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**Mental  
Health  
Council**  
OF TASMANIA



# COVID-19 Impacts and Emerging Themes within the Mental Health Sector

Monthly Report, August 2020  
Report 4

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## About Us

The [Mental Health Council of Tasmania](http://www.mhct.org) (MHCT) is the peak body for community managed mental health services in Tasmania. We represent and promote the interests of our Members and work closely with Tasmanian Government agencies and Primary Health Tasmania to ensure sectoral input into public policies and programs. We have a strong commitment to enabling better mental health care access and outcomes for every Tasmanian. Our purpose is to improve mental health for all Tasmanians, and our vision is for all Tasmanians to have awareness of, and value, their mental health and wellbeing.

In response to the global COVID-19 pandemic, Federal and State government responded rapidly by implementing a raft of COVID-19 restrictions and social distancing measures in mid-March 2020. In order to clearly understand the impacts on the mental health sector, consumers and their families and friends, MHCT developed a COVID-19 Response and Recovery Strategy. The Strategy incorporates extensive and ongoing consultation which allows MHCT to map how these restrictions and their eventual easing are impacting mental health service delivery in our state. In addition, through engagement with service providers delivering psychosocial supports to the broader population in response to COVID-19, MHCT is also gaining understanding around whole-of-population mental health.

### MHCT COVID-19 Response and Recovery Strategy

The strategy consists of three priority groups and through regular consultation and data collection aims to track how COVID-19 is impacting on the mental health sector, consumers, families and individuals experiencing psychological distress due to the pandemic.

- ▶ The **COVID-19 Mental Health Sector Network** aims to track the impacts of COVID-19 restrictions on Tasmanian Mental Health Sector service providers during the restriction period and beyond into the recovery phase. The Network provides a platform to identify the impact of COVID-19 on service delivery, workforce and client needs and will identify and track emerging issues. The network will provide a mechanism to provide direct and timely information to government, agencies and other key stakeholders as COVID-19 restrictions continue and as services respond to the lifting of restrictions.
- ▶ The **COVID-19 Psychosocial Supports Working Group** aims to provide a platform to capture data and evidence of cross-service collaboration to support people who have no history of mental-ill health, but due to the impacts of COVID-19 are experiencing varying levels of psychological distress. The Working Group members will capture shared data and emerging themes to inform State and Federal Government and relevant agencies on the level of demand and need in the Tasmanian community for psychosocial supports and services during the COVID-19 restriction period, into the recovery phase and beyond.
- ▶ The **COVID-19 Mental Health Consumer, Carer, Family and Friends Network** aims to monitor the impact of COVID-19 on people with pre-existing mental health needs prior to the COVID-19 pandemic along with their families, friends and carers. The Network will provide a platform for sharing the voice of lived experience during the COVID-19 restrictions and into the recovery phase. Network members will provide information on emerging themes and issues experienced by people with mental ill-health, their friends and family in relation to COVID-19 restrictions and beyond into the recovery phase. The Network will provide direct and timely information to government, agencies and other key stakeholders as COVID-19 restrictions continue and begin to ease.

## Executive Summary

MHCT's COVID-19 August Monthly Report provides insights into the impacts on the mental health sector and the Tasmanian community during the ongoing uncertainty of the COVID-19 pandemic and extended border restrictions. The August report indicates that several service providers are at capacity, with demand continuing to increase.

During August, mental health service providers continued to deliver as much face to face work as possible while the state's borders remain closed and the physical distancing restrictions eased in line with the Tasmanian Government's ['Roadmap to Recovery'](#). However, staff fatigue continued to be a concern for service providers along with difficulties in recruiting due to a skills shortage in Tasmania and limited opportunity to recruit interstate.

MHCT has heard from service providers that instances of psychological distress are expected to increase over the Christmas period and beyond. With this in mind, implementation of prevention and early intervention initiatives have never been more important. Early data from August does suggest that the Tasmanian community are reaching out, with 95% of contact with COVID-19 funded mental health services being new presentations. The Community Managed Mental Health sector is well placed to support prevention and early intervention strategies, which alongside other social and economic recovery strategies, can help to support rebuilding the economic, social and mental wellbeing of our communities.

### Key points

- A number of mental health service providers indicated that they have very limited to no capacity to support new clients.
- Members of the Mental Health Sector Network have identified that the recruitment of staff is an 'ever-increasing' issue.
- Service providers are noting a higher increase in acuity with indications of referrals to ACMHS and CAMHS increasing since last month.
- A spike in psychological distress is anticipated in the lead up to and over the Christmas period.
- Data from the Psychosocial Support Working Group suggests that help-seeking may be increasing with 95% of callers experiencing psychological distress being new presentations.
- Service providers continue to offer a range of face to face and telehealth supports, reflecting the preferences of mental health consumers in having greater choice over service delivery methods.

## Identified impacts during August 2020

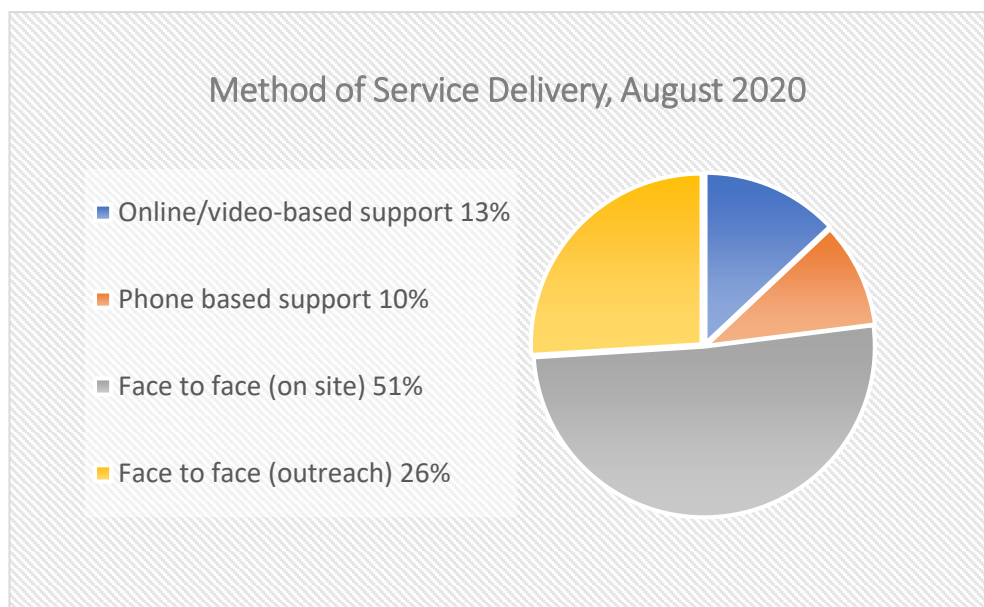
### Mental Health Service Providers

#### ► Workforce mental health and wellbeing

- Members of the Mental Health Sector Network have reported that staff are experiencing fatigue due to increased demand and increased acuity or complexity in client presentations.
- Additionally, service providers noted that staff are struggling to manage increased caseloads in addition to dealing with their own personal and family needs that have arisen due to the pandemic.
- Members of the Mental Health Sector Network have identified that the recruitment of staff is an 'ever-increasing' issue. This is partly due to border restrictions and an insufficient skills base to recruit within the state.

#### ► Service Delivery

- In August, members of the Mental Health Sector Network indicated that services continued to be delivered by a mix of telehealth and in person supports:



- Respondents to the Mental Health Sector Network survey in August, highlighted that 50% of service providers provided **psychosocial supports** most often, 30% provided **clinical and/or therapeutic supports** most often and 20% provided **low intensity supports** most often.



- The Mental Health Sector Network indicated that social support services were seeing an increase in acuity among their clients, however, staff have limited skills to respond effectively to these more acute and complex mental health presentations. The Network highlighted the need to integrate clinical expertise within social support services to ensure client needs are appropriately met.

### Service delivery during and beyond COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic and associated restrictions changed the way mental health providers delivered their services. These changes have provided an opportunity to identify new ways of delivering services beyond COVID-19. MHCT recently compiled a survey to gain perspectives from clients and consumers on their experiences of changes in service delivery and how services should be delivered beyond COVID-19.

61 people completed the survey, respondents represented clients from a broad range of service and program types including NDIS funded psychosocial supports, clinical and therapeutic adult and youth services, supported accommodation and assisted living programs.

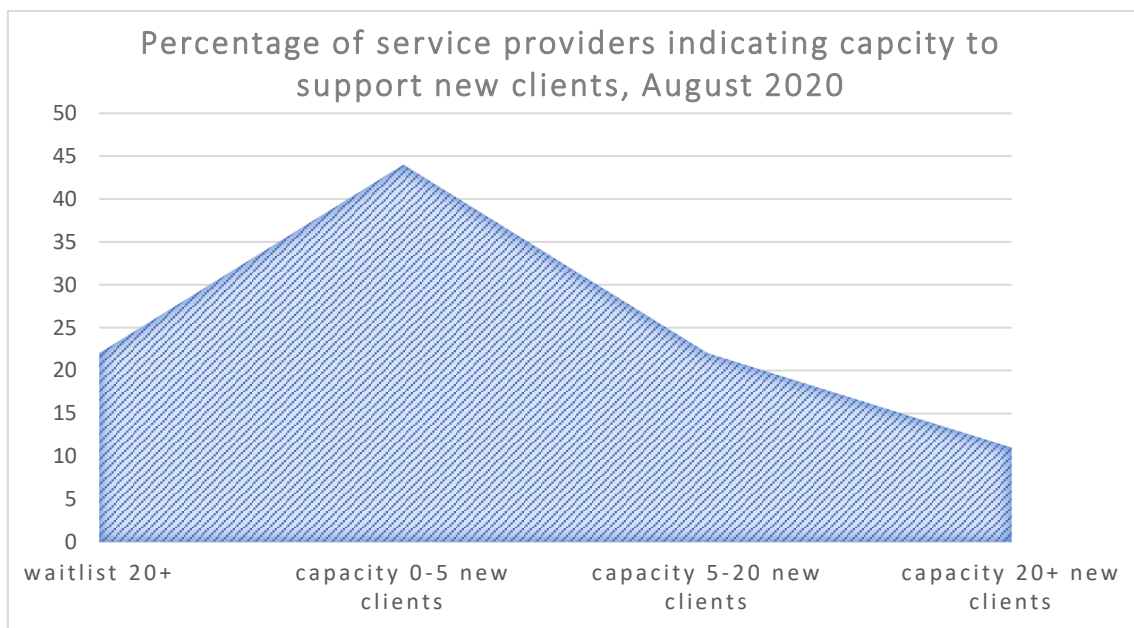
The survey indicated that during the COVID-19 restrictions (March - June 2020), 48% of respondents received one-to-one sessions via phone and 32% via online video conferencing. However, when asked what respondents missed most in terms of mental health supports during the COVID-19 restriction period, several respondents identified missing either face to face (in person) support, a private space to talk with no distractions, social interaction or activity based supports such as cooking and outings. While other respondents indicated that they were unconcerned by changes in service delivery and did not miss anything. Several respondents indicated difficulties in access, such as limited internet connectivity and data. Other respondents indicated that their service provider offered a room and video set up along with a phone to support continued telehealth support.

When respondents were asked what type of mental health supports would work best for them after COVID-19 restrictions are eased, 62% preferred to attend one to one sessions in a community setting, such as at the service providers office, 26% preferred to receive one to one sessions at home, 22% via phone and 12% via online video conferencing.

Looking beyond COVID-19, it is clear that clients and consumers have a mix of preferences in the way services and supports are delivered to them. MHCT has heard that service providers have continued to offer a range of telehealth, face-to-face and outreach services to meet the needs of their clients. As COVID-19 continues to change the way we operate, there are opportunities to provide new ways of delivering services that provide greater client choice and accessibility. Flexibility in service provider funding agreements will be a crucial aspect to support these new ways of delivering services.

### ► Service Capacity and Demand

- In August, 90% of MH Sector Network survey respondents noted an increase in demand. Providers indicated that 100% of increase in demand was due to new referrals.
- Respondents to the August MH Sector Network indicated continued reduced service capacity.
- 22% of respondents to the MH Sector Network survey indicated they had no capacity and a waitlist of 20 or more referrals.



- 44% indicated they had very little capacity and could support 0 – 5 new clients.
- 22% had capacity to support 5 – 20 new clients.
- 11% of respondents indicated they had capacity to support 20 or more new clients.

### Clients of Mental Health Services

- In August, 50% of respondents to the MH Sector Network survey indicated that client support needs had risen since July 2020. Of those service providers, 60% indicated that to some extent, an increase in client support needs was due to the current COVID19 situation
- Additionally, 60% of respondents to the Mental Health Sector Network survey indicated that previous clients re-engaged to seek renewed support.
- The impact of anxiety continued to be identified by the COVID-19 Mental Health Sector Network as a frequent cause for new referrals in August, with depression also being a common presenting issue among new clients.

- In supporting clients, the MH sector Network survey indicated that 70% of providers most commonly referred clients to social support services, 50% of service providers indicated they commonly referred to acute mental health and physical health services and 30% of providers indicated commonly referring to sub-acute clinical mental health services (i.e private psychology) and alcohol and other drug services.

### Consumers, Carers, Family and Friends

- Consumers, carers, family and friends highlighted continued concerns regarding a higher level of stress and anxiety for consumers due to the current situation in Victoria and stage 4 restrictions in Melbourne.
- A recent health consumer survey indicated that 46% of health consumers were feeling more anxious and 50% feeling more isolated.
- Consumer representatives highlighted that people with chronic health conditions and those waiting for surgery are experiencing increases in anxiety.
- Consumer representative also continued to highlight the impacts on young people.
- Carer representative groups noted a decline in carers reaching out for counselling and supports.
- Carer and consumer representative groups noted a general sense of fatigue among consumer, carers, family and friends due to COVID19 and media saturation.
- Consumer and carer representatives highlighted the need for public communication to shift its focus on the social aspects of navigating the physical distancing measures.

### Social challenges under COVID-19 guidelines

MHCT continues to hear from the Mental Health Consumers, Carers, Family and Friends (CCFF) Network that consumers are experiencing a level of anxiety in reintegrating back into the community.

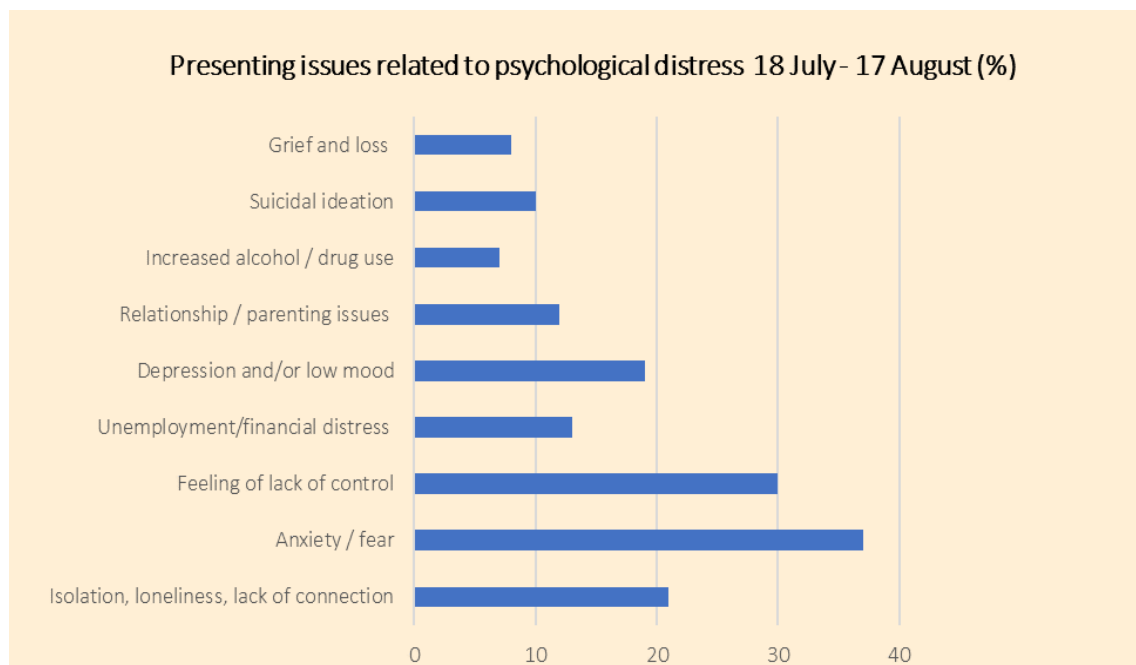
Consumer representatives have indicated that people are reluctant to interact in the community, preferencing to stay at home as the social aspects of navigating the state government's COVID-19 physical distancing measures can be challenging. For example, social situations such as navigating a supermarket under the COVID-19 guidelines can be particularly challenging for some consumers.

The CCFF Network has suggested that more work needs to be done in public messaging related to COVID-19 guidelines. The Network suggests that public messaging should now focus on informing the community on how to live, interact and work using COVID-19 safe behaviours. The Network will continue to explore ways to increase messaging that actively supports navigating the social interaction aspects of the COVID-19 guidelines.



## Impacts on the mental health of Tasmanians

- Based on the data provided to MHCT, the reasons and issues contributing to psychological distress within the community are indicated in the table below. Of note, anxiety / fear was a primary presenting issue, along with a feeling of lack of control, depression and/or low mood along with isolation and loneliness.
- In 31% of interactions, the individual was referred onward to a professional support service, of which 16% were referred to Adult Community Mental Health Services (ACMHS) and Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS). 37% of interactions were referred to Community Managed Mental Health Services and 21% referred to physical health services.



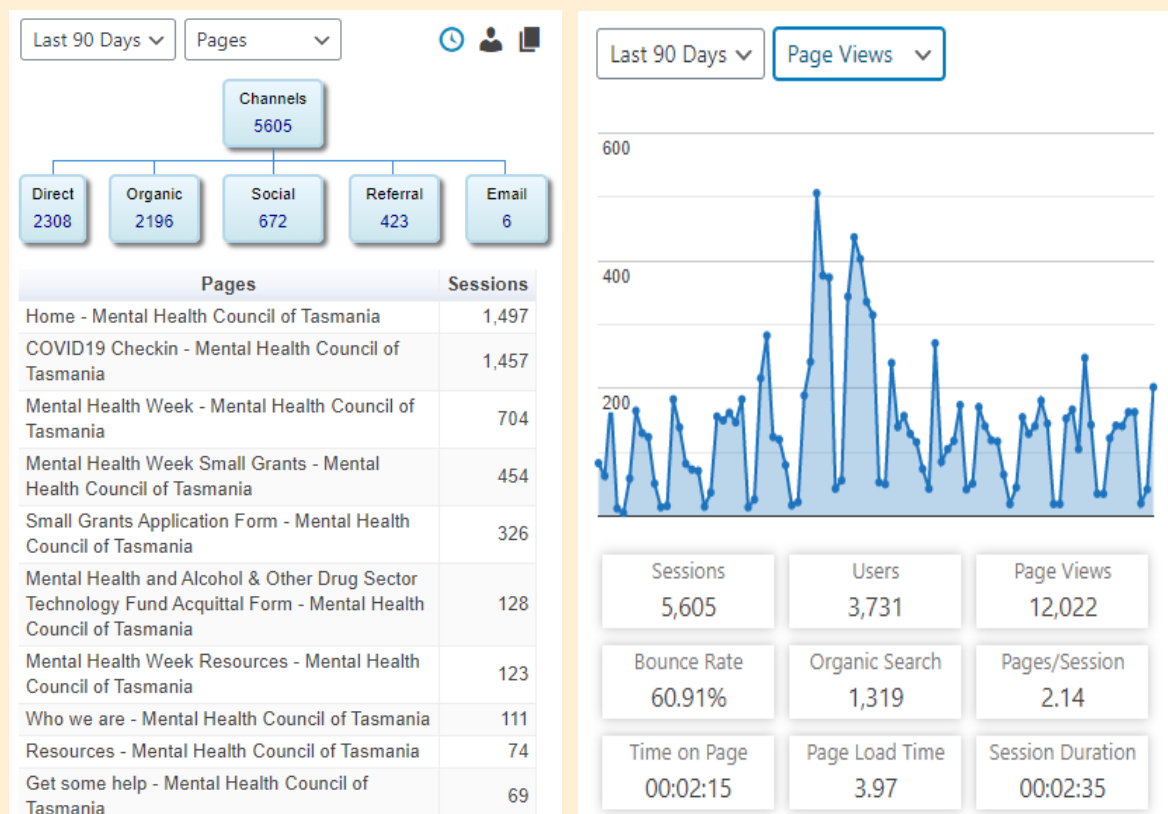
- The COVID-19 Psychosocial Supports Working Group data collection indicated that during the period 18 July – 17 August, 100% of interactions with their services related to psychological distress, of these interactions, 95% were new presentations. (Note: limited data was collected during this period, the data therefore is not reflective of whole of population mental health but rather an indication that people in psychological distress are reaching out for support).
- Additionally, the Psychosocial Supports Working Group indicated that there may be an increase in psychological distress in the lead up to and over the Christmas period due to the COVID-19 pandemic and associated restrictions limiting travel and connections with family which may contribute to exacerbated feelings of loneliness. Additionally, the economic downturn may also contribute to an increase in psychological distress over the Christmas period.

## Promoting help-seeking and mental health literacy through #checkin

As the whole of population has been affected in some way by the pandemic, it is understandable for people to be feeling an ongoing sense of anxiety, stress and a feeling that we may have lost the safety and security we once had in everyday life. However, a user friendly, state-based guide on what Tasmanians can do if their mental health has been impacted and how they might prevent mental ill-health from escalating has not been available until recently.

MHCT has been working to build a website to support people to 'check in' on their mental health with clear steps on where to get help and what supports are available in Tasmania. As a result, the #checkin website (Phase 1) was launched in mid-July 2020.

Alongside the website, promotional activity was initiated to build community engagement, the promotional activity is a key element to reaching as many people in the Tasmanian community as possible and to encourage them to #checkin. The graphs below represent stats across the entire MHCT website (individual page stats aren't currently available). There is a clear spike in Page Views on the day #checkin launched, and for couple of weeks following launch.



As anticipated, visitors to the site have reduced since the launch, this is in part due to a deliberate reduction in promotional activity while Phase 2 work is being undertaken. While visitors have reduced, individual page stats show that #checkin still makes up around a third of total visits to mhct.org. As MHCT develops Phase 2 of #checkin, which will include an improved user experience, more customised resources based on individual need, as well as strengthening branding and brand recognition, MHCT will also increase promotional activity and anticipate visitors will increase accordingly.

Phase 2 of the #checkin website will launch at the end of November 2020, this is particularly timely with a peak in psychological distress expected over the Christmas period, the #checkin website and promotional campaign will aim to encourage as many Tasmanians as possible to check in on their mental health.

## Further information

MHCT welcomes further discussion to support the mental health and wellbeing of all Tasmanians and to ensure the CMMH sector is well equipped to meet service demand. MHCT invites government and community stakeholders, MHCT members and other interested stakeholders to contact us to discuss the findings from the August 2020 monthly report or to access the documents below:

- Mental Health Sector Network report summary (8)
- Psychosocial Supports Working Group collated data report 18 July – 17 August 2020
- Future of Service Delivery: client survey report, August 2020

**Mental Health Council of Tasmania**  
**22 September 2020**