

**From the Permanent Secretary  
and HSC Chief Executive**



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Dear Sara

Thank you for your letter dated 13 November 2020, inviting me to attend a joint meeting with the Council's People and Communities Committee and the Belfast Youth Forum, the Permanent Secretary of Department of Education, and representatives from the Public Health Agency, to discuss the 'Any Use?' Relationship and Sexual Education Campaign report and 'Elephant in the Room' mental health campaign.

As you may already be aware, I hosted a joint meeting with the Permanent Secretary of Department of Education, officials from the Public Health Agency (PHA) and members of Belfast Youth Forum on 1 August 2019 to discuss proposals stemming from the Elephant in the Room Report on young people's mental health. This was a very useful meeting to understand the issues being raised.

Following on from this meeting, the Northern Ireland Youth Forum gave a presentation on the Elephant in the Room campaign at the Executive Group on Mental Well-being, Emotional Resilience and Suicide Prevention meeting held on 29 July 2020 and that Ministers discussed the report and the recommendations contained within it. I understand that Ministers were very impressed with the work of all of the young people involved and also that they agreed, where possible, to support implementation of the recommendations made in the report.

There is much work being done within both Health and Education independently and collaboratively to challenge the culture of silence and negative stigma around mental health, developing new and positive language for mental health, and creating digital solutions to receive mental health information and support. Also, creating a curriculum programme for schools and colleges on mental health and wellbeing which, whilst led by Education, we in Health are keen to assist.

The PHA have been engaged with young people through the Facilitating Life and Resilience Education (FLARE) project. The young people involved identified similar issues to those raised in the *Elephant in the Room* Report including having a safe place to talk,

raising awareness of support services in other areas and increasing knowledge of mental illness and health issues and self-care.

FLARE's main aim is to support young people who are struggling with mental ill health, suicide ideation or previous suicide attempts. Young people are referred from various sources including social services, youth service, self-referral, schools, parents, guardians, CAMHS, PSNI, community groups.

Programme outcomes for young people include increased self-awareness and ability to manage emotions; increased understanding of the reason behind negative and suicidal thoughts; increased resilience and positive sense of wellbeing; improved interpersonal skills and sense of purpose.

I also note that at the Executive Group meeting on 29 July, the Minister for Communities asked for a meeting to be arranged with the Northern Ireland Youth Forum and that it was suggested that the FLARE project should also be invited to participate given their similar interests.

I am also aware that the Youth Forum is involved in the PHA work on Young People's Covid messaging and I have been advised that PHA are open to further engagement with the forum around mental health. I understand that Olive Macleod, Interim Chief Executive and David Tumilty, BCC Lead from PHA have agreed to participate in the proposed meeting.

My Department does not directly commission Relationship and Sexual Education (RSE). It may be more appropriate for you to discuss this with the Public Health Agency, who currently commission RSE in two ways: training of teachers to deliver RSE; and funding of voluntary sector providers to deliver RSE in community settings.

Given that my Department has already extensively engaged with the Northern Ireland Youth Forum on these matters and also the priority being given by the Department to a number of urgent health issues, including the Coronavirus response we are not in a position to accept your kind invitation at this time. Thank you again for your interest in this area and I trust this provides a further update on the issues raised.

Yours sincerely



**RICHARD PENGELLY**  
**ACCOUNTING OFFICER**