

Memorandum of Understanding on Conversion Therapy on the Island of Ireland

12 July 2024

Conversion therapy is the term for therapy that assumes certain sexual orientations or gender identities are inferior to others and seeks to change or suppress them on that basis. This Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on Conversion Therapy on the Island of Ireland makes it clear that conversion therapy in relation to gender identity and sexual orientation (including asexuality) is unethical, potentially harmful and is not supported by evidence.

It is very important to emphasise that this MoU does not seek to deny, discourage or exclude those with uncertain feelings around sexuality or gender identity from seeking qualified and appropriate help. The MoU explicitly supports healthcare providers to provide appropriately informed and ethical practice when working with clients who wish to explore, experience conflict with, or are in distress regarding their sexual orientation or gender identity.

This MoU is our public commitment to renounce such practices and to advocate for the LGBTI+ community. We are deeply indebted to our colleagues in the United Kingdom, who have produced an initial MoU in 2015 and an updated version in 2022. Given our geographic and professional closeness, we have modelled the All Ireland MoU on the UK MoU and are very grateful for their work in this area.

It is our hope that the All Ireland MoU will:

- Inform the public about the risks of conversion therapy.
- Ensure healthcare professionals and psychological therapists are aware of the ethical issues relating to conversion therapy.
- Ensure new and existing psychological therapists are appropriately trained.
- Ensure that evidence into conversion therapy is kept under regular review.
- Ensure professionals from across the health, care and psychological professions work together to achieve the above goals.

Purpose and Position:

1. The purpose of this Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) is a commitment to ending the practice of 'conversion therapy' for the protection of the public in the Republic of Ireland (ROI) and Northern Ireland (NI).
2. For the purposes of this document, 'conversion therapy' is an umbrella term for a therapeutic approach or any model or individual viewpoint that demonstrates an assumption that any sexual orientation or gender identity is inherently preferable to any other and which attempts to bring about a change of sexual orientation or gender identity, or seeks to suppress an individual's expression of sexual orientation or gender identity on that basis.

These practices are sometimes referred to by terms including, but not limited to, 'reparative therapy', 'sexual orientation and gender identity change efforts' or 'gay cure therapy'. This therapy may sometimes be covertly practised under the appearance of mainstream practice without being named.

- a. For the purpose of this document, sexual orientation refers to the sexual or romantic attraction someone feels to people of the same gender, opposite gender, more than one gender, or to experience no attraction.
 - b. For the purposes of this document, gender identity is interpreted broadly to include binary (male or female), non-binary and gender-fluid identities.
3. Signatory organisations agree that the practice of conversion therapy, whether in relation to sexual orientation or gender identity, is unethical and potentially harmful.
 4. Signatory organisations agree that neither sexual orientation nor gender identity in themselves are indicators of a mental disorder.
 5. This MoU also intends to ensure that:
 - The public is well informed about the risks and harm caused by conversion therapy.
 - Healthcare professionals and psychological therapists are aware of and informed on the ethical issues relating to conversion therapy.
 - New and existing psychological therapists are appropriately informed regarding the ethical, potentially harmful effects and lack of scientific evidence supporting conversion therapy.
 - Evidence concerning conversion therapy and practices are kept under regular review.
 - Professionals from across the health, care and psychological professions work together to achieve the above goals.
 6. This MoU supports therapists to provide ethical and competent practice when working with a client who wishes to explore, experiences conflict with or is in distress regarding, their sexual orientation or gender identity.

This position is not intended to prevent, discourage or exclude those with uncertain feelings around sexuality or gender identity from seeking qualified and appropriate help. Nor is it intended to stop psychological and medical professionals who work with transgender and gender questioning clients from carrying out currently required clinical assessments prior to medical intervention. Nor is it intended to stop medical professionals from prescribing hormone treatments to transgender patients and people experiencing gender dysphoria.

Some people may experience distress or feel unhappy in relation to their sexual orientation or gender identity. This can happen when surrounded by discriminatory societal, political and systemic structures. Where this is the case, they may require therapeutic options to help them live more comfortably with their identity, reduce their distress and reach a greater degree of self-acceptance through identity integration. Some people may benefit from the support of psychotherapy and counselling to help them manage this distress and to clarify their sense of identity. Clients make healthy choices when they understand themselves better.

Ethical practice in these cases requires the practitioner to have competent knowledge and skills and an understanding of gender and sexual diversity. They must be free from any agenda that favours one gender identity or sexual orientation as preferable over other gender and sexual diversities. For this reason, it is essential for clinicians to acknowledge the broad spectrum of sexual orientations and gender identities and expressions.

Roles and Responsibilities:

7. Signing this document commits signatory organisations to draw up an action plan to proactively implement the relevant actions below.
8. The undersigned organisations will have management support in carrying out the necessary measures to meet the commitments within the MoU.
9. While all parties share a common interest in ending conversion therapy, their remits and responsibilities differ.
10. This MoU does not exhaustively list every action which every organisation will take but aims to set out a framework for responding to the issue in areas where they do have responsibility.
11. Organisations with practice members will ensure through training and/or published guidelines that the relevant over-arching ethical principles in their statements of ethical practice are understood and applied when working with sexually and gender diverse clients, as pertaining to the basic standards of honest, competent and non-discriminatory practice to which clients of all identities and orientations are entitled.
12. Organisations that work in the provision of mental or psychological health delivery or commissioning, such as the HSE and NHS, will ensure they do not commission or provide conversion therapy.
13. Professional associations will work to ensure their memberships have access to the latest information regarding conversion therapy and their position on this.
14. Professional associations will endeavour to make Continuing Professional Development (CPD) events available, which help develop therapists' understanding and cultural competence in working with gender and sexually diverse clients.
15. Organisations will work together to create a shared information resource on conversion therapy, including Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs), and help and support for both members of the public and professionals.
16. Those with a responsibility for teaching or training will work to ensure that training prepares therapists to have sufficient levels of competence to work effectively with gender and sexually diverse clients.
17. Training organisations are advised to refer to the latest guidelines from professional associations who are signatory organisations on working with gender and sexually diverse clients when reviewing their curriculum on equality and diversity issues.
18. Organisations will review their current policies and guidelines to consider the need to include more specific requirements to ensure individual practitioners and training organisations demonstrate awareness and understanding of policy regarding conversion therapy.
19. Campaigning bodies will work to ensure that their target audiences are aware of the basis for concern about any ongoing practice of conversion therapy. This may include research, information campaigns or social media posts.

Review & Research:

20. Signatory organisations will meet regularly to oversee the implementation of the MoU and monitor progress towards realising its intentions and goals.
21. The text of the MoU will be kept under review and altered, if necessary, in the light of new research or the appearance of unintended consequences. A formal review will be conducted every three years from the date of the MoU hard launch (12 July 2024). The next formal review is due in July 2027.
22. Signatory organisations will endeavour to keep informed on international developments in addressing conversion therapy.

Mutual Understanding:

The memorandum is not intended to and does not create any contractual obligations between these parties. Instead, this memorandum is signed in recognition of a shared professional responsibility to improve the support and help available to those at risk from conversion therapy.

Signatory Organisations:

The College of Psychiatrists of Ireland

The Irish Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (IACP)

The Psychological Society of Ireland

Supporter Organisation:

LGBT Ireland