**Call for contributions: Human rights in the context of HIV and AIDS (Human Rights Council resolution 47/17)**

**Ireland**

**International Action**

Ireland's leadership on the fight against HIV and AIDS is recognised internationally. Irish Aid works at the national and global level with international organisations, governments, civil society and local communities to address the needs of people living with HIV and AIDS and to prevent the spread of the virus.

Ireland’s engagement in Global Heath and HIV and AIDS is embedded in a deep understanding, based on our experience, of the relationship between poverty and poor health. *A Better World*, Ireland’s policy on International Development, highlights our focus on disease prevention, health systems strengthening, Comprehensive Sexuality Education, the improvement of maternal and child health, and improving access to sexual and reproductive health services. In 2021, Ireland provided over €20 million to support HIV and AIDS-focused interventions in several countries in sub-Saharan Africa through a mix of bi-lateral and multi-lateral partnerships such as UNAIDS and the Global Fund. This strong support for our HIV and AIDS programmes will continue in 2022.

The global context around HIV and AIDS has changed significantly over the last 15 years. It is now widely understood that the siloed approach of the early 2000s to HIV and AIDS treatment, while having a positive impact on the epidemic, undermined national health systems, with negative impacts on other services. Recognising that a focus on treatment alone will not effectively address the HIV and AIDS epidemic, Ireland has consistently advocated very strongly for prevention. Stigma and discrimination, the marginalization and criminalization of entire communities and a lack of access to health, education and other essential services continue to fuel the epidemic. Globally, key populations and their partners continue to be disproportionately affected by the HIV and AIDS epidemic. In sub-Saharan Africa, women and girls are especially vulnerable.

Ireland is a long-standing core supporter of the **Global Fund** and currently holds the Board seat of the Point 7 Constituency. Ireland’s continued support for the Fund reflects our view that the Global Fund has proven itself as one of the most effective organisations in global health, building more resilient and sustainable systems for health, which is in line with HR 47/17. Ireland is supportive of the Global Fund’s mutually reinforcing objectives of its new strategy, including maximising people-centred integrated systems for health and a greater focus on empowering the most affected communities. It is essential to ensure programmes designed to address HIV and AIDS are rooted in the reality of those most affected, building on the learning of decades of community-driven action to tackle the virus.

Ireland is also a long-standing core contributor to the **Joint UN Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS**). UNAIDS provides global leadership in response to the epidemic, promotes global consensus on policy and programmatic approaches to ending AIDS, and supports national Governments to develop comprehensive national strategies and implement effective HIV/AIDS activities at the country level. At the end of 2021, Ireland announced additional funding to help UNAIDS continue to provide vital services, as well as their work to fight stigma and discrimination. This brought the total funding to UNAIDS in 2021 to €3.4 million.

Ireland has supported the **International Partnership for Microbicides** for the last two decades, and will continue to do so in 2022, supporting their work to develop long-acting HIV prevention tools, such as the monthly dapivrine vaginal ring - a woman-centred prevention method. To reach those furthest behind and most marginalised, Ireland will continue to support **Frontline AIDS**, who work to support societal enablers and create a future free from AIDS. In 2022, Ireland will continue its support to the **UNESCO programme**, Our Rights, Our Lives, Our Future (O3), which is the biggest comprehensive sexuality education programme in Africa. Funding from Ireland supports the empowerment, health and resilience of adolescents and young people in Ethiopia, Uganda, Zambia and Zimbabwe.

Ireland also supports many Irish NGOs in preventing and responding to HIV-AIDS. Often this work takes place as part of a wider programme addressing various needs in a community. For example, in Uganda, Ireland is funding Trócaire and its local partners to change attitudes, behaviours and practices related to gender-based violence and associated HIV risks. In Bangladesh, Ireland is funding Concern Worldwide’s work with pavement, squatter and slum dwellers to ensure that they have access to water and increased understanding of how to prevent HIV transmission.

**Domestic Action**

Sexual health is a priority action item for the Irish Government. The below sets out the current strategy and actions being taken in this area.

**The National Sexual Health Strategy**

The National Sexual Health Strategy, 2015-2020 was launched in October 2015. It takes a life course approach, acknowledging the importance of developing a healthy attitude to sexuality in young people and of building on that foundation for positive sexual health and wellbeing into adulthood and older age.

Current priority deliverables under the Strategy are **HIV prevention**, including the continued expansion of a **Pre-Exposure Prophylaxis (PrEP)** programme, which commenced in late 2019, and the membership of the international **HIV Fast Track Cities** programme, involving Dublin, Cork, Limerick and Galway in the Irish context.

Other key areas of work include expanding access to contraception, free of charge, through the National Condom Distribution Service and through planned roll-out, in late 2022, of free prescription contraception for 17-25 year old women; sexually transmitted infection (STI) services, progressing a population survey on sexual health and improving sexual health education, training and resources, including in schools, higher and further education.

It is intended to review and refresh the Strategy; this work was postponed due to the onset of the pandemic but has commenced in 2021. Focus group meetings with key stakeholders, including clinical and public health staff, the SHCPP team, those working in the STI clinics, the Education sector, the Department of Health and Women’s Health Taskforce, the research and academic sector and organisations representing the LGBTI+ community have now been held. The findings from these meetings will inform the future direction of the next iteration of the strategy.

The text of the current strategy can be found [here](https://assets.gov.ie/7562/e5a5ac26eb22405aaf6538656564690a.pdf).

**STI services (including HIV)**

STI services in Ireland are provided, in the first instance, through primary care and through the national network of 23 STI clinics; details of access and of various supports are available through the [www.sexualwellbeing.ie](http://www.sexualwellbeing.ie) website. Sexual health service provision is overseen by the Health Service Executive (HSE) Sexual Health and Crisis Pregnancy Programme (SHCPP).

The COVID-19 pandemic initially led to an unprecedented interruption to normal healthcare activity in 2020/2021. Over the last year, public STI services have re-configured services, establishing online booking systems and providing virtual appointments, in order to support service provision in line with social distancing and infection prevention control requirements resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic.

Public STI clinics have prioritised those with symptoms and who require treatment, in order to treat active infections and minimise onward transmission. The Gay Men’s Health Service website and other resources such as HIV Ireland’s website, [www.man2man.ie](http://www.man2man.ie) and [www.sexualwellbeing.ie](http://www.sexualwellbeing.ie) are regularly updated to reflect current service delivery and to signpost users to the HSE list of approved STI and PrEP services.

The HSE is continuing to progress a number of initiatives that aim to reduce the level of HIV and STIs nationally and improve access to services for those in need as follows:

* The promotion of safer sex messages to the public via a range of social media platforms including Twitter, Facebook and Instagram.
* During the pandemic, the public has been advised about STI clinic restrictions and encouraged to consider safer sexual practices to reduce the risk of HIV and STI transmission.
* Guidance has been issued around sex and COVID-19 which advised the public to limit numbers of partners to reduce transmission of HIV/STIs as well as COVID-19 during the pandemic.
* Those who are symptomatic are advised to contact a clinic directly for an emergency appointment.
* Condoms are freely available to NGO partners and service providers via the National Condom Distribution (NCDS) service.
* A number of NGOs have established postal services to make condoms and lubricant accessible to service-users throughout the pandemic while venues were closed.
* Free rapid HIV testing is available in Dublin, Cork, Galway and Limerick through community NGO partners HIV Ireland, Sexual Health Centre Cork, Sexual Health West and GOSHH. NGO partners have adapted their services and are currently providing free rapid HIV testing from their offices or alternative venues.
* STI/HIV testing is currently available through HSE home STI testing, through a pilot originally funded by the Sláintecare Integration Fund. As a result of unprecedented demand, the service has been expanded and is currently offered in 14 counties including Dublin, Cork and Galway.
* €3.3m has been provided in Budget 2022 for the further expansion of online STI testing nationwide. Approximately €300,000 of this funding will also benefit sexual health projects in Athlone Institute of Technology, and the Dublin North side inner city STI project linked to the Mater Misericordiae University Hospital.

**PrEP**

PrEP, or pre-exposure prophylaxis, is taken by HIV negative people before having sex (pre-exposure) and after sex, to prevent HIV. PrEP has been shown in many studies to be safe and highly effective at preventing HIV. When taken correctly PrEP has been found to be about 99% effective.

The development and implementation of a national programme of Pre- Exposure Prophylaxis (PrEP) was a landmark development in realising the strategic vision of the National Sexual Health Strategy 2015 - 2020, which was to improve sexual health and wellbeing and reduce negative sexual health outcomes by ensuring that everyone living in Ireland has access to high quality sexual health information, education and services throughout their lives.

As detailed above, the Covid-19 pandemic and associated necessary restrictions has had impacts on all health services, including STI clinics and PrEP. However, while services have been subject to some Covid-19 related restrictions, the national PrEP programme has continued to expand and over 2,000 individuals, mostly gay men, are currently registered on the national PrEP programme.

All PrEP service providers have maintained existing PrEP service users in the programme, providing virtual consultations, postal prescriptions and attendance for screening or treatment where necessary. Needless to say, full funding remains in place for the national PrEP programme and it is hoped that this service can be delivered to its full potential and developed further, once pandemic related constraints on the health service as a whole can be reduced.

**National Condom Distribution Service**

Some access to free contraception is already enabled in some contexts. The National Condom Distribution Service (NCDS), which was established by the HSE Sexual Health and Crisis Pregnancy Programme (SHCPP) in October 2015, functions as a central point for distributing free condoms and lubricant sachets to HSE services and other organisations working with individuals and groups at increased risk of negative sexual health outcomes. The NCDS currently distributes free condoms through 25 HSE locations, 27 higher education institutions and 44 non-government agencies.

It should be noted that, while oral contraception and various forms of long-acting reversible contraception can be more effective at preventing pregnancy, condoms provide protection against STIs that is not provided by non-barrier forms of contraception.

It is envisaged that continued expansion of the NCDS will be facilitated in line with demand, in order to support the STI prevention and sexual health promotion needs of people living in Ireland.