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# **Eircom Men's Health Project (HealthNet): Discussion and Scoping Paper**

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## **Purpose of this Paper**

Noel Richardson and Colin Fowler from the Men's Health Forum in Ireland (MHFI) have been involved in one meeting and a number of teleconferences with staff from Eircom. These discussions have focused upon the possibility of introducing a workplace-based men's health initiative within Eircom.

This paper seeks to outline some of the issues which need further consideration before progressing this venture. It also makes suggestions for potential interventions which might be pursued to achieve the aims of this project.

## **Men's Health Forum in Ireland**

The Men's Health Forum in Ireland (MHFI) is a diverse network of individuals and organisations, men and women, from both the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland. The Forum was established in 1999, and operates on an all-island basis. At present, it has one temporary self-employed worker, but is, primarily, structured, organised and run using the expertise, resources and enthusiasm of volunteers. It relies on fund-raising and is managed by a Board of Trustees.

MHFI is a small charitable organisation which seeks to promote all aspects of the health and well being of men and boys on the island of Ireland through research, training, networking, health initiatives and advocacy. Each year, it coordinates the celebration of National Men's Health Week in Ireland. See [www.mhfi.org](http://www.mhfi.org) for more information on the Forum and its work.

## **Men's Health in Ireland**

Ireland is one of the few countries in the world which has a National Men's Health Policy. Indeed, Ireland was also one of the countries which was in the vanguard of developing policies in this field. However, even with this policy in place, local men's health is, still, a matter for concern ...

- Despite an overall pattern of increasing life expectancy, men in Ireland die, on average, almost five years earlier than women do.
- Local men have higher death rates than women from all of the leading causes of death and at all ages.
- Poor lifestyles and preventable risk factors account for a high proportion of chronic diseases.
- Male knowledge of / attitudes towards health and safety issues may act as a barrier to improving their health.
- The burden of ill health and mortality is mostly borne by men from the lower socio-economic groups.
- Men's late presentation to health services leads to higher levels of potentially preventable health problems and fewer treatment options.
- Absence from work due to ill-health places a significant financial burden on the Irish economy through the provision of sick pay, staff substitution and reduced productivity ...

## Workplace Based Health Initiatives

There is a substantial body of evidence which suggests that workplace-based men's health initiatives can offer an effective means to impact on this situation. Furthermore, since many men spend much of their waking hours at work, this offers an ideal setting for health promotion initiatives.

Such programmes tend to be successful because they:

- show that the employer cares about the health of their staff;
- draw upon a 'captive audience' which can be easily accessed;
- are often conducted on the employer's time;
- take place in a familiar environment;
- target people who are already part of workplace social / support networks;
- have a collective / team dimension to them ...

The most successful workplace-based health promotion programmes also share a range of common characteristics. These are that they:

- meet a real need;
- are issue specific;
- offer health assessment and medical follow-up;
- involve a sustained intervention rather than a quick fix approach;
- seek to become part of the culture of the workplace in the longer-term.

## Preliminary Questions that need to be Addressed

Many health promotion activities for men (and, indeed, other target groups) start in the wrong place. The 'wrong place' is that they begin the process by asking 'what should we offer' rather than 'why are we offering it' and 'how can we go about it'.

Subsequently, before embarking on a project such as this one, there is a need to start by reflecting upon some fundamental questions. These include ...

- Why do we want to do this (i.e. what is the motivation and benefits to Eircom)?
- Is there an obvious and quantifiable need (i.e. what is the evidence for / rationale behind doing it)?
- Will this initiative focus upon health promotion / accident prevention / the management of ill-health (or a combination of these)?
- Is there any health-related issue(s) (e.g. depression, substance misuse, obesity etc.) which will be 'out-of-bounds' for this programme?
- Has the company's management team fully bought into this venture?
- What is the overarching aim for this intervention (i.e. what will 'success' look like)?
- Are there specific objectives (deliverable outputs and outcomes) that have to be achieved?
- Who - precisely - will the initiative be aimed at (e.g. all / some / targeted male members of staff)?
- Who are the key stakeholders e.g. management, human resources department, occupational health team, trade unions, staff themselves ...)?
- Does the project need an Advisory / Reference / Steering Group and, if so, what would it look like?
- How many people would you like to engage?

- Is it possible to offer the men's health programme during 'work time'?
- What budget and resources will, realistically, be made available to underwrite this project (as this will determine what can be offered and for how long)?
- Who has / will have the authority to determine how this budget is spent?
- Is this project the beginning of a longer-term process for Eircom, or is it a short-term end in itself?
- What is the projected timescale?
- Is there / will there be a Project Coordinator(s) for the whole duration of project? ...

All of these questions need clear and definitive answers as a pre-requisite to further development, as they will determine the scope, reach and support for it.

## MHFI Recommendations for Future Development

To progress this initiative, MHFI recommends that Eircom should ...

- Gather statistics / an evidence base - this will help to make the 'business case' by answering the key question: 'why should we be involved?'
- Secure a top-down company 'buy-in' - based upon a realisation of the need and the benefits of investment (rather than simply the 'cost') in this field.
- Identify and engage the key players who can provide leadership, coordination and an executive function.
- Involve the Trade Unions and men, themselves, from the beginning.
- Recognise that this is a long-term project (at least 3-5 years), and is developmental and progressive in nature.
- Put the project onto the agenda of every senior management team meeting - to remind everyone of its existence and progress.
- Develop an identity / brand (e.g. logo and a catchy / relevant project name) - to make it real and unique.
- Start with the most immediate need and build upon any successes. Pick 'winnable battles', and do things in bite-sized chunks.
- Connect to anyone / everyone who may be able to inform developments because of their experience (e.g. An Post).
- Research, detail, and test interest in a menu of possible activities / projects / outputs / options. Rank these according to feedback and feasibility.
- Identify the main priorities for action over the next 3-5 years - it might be best to start with the broad (e.g. a generic men's health booklet) and move towards the specific (e.g. mental health needs).
- Work towards a launch of the first action or product during Men's Health Week 2012.

## Intervention Stages

MHFI believes that there are a number of discrete stages to this project. Some of these may run in parallel to each other. The main phases include ...

1. **Background research and setting parameters** - management reaching consensus on the answers to the preliminary questions listed earlier.
2. **Determining and agreeing practical actions** - management deciding which initiatives would be most realistic, relevant and appropriate to implement.

3. **Consulting with stakeholders** - using either one all-inclusive Focus Group or separate 'community of interest' Focus Groups (e.g. frontline staff, managers, trade union representatives) to assess support for / the weaknesses of the proposed action plan. The purpose of these meetings is to test the proposals - not to find out about individual men's health issues or to give participants a 'carte blanche' to suggest future actions (as they will then expect all of their issues to be addressed, and this is not realistic). It is MHFI's experience that after a few of these consultations, very little new information will be generated. If necessary, support for the findings from this consultation stage could be 'double-checked' via a questionnaire administered to a wider cross-section of staff. However, this would be a long and resource-intensive process.
4. **Pilot phase** - testing a small scale version of the intervention(s) and reviewing what has worked well / what hasn't worked well and why. This will also involve identifying the key challenges / obstacles to moving the project forward.
5. **Roll out** - implementing the full version of the practical action(s).
6. **Evaluation** - ongoing reflection and feedback which will help to gauge the effectiveness of the project, and inform future improvements. This should be in addition to a final external evaluation.

## Possible Practical Interventions

Depending upon the budget, resources and level of commitment which can be offered, a broad range of practical projects could be introduced within Eircom. These might include, for example ...

- Offering a free comprehensive **men's health check** for each male member of staff.
- Producing an Eircom **men's health booklet**. This could be generic or focus upon a specific health issue or theme.
- The development of an Eircom **Intranet site** which focuses upon men's health. This could offer either static brochures / information, or - preferably - be interactive (e.g. periodically answer online questions about health concerns on a specific topic, provide a BMI calculator, have a programme to estimate the amount of calories in specific foods etc.)
- Creating an Eircom men's health **Phone App** for staff.
- Sending male staff regular (e.g. monthly) **text messages** which give an important health fact, update or piece of information.
- Workplace (or home-based) **health challenges** e.g. increasing fitness levels / weight loss programme / bike to work scheme.
- Establishing a '**Healthy Eating Breakfast Club / Canteen**' within Eircom workplaces.
- Collating a Credit Card sized publication with a broad range of useful **helpline numbers**.
- Offering **training on avoiding accidents** in the workplace.
- Having occasional **talks** on men's health.
- Running men's health competitions / quizzes / fundraising **events**.
- Establishing an Eircom **walking club** / running group / sports team.

- Giving out **health-related freebies** (e.g. pedometers, waist tape measures, cool bags for sandwiches, gym passes).
- Reviewing Eircom's workplace **policies and practices** to ascertain if they are 'male health friendly'.
- Supporting male staff to organise or participate in activities which coincide with **Men's Health Week** each year - including displaying posters / information or running in-house initiatives to coincide with national initiatives.
- Introducing more **flexible working hours** ...

## **Role of MHFI**

MHFI believes that this Eircom proposal will play an important role in improving the health of men in Ireland. The Forum would, therefore, like to be involved in it.

Noel Richardson has been able to offer his time to support the start-up phase of this project as part of his Health Service Executive funding to support men's health initiatives. Unfortunately, he is unable to give a long-term commitment to the Eircom project in this capacity. Subsequently, it is proposed that, in the future, Eircom should work in partnership with MHFI, with Noel continuing to have an advisory role as the Chairperson of the Forum.

MHFI is, however, a small, unfunded charity, and would require some financial recompense for their input. It is proposed that this involvement could be offered at the rate of €300 per day / €175 per half day, plus any travel expenses.