

Covid-19 threatens to throw mental health services into disarray

COLLATERAL DAMAGE

By **Niamh Griffin**

MORE than half the centres catering for people with dementia cannot re-open due to social distancing rules, and families warn of the devastating impact of the lockdown on their loved ones.

About 64,000 people have dementia in Ireland, with Alzheimer's Disease the most common form. Most care is provided by the Alzheimer's Society in partnership with the HSE. Face-to-face services including two respite centres, 21 'Dementia Cafés' and activity centres have been shut or online since March.

One woman said her 62-year-old husband was devastated when their local centre closed, leaving him cut-off from his friends.

Tina Leonard, Head of Advocacy at the Alzheimer Society of Ireland, said funding announcements in the Budget were welcome, but warned: 'Level 5 restrictions makes no difference to what's available for people living with dementia and their families. Day services and other

face-to-face services never re-opened after they closed in March and that remains the case. Carers have said to us that they are in a permanent lockdown anyway.'

She said many activities or classes are delivered in old buildings.

Ms Leonard will meet Health Minister Stephen Donnelly tomorrow to discuss this.

'Even if we are allowed to open, only one third of our centres would be in a position to re-open,' she said. 'We need a support fund to ensure premises can be compliant with new health and safety guidelines.'

Carmel Geoghegan, founder of Dementia Ireland, said pandemic guidelines for caring for people with

dementia outside nursing homes are unclear.

She said: 'It is horrendous, devastating really. I see it with people I am in contact

with. Some people are coping well, but others do not have access to the outside world, they have withdrawn completely.'

Ms Geoghegan

said she would like to see more support next month: 'I don't know why services couldn't be re-started with smaller groups. Maybe people could go on alternate days or go for half-days.'

Community hospitals in many counties used to offer respite for

dementia patients. Dr Clifford Haley, clinical director of the HSE Donegal Mental Health Services, said this is only available on an emergency basis now.

'It was high quality local provision. You can imagine if a person is facing challenges with dementia that 14 days isolation is very difficult. There is a big burden of care now in the community,' he said.

Mental health services continue to run, but he said working remotely is challenging for older patients with dementia.

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'Some don't have access to the outside world'



DEVASTATING:
Tina Leonard of the Alzheimer Society

