
First Meeting of the Men's Health Week (MHW) 2022 Planning Group

Date: Friday 3rd December 2021
Time: 10.00am - 11.45am
Mode: 'Zoom' Video Conference
Minute Taker: Colin Fowler

Present:

Lise Alford - 3Ts
Paul Anderson - Forever Fathers
Alison Balfe - Pieta
Lorcan Brennan - Men's Development Network (MDN)
Emmett Breslin - Western Health and Social Care Trust (WHSCT)
Clare Deasy - Health Service Executive (HSE)
Suzanne Dowd - Irish Cancer Society
Anne Farrell - CIE
Colin Fowler - Men's Health Forum in Ireland (MHFI)
Brien Frazer - South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust (SEHSCT)
Robert Glusek - Sure Start South Armagh
Caroline Hughes - Action Cancer
Ellen Jennings - Bodywhys
Mark Kelly - Dudes and Dogs
Kathryn Meade - National Screening Service
Barry Murphy - Bodywhys
Finian Murray - Health Service Executive (HSE)
Deirdre Ní Mhordia - Migraine Association of Ireland
Kevin O'Driscoll - National Youth Council of Ireland (NYCI)
Selena Ramsey - Northern Health and Social Care Trust (NHSCT)
John (JT) Treanor - Irish Heart Foundation (IHF)
Bill Vaughan - Mental Health Ireland

Apologies:

Julie Aiken - Samaritans Ireland
Kathrina Bentley - Men's Aid Ireland
Kiera Brett - Healthy Fingal
Louise Burke - Sport Ireland
Michael Collins - Pavee Point
Lorraine Conneely - Irish Men's Sheds Association (IMSA)
Anne Corcoran - Samaritans Ireland
Jim Curran - Irish Pharmacy Union (IPU)
Carrie Davenport - Shoot Positive
Paula Devine - ARK
Brian Doyle - Dublin Fire Brigade
Ann-Marie Flanagan - Clanrye Group
Frances Haughey - Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon Borough Council
Donnacha Gallagher - HSE
Stephen Lee - Arthritis Ireland
Lianne McAree Murphy - Irish Men's Sheds Association (IMSA)
Michael McKenna - YouthAction NI Work with Young Men Team
Eunan McKinney - Alcohol Action Ireland
Bróna Mooney - School of Nursing, NUI Galway

Ailsa Spindler - Gay Project
Shauna O'Connor - See Change / Green Ribbon
Kevin O'Hagan - Irish Cancer Society (ICS)
Roisin O'Hara - National Screening Service
Paul O'Kane - Belfast Health and Social Care Trust (BHSCT)
Padraig O'Neill - Pieta
Aoife O'Reilly - safefood
Tracey Powell - Southern Health and Social Care Trust (SHSCT)
Linda Sankey - Get Ireland Walking
Sandra Semple - Western Health and Social Care Trust (WHSCT)

AGENDA ITEMS ...

1. Welcome and Overview

Colin welcomed everyone to the meeting (especially the large number of 'new faces') and gave a brief overview of the practicalities of the session.

In normal circumstances, the first meeting of the all-island Planning Group for Men's Health Week (MHW) would take place face-to-face, with plenty of opportunities for: chatting to each other informally over a cup of tea and lunch; building useful contacts and relationships; and teasing out issues in depth. However, the fluctuating COVID situation has meant that we have to rely (at least in the short-term) on 'Zoom' to build the programme and maintain relationships from a distance. Despite this, a huge amount of interest has been shown in planning Men's Health Week for the coming year.

Apologies were tendered from a broad range of organisations who were unable to make today's date, as well as from others who have committed to contributing remotely via email and telephone follow-up calls, but who can't attend future gatherings. Unfortunately, though, the COVID pandemic has meant that many of the regular contributors to the planning process have now either lost their jobs or decided to use this watershed time to move on to something new.

The meeting was reminded that membership of the Planning Group is open to anyone who wishes to contribute, and that the wide reaching partnership approach to planning MHW adopted in recent years has proved to be very beneficial. It is based upon the premise that many heads generate better outcomes than few. Everyone is welcome to invite other organisations to attend future meetings and/or to input electronically.

Colin highlighted that the purpose of today's meeting was to: get to know each other; gain a shared understanding of what MHW is; reaffirm the core value base of the week; reflect upon any learning from previous MHWs; and explore possibilities for the MHW 2022 theme.

2. Round of Introductions

Lorcan invited everyone to introduce themselves - by way of helping to get to know each other and to understand the work that each person is involved in. Individuals were asked to:

- Give their name.
- Say which organisation they represent and what it does.
- Briefly outline their interest in men's work.

3. Overview of MHW

Finian gave a short piece of background on what MHW is and how it has developed over time (see: www.mhfi.org/mhw/about-mhw.html).

MHW always begins on the Monday before Father's Day and ends on Father's Day itself. During 2022 it will run from Monday 13th until Sunday 19^h June. It is celebrated in most European countries, as well as in the USA, Australia, New Zealand, Canada and a number of other places worldwide.

The development timeline was ...

- 1994: A MHW Bill (for the USA) was passed by Congress and signed into law by President Clinton.
- 2002: At the Second World Congress on Men's Health (Vienna, Austria), representatives agreed to work together to launch International Men's Health Week.
- 2002 onwards: Individual groups throughout Ireland begin to organise local activities to mark this week.
- 2005: MHW is first celebrated in Ireland on an all-island basis (when the Men's Health Forum in Ireland - MHFI - took on the coordinating role).

Each year, MHW seeks to ...

- Heighten awareness of preventable health problems for males of all ages.
- Support men and boys to engage in healthier lifestyle choices / activities.
- Encourage the early detection and treatment of health difficulties in males.

However, all initiatives which celebrate MHW and highlight men's health and wellbeing needs (in whatever form) are encouraged.

The themes in previous years were:

- 2005 - Obesity
- 2006 - Mental Wellbeing
- 2007 - Long-term Conditions
- 2008 - Workplace Health
- 2009 - Access to Services
- 2010 - Physical Activity
- 2011 - These are Challenging Times. It's No Joke. Let's Talk.
- 2012 - What's Your First Instinct ... Fight? Flight? Find Out?
- 2013 - Action Men: Turning Words into Actions
- 2014 - Challenges, Choices and Celebrations: What's Your Aim?
- 2015 - Creating Culture Change - it's time for a new script
- 2016 - Men United: for Health and Wellbeing
- 2017 - It's All About HIM - how are you doing?
- 2018 - One Small Step for Man. One Giant Leap for Men's Health.
- 2019 - Men's Health Matters: Make the Time. Take the Time.
- 2020 - Restoring the Balance - be part of the solution
- 2021 - Making the Connections: Check In. Check Up. Check It Out.

During this time, activities have included, for example, national awareness campaigns, conferences, health screening opportunities, dissemination of booklets and posters, widespread media coverage, health-focused competitions, creation of online resources, and the development of a men's fitness programme.

4. Value Base Underpinning MHW

During the planning process for previous Men's Health Weeks, considerable discussion took place as to what the value base underpinning the week should include. Lorcan gave a brief overview of the agreements that were made, referencing the paper on these which was circulated before today's meeting:

- Health and wellbeing is about much more than physical health problems and/or treating illness. It is a holistic vision-led concept.
- It is important to focus on the positive aspects of men's lives, and to avoid the usual caricatures of unresponsive men who don't care about their health. Such deficit-based approaches often portray men as a problem to be solved, rather than an asset to themselves and everyone around them.
- Men can - to a degree - take responsibility for and influence some aspects of their health. However, their health and wellbeing is not only about what they do or how they act as individuals. It is also often affected by the environment in which they live, the jobs that they carry out, the pressures that they face in a world which emphasises gendered roles, the way that services engage with them ... These social determinants are very powerful influencers of men's health and wellbeing.
- We need to be careful not to blame men for their own poor health or to focus solely upon their personal shortcomings. The key messages for MHW must also recognise the responsibilities of everyone who can have an impact on the health of men and boys, and highlight the breadth of organisational, political, structural, environmental, cultural, service provision, individual choice ... factors that can be influential.
- Where possible, we should use positive terms / phrases such as: *listening to men, hearing men's voices, responding to need, creating opportunities, offering support, providing encouragement, seeking change, promoting positive action, respecting men's lives, self / organisational reflection and introspection, planning for the future, learning from men's experience, overcoming barriers, expanding options, promoting equality, offering choices, making the connections, working together, having new conversations, diverse needs, challenging the myths, partnership and cooperation ...*
- While it is often easier to get media and public attention for a specific illness or negative issue (e.g. aggressive cancers or suicide or domestic violence) rather than a 'good news' story, MHW should seek to promote men's needs and issues in a positive light. This will, probably, mean that we will miss the high profile shock-horror media coverage that is generated by 'Men in Crisis' or 'Men Behaving Badly' headlines.
- In Ireland, we tend to think of a 'real man' as being one single model, and his characteristics are often perceived as: white, heterosexual, able-bodied, physically fit, muscular / large body frame, fairly young, into sport, can handle himself ... Whenever possible, MHW imagery and text needs to challenge this stereotype and to reflect the diversity of men's lives and personal traits.
- Hearing about / exposure to the real life experiences of local men can help to bring MHW to life.

Lorcan proposed that we should, once again, adopt this approach for MHW 2022 - as these messages set the right tone for the week. This was agreed by all present. However, everyone was asked to have another read of the Value Base paper and to send any feedback or suggestions to Colin as soon as possible.

5. Learning from Previous Years

Finian asked the meeting if there was anything from Men's Health Week 2021 - or previous MHWs - which we should continue, change, avoid or learn from. Comments included ...

- COVID has dominated all of our lives for a long time now, but we need to move on. There is 'COVID burnout / fatigue', as well as a sense of powerlessness - as a lot of what happens is beyond our control. Therefore, while acknowledging that it still influences many aspects of our lives, MHW 2022 should not be too COVID-centric.
- The call to action for MHW has to: be realistic; focus upon the things that men can have some control over; empower men; encourage males to become the directors of their own health.
- Men's resilience needs to be at the heart of all MHW discussions.
- It's important that MHW is aimed at 'lay people', rather than solely engaging service providers. Thus, it has to be 'grounded'.
- Agreeing a theme as early as possible helps to get it onto the agenda of the Health Trusts and statutory bodies.
- Many groups have shown that where there is a will, there is a way. Despite the limitations upon social gatherings, some organisations explored creative ways to bring men together in the physical world while still being COVID-compliant. Others used innovative online mechanisms to raise awareness and engage new audiences.
- Highlighting all the dimensions of men's health (e.g. physical, mental, emotional, sexual, spiritual, social, relational) is crucial.
- Translating the MHW materials into other languages was well received, and enhanced the sense of the week being for everyone.

6. Theme for MHW 2022

Colin reminded the meeting that MHW ...

- Offers everyone an annual occasion to encourage men and boys to take better care of their health and to seek help or treatment at an early stage.
- Is an ideal opportunity for collective and collaborative action.
- Targets males themselves, policy / decision-makers, service providers, public awareness and preconceptions.
- Focuses upon a specific theme each year - determined by individual countries.

In the early years, the MHW theme in Ireland tended to mirror the theme in other countries. However, from 2011 onwards, there has been a tendency for each country to choose a theme which is most relevant to its own circumstances and needs.

From 2005 - 2010, MHW in Ireland focused upon a specific medical condition each year, and mostly followed the lead of the Men's Health Forum in England and Wales. However, after this, it tended to adopt broad and generic themes which could facilitate 'buy-in' and participation from the widest possible range of organisations and individuals. This was, in large part, due to advice from the ever increasing range of partner organisations who volunteered to be part of the all-island Planning Group from 2010 onwards.

The purpose of the theme / strapline is simply to create a common identity for everyone to rally around. However, it needs to be a broad enough concept for everyone to see that it is relevant to them and their work - and to fit with the MHW value base.

It is also useful to have a call to action (e.g. last year it was '*Check In. Check Up. Check It Out*') which poses a challenge for policy makers, service providers, practitioners and men themselves, and helps to kick-start a wider discussion on improving men's health.

Whatever theme is selected, it needs to be catchy, easy to explain, and easy to express visually.

Meeting participants were randomly allocated to 'Zoom Breakout Rooms', and were asked to brainstorm on possible ideas for MHW 2022. A number of suggestions / considerations were proposed. These included ...

- The negative impact of toxic masculinity upon males, generally, and boys / young men, specifically.
- Men and the environment.
- The importance of fathers as role models for their children.
- The benefits and drawbacks of the current focus upon 'virtual health' rather than real world health check-ups.
- Challenging the myths about men.
- Strengths-based approaches to men's health.
- What good are men? ... a mind-map of positive words / positive masculinity.
- Hidden illnesses.
- Loneliness.
- Disability.
- Challenge yourself - give, volunteer, do something for other people.
- Self-care and looking after yourself.
- Being open and having frank conversations (e.g. emotional / sexual / physical health).
- Get out into nature - it's always there.
- Competitiveness.
- Who's your best friend?
- Bullying in the workplace.
- Expressing feelings.
- Go figure it out.

After the meeting, other people - who could not attend the Zoom call - submitted ideas for themes too. Based upon the discussion in the meeting, and the additional suggestions tendered afterwards, a list of possible themes (or calls to action) could include ...

1. **Myth Buster** - challenging the commonly held myths / stereotypes / perceptions about men and boys, helping to put the record straight, as well as focusing upon positive masculinity.
2. **The Invisible Man** - shining a light into little known / talked about aspects of men's lives, the issues facing them, and their needs.
3. **What Good Are Men?** - using a strengths-based approach to highlight and celebrate the positive contributions that men and boys make to the world, as well as their own health.
4. **No Man Is An Island** - raising awareness of the need for connectedness and reducing social isolation and loneliness.
5. **Be Your Own Best Friend** - focus upon self-care / compassion, looking after yourself, and identifying the people / services who can support this.

6. **Frank Conversations** - being open to talking about difficult health matters (with a play on the name Frank).
7. **Give It Up** - double play on the idea of giving-up unhelpful health behaviours, but also volunteering time / energy / skills / enthusiasm to good causes and community action.
8. **Express Yourself** - men's frustrations, joys and needs, as well as male creativity.
9. **Problem Solvers** - concentrate upon the positive ability of many men to overcome difficult circumstances in creative ways.
10. **Challenges and Choices** - use the 10 practical challenges in the Men's Health Week Man Manual (<https://www.mhfi.org/challenges2021.pdf>) as the basis of MHW 2022.
11. **Move On Up** - focus upon physical activity to improve mental health.
12. **Blue is for [Boys] Everyone** - emphasise the need to move away from traditional stereotypes and associations; play upon the mental health associations with the word 'blue'; and highlight the need for improving male mental health.

7. Next Meeting

The next meeting of the Planning Group will be held via Zoom on Wednesday 19th January 2022. It will begin at 10.00am.