Improving the mental health of the population, a strategy for the European Union. Green Paper

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The committee adopted the own-initiative report drawn up by John BOWIS (EPP-ED, UK) in response to the Commission's Green Paper on a strategy on mental health for the European Union. MEPs drew attention to the "sizeable differences" in mental health expenditure in individual Member States and welcomed the Commission's commitment to mental health promotion. They called for the Green Paper to be followed up with a proposal for a directive on mental health in Europe and "the defence of and respect for the civil and fundamental rights of persons suffering from mental disorders". Any such proposal should involve partnership and consultation with those who have experienced or are experiencing mental health problems, their families and carers and advocacy NGOs, associations of family members and other interested parties.

MEPs wanted the key target groups identified by the Commission (children, employees, older people and disadvantaged members of society) to be extended to include those with severe mental illness, those with long-term and terminal illnesses, the disabled, prisoners, ethnic and other minority groups, those sleeping rough, migrants, those in precarious jobs and the unemployed. They also felt that the Green Paper did not take due account of the gender dimension. The report acknowledged that men and women may have different mental health needs, and called for more research in order to develop separate approaches and treatments for the two sexes.

Among its many recommendations, the committee called for "a multi-disciplinary and multi-agency response" to tackling complex mental ill health situations, such as those involving children or adolescents. It also urged employers to introduce "Mental Health at Work" policies with a view to ensuring the best possible jobs for and best possible incorporation into the labour market of persons with mental disorders.

Pointing out that one of the greatest challenges in mental health was the ageing of Europe's population, the report wanted to see more research into neurodegenerative diseases or other psychiatric illnesses in the elderly. MEPs also stressed that the "defeat of stigma" should be at the heart of any future mental health strategy, for example by establishing annual campaigns on mental health issues in order to combat ignorance and injustice. The committee also wanted to see mental health services reformed with a view to providing high-quality community care at home or in sheltered accommodation, regular monitoring and assessment and respite care. The Commission was urged to support continuing reforms in any Member State that practised the abuse of psychiatry, over-use of medication or incarceration, or "inhumane practices such as caged beds or excessive use of seclusion rooms".

Other points raised in the report included the need for more research into therapeutic and psychological interventions, into the development of more effective drugs with fewer side-effects, and into determinants of mental disorders and suicide. There should also be greater involvement of service users in all aspects of mental health research. Lastly, the committee called for the Commission to set up a "Mental Health Coordinating and Monitoring Group" to collect information on mental health practice and promotion in the EU, to assess the adequacy (in terms of numbers and training) of existing mental health professionals and infrastructure, and to disseminate information on best practice.