

THE CRITERIA FOR RECONFIGURING HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE SERVICES

Comments by Northern Ireland Environment Link

20th January 2017

Northern Ireland Environment Link (NIEL) is the networking and forum body for non-statutory organisations concerned with the environment of Northern Ireland. Its 70+ Full Members represent over 90,000 individuals, 262 subsidiary groups, have an annual turnover of £70 million and manage over 314,000 acres of land. Members are involved in environmental issues of all types and at all levels from the local community to the global environment. NIEL brings together a wide range of knowledge, experience and expertise which can be used to help develop policy, practice and implementation across a wide range of environmental fields.

NIEL is also a member of the Space & Place Consortium which is delivering a £15 million lottery funded project with an intended outcome of improving health and wellbeing. The organisation also has an interest in how the natural environment can support and enhance health through initiatives such as 'Green Prescriptions' or 'social prescribing'.

These comments are made on behalf of Members, but some members may be providing independent comments as well. If you would like to discuss these comments further we would be delighted to do so.

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1. General Comments

Northern Ireland Environment Link welcomes the opportunity to engage with the Department on the Criteria for Reconfiguring Health and Social Care Services. While we note that the reforms are influenced by the urgent need to address shortcomings in the Health Service, they present an opportunity to introduce new ways of working.

The link between quality of environment and health outcomes is largely accepted across the globe. Access to healthy, well-functioning places supports good population health. Conversely, lower quality, polluted areas challenge and undermine the health of inhabitants. The World Health Organization recognises that “...the highest attainable standard of health [is] a fundamental right of every human being.”¹ To deliver this requires high quality health and social care to enable people to full their potential within society.

Health is not the sole responsibility of one Department. It is a cross-cutting issue that is impacted upon by multiple agencies. A ‘whole of government approach’ as practiced elsewhere, is essential to effective service delivery. Furthermore, the emphasis on designing services with end users is important in order to tailor solutions to local needs and create the conditions for healthy lifestyles.

2. Comments on Criteria

Criterion 1:

- **There is evidence that the outcomes for patients using these services are below acceptable levels either in the services as a whole or in particular hospitals, or where there are safety concerns.**

Robust structures are required to deliver high quality universal healthcare and meet the needs of everyone. Systems and services are under increasing pressure due to an ageing and growing population. In order to address current and future challenges, NIEL supports reconfiguration of Health and Social Care systems. The principles of safety, effectiveness and taking a patient and client focus are important. Alignment with the Programme for Government and the Quality 2020 strategy will support greater collaboration and joint working across departments.

Criterion 2:

- **There is a clear clinical pathway for the patient population. Co-created with patient groups.**

While the intention of the criterion is welcomed, it is important patients are properly informed and actively involved in policy making and service design. Its scope should be expanded beyond patient groups to include clients, carers and communities in line with existing strategies and guidelines. The Department could also consider how links can be established with emerging community planning structures.

Criteria 3,4,5:

- **The service cannot meet professional standards or minimum volumes of activity needed to maintain expertise.**

¹ Health and Human Rights <http://www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs323/en/>

- **The permanent workforce required to safely and sustainably deliver the service is not available/cannot be recruited or retained, or can only be secured with high levels of expensive agency/locum staff.**
- **The training of Junior Doctors cannot be provided to acceptable levels**

NIEL welcomes the Department's commitment to invest in training with the intention of addressing shortfalls in the number of staff across a range of services including GP services. Flexible approaches should be adopted. For example, utilising opportunities to re-train existing staff or undertake pre-employment training Programmes. The introduction of nurse practitioners and the expansion of community pharmacy initiatives is also welcomed, and should be prioritised in both rural and urban areas where there are existing shortfalls in provision.

Criterion 6

- **There is an effective alternative 'out of hospital' care model or an alternative 'shared care' delivery model.**

The introduction of new models of care has potential to deliver efficiencies and more timely treatment, if properly resourced. Patients need to have confidence in the quality of care and treatments. While many patients will choose to remain in their own homes, a hospital setting will be more appropriate for others. Social isolation in both rural and urban areas is an increasing problem which is harmful to health and wellbeing and in some cases lengthens recovery times.

NIEL urges the Department to consider initiatives that increase opportunities for social interaction alongside physical treatment as part of a comprehensive package to provide adequate support and prevent unnecessary hospital admissions. This should include the use of 'Green Prescriptions', where the environment is used as a setting for a course of GP prescribed physical activities as interventions to health conditions² and 'social prescribing', which links patients in primary care to sources of non-medical support in their communities. Evidence suggests, that in addition to providing a good return on investment, Green prescriptions can reduce hospital admissions. In Rotherham, one study found that participants had up to 25% fewer in-patient admissions and visits to A+E fell by up to 25%³.

Locally, RSPB Northern Ireland delivered a 12 week pilot project working in partnership with South Eastern Trust and the Public Health Agency. The project involved 8 service users suffering from mild mental health issues undertake nature related activities for a half a day each week. Unlike similar schemes that struggle with retention, such as Council led gym referrals, the project had 100% of the service users after 12 weeks. NIEL and partner organisations urge the DoH invest in similar pilot studies throughout NI, to add to the already existing evidence base across the UK demonstrating the success of this approach. Further information on these projects is available on request.

Criterion 7

- **The delivery of the service is costing significantly more than that of peers or of alternative 'out of hospital' alternatives due to a combination of the above factors**

² http://nhsforest.org/sites/default/files/Dose_of_Nature_evidence_report_0.pdf

³ <http://www4.shu.ac.uk/research/cresr/sites/shu.ac.uk/files/social-economic-impact-rotherham-summary.pdf>

NIEL welcomes the principles of prevention and exploring alternative primary and community care. While the reconfiguration may benefit some rural dwellers, centralisation of specialist services could negatively impact on some rural communities. We welcome the intention to consult communities on this matter.

Concerns about transport have been identified as a barrier to hospital attendance and participation in Programmes. People on lower incomes are less likely to have access to private transport and instead rely on public transport. Work should be carried out with the Department for Infrastructure to address accessibility by integrating transport and services at the planning stage to promote equity across socio-economic groups. It would also provide an opportunity to promote the environmental and health benefits of active travel.