



# Briefing for Senedd debate on tackling mental health inequalities

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## Introduction

This briefing is for Members of the Senedd (MSs) in preparation for the debate on the Health and Social Care Committee report [Connecting the dots: tackling mental health inequalities in Wales](#) on Wednesday 3 May.

## Key points to consider:

- We welcome the Committee's report and the calls for the Welsh Government to focus on tackling the wider causes of poor mental health and develop a mental health strategy that recognises inequalities as a barrier to improving the wellbeing of the population.
- NHS leaders recognise the significant impact the COVID-19 pandemic had on the mental health and wellbeing of the population and how some people have been disproportionately affected, including older people, families living in poverty, those who identify as LGBTQ+ and BAME communities.
- It is anticipated that there will be an increase in demand for mental health and wellbeing services over the coming years as a result of the pandemic and the cost-of-living crisis, as people with pre-existing mental health conditions and the general public have been impacted by self-isolation, financial insecurity, bereavement, and increases in substance abuse and domestic abuse.
- Existing societal inequalities are also likely to be exacerbated, with certain groups being disproportionately affected. Health inequalities are the result of many and varied factors and the NHS alone does not hold all the levers required to create the necessary conditions for good health and wellbeing. We're calling for coherent cross-sector and cross-government action to tackle mental health inequalities which should include addressing the social determinants of mental health.
- To improve population health and mental wellbeing further, it is vital that meaningful person-centred performance measures and frameworks are developed which focus on patient experience, clinical outcomes, prevention, whole-system collaboration and applying value-based healthcare.
- We welcome the emphasis on social prescribing within the Committee report. Social prescribing, whether through the arts and culture, physical activity or nature, can have a positive impact on people's mental health and wellbeing.
- It is vital that providing care to people is based on individuals' need and as a society we must value physical and mental health equally.

## Impact of the pandemic on mental health

NHS leaders have highlighted the significant impact the pandemic has had on the mental health and wellbeing of the population. During the first wave, it was widely believed any psychological distress experienced by the majority of the population would be short lived and a natural response to an unprecedented situation. However, there was also certainty that for some groups the effects would be more severe and long lasting. [Evidence](#) indicated that these groups could be those directly affected by COVID-19, those at heightened risk from being locked down at home and those already identified as being at greater risk of poor mental health.

[The Influence of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Mental Well-Being and Psychological Distress: Impact Upon a Single Country](#) examined the psychological wellbeing and mental distress of the Welsh population during the first and second lockdown periods. It found that levels of psychological wellbeing were lower in the second survey compared to the first, with wellbeing continuing to be lower in women, young adults and those from deprived areas. It also found the wellbeing gap between young and old continued to broaden.

## Inequity of prevalence, access and outcomes

The Commission for Equality in Mental Health indicated in its report '[Mental Health for All](#)' that chances of experiencing poor mental health are known to be closely linked and mirror a range of social, economic, ethnic and health inequalities. As outlined in the section above, these inequalities have been exacerbated by the pandemic. However, we know there are groups of people who are disproportionately affected by poor mental health and subsequent suicide risk in Wales, including people living in poverty, children and young people, women, older people, LGBTQ+ individuals and Black, ethnic minority groups.

Mental health conditions also often interact with and include biological, psychological, environmental, economic and social elements. The clearest evidence of this is the well-established overlap between those who experience mental health conditions and indicators of poverty e.g. poor housing, low income and poor educational attainment.

Public Health Wales NHS Trust (PHW) has outlined the interconnected nature of some of the factors which can impact on mental health and wellbeing. In its report, '[Unpaid Carers in Wales: The determinants of mental wellbeing](#)' it noted that "*socio-economic position (i.e. economic status, level of education and income) can be both a cause and a consequence of poor mental wellbeing. A lower socio-economic position is associated with lower mental wellbeing. However, mental wellbeing can also impact socio-economic position*". PHW has also explored the impact of wider determinants and population characteristics on wellbeing outcomes for young people during the COVID-19 pandemic in a report entitled '[Children and young people's mental well-being during the COVID-19 pandemic](#)'.

Our members also expressed concern around the potential increase in mental health issues among the population as a result of the economic crisis arising from the pandemic and cost-of-living crisis. As highlighted in the PHW report, '[Cost of living crisis: a public health emergency](#)', the crisis is having a significant and wide-ranging negative impact on people's mental health. It is likely that those facing the difficult decision to eat or heat their homes will

require the support of the NHS, and so preventative action is required to alleviate any potential demand and to ensure inequalities are not exacerbated.

However, the NHS alone does not hold all the levers required to create the necessary conditions for good health and wellbeing as health inequalities arise from the social and economic inequalities that shape the conditions in which people live. As highlighted within our Health and Wellbeing Alliance briefing, [Making the difference: Tackling health inequalities in Wales](#), meaningful progress will require coherent, strategic efforts across all sectors and Welsh Government departments to close the gap. We call on the Welsh Government to take action to tackle mental health inequalities by developing a delivery plan that outlines measures being taken across all government departments. It should also include how success will be measured and evaluated, and how individual organisations should collaborate across Wales to reduce health inequalities and tackle the cost-of-living crisis.

## NHS workforce

Health and care workers could be at greater risk of burnout and post-traumatic stress disorder due to the nature of their work and experience of responding to the pandemic and caring for patients. As highlighted within our briefing, [Supporting Welsh NHS staff wellbeing throughout COVID-19](#), NHS organisations across Wales have introduced a range of initiatives during the pandemic to support staff health and wellbeing.

## Improvements in patient outcomes and experience

For a number of years, NHS leaders have recommended a shift away from targets that focus on process to ones concerned with improvements in patient outcomes and experience.

As highlighted within our Senedd election briefing, [Valuing, engaging and delivering: A health and care system for future generations](#), to improve population health and wellbeing further, it is vital that meaningful person-centred performance measures and frameworks are developed across the NHS and local government which focus on patient experience, clinical outcomes, prevention, whole-system collaboration and applying value-based healthcare.

The current NHS performance targets focus too specifically on acute and secondary care and do not always support the system to grow and redesign. While targets have a role to play, we must also look at the bigger picture and instigate a whole system change in the way treatment is delivered, how services are provided, and population health measured. A key driver within this is the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015. Taking a preventative approach will be key to address mental health issues and their underlying causes and funding should be focused on more tier 0 prevention support prior to people accessing statutory services.

## Emphasis on social prescribing

We welcome the emphasis on social prescribing within the Committee report and the benefits social prescribing, including the arts, physical activity and nature, can have on people's mental health and wellbeing.

In relation to arts and culture, over recent years Wales has led the way in developing arts and health initiatives which enhance the lives of the most vulnerable in society, keeping people healthy and close to their communities for longer. [Research](#) highlights that access to arts opportunities and participation in the arts can dramatically improve health outcomes and wellbeing, counter inequalities and increase social engagement. As a supplement to medicine and care, the evidence suggests that engagement with the arts can improve a person's physical and mental wellbeing. The benefits of arts activities are being seen beyond traditional settings, and their role in supporting communities and individuals who would otherwise be excluded is increasingly being recognised.

## Further information

If you would like further information on any of the issues raised in the briefing, please contact Nesta Lloyd – Jones on [nesta.lloyd-jones@welshconfed.org](mailto:nesta.lloyd-jones@welshconfed.org)

The Welsh NHS Confederation represents the seven local health boards, three NHS trusts (Velindre University NHS Trust, Welsh Ambulance Services NHS Trust and Public Health Wales NHS Trust), and two special health authorities (Digital Health and Care Wales and Health Education and Improvement Wales). We also host NHS Wales Employers.