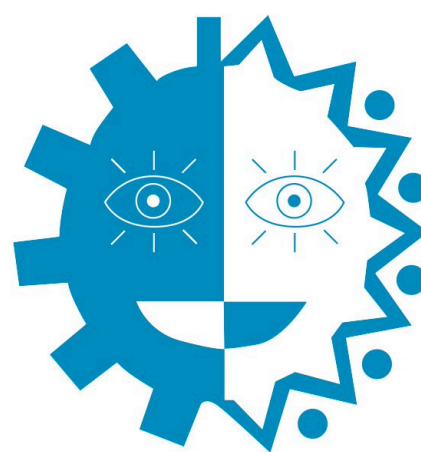


What does a Community Development & Rights Based Response to Mental Health and Poverty Look Like?

Edel Quinn, Joanne Vance, Rachel Doyle and Eleanor McKenna

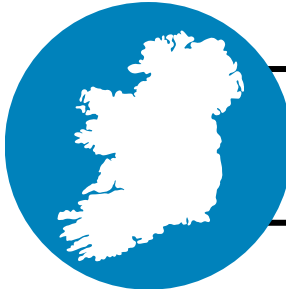


Community Development & Health Network



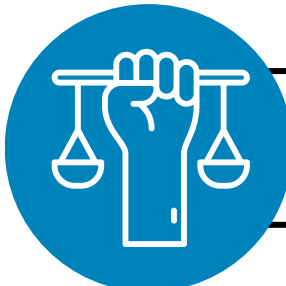
Email: eleanormckenna@cdhn.org

Background



Mental Health across the Island of Ireland

- Impact of COVID-19:** The pandemic exacerbated mental health issues, especially among vulnerable groups such as older people, children, people with disabilities etc. (1)
- Mental Ill-health Rates:** High prevalence of mental health disorders among adults and children in both Northern Ireland and Ireland, with rising suicide rates (2)
- Government Investment:** Chronic underfunding in mental health services, leading to inadequate access and support (3)
- Poverty and Mental Health:** Strong link between poverty and mental health issues, with high poverty rates contributing to mental distress (4)
- Health Care Structures:** Differences between the healthcare systems in Northern Ireland and Ireland, both struggling with accessibility and quality of care (3)



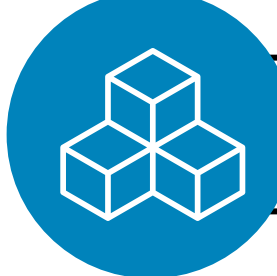
Community Development and a Rights-based Approach to Mental Health

Collective action to transform mental health and social justice from the ground up. Adoption of trauma-informed, strength-based, and recovery-oriented approaches (5).



An International Paradigm Shift in Mental Health Care

- Human Rights and Social Determinants:** Emphasis on a human rights-based approach to mental health, addressing social determinants and structural inequalities (6)
- Mental Health Reform:** Shift from a biomedical model to a social model, focusing on community-based, person-centered, and recovery-oriented approaches (7)



The Structural Determinants of Health and Inequality

The Impact of Social Inequality on Health Outcomes: People and communities who have limited access to quality housing, education and job opportunities have a higher risk of illness and death. These avoidable, unjust and preventable differences in health between communities are not random – they are the result of how our society is structured and how society allocates resources and opportunities; reinforced by political choices and leadership (8)

Aim

To explore what a **community development and rights-based response to mental health and poverty** looks like through **collective learning** and **shared experience** across the island of Ireland.



Who is carrying this out?

Voice Equality Experience Power (VEEP) is a community mental health and poverty platform for community and voluntary workers and organisations across the island of Ireland. It promotes **community-led, rights-based, and preventative** approaches to health, grounded in **tackling the root causes of poverty and inequality**.



Method

Three methods combined theory, real-world input, and professional benchmarks to build a comprehensive understanding of effective community development in the context of mental health.



Baseline Scoping Research (Nov-Dec 2024)

- Incorporated international and national best practices
- Referenced key frameworks such as the UN PANEL Principles for a human rights-based approach to mental health



Case Study Contributions

- Presentations from six community practitioners
- Shared at the VEEP Inaugural Seminar (Sept 2024) and Northwest Knowledge Exchange Workshop (April 2025)
- Identified “key ingredients” for successful community development approaches to mental health



Standards Comparison

- Benchmarked against:
- All-Ireland Community Work Standards (2016)
 - UK Community Development National Occupational Standards (2023)

Results so far: Key ingredients of Effective Community approaches to working with Mental Health



Human Rights Approach

A rights-based approach promotes autonomy, respect, and non-discrimination. It challenges stigma and systemic inequality by encouraging people to speak openly about their experiences and by creating community-driven campaigns that promote inclusion, social justice and healing.



Trauma-Informed Community Development

Mental health challenges are often rooted in trauma and inequality. A trauma-informed approach creates safe, welcoming spaces that support healing. It recognises trauma as both an individual and societal issue and promotes practices that avoid re-traumatisation and celebrate diversity.



Collaboration & Consensus Building

Communities are powerful drivers of change. Collective action challenges harmful narratives, supports peer-led initiatives, and influences broader policy. Empowering communities through education and solidarity builds long-term resilience and justice.



Collective Care

Sustainable change requires caring for community workers and volunteers. Collective care addresses burnout and fosters a culture of mutual support, ensuring stronger and more resilient communities.



Meaningful Participation & Peer Leadership

Those with lived experience must be central to shaping services and policy. Peer-led, peer-run models foster empowerment, build community, and ensure decisions reflect real needs. Participation must be inclusive, equitable, and remove barriers to involvement at every level.



Collaboration & Consensus Building

Tackling complex issues like poverty and mental health requires cross-sector collaboration. Consensus-building ensures all voices are heard and promotes shared responsibility in decision-making. Long-term partnerships and inclusive governance structures are key.



Co-Production

Co-production means sharing power equally between communities and professionals. It ensures policies and services are co-designed, co-delivered, and co-owned; leading to more effective and inclusive outcomes.

Conclusion

VEEP’s work is building shared momentum for a transformative, rights-based approach to mental health that is community-led, preventative in focus, informed by lived experience, and oriented toward systemic change. The research and engagement process supports the development of the VEEP initiative and aims to build wider consensus and support among stakeholders. Together, we are working to address the social determinants of mental health and the root causes of poverty and inequality across Ireland.



Acknowledgements

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- The **40 organisations and 130 people** who shared their community knowledge, practice and experience by engaging in this research
- Edel Quinn, Eleanor McKenna and Joanne Vance** (CDHN) for designing and facilitating the north-south policy and practice workshop
- Caoimhe Shields** (Piece by Piece Research Solutions) for preparing this poster

What’s next?

- Collate all findings into a final paper
- Develop a practical toolkit for community practitioners to support them to apply rights-based, community development approaches to mental health and poverty in their own contexts



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