**To the members of the Health and Social Care Board**

**There is a mental health crisis in Northern Ireland.**

As the agency responsible for commissioning and managing General Medical Services (GMS) we are asking the Health and Social Care Board to **take the necessary steps to ensure that all GMS patients can access counselling through their GP practice.**

The numbers of people in our society who are struggling with poor mental health is 25-44% higher than in England. The rate of deaths by suicide is also the highest across these islands. **Getting the right help at the right time is vitally important**, both in improving a person’s recovery and in preventing someone’s mental health from worsening, with all the ensuing costs to the individual, their family and to wider society.

**Over** [**90% of people with mental health problems will be treated by their GP**,](https://www.gmc-uk.org/3_10_Mental_Health_Problems_May_2014.pdf_56885087.pdf) with approximately one in three GP appointments being for mental health. As the first port of call therefore, 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.**

While recognising that people will access counselling via a number of different routes, including through community and voluntary organisations and the mental health hubs, **it is crucial that GP practices provide timely and equal access to counselling.** The funding of practice based counselling by the Health and Social Care Board demonstrates a recognition by the Board of the need for this service. However**, it is deeply concerning that the Board’s figures indicate that only two thirds of GPs currently offer access to practice based counselling and that the budget allocated by the Board for the provision of counselling is nowhere near sufficient to meet the real level of need.**

GPs and patients alike recognise the seriousness of this situation. In a survey of 200 GPs carried out in England in 2013, two thirds said they were forced, due to long waiting lists, to prescribe medication to patients with depression when they felt that counselling would be more effective.

**The Health and Social Care Board has a duty to ensure that the range and effectiveness of services meets the needs of the population it serves. Ensuring that all GP practices provide equal access to talking therapies is a crucial aspect of the overall provision of services for patients presenting with mental health problems.**

**We are asking the Health and Social Care Board to take the necessary steps to ensure that all GMS patients can access counselling through their GP practice.**

**List of signatories to the Open Letter to the Health and Social Care Board**

#123GP campaign

Dr. Brendan Gillan, Psychotherapist

Dr. David J Johnston OBE FRCGP

Dr. John Kyle GP

Dr. Nuala Quiery Counsellor

Mr. Bobby Carlin, Counselling and Counselling Services Manager, Ballymena

Mr. Desy Jones Training Co-ordinator PIPS Charity

Mr. Gerard McCartan, Chairperson PPR

Mr. Hugh Scullion, mental health professional ( retired), mental health rights activist

Mr. Lekan Ojo-Okiji Abasi

Mr. Patrick Doherty

Mr. Philip McTaggart, Mindskills Training and PIPS founder

Ms. Brenda Skillen Counsellor

Ms. Brid Keenan, Gestalt Psychotherapist ( BACP accred) and NARM therapist

Ms. Claire Thompson Fundraiser and Events Co-ordinator PIPS Charity

Ms. Éilís McIntyre, Counsellor, Registered BACP ( Accred)

Ms. Elizabeth Stott

Ms. Joan Corrigan

Ms. Karen Bester, mental health service user, trainer and writer

Ms. Karen Copeland, Copeland Counselling Services

Ms. Karen McGuigan

Ms. Kathy Gilliland Belfast Mental Health Rights Group

Ms. Kirston Scott Belfast Mental Health Rights Group

Ms. Lynda McEldowney

Ms. Marie Quiery, MBACP ( Senior)

Aware NI

Ballinascreen Men’s Shed

British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy

East Belfast Community Counselling Centre

Embolden

Focus the Identity Trust

Jigsaw

Lighthouse

Men’s Health Forum in Ireland

Nexus NI

NI Counselling Forum

PIPS Charity

SAM88

Square Cut Punt Crew

STEPS

Suicide Down to Zero

Turas na nDaoine

Victim Support NI

Women’s Aid Federation NI