

## **Chairperson Report**

An annual report is a time to stop and reflect on the past year...and this year 2023/24 has seen an ever-increasing demand on our services. We were delighted to secure a lease on the building next door which provided much needed extra counselling space. All against the background of a very challenging economic climate.

We could not provide our services without the continued support of our many funders and we thank them most sincerely. The generosity of the community, their unwavering support and fund-raising endeavors has been fantastic; marathons, tractor runs, bag-packs, carol services, personal donations, business and school events and other activities large and small.

Collectively all this support keeps us working at our current level. I would like to pay tribute to our own energetic fundraising sub-committee and the many volunteers who support then, your pro-activity has been excellent in helping meet financial demands.

It has also been a busy year in terms of staff changes and the implementation of our pilot counsellor mentoring programme. A new financial administrator has also been appointed. Conversely, we were very sorry to see the departure of experienced counsellors Helen, Nicholas, Rosemary and Zahada, who all made a valuable contribution to the team at Aisling Centre. We wish them well. In the coming year we will say a fond farewell to Joan, the longest serving member of the team as she and her fellow receptionist Fionnuala both look forward to retirement.

Strategic development is constantly under review by our board of directors and I am pleased to report that we have fulfilled all our core aims on target for this year. I would like to take this opportunity to thank my fellow board members for their support, hard work and commitment throughout the year and especially my vice-chairperson Roberta Hamilton who has now stood down from post in October 23, but remains a valued director and to welcome my new vice-chair Deirdre Kane.

We were delighted to welcome to the board two new directors, Monica Corrigan and Maeve Devlin. Both bring with them great skills and have already settled in well and are active in their roles, Maeve on the Fundraising Sub-Group and Monica Corrigan on the Finance Sub-Group. Monca is now the company treasurer having replaced Neville Armstrong who along with Dr Ann McDermott (former chairperson) stepped down from the board at our AGM in October 23. Both stalwarts gave long and sterling service in various roles to the work and ethos of Aisling. The calm face of Aisling belies the enormous amount of activity within. We are very blessed with a very dedicated administrative and clinical team with complementary therapists under the direction of the management team, Bridie Sweeney, Service Director, John Bennett, Clinical Lead and Patricia Kelly, Admin Facilities Manager. Collectively it is thanks to all their hard work that Aisling Centre is held in such high esteem in the community.

It is a privilege to serve on the Board of Directors of Aisling Centre and be part of an organisation where the ethos has remained intact since its inception and the common thread is for hope, healing and growth for everyone who uses the services.

**Alison Annan, Chairperson**

## **Service Director Report**

For the first time in the 13 years that I have worked in Aisling Centre I have not managed to have the annual report printed up in a glossy format in time for the AGM.

This does not sit easy with me, but it has made me sit back and reflect not just on the last year but the last decade. In that time our financial turnover has increased by 150% while still maintaining strong reserves. The number of counselling sessions has increased from an average of 2000 per year to 5000+ including outreach work. We are well on the way to establishing a vibrant and consistent well-being programme including the annual HHG event which is now in its eight year. We have an extremely active fund-raising sub-committee and other more recently established sub-groups. We have also developed a really strong community presence. At a practical level we have updated our management information systems, tightened our governance, refurbished the building and accessed new sources of income. In that time, we received the Queens Award, celebrated 25years of AC, appointed a Patron and a Life-time honorary member and had the honor of being gifted the building by the SOM. These are just some of the highlights that sit alongside the day-to-day operations of the Centre.

The world of charities has also changed in that time, mostly notably with the introduction of the NI charity commission of which we are a member. We are without doubt the most highly monitored sector both in terms of finance and outputs and that is only going to continue.

Funder requirements are increasing, sometimes it almost feels like quarterly, and while some of this can feel frustratingly like tick box exercises, it is for the most part welcome because it also increases accountability for the Organisation and offers protection to its staff and perhaps more importantly to our voluntary Board of Trustees.

We are living in financially challenging times and going forward we may have to make difficult decisions to make, like any small business we will have to cut our coat according to our cloth. But we have been here before. When I was interviewed for this job all those years ago, I was asked by Sr Edel how I would take the work of the Centre forward. I was aware that AC was in a time of change and ever cautious and with many years of community experience behind me I replied that my first steps would be to review and consolidate the crucial work of the Centre. And, as discussed at recent board meetings, following the growth of the last decade we are at that review and consolidate stage again. I look forward to working with the Board to progress this work in the New year.

As a small local charity Aisling Centre punches well above its weight. This dream of Aisling Centre is well and truly alive and vibrant thanks to a fantastic team effort from Directors, staff, sessional workers and volunteers, each playing an essential role.

I would like to record my thanks to everyone who supports my work year on year. To Alison and the board and most particularly John and Patricia who regularly go above and beyond.

## **Clinical Lead Report**

Within this Annual Report, you will find a summary of the anonymous feedback provided by clients about their experiences at the Aisling Centre. Collected at the end of therapy, this feedback reflects the deep gratitude of those who embarked on a personal journey of self-exploration and growth - often discovering that their experience was quite different from what they had imagined at the outset. With hindsight, clients can appreciate the contrast between how they felt before counselling and the positive changes they experienced because of it. They reveal just how worthwhile it was to embrace the challenges of the process; of opening up, of confronting painful emotions, of revisiting difficult life events or making difficult changes in behaviour, relationships and thought patterns. Much like the athletes we watched during the Olympics, progress for our clients is often gradual, requiring patience, persistence, and commitment to the process, in the hope of life-changing rewards.

We understand that the counselling process begins long before a client arrives here, shaped by their lived experiences and often supported by the encouragement of family, friends, or medical professionals. Their feedback highlights the importance of the welcoming atmosphere first experienced at our reception and the sense of arriving in a safe and peaceful environment. In this space where confidentiality is paramount, clients can and do express their true selves without fear of ridicule or rejection - a place where they feel accepted, heard, understood, and free from judgment. It is here that we strive to offer hope, healing, and growth to every person who comes to the Aisling Centre.

The dedication and hard work of our staff, along with the generous giving of themselves by our volunteers, make what we do possible. When I read our feedback, I hope each one knows they have played an important part in affirming the value of our work. I also want to thank our independent Clinical Supervisors, who assist in overseeing the clinical work of our therapists, enhancing the quality of care and ensuring ethical integrity and professional competence.

Finally, this year, some of our own colleagues have faced significant personal challenges with quiet strength and resilience, serving as an inspiration to us all. We continue to extend our heartfelt support and gratitude to them.

**John Bennett, Clinical Lead**

## **Treasurer's Report**

By way of introduction, this is my first report as Treasurer of Aisling Centre.

I joined the Aisling Centre Board of Directors in July 2023 and I was delighted to be appointed as the new Treasurer in October 2023.

Since joining the Board I have seen how beneficial Aisling Centre is to Fermanagh and how supportive of these services the people of Fermanagh and the wider community are.

As you can see from the accounts, we have continued to receive financial income from a range of funders, fundraising and personal and public donations and we thank everyone for their continued support. It is vital in enabling us to do the work we do. This year the fundraising committee have raised significant funds with the help of volunteers through a number of very successful events. The volunteers are essential to our success as they provide support to fundraising but also promote awareness of the Aisling Centre.

Unfortunately, due to the increasingly difficult economic climate, these efforts are more important than ever. Due to the challenges of financial sustainability faced by Aisling Centre, the Board have maintained a pro-active and focused approach on finances through the implementation of a successful fundraising review, continuous review of overheads and the introduction of cost saving measures throughout the year. Through these steps I am confident Aisling Centre can continue to thrive and operate as a facility to serve multiple needs within the community.

I commend this financial report.

**Monica Corrigan, Director/Treasurer**

## Counselling Services

*“The service is invaluable. You actually don't realise how much you really need it until you do it and such amazing staff so caring and helpful that you leave a much better version of yourself than when you arrived (albeit a little emotionally exhausted) but overall could not advocate more for the service going forward”*

753 people attended counselling with a total of 6040 sessions of counselling offered.

*“There are many diverse clients within Aisling Centre, with many different presenting issues. The therapeutic relationship is fundamental with each and every client regardless of their presenting issue. It is the foundation for the counselling process. It provides a safe and trusting environment where clients can talk openly and freely in a safe and confidential space and develop autonomy as they actively participate in their own healing process.”* Therapist

## ADULT COUNSELLING SERVICE

### Source of referrals

Self	33%
GP	42%
Other Health Professionals	14%
Other Statutory Services	04%
Misc. other	07%

*“ Aisling Centre is a wonderful service/ life-line for the many levels of distress/trauma people are experiencing”*

### “A Time of Great Confusion”

*“I am very grateful for the service provided for me by the Aisling Centre. Without their help my condition would have been extremely difficult to manage. For the first time in my life, I had the opportunity to discuss and try to make sense of my condition.*

*When I first came for my counselling session, I felt fearful and full of anxiety, but this soon eased after my first meeting with my Counsellor. I felt that she had a great understanding and was able to help me to better understand myself during a time of great confusion in my life.*

*Without the service provided by the Aisling Centre I would have had to face my condition alone. These services, without any doubt in my mind, save lives, especially in a region that is desperately neglected and underfunded in terms of Mental Health Services.*

*I would like to thank the Aisling Centre and especially my Counsellor for the help I was provided”.*

Male, aged 30. Attended 12 Sessions.

## Feedback

Overall Experience of the Service	
Excellent	92%
Good	5%
No Ans	3%

Support/Service Received	
Excellent	92%
Good	8%

Levels of Distress		
	Before	After
None	0.5%	18.5%
Mild	4%	58.5%
Moderate	21%	22%
High	74.5%	1%

Outcomes	
Feeling more positive about the future	98%
Identified improvement	96%

## The Legacy of The Troubles

This case study is based on the experience of a lady, who was referred by her GP for issues in relation to anxiety and low mood. Middle aged, she worked in the caring profession. She also supported her husband, who due to a work injury was confined to home and suffered with depression. She was experiencing low mood and panic attacks, which were having a very restrictive and negative impact on her quality of life. She admitted that it was such a struggle for her to attend and had taken a lot of courage and effort for her to come and see me.

Listening to this lady whom I will call Carrie, I understood that she had lived with trauma in her early years. Creating a place of safety in the sessions was vital. The consistency of weekly meetings, where she felt no judgement, helped build trust which provided a safety also. Carrie's father had been in the security forces, she told me that fear had played a huge part in her experience as a child. She spoke about the trauma of having constant vigilance and an attempted attack on her father. She told me she had never spoken before about this experience. She started to see the impact which this had on herself and her family. She realised the trauma of her childhood had greatly influenced her and that of her own children. She started to understand how she had lived a life which was greatly restricted due to fear.

The demands of a caring role in work and at home, was beginning to wear her down. She realised that she never stepped out of this role and was surprised at the anger and resentment she felt. Carrie saw that she had lost a lot of who she was and had neglected her own needs in the process. She recognised also that she wasn't good at reaching out for help, just was "getting on

with it all". She began to look at getting help from others to give her the time and space she needed.

She spoke more of the night her dad was attacked, telling me she experienced constant flash backs. She had buried a lot. She told me she was easily triggered, especially by sound. Use of more creative techniques, sand tray and art as a part of sessions, helped Carrie to express what she couldn't put into words.

Slowly Carrie began to trust herself further as our sessions progressed. Reflecting on this, gave her confidence, most especially on the more difficult days. She admitted she found it difficult to deal with flash backs and we used grounding techniques to take her back to the here and now. Relaxation techniques also helped gain a sense of control of her anxiety. As we came to the end of our time together, we looked at support from other organisations as Carrie now felt able to address further the impact of her early life experiences.

### **Not "Feeling Himself"**

37-year-old Will referred himself for counselling. Nervous and uncertain, this was the first time he had sought help with his emotional wellbeing, unsure whether he had 'done the right thing'. During assessment, Will conveyed that his usual struggles with low mood and lack of motivation had recently gotten worse and he had not been 'feeling himself' lately, reaching out for help in an effort to prevent this situation from getting worse. He was stuck in a 'dead-end' job he didn't enjoy but lacked confidence to apply for other positions. His anxiety was palpable in the room and he initially struggled to talk about himself, diverting into small talk about the town, other people etc. We spent several sessions building up trust and laying down a solid foundation and eventually were able to start peeling back the layers of Will's life, connecting past events with current difficulties.

As a young child, he had experienced the death by suspected suicide of a parent – something that was never talked about or processed in the family; there was no outlet for grief, confusion or anger. The remaining parent withdrew emotionally from Will and his sibling, meaning that he effectively lost both. From then on and into the present, he became a people pleaser, always looking out for everybody else's needs and neglecting his own. He learned to dismiss and detach from his emotions, a process that was never reversed. Alarming, Will had initially described his childhood as 'normal' and the parent's death as 'no big deal'. Throughout his formative years, he had felt 'other' and different – not wearing the right clothes, not being picked for football teams, labelled stupid for his dyslexia. He had internalised all and now, as an adult, had extremely low self-esteem, which I could sense when I was in his presence. Body posture, tone of voice, the struggle to keep eye contact all conveyed a sense of 'I'm sorry to take up space'. Will complained about the lack of respect from colleagues.

Initially appearing like a case of anxiety and depression, this case revealed itself to be complex, with significant childhood trauma, which the client himself had never acknowledged. Of the different approaches I used, Psycho-education was key. Validating the traumatic experiences of his child self and connecting them to current difficulties created important insights. This understanding seemed to bring some relief. We worked with the Inner Child, creating a felt sense

that the adult Will is now in a position to meet the needs of the child Will. Through role play, we also practiced how to act with greater confidence in daily life. A large sheet of paper served as a Vision Board, capturing the various 'ingredients' of a good life for Will.

There is much work that still needs doing, the 16 sessions we had are only the beginning. Our work gave Will the confidence to apply and interview for a different job and in our second last session he reported that he had been successful!

## **Evaluation Feedback**

### **What worked well?**

Client feedback was overwhelmingly positive about the service they received. They focused on the welcome and feeling of being safe, heard and supported.

*"This is the first time ever doing this, thinking of a service like this before I wouldn't have been in favour of it but I'm so glad I did. This has helped me to become myself again and think of my future as it becoming a bright happy place"*

### **The Welcome Received**

*"Lovely and calming environment, friendly and welcoming staff. Kind, empathetic, and empowering counsellor"*

*"Friendliness of staff, made it very easy to come back, welcoming"*

*"Staff are helpful, friendly and supportive"*

*"Excellent local service, easy to access and friendly/ confidential staff"*

*"I would like to thank each one and all of the staff of the Aisling Centre for their hard work and being there for me. I will never forget"*

*"Yet again I would like to thank everyone involved in providing the services in The Aisling Centre it has been the only proper support that I received throughout my journey of navigating my way through the health system to receive the help I needed"*

*"Aisling Centre offers an amazing service to our community. It is a beautiful, calming, peaceful environment. We are so blessed to have it. Staff are helpful, friendly and supportive"*

### **The Safe Space**

*"Very calm atmosphere, nice waiting areas, a feeling of tranquillity"*

*"Very relaxing environment, use of essential oils brilliant"*

*"Aisling Centre offers an amazing service to our community. It is a beautiful, calming, peaceful environment. We are so blessed to have it"*

*"Peaceful, friendly surroundings along with professional counsellor"*

*"The actual counselling and the building atmosphere were very relaxing"*

*"I really enjoyed my sessions. The whole place is very relaxing and welcoming"*

### **The Professional Service**

*"I love coming here each week to have a quiet safe space to offload. It has changed my life"*

*"Keep up the fantastic work you're all doing. This service has truly helped me in ways I couldn't have imagined"*

*"I was very grateful for the counselling I received and it certainly helped me at the time. The counsellor was very easy to talk to and she provided me with strategies which I still use"*



*“Discreet, professional and no fuss”*  
*“Peaceful, friendly surroundings along with professional counsellor”*

### **Being listened to without judgement**

*“Being able to talk to someone who listened and didn't judge”*  
*“Worked well for me, I feel my voice got heard. I feel the pain is getting out of me”*  
*“The space to talk and share my innermost turmoil. The kindness, compassion and understanding of my counsellor”*  
*“Everything about my experience has been great and would have been lost without the service provided here”*  
*“Helpful conversation, Compassion shown. Had a laugh!”*

### **The benefits of having attending counselling**

*“Feel my mood has improved. Relationship within my family have got better. Things are easier now. Understand myself better”*  
*“I was really low at the start. My health has been brought back together”*  
*“Thank you for this experience. I can now understand the things that I need to work on/develop and I feel a lot more confident in myself to do so”*  
*“The service at Aisling Centre is excellent. I don't know where I would be today without this help”*  
*“Thank you very much, I have thoroughly enjoyed my experience here and all of the wisdom I have gained. Thank you for being a valuable part of my journey”*  
*“I can I realise now, express emotions much better than I thought I could. I feel I've achieved something in being able to get my own identity back. Empowered/complete sessions”*  
*“Made a big difference to me. My family have noticed that I'm "glowing" again”*  
*“It is very relaxing and supportive, it helps to clear your mind and getting things off your mind”*  
*“I am very happy to have availed of this service, I feel so much better”*  
*“It helped me to look at my issues in a more positive way”*  
*“I feel so grateful for having this opportunity. It is my hope that everyone should be able to access this service”*

## Aisling

Aisling has endured a challenging early life though her bright smile, colourful clothing and cheerful demeanour suggest otherwise.

Raised in the countryside with financial difficulties, Aisling's father alternated between working and drinking while her mother was perpetually angry and bitter. Aisling received more attention from her father which exacerbated her mother's harshness towards her. She describes herself as a lonely child.

From a young age Aisling experienced sexual abuse from a neighbour. When she tried to tell her mother, she was disbelieved allowing the abuse to continue. At 16 she was pregnant leading to a rejection from her family. She moved in with a seemingly supportive boyfriend. The initial support he had shown her soon faded and by the time Aisling was 18 she was being regularly physically abused whilst also caring for two small children.

A back injury sustained by an assault brought her in contact with the GP but she was too afraid to disclose the abuse and the prescription for antidepressants and pain relief allowed her some sense of ease.

Aisling's main aim throughout was always to protect and care for her children and without any support network she couldn't see a way out. To escape the misery, she began to take more and more pain relief as she felt that was the only way she could get through. Eventually this came to a head and after 12 years a referral was made to social services from the school.

When social services initially got involved, Aisling was convinced that his threats would come true and she would lose her children. She was shocked to discover at this point that Social Services did have an awareness of the bigger picture and relieved when their support enabled her to leave this abusive relationship.

Since leaving Aisling had been involved and supported by the addiction services and Women's Aid and had made many positive changes. She felt that she wanted to address and reflect upon the many events that had brought her to this point and her support worker had suggested the Aisling Centre.

Many clients approach counselling with a fear that they will be made to talk about something that they do not wish to discuss and that counselling involves a necessity to open up completely and tell everything. Our assessment interview allows us to gather some information about both a client's background and their hopes and aims for their counselling sessions. Aisling had talked briefly around the experience of abuse at a young age but decided that this was not the time or place to talk about this. Aisling was more focussed on the recent traumatic events around the separation and the rebuilding of her life. She had completed a controlled reduction of her medication with the help of the GP and was ready to talk. Most of our sessions were focussed on Aisling gaining an appreciation of her survival and parenting skills and looking at what hopes she had for herself and her children in the future.

When she finished her sessions, she reflected that being able to choose what she talked about in sessions had been really helpful and that she was now thinking that when she was more settled in

her new accommodation it might be time for her to return and address her early childhood experiences

### **Areas for Improvement**

Overall, the feedback related to accessibility in terms of physical access to the building (lots of stairs) and the length of waiting times.

*“Accessibility - managed the stairs but would have preferred not to”*

*“Perhaps accessibility but otherwise excellent”*

*“Accessibility initially but alternative room worked well”*

*“There is a long wait to see someone”*

Unfortunately, changing these situations are outside our gift. We have tried to make the building as accessible as possible including the use of a stair lift but we understand the challenges and where possible we worked to change appointments to more accessible rooms.

In terms of waiting times, we are seeing an ever-growing demand for services amid a very challenging economic environment and are very grateful to the local community for their support in helping us meet this challenge with all donations received used to support the counselling service. Without this support waiting times would be much longer.

The challenge of finding suitable outreach venues continues and for some client's external noise was very distracting.

Another very practical suggestion was made to have *“Toys in waiting area”* this we have put in place and it is well received.

### **General Feedback**

*“Aisling Centre go above and beyond to help people. My sessions have been very educational and I now have a better understanding of trauma and it's lasting impacts. I see things differently now. I am grateful to have been signposted to the Regional Trauma Network”*

*“It has helped me realise a lot about myself and has helped me to go and seek out medical intervention which I'd never have done without it. Lovely staff and very kind”*

*“I think the service provided have helped me sort out how I was feeling as before I felt totally overwhelmed. I feel a lot better able to cope and prioritise life”*

*“My therapist has made my first counselling experience easy for me to open up to and embrace and have found it extremely helpful”*

## **BETH**

Beth is a 10-year-old girl who attended therapy due to family Separation. This not only included parental separation but also having been removed from the care of her parents during her infant years. Both parents have a history of substance disorder, but her mum has been in recovery for a number of years and her daughter had been returned to her care. Beth has experienced a lot of trauma during her childhood, leaving her to struggle with issues of abandonment, rejection and low self-worth.

During the initial assessment, both Beth and her mum, talked about Beth's experiences to date and the impact they have had on her. They talked about Beth's issues around trust, feeling rejected by a number of family members and feelings of self-blame and shame. They both spoke about how all of this would create high levels of anxiety for her, resulting in frequent emotional outbursts.

As the therapy progressed, Beth slowly gained trust in me, something she said was hard it is for her to do with anybody. Beth and her mum stated that whilst she found the sessions very emotionally challenging sometimes, she knew they were helping her, not only to openly talk about things she would not contemplate sharing anywhere else, but also finding ways to manage her anxiety and to deal with those around her that were adding to it. During her therapy, these feelings were continually retriggered due to current family incidents, hence increasing her anxiety levels. However, she increasingly used the calming techniques that she had learned in the sessions. She also did a lot of CBT work around managing her thoughts.

Beth and her mum often clashed around their conflicting ideas on dealing with family members and incidents that were emotionally harmful to Beth. Beth often found it hard to understand decisions made by her mum in order to protect her, sometimes being strongly influenced by unhealthy family relationships. We were able to give Beth the space to process this, bringing her to a better understanding of the harm that can come from toxic relationships and coming to her own conclusions on what was needed to protect her.

As Beth approached the end of her therapy, both Beth and her mum talked about how it had helped Beth to face the issues she had been experiencing and to gain a deeper understanding of how other peoples' behaviors can negatively impact on an individual, destroying their self-belief. Beth learnt ways to manage the negative influences around her, helping her to feel more in control of her own being, which they both reported had significantly reduced her anxiety.