even when your practice has a counsellor we know that people wait for up to 7 months to be seen. We know that in 2017 65 people in the Northern Health and Social Care Trust alone died by suicide. The awful reality is that some people will be dead before they get the help they need. The Health and Social Care Board needs to at least double the amount of money it is putting into GP practice based counselling, and do it now”.

GPs and counsellors alike have also highlighted the critical role that the provision of practice based counselling can play in effectively treating mental health problems at primary care level, thus reducing the need for referrals into secondary mental health care services, as well as the over-prescription of medication.

Dr. David Johnston OBE FRCGP, points out *“this is a very valuable service that helps GPs to provide better services locally. It not only reduces referrals to secondary care but also improves patient outcomes”.*

Mr. Bobby Carlin, a Counsellor and Counselling Services Manager in the Ballymena area explains how having a counselling service based in the GP practice makes it accessible to people *'Lots of clients would never had thought about counselling as an option if it wasn't offered by their GP but also based within the GP practice. This is a vital service which should be expanded as a model of best practice.'*

In the face of the evidence presented, **campaigners have been shocked by the response they've received from both the Department of Health and the Health and Social Care Board**, who have adopted a *'crisis, what crisis?'* attitude. The Health and Social Care Board, who hold the budget for GP practice based counselling, has publicly stated there is an under-spend for mental health programmes and that they are forced to regularly *'hand money back'*.

Christine Rocks and SAM88 are urging anybody who is concerned about the mental health crisis that is affecting our community to come along on 18 June. For further information contact Christine Rocks on 07845600231 or on cpatricia1109@gmail.com

Notes

1. **For further information or interviews** contact Christine Rocks SAM 88 on 07845600231 Sara Boyce, PPR on 90 313315/07710953270 or email sara@pprproject.org
2. **#123GP is a grassroots campaign made up of people from across NI** with personal or family experience of accessing mental health services and/or of bereavement by suicide. It is calling on the Department of Health and the Health and Social Care Board to fund GP practices to provide timely and appropriate access to counselling provision.
3. **The #123GP campaign is supported by all political parties:** Alliance Party, DUP, Green Party, People Before Profit, SDLP, Sinn Féin, UUP, Workers Party.
4. Over **40 organisations and influential individuals** signed an **Open Letter to the Health and Social Care Board in August 2018**, calling on it to urgently increase funding in line with need and ensure that access to counselling provision in all GP practices is made available. Among the organisations and individuals to add their names were Aware NI, Victim Support NI, Women's Aid NI, Nexus NI, British

Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy, the NI Counselling Forum, PIPS charity, Lighthouse, Dr. John Kyle GP, Dr. David Johnston GP, Mr. Bobby Carlin Counselling Services Manager and Dr. Nuala Quiery Counsellor.

5. View the new campaign video here <https://vimeo.com/315931736>
6. View the motion graphic here <https://youtu.be/MLcrEaFI3fo>
7. Read more about the campaign here <https://bit.ly/2FIVd8q> and on social media @123GPCampaign or facebook Mental Health Rights Campaign
8. Read #123GP's report here '[Counselling –A Vital Tool in Equipping GPs with Mental Health Expertise](#)'
9. Read the #123GP campaign's response to the Health and Social Care Board's position here <https://bit.ly/2FIVd8q>