

Statement issued on behalf of the Raphoe Diocesan Pastoral Services CLG Board of Directors

It is with profound sadness and regret that the Raphoe Diocesan Pastoral Services CLG Board of Directors is announcing the complete cessation of its counselling services across Co Donegal due to lack of public funding for a full-time director of counselling.

The service offers the only provision for child and adolescent counselling in the county, as well as providing counselling services to adults. Based out of the Raphoe Pastoral Centre in Letterkenny, the not-for-profit community-based organisation has provided support to many thousands of clients in Donegal since 2010, delivering almost 15,000 counselling sessions in the last six years alone.

A total of 26 part-time counsellors, including 11 student placements, currently deliver the service in seven outreach centres across the county — including Letterkenny, Dunfanaghy, Stranorlar, Creeslough and Bunrana. Counselling is also provided by the Pastoral Centre at Hughie's Corner in Carndonagh and Gemma's Legacy of Hope in Dungloe, which are both community funded projects. Clinical governance and management are provided by award-winning Director of Counselling, Liam Cannon, who is employed part time one day per week but is standing down after 14 years at the helm.

The service has grown exponentially in recent times, with around 120 clients now receiving counselling at any one time. More than 350 people seeking counselling support are currently on the waiting list, which continues to grow daily.

The rapid growth of the service in response to surging demand for counselling has resulted in an acute necessity for the funding of a full-time director of counselling and a coordinator.

Despite consistent, exhaustive and explorative efforts in recent months to secure much-needed rolling investment from the HSE and Tusla to finance these positions, it's now been confirmed that no funding will be made available.

Consequently, the Raphoe Diocesan Pastoral Services CLG has been forced to take the extremely difficult decision to wind down its counselling provision across Donegal.

Services at the Pastoral Centre in Letterkenny and at all outreach centres across the county will cease to operate from mid-March.

The Board is fully aware of the devastation this will cause to clients, people on the waiting list, counsellors, support staff, students dependent on placements, and so many communities across Donegal. As the only counselling service for children and adolescents in the county, the cessation of this service will have far reaching consequences and create a dangerous void in the provision of mental health services for young people in Donegal. It's envisaged that the situation will become even more bleak for Donegal communities, as demand for counselling services steadily grows.

The reality is that the loss of this vital service will leave the many thousands of people who need counselling with nowhere to turn. It will also undo many years of hard work invested in building the infrastructure and governance to deliver this service in local communities.

It is deeply regrettable that adequate financing is not available to allow the continuation of this essential service, which has been delivered with the utmost dedication, commitment and professionalism by all involved.

Director of Counselling, Liam Cannon, who has provided the clinical governance as well as designing, building, rolling out, and steering this exemplary service model, was to leave his one-day-per-week post on January 2, having announced his resignation in September 2023. However, he has remained in position temporarily to allow the service to continue under his clinical governance and to drive attempts to secure funding to appoint a full-time director and coordinator. The failure to secure this funding leaves the service without the required clinical governance essential to its delivery.

The service model is the only one of its kind in Ireland and has been acclaimed nationally as a perfect blueprint for the delivery of counselling services throughout the country, with Liam being awarded the 2022 Carl Berkeley Memorial Award and the Northern Ireland Regional Award for Outstanding Contributions to the Counselling/Psychotherapy Field by The Irish Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (IACP).

The Diocese of Raphoe has supported the service since 1992, with additional funding provided via charitable contributions and client donations. In more recent times, Tusla has part-funded service delivery for children and adolescents. At no time has any public funding been allocated for the adult counselling service provision. No funding is in place for management, staffing and administration costs.

Inadequate public funding has presented a very tough challenge to even maintain the enhanced service provision in recent times, let alone deal with increased demand. Our struggle has long since reached a tipping point and, unfortunately, our finances can no longer cope with the continuation of the service.

As a Board, we would like to extend our heartfelt thanks and gratitude to everyone who has played their part in the delivery of this essential service.

During the transition period, the Board is committed to providing full support and information to everyone affected by this regrettable situation — including our clients, those on the waiting list, employees, outreach centres, GPs and medical professionals, funders, and other associates — to ensure as seamless a conclusion as possible to service provision.

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