



**Mental  
Health  
Council**  
OF TASMANIA

[www.mhct.org](http://www.mhct.org)

# Literacy Framework Community Consultation Submission

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## About Us

The Mental Health Council of Tasmania (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 government and agencies to ensure sectoral input into public policies and programs. We advocate for reform and improvement within the Tasmanian mental health system. Our purpose is to strengthen and advocate for our communities and service providers to support the mental health and wellbeing of all Tasmanians, and our vision is that every Tasmanian has access to the resources and support needed for good mental health and wellbeing.

## Introduction

MHCT welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the Literacy Advisory Panel's community consultation.

As described in the consultation paper, literacy is a broad term that “encompasses the knowledge and skills needed to access, understand, analyse, and evaluate information, make meaning, express thoughts and emotions, present ideas and opinions, interact with others. It involves a continuum of learning to enable individuals to achieve their goals, to develop their knowledge and potential, and to participate fully in their community and wider society.”<sup>1</sup>

Whilst the consultation paper references the importance of health literacy and current work underway in this space, it does not specifically reference mental health literacy.

**MHCT recommends that mental health literacy is recognised as an integral aspect of achieving a literate Tasmania and is included as an important and measured element within the community-wide literacy framework.**

## What is Mental Health Literacy and why is it important?

Mental health literacy is made up of the following key components:

1. Knowledge and beliefs on mental illnesses that aid in their recognition, management and prevention
2. Knowledge on how and where to seek mental health information and support
3. Knowledge of risk factors and causes of mental illnesses, of self-treatments and professional help available
4. Knowledge and attitudes that promote recognition and appropriate help-seeking
5. Knowledge and recognition of what positive mental health and wellbeing is and how to maintain mental health and wellbeing.<sup>23</sup>

Poor mental health literacy can be a significant barrier to seeking treatment for mental ill-health.<sup>4,5</sup> Improving mental health literacy promotes positive help-seeking attitudes and has been shown to increase help-seeking behaviour.<sup>6,7</sup> This is important, as early help-seeking for mental ill-health has been shown to promote early intervention and treatment, resulting in improved outcomes in the longer term.<sup>8,9</sup> Furthermore, an investment in a mental health literacy approach aims to see more Tasmanians know how to take care of their mental health and get help early if they need it, which will have a direct impact on service demand, and will reduce the pressure on and costs of the public mental health system, whilst contributing to social and economic recovery.<sup>10</sup>

While national surveys have indicated improvement in the Australian population's mental health literacy, significant gaps and issues remain. For example, beliefs about the dangerousness and unpredictability of people with mental illness appear to have increased. Also, when compared with health professionals, the general public appears to have less favourable beliefs about the helpfulness of evidence-based treatments, as well as higher levels of stigma and discrimination.<sup>11</sup>

## National and State-level support

The importance of addressing whole of population mental health through a promotion, prevention and early intervention approach has been recognised at a national level. The Australian Productivity Commission Inquiry into mental health emphasised the current under-investment in prevention and early intervention in relation to mental health, resulting in poor uptake of services and people living with mental ill-health for too long.<sup>12</sup>

Investment in mental health literacy is an important component in addressing gaps in mental health prevention as it focuses on building both individual and community capacity, alongside system level augmentation, that can allow for agility and flexibility within the service system.

At the state level, Reform Direction 1 of Tasmania's State Mental Health Plan, Rethink 2020, is 'Empowering Tasmanians to maximise their mental health and wellbeing'. This includes a stated goal to 'build the capacity of Tasmanians to find, understand and use health information to maximise their mental health and wellbeing'.<sup>13</sup>

Tasmania's Premier's Economic and Social Recovery Advisory Council (PESRAC) Final report in 2021 recognised the importance of prevention and early intervention, specifically recommending that rethink 2020 be funded as a matter of priority, that funding be committed to expanding MHCT's #checkin website to provide more mental health education and awareness material, and support for community level resources to improve mental health literacy.<sup>14</sup>

In addition, the recently released Healthy Tasmania Strategic Plan includes a commitment to promote and support mental health literacy in communities and where people live, learn and work.<sup>15</sup>

## What is being done?

National and international evidence demonstrates that community education campaigns and targeted training courses can improve mental health literacy.<sup>16</sup> Examples within Australia include the Mental Health First Aid training program and the beyondblue and 'R U OK?' awareness campaigns.<sup>17</sup> These awareness campaigns, however, rely on help seeking behaviour where individuals recognise something is wrong. This type of approach limits the reach of the campaign and does not support a population-based method to increase mental health literacy.

Evidence demonstrates that effective mental health literacy interventions should be

- context-specific,
- culturally and developmentally appropriate,
- locally led,
- developed with consumers and carers, and
- integrated into existing structures and community-based initiatives.<sup>18</sup>

MHCT has recently received funding to implement a whole of population approach to mental health literacy. This approach will incorporate current resources in Tasmania and build on existing platforms whilst integrating best practice approaches to mental health promotion, prevention, and early intervention. Underpinning MHCT's mental health literacy approach will be a place-based focus that develops easy, accessible and novel ways to engage with learning and encourages behaviour change at an individual, community and population level.<sup>19</sup> This will include a targeted focus on young people and older people, recognising the unique needs and experiences of these priority cohorts.

Key elements of MHCT's mental health literacy approach will include:<sup>20</sup>

▶ **Mental health education campaign focused on prevention**

This campaign will aim to build individual and community capacity in managing mental health and wellbeing. The #checkin website ([www.checkin.org.au](http://www.checkin.org.au)) provides a digital platform for further building a mental health literacy campaign that is developed and designed specifically with Tasmanians in mind. This will provide consistent public messaging aimed to increase mental health literacy across Tasmania, engage Tasmanians in understanding what good mental health looks like and how to access supports based on locality and level of need. The #checkin platform will also support community capacity building and learning modules will be specifically tailored for younger and older audiences.

▶ **Community capacity building**

To ensure consistent and coordinated mental health education is delivered across the whole of population, a multilayered approach will be taken to reach and meet the needs of local communities. With 50% of the Tasmanian population living outside of major cities, localised, community-led approaches to mental health literacy will be key to ensuring education programs reach local communities in a targeted, consistent and

coordinated way.<sup>21</sup> Such an approach will require targeted initiatives including the implementation of peer-to-peer models to increase community participation and engagement, with a strong focus on youth and older people to target these groups and individuals at a local community level (via networks, clubs, and community groups etc. who specifically engage with these cohorts). The community capacity building element will build on and support local experience, expertise, leaders, and volunteers and leverage their enthusiasm to engage their communities and networks with mental health education and information. In implementation, the #checkin campaign and website will provide a suite of training and support to Regional Coordinators and Community Engagers to ensure a consistent and safe approach to promoting and engaging communities and individuals with their mental wellbeing.

▶ **Appropriate referrals and navigation**

In building mental health literacy across the whole of population, a coordinated system must be in place to respond effectively to individuals who require further information and access to mental health supports and services. Currently, navigating the range of supports and services available can be a complex and time intensive process. A centralised approach to assessment, intake and referral should be considered to support all Tasmanians to access appropriate mental health supports and services. Several current initiatives are already in place that can support this recommendation including the Tasmanian 1800 Lifeline Number and the Initial Assessment and Referral (IAR) Framework. MHCT suggests that a Tasmanian based central intake process that incorporates both of these initiatives is well placed to address inconsistencies and difficulties in the navigation of the mental health system, streamlining the process for Tasmanians and contributing towards a more integrated mental healthcare system.

Further details on MHCT's mental health literacy campaign can be found in [MHCT's Budget Priority Submission 2021-2022](#).

## Measuring impact

As per the consultation paper, developing a framework to improve literacy in Tasmania requires setting clear and measurable targets. These targets should incorporate mental health literacy. Australian researchers have developed the Mental Health Literacy Scale, which is a scale-based measure that can be used to evaluate the effectiveness of interventions aimed at improving mental health literacy.<sup>22</sup> The scale was recently utilised by the Royal Flying Doctor's Service as part of their national mental health literacy survey<sup>23</sup> and could provide a useful tool in measuring mental health literacy in Tasmania and the impact of targeted interventions in this space.

MHCT looks forward to contributing to the work of the Literacy Advisory Panel and ensuring that mental health literacy, and the work already underway in this space, is integrated into a community-wide framework for Tasmania and included in literacy measures and targets.

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