

Lifeline development and improvements – Questions and Answers

Delivering now and in the future for people in distress or despair

Lifeline is Northern Ireland's crisis response helpline for people who are experiencing distress or despair. It is funded by the Department of Health and commissioned by the Public Health Agency (PHA) to provide crisis support 24 hours a day, seven days a week, to listen and help in confidence, through a free phone helpline.

Follow-up support services for people of all ages are also available through Lifeline. A Lifeline counsellor helps each caller to identify what type of support will meet their individual needs.

People living in Northern Ireland can call Lifeline on 0808 808 8000. Deaf and hard of hearing Textphone users can call Lifeline on 18001 0808 808 8000. Calls to Lifeline are free for people living in Northern Ireland who are calling from UK landlines and mobiles.

To ensure that Lifeline continues to best meet the needs of people who will require its crisis support over coming years, and to make it as effective and responsive as possible, some changes are being made to how it is delivered. The free 24/7 helpline will continue, while the follow-up counselling will be boosted with the addition of new relative and carer support and complementary therapy.

Instead of a single provider running both the helpline and the follow-up counselling support services, there will be one provider focusing on the Lifeline helpline and respective providers managing the counselling support in each of the five trust areas, meaning the support can be tailored to the needs of local communities. This will all be done within a very robust and integrated system to ensure that people get the support they need at all stages of their journey with Lifeline.

Investment in Lifeline will remain at the current level.

To address queries people may have, this Questions and Answers document has been created to help provide clarity about what is planned.

Questions and Answers

Q. What is Lifeline?

A. Lifeline is the Northern Ireland crisis response helpline for people who are experiencing distress or despair. No matter what your age or where you live in Northern Ireland, if you are or someone you know is in distress or despair, Lifeline is here to help. Lifeline also provides free follow-up counselling for people who need it.

Follow-up support will be provided locally, in the community, by dedicated providers, with additional support for relatives and carers and complementary therapy being added to the range of support which is available.

Q. Will there continue to be a 24-hour helpline?

A. Yes. Lifeline, which is free to call on 0808 808 8000, will continue to be a 24-hour service, 365 days a year.

Q. What changes are being made to Lifeline?

A. The existing helpline will remain in place, but there will also be additional support services for people who call Lifeline. This means that alongside immediate telephone crisis support and follow-on face to-face counselling, there will be new relative and carer support, and complementary therapy for those with the greatest levels of anxiety to assist them into talking therapies.

Q. Will call handlers be qualified?

A. Yes. The PHA fully recognises the importance of the staff who provide the telephone helpline service being appropriately skilled and trained for this vital role.

The new model will maintain the 24 hour, seven days a week free Lifeline telephone helpline provided by staff who are skilled and experienced in talking to people in crisis, and in particular in the field of suicide and self-harm prevention.

The plans will also see this enhanced to include a range of qualified and experienced staff which could include, for example, professionally qualified staff from fields such as mental health nursing and social work, etc.

Q. How will the new helpline and counselling model work?

A. The revised Lifeline service will continue to have the free, 24/7 telephone helpline. This will be managed by one provider, enabling them to provide specific focus on this key aspect of the Lifeline service. Follow-on support services will be managed by separate providers in each local trust area, enabling them to focus on the particular needs of the community and manage the demand for support at local level.

The Lifeline crisis response service will be fully integrated, with skilled, experienced and qualified staff on the telephone helpline, and a warm handover to face-to-face support delivered locally across the region within a seamless and unified system, ensuring that people get the support they need at all stages of their journey with Lifeline.

Q. Will Lifeline receive the same level of investment?

A. Yes. The Lifeline crisis response service is highly valued by the Health and Social Care system and is a key priority as it provides essential support to people at a time when they are at their most vulnerable.

Overall, the same investment in running Lifeline will be made under the new model but by adapting how that money is spent, we can provide a more effective service to help people in crisis, and that is what is most important.

The 24/7 telephone helpline will be maintained. The enhanced service will offer a broader range of support services.

The capacity for 25,000 sessions of follow-on counselling will remain the same, and this will be enhanced with the capacity to provide an additional 2,680 sessions for relative and carer support and a further 6,500 sessions for complementary therapy will be made available for those with the greatest levels of anxiety, to assist them into talking therapies.

Q. Can people still ring Lifeline now, and when the new model is in place?

A. Yes. The Lifeline service will continue to be in place. It provides vital support for people who need it – this will continue to be the case while the current contract is in operation and after the new contracts begins, so we encourage anyone who is in distress or despair to call Lifeline on 0808 808 8000. The person on the end of the line will listen and help immediately on the phone and follow up with other support if necessary. For the service user, they can rest assured that Lifeline will continue to be available 24/7.