

Mental Health, Sensory Loss and Human Rights

– Summary of The Transition Report on Sensory Literate Services

Introduction

deafscotland, Deafblind Scotland, RNID, Sight Scotland and the ALLIANCE agreed in January 2021 to co-produce this report to inform and change decision making. Through our practice and experience, we recognise sensory poverty is amplified by policy, funding and service decisions which cause poor mental health and stops people accessing support. This is a human rights issue. Scotland needs universal, sensory literate services to prevent as well as address the high prevalence of poor mental health in people with sensory loss.

COVID-19

The personal isolation caused by communication exclusion is a cause of poor mental health which can be significant, traumatic and life changing. Due to COVID-19, more people experienced communication poverty but for the 1,310,533 people with sensory loss in Scotland, it is an everyday experience. The response to COVID-19 made their lives worse: increasing existing poverty, providing inaccessible services and the disruption of vital health, social care and other support services. Historically, organisational culture, service practice and funding priorities have overlooked sensory loss but the appetite to 'Build Back Better through a Resilient Recovery', creates opportunities for us to seize.

Mental Health

Mental health problems can affect anyone. Environmental factors such as poverty, adverse childhood experiences, trauma, toxic relationships, social isolation and, too often, disability are key predictors of mental ill health. Our stakeholders are some of the most vulnerable and high-risk groups in our society due to the intersectionality of all these factors.

Human Rights

Everyone has the potential to communicate but whether they can often depends on awareness as well as access to the services and funding they need to achieve their communication potential. Communication is a human right set out in the European Convention on Human Rights and in numerous UN Treaties. It is a gateway to all rights such as respect for family life, to participate in society and to share ideas and opinions. For duty bearers the solution is established - mainstream Inclusive Communication as a continuous, enabling and empowering process.

Transitions

Sensory loss is common, not exceptional, yet its centrality in policy is consistently overlooked. In this period of policy transition, sensory loss needs to be mainstreamed in designing how Scotland's serves people better. The opportunities to reform and to build back better come from: the Independent Review of Adult Social Care in Scotland, of February 2021; the Scottish Government's COVID-19 mental health strategy published in November 2020¹; and the report of the 'Taskforce on Human Rights Leadership' which is expected in March 2021. Our full report invites consideration from government, public authorities and trade unions which have an important role to play in delivering the pace and detail of the change required. Please support our eight asks!

Recommendations

1. 'Universal design', should be adopted to provide 'Sensory Literate Services', which are usable by all people, to the greatest extent possible, without the need for adaptation or specialised design.'
2. Scotland needs better oversight and monitoring of human rights duties and should invest in their delivery.
3. The Gaelic Language (Scotland) Act 2005 brings benefits of having a Board to oversee delivery, a 'Language Plan' to drive change across sectors and is underpinned by finance to ensure impact. It may be useful to replicate this model for mainstreaming Inclusive Communication and to deliver 'Communication For All'.
4. "Mental Health - Scotland's Transition and Recovery" plan, needs to include a specific and cross sector workstream to deliver actions and outcomes for people with sensory loss.
5. The Scottish Government should embark on training for all staff in publicly funded services so that services are 'sensory just'.
6. All future policies and services should be subject to a Human Rights Based Approach so that the outcomes are sensory just.
7. Consideration should be given to positively promoting sensory loss as a 'linguistic minority', in line with the Council of Europe Treaty.
8. Set up a joint working group to progress recommendations - done and led by the five organisations who have authored this report.

Read the full report at partners' websites.



¹ [Coronavirus \(COVID-19\): mental health - transition and recovery plan - gov.scot \(www.gov.scot\)](https://www.gov.scot/publications/coronavirus-mental-health-transition-and-recovery-plan/pages/1-introduction-and-contents.aspx)