

[Sample letter]

[Insert your own address]

Ms Mary Harney, T.D.
Minister for Health and Children
Department of Health and Children
Hawkins House
Hawkins Street
Dublin 2

[Insert date]

Dear Minister,

I am writing to you to express my concern over the provisions for mental health services in Budget 2009. In light of the figures announced by you for mental health services in last week's Budget, I want to express my continued concern and regret with the ongoing failure of your Department to meet the funding commitments made in *A Vision for Change (AVFC)*. Recommendation 17.1 of this documents states that "substantial extra funding is required to finance this policy". Your Department has failed to account for the €25 million allocated for mental health services in Budget 2006 and 2007 while the current Budget, as with Budget 2008, once more abandons the needs of service users by allocating no dedicated development funding to the sector whatsoever.

While I appreciate the seriousness of the current economic climate I do not believe that vulnerable groups should disproportionately bear the burden of this. A recent Mental Health Commission report, *The Economics of Mental Health Care in Ireland*, estimated that poor mental health costs the country €3 billion each year. That is 2% of GNP. I think that increased spending on adequate mental health services represents a more sensible economic policy. As spending on mental health has fallen by 6% over the past 20 years to a figure of 7% of overall health expenditure, this Government has continually failed in its duties to ensure the right of all people to the highest attainable standards of mental health.

I also wish to take this opportunity to raise concerns with you about the over-reliance on medication that exists in the mental health services and particularly the adverse side effects of pharmaceuticals. *AVFC* cited the need for high quality research into mental health services as being crucial to developing good policy. However there was an acknowledgement that mental health research received insufficient funding from the Health Research Board. Concerns were expressed that this shortfall in funding was being met, in part, by drugs companies and that this conflict of interests may lead to an increasing focus on a narrow biological/medical approach to mental health problems and treatments. The need to avoid this conflict of interest and the need for the better development of mental health policy generally resulted in

Recommendation 19.11 which states that “dedicated funding should be provided by the government for mental health service research”. In particular this research should contribute to establishing the effectiveness of pharmacological, psychological and psychosocial interventions in the settings where these treatments will be delivered and not solely in the context of laboratory drug trials.

In 2007 the Joint Committee of Health and Children published a report by the sub-Committee on the Adverse Side Effect of Pharmaceuticals. The report concluded that, while pharmaceuticals bring benefits and the sub-Committee was not hostile to drug therapy, mental health services in Ireland were characterised by an excessive reliance on drug intervention to the neglect of alternative forms of therapy with attendant rates of adverse drug reactions. The report issued a series of recommendations for best practice in the areas of regulation of the drug industry, professional responsibilities, health service systems and public awareness. The Committee urged that, “given the importance of the issues raised in this report...immediate action is taken to implement the recommendations contained”.

I would be grateful for an answer to the following questions:

- Will the Government allocate the promised €25 million for mental health services in order to achieve the goals of *AVFC* **and** put in place adequate mechanisms to ensure that it is spent accountably?
- What steps have been taken by the government to implement Recommendation 19.11 of *AVFC*?
- What actions have been taken by the Government on the Recommendations issued by the sub-Committee on the Adverse Side Effects of Pharmaceuticals?

The 2009 budget was a clear statement that the Government still does not consider mental health services as a priority issue. In writing this letter I want to make clear that, as a voter, mental health issues are a priority to me; as a supporter of human rights, mental health issues are a priority to me. I am calling on the Government to **act immediately** on the issues raised here.

I look forward to hearing from you,

Yours sincerely,

[Your name here]