



STRONGER FROM THE START

MANIFESTO 2022



Working together to
promote and **improve**
infant mental health
in **Northern Ireland**



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#StrongerFromTheStart



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WHO WE ARE

The Stronger from the Start Alliance is a collaboration between the Association for Infant Mental Health Northern Ireland (AIMH NI) and organisations from across the community & voluntary sector in Northern Ireland.

Our member agencies are committed to collaborating in the best interests of infants and their families. We are working together to amplify infant mental health in Northern Ireland and to campaign for meaningful change in policy, practice and life experiences.

Stronger From The Start was established in response to the absence of sufficient actions and outcomes relating to infant mental health within the draft Mental Health Strategy for Northern Ireland issued for consultation in 2021.

Many of our member agencies had worked for years alongside Public Health Agency (PHA), Health Trusts and other community and voluntary partners in the development and implementation of the Infant Mental Health Framework for Northern Ireland. We believe that the evidence gathered, the significant progress made and the gaps identified through the PHA-led work should form a central part of a new lifespan approach to mental health and wellbeing.

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We are working together to amplify infant mental health in Northern Ireland and to campaign for meaningful change in policy, practice and life experiences.

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We campaigned for, and welcome the explicit inclusion of infants within the Mental Health Strategy for Northern Ireland 2021-2031, particularly those actions specific to promoting and improving mental health. However, actions and resources beyond those committed to in the Strategy will be required if every infant and family in Northern Ireland are to enjoy the best start in life.

We look forward to working with politicians, civil servants and local leaders and managers to shape and support the implementation of the commitments we believe are required. We will monitor and share the changes made and the impact this has on babies and families.

We will continue to raise political awareness of infant mental health, and campaign for changes to broader policies which have an impact on infant mental health.



WHAT IS INFANT MENTAL HEALTH?

"Infant mental health describes the social and emotional wellbeing and development of children in the earliest years of life. It reflects whether children have the secure, responsive relationships that they need to thrive"

[Parent-Infant Foundation, 2022](#)

- ▶ **Early relationships are fundamental to infant mental health.** Young babies need sensitive, responsive adults to help them to bring difficult emotions under control (for example, through soothing them when they cry). Parents' responses shape how babies experience their emotions and how they learn to regulate and express these emotions.



- ▶ Poverty amplifies the negative effects of all types of stress. This can lead to impaired caregiving and increased use of inconsistent and harsh discipline. **Poverty, the associated parental stress and poor parent-child relationships have a negative impact on the child's future cognitive abilities, behaviour and health.**



- ▶ Although children's futures are not determined by the age of two, **wellbeing in the early years is strongly linked to later outcomes.** Research shows a strong connection between exposure to stress in pregnancy and early life, and later mental ill-health.



- ▶ Through improving infant mental health and strengthening parent-infant relationships, the emotional wellbeing and development of babies' can be protected and promoted. Therefore **we have an opportunity to put children on a positive developmental trajectory**, better able to take advantage of other opportunities that lie ahead.



WHY DOES INFANT MENTAL HEALTH MATTER?

Infant mental health matters now more than ever. By investing in this type of support, we are preparing the future generation.

The case to protect and promote infant mental health is strong. Investment in the earliest years of life is supported by a wealth of research and evidence, and is a **cost-effective way of transforming child and family outcomes**. COVID-19 and its impact on babies and their families has strengthened the case for urgent action.

By working to **#IncludeInfants** in policy, strategy and service delivery we can deliver change to the life chances of our children, and to generations to come.

Infant mental health needs a whole system response, including specialised services for those at most risk. Without offering appropriate support at the earliest opportunity, we risk children experiencing unnecessary suffering and emotional disturbances taking root and escalating into mental health problems.

Babies need action on infant mental health now more than ever. Investing in such support will reap rewards for our families, communities and services in the future.



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Northern Ireland spends a total of £536 million per year on late intervention. This equates to £288 per head, or £1,166 per child.

Late intervention issues are often related and cumulative. This is because children and young people often have multiple issues which reinforce each other.

Poor mental health and poverty are co-morbid with many other late intervention problems. Successful early intervention should tackle the root causes of these issues and consider the connections between the different issues which children and young people face.

Early Intervention Foundation, 2018

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OUR ASKS

We believe there are 4 key areas of focus for the promotion and improvement of infant mental health in Northern Ireland. Three of these are already established within the IMH Framework for Northern Ireland and we echo their importance: Improving Evidence & Policy; Workforce Development; and Service Development. We've added Leadership & Collaboration as an underpinning principle and an area in which we need to see urgent and demonstrable progress.

We're calling on all political parties to join us by signing up to the following priorities:

Leadership & Collaboration

Outcome:

There is a clear commitment to improve infant mental health. This is supported by investment and action in all relevant strategies and policies to reduce adversity in infancy and support early relationships.

Actions:

- **Investment in infant mental health**, including an increase to the Mental Health Strategy 2021-31 funding allocation of 34%, as campaigned for by the Mental Health Champion and mental health charities. This will ensure **full delivery of the commitments made to infants and their families**.
- Ensure a multidisciplinary, cross-departmental approach to prioritise and improve infant mental health. This should include **joined-up planning, commissioning, delivery and review processes**, which are co-designed/co-produced in **partnership with the voluntary & community sectors and with families**.

Improving Evidence & Policy

Outcome:

Insights, data and evidence about infant mental health are collected, shared and used to inform policies and service delivery.

Actions:

- Invest in research programmes to **understand infant mental health needs, experiences and risk/protective factors**.
- Identify appropriate measures and implement data collection and sharing processes to inform and improve infant mental health service planning and delivery.

OUR ASKS



Workforce Development

Outcome:

There is a skilled and supported multi-disciplinary workforce with capacity to meet the mental health needs of infants and their families.

Actions:

- Develop and fund an **infant & early childhood workforce strategy** to ensure sufficient professionals with appropriate knowledge and skills across maternity, early childhood, family support and mental health services. This strategy should cover **pathways, pre-qualification training and continuing professional development**.
- Enable **effective collaboration with, and resourcing of**, the community & voluntary sector as workforce partners in infant mental health.

Service Development

Outcome:

An infrastructure of resourced, evidenced and high-quality services to ensure all babies and their families can access the right support at the right time to protect and promote their mental health.

Actions:

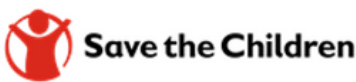
- Develop and resource a regional model for infant mental health, to **ensure there is a range of universal, targeted and specialist support available** with pathways of care that enable families to receive the right care at the right time to meet their needs.
- Support services to be accessible and effective. This includes ensuring services are **locally available, high-quality, culturally-appropriate, evidence and trauma-informed and relationship focused**.

MEMBER AGENCIES

This Manifesto is endorsed by The Stronger From The Start Alliance member agencies:



ASSOCIATION FOR INFANT MENTAL HEALTH
(NORTHERN IRELAND)



MEMBER AGENCIES

