
First Meeting of the Men's Health Week (MHW) 2021 Planning Group

Date: Friday 8th January 2021
Time: 10.30am - Noon
Mode: 'Zoom' Video Conference
Minute Taker: Colin Fowler

Present:

Clare Austick - Union of Students in Ireland [Welfare]
Lorcan Brennan - Men's Development Network (MDN)
Bernie Carter - Marie Keating Foundation
Annie Clarke - Southern Health and Social Care Trust (SHSCT)
Anne Corcoran - Samaritans Ireland
Jim Curran - Irish Pharmacy Union (IPU)
Sharon Daly - CIE Group
Marese Damery - Irish Heart Foundation (IHF)
Alison Doake - South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust (SEHSCT)
Anne Farrell - CIE Group
Colin Fowler - Men's Health Forum in Ireland (MHFI)
Garry Glennon - Letterkenny Youth and Family Service
Robert Glusek - Sure Start South Armagh
Lisa Harold - National Youth Council of Ireland (NYCI)
Lianne McAree Murphy - Irish Men's Sheds Association (IMSA)
Michael McKenna - YouthAction NI Work with Young Men Team
Michael McKeon - Dublin City University (DCU) School of Nursing
Eunan McKinney - Alcohol Action Ireland
Bróna Mooney - School of Nursing, NUI Galway
Marcos Morandeira - Balbriggan Community Centre
Finian Murray - Health Service Executive (HSE) Health Promotion and Improvement
Shauna O'Connor - See Change / Green Ribbon
Michael O'Donnell - Gay Project
Kevin O'Hagan - Irish Cancer Society (ICS)
Andy O'Hara - Traveller Health Unit
Roisin O'Hara - National Screening Service
Tadhg O'Leary - Sport Ireland
Gillian Prue - Queen's University Belfast (QUB) School of Nursing
Kerrie Simms - Lisburn and Castlereagh City Council
Nigel Tate - Flowerhill Counselling and Psychotherapy Services
Gary Tobin - Union of Students in Ireland [Border, Midlands and Western Region]
Bill Vaughan - Mental Health Ireland

Apologies:

Julie Aiken - Samaritans Ireland
Lise Alford - 3Ts
Carrie Davenport - Shoot Positive
Paula Devine - ARK
Helen Forristal - Marie Keating Foundation
Paddy Hannigan - Donegal Education and Training Board
Frances Haughey - Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon Borough Council
Marita Hennessy - INFANT Centre, University College Cork
Caroline Hughes - Action Cancer

Peter Jones - Waterford Sports Partnership
Jason King - Get Ireland Walking
Michael Lynch - Men's Action Network
Emma McCrudden - Northern Ireland Chest, Heart & Stroke (NICHs)
Andrea McDermott - Men's Aid Ireland
Michael McTigue - Counsellor
Shane O'Donnell - Marie Curie Early Years Researcher
Paul O'Kane - Belfast Health and Social Care Trust (BHSCT)
Tracey Powell - Southern Health and Social Care Trust (SHSCT)
William Purcell - Primal Paddy
Colin Regan - Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA)
Sandra Semple - Western Health and Social Care Trust (WHSCT)
Peter Shaw - Community Sports Network
Pamela Smyth - South Eastern Health and Social Care Trust Carers Support

AGENDA ITEMS ...

1. Welcome and Overview

Colin welcomed everyone to the meeting (especially the '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 always take place face-to-face, with plenty of opportunities for: chatting to each other informally over a cup of tea or lunch; building useful contacts and relationships; teasing out issues in depth. However, the ongoing COVID situation has now meant that we have all become 'Zoom-junkies' - as we try to build programmes and maintain relationships from a distance. Yet despite this context, it was acknowledged that it is uplifting to see the fantastic amount of interest shown in planning Men's Health Week again this 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, the COVID pandemic has meant that many of the regular contributors to the planning process have been redeployed at work, been furloughed or, worse still, lost their jobs.

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 a possible theme for MHW 2021.

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

Colin 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 2021 it will run from Monday 14th until Sunday 20th 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

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 2021 - as these messages set the right tone for the week. Everyone was asked to read the Value Base paper and to send any feedback or suggestions to Colin as soon as possible.

5. Learning from Previous Years

Michael (McKeon) asked the meeting if there was anything from Men's Health Week 2020 - or previous MHWs - which we should continue, change, avoid or learn from. Comments included ...

- MHW offers an ideal time to reflect upon and challenge the commonly held stereotypes about masculinity.
- It's important for men to feel that they are offering something positive and practical to others, rather than simply being the recipients of other people's programmes.
- When we can create conditions, wherein men feel comfortable providing support and help to their peers, this can have powerful outcomes.
- Early planning is crucial - as is having the theme agreed early on.
- MHW 2020 had to rely heavily upon online technologies. While this was not ideal - and there were many barriers around access to hardware / infrastructure and having the skills to fully utilise it - it also created new opportunities for some people. Thus, while in-person interactions might be the gold standard, technology could offer additional value and possibilities this coming year.
- It is important for the week to showcase all the dimensions of men's health e.g. physical, mental, emotional, sexual, spiritual, social, relational ...
- Every person / organisation has to be able to identify with, and 'see themselves' in, the theme for MHW. Thus, whatever theme is agreed, it needs to be broad enough to be of relevance to a very diverse audience.
- The daily themes / social media campaign was a positive aspect of MHW 2020.
- It would be useful to consider having a high profile Ambassador(s) for the week. However, there is also a need for 'everyday heroes' / men's health champions among specific local population groups too.

6. Theme for MHW 2021

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.

It is also useful to have a call to action (e.g. last year it was *'be part of the solution'*) 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.

Michael (McKeon) invited meeting participants to suggest themes which we might like to consider for 2021. Lise Alford from 3Ts, was unable to attend today's meeting, but had submitted a proposal to Colin. This focused upon: 'Check In. Check Up. Check It Out.'

This idea captured the imagination of meeting participants, and proved to be universally attractive to everyone. Discussion ensued as to how this concept might be tailored to suit MHW 2021 ...

- It was agreed that 2020 was a remarkable and challenging year for many people, and that 2021 is shaping-up to be similar. While we need to reflect upon this, we also need to look forward rather than backward, and to acknowledge / support the resilience of people on the island of Ireland.
- One of the key outcomes of the pandemic (caused by social distancing and isolating) has been that many people have lost their sense of connectedness - to their family, friends, work colleagues, communities, sports clubs, Men's Sheds, GP Practice ... and, indeed, their sense of self in the world. Reflecting on, and rebuilding these connections, is crucial for society as we move forward.
- For the past year, everyone has been influenced by the reactionary, uncertain, chaotic and, often, frantic times that we live in. From a mental health point of view, there is a need to slow down, take stock, and plan positively and proactively for a different future.
- In such an uncertain world - dominated by fire-fighting all things COVID - health promotion messages and activities have taken second place or, sometimes, no place at all. In some cases, this was also true of treatments for existing medical conditions - as some people didn't come forward for their regular regime, or their treatments were delayed / cancelled.
- Limitations upon routine, support services, freedom of movement, food diversity etc., plus poorer personal lifestyle behaviours during COVID, has exacerbated this issue.
- As we move forward, there is a need to promote a number of core principles e.g. belief in the ability to cope; the importance of connecting with sources of support; having the opportunity to talk about what we've been going through; being helpful to others; activating positive emotions; cultivating an attitude of survivorship; seeking meaning in what has happened ...
- If we adopt the proposed theme ('Check In. Check Up. Check It Out.') we could address many of these issues, for example:

- Check in with yourself to see how you are coping / feeling, and to identify any health worries that you might have.
 - Check up on your family, friends, neighbours, colleagues to see how they're doing and offer support.
 - Check it out and seek information / help if there's anything which needs attention.
- It was suggested that the full title for MHW 2021 could be:
Make the Connections
- Check In. Check Up. Check It Out.
 - 'Check In. Check Up. Check It Out' could, therefore, be a call to action to men and service providers, and offer focus, encouragement and direction to take action.

7. Practical Suggestions

A number of suggestions / considerations were proposed. These included ...

- Having a degree of ambiguity in the theme could help us by creating a conversation e.g. what does 'check it out' mean in reality?
- There is a need to offer realistic and practical suggestions / signposting for how to overcome any barriers.
- To give men / service providers 'a voice', we could consider promoting 'Soap Box' events, wherein individuals or organisations are asked to say their piece about why they feel making the connections and checking in, checking up and checking it out is important to them.
- It might be useful to consider running one or more virtual 'Connect Cafés' - similar to the model used by Mental Health Ireland.
- We could issue a challenge to men / groups e.g. contact five men and 'Check In. Check Up. Check It Out'.
- Connections could be established by running an online comedy session, and by using humour in the promotion and marketing of the week. The Marie Keating Foundation found that this was a very useful strategy during their 'Stand Up for Your Prostate' campaign last year.
- It would be important to have a number of 'Ambassadors' for the week - some of whom are nationally recognised, and others who are locally known / respected. The Green Ribbon campaign has a number of males in this role who might offer their services (as in previous MHWs). Pavee Point has also successfully invited Traveller men to make videos on their personal experiences and to act as role models for other Travellers.
- It was suggested that Dermot Whelan (Today FM presenter, comedian and meditation advocate) might be a good person to approach about being a public face for MHW and/or an Ambassador. If anyone has a means to contact him, they are asked to get in touch with Colin.

- Last year, MHW in Ireland reached the prestigious heights of being a top trending topic on social media in both Ireland (for the whole month) and, for a much shorter period of time, worldwide. There was also extensive and detailed coverage by local radio stations and daily / weekly newspapers. However, there was much less coverage on TV and national radio programming. Two suggestions were made:
 1. We try to find a budget to engage a PR company to drive MHW in the media. This might be impossible given the financial pot available, but everyone was asked to submit suggestions for companies that they have worked with who are reliable, produce results and are cheap!
 2. We seek to identify a third level Public Relations student(s) who would be willing to coordinate MHW media relations on a pro bono basis as a course project. Again, everyone was asked to submit suggestions to Colin.

- All members of the Planning Group are encouraged to do their own local Press Releases during MHW 2021 - as regional radio / newspapers want a local angle to report on, and these outlets tend to give the most detailed coverage to the week.

8. Any Other Business

8.1 In December 2020, the Men's Health Forum in Ireland (MHFI) launched two statistical reports on men's health in Ireland. This 'Men's Health in Numbers' initiative comprises:

- a) A comprehensive Trends Report that describes, in detail, changes in significant markers of men's health on the island of Ireland in the last twenty years - <https://www.mhfi.org/MensHealthInNumbers1.pdf>
- b) An infographically-driven Men's Health Report Card that provides a lay person's synopsis of contemporary key men's health statistics in the Republic of Ireland - <https://www.mhfi.org/MensHealthInNumbers2.pdf>

Both of these will be useful to anyone who wants up-to-date evidence upon which to base future campaigns, programmes or funding applications.

8.2 It was agreed that Colin should compile and circulate a list of email contact details for all participants at today's meeting - so that people can forge individual relationships between meetings. This list will be sent out with these minutes.

8.3 Colin was asked to take a 'screen shot' of as many of the participants at today's meeting as possible, and to circulate it immediately - to be used by individual groups on their social media outlets.

9. Next Meeting

The next meeting of the Planning Group will be held via Zoom on Friday 29th January 2021. It will begin at 10.30am.