

Mental health inequalities inquiry

Welsh Youth Parliament focus group

10 October 2022

Background

1. On 10 October 2022, six Welsh Youth Parliament Members (“WYPMs”) participated in a focus group as part of the Health and Social Care Committee’s [inquiry into mental health inequalities](#). The questions WYPMs were asked to discuss, and a summary of the issues they raised, are set out below.

Question 1: What things contribute to poor mental health and wellbeing among children and young people?

2. School and exam pressure. One participant suggested that this could be alleviated by the new curriculum. Another suggested that teachers need to be more aware and considerate of issues that children and young people may be experiencing at home, and the impact this can have on them when they are in school.

3. Peer pressure, bullying and negative body image. Participants spoke about children and young people being bullied because of their disabilities, age, gender, sexual orientation, and additional learning needs such as dyslexia. If staff members do not have the training or expertise to support children and young people, or protect them from bullying or harassment, this can exacerbate the situation further, as school can cease to be the safe space that people need to be able to rely on.

4. Lack of understanding and education for people of all age groups about inclusion and equality.

5. Poverty, the rising costs of living, and the resulting uncertainty about the future and instability in households’ circumstances. One participant spoke about the importance of place



and the local environment. Often in more deprived areas the local area is drab with poor facilities and this has a negative impact on people's mental health and resilience.

6. Poor service from Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services ("CAMHS") was described as a contributing factor to poor mental health, with some participants saying that children and young people saw "no point" in going to CAMHS because the support received would be inadequate. (See also paragraphs 16-17).

7. One participant raised language barriers, long waiting times for asylum claims to be processed, and a lack of knowledge about what support may be available as factors affecting children and young people who are seeking asylum, or whose family members are seeking asylum.

Question 2: What things help 'protect' children and young people's wellbeing – what helps keep you mentally well?

8. Participants talked about the adverse and ongoing impact of lockdowns and school closures during the pandemic, and the need to encourage children and young people to get back into the habit of going out to meet friends and socialise in person rather than just communicating through screens and social media.

9. The impact of sport and physical activity on mental health and wellbeing post-lockdown was emphasised, including the benefits of participation, coaching, socialisation and learning new skills.

10. School was described as a safe space by some participants, and many spoke about the importance of being back in school now that COVID restrictions have been lifted. However, participants described a mixed picture in terms of what different schools were offering; some said that their schools had prioritised offering extracurricular activities such as sports to help promote positive mental health and wellbeing. They added that a range of activities should be provided to ensure that all children and young people's needs are met, including, for example, art and music activities.

11. Family and friends were raised by all participants as key to staying mentally well. Spending time with family and friends helps create opportunities to relax, and "enjoy being young with little pressure and responsibilities". It was also suggested that this is valuable in building confidence, skills and resilience for later life.

12. Youth clubs and groups provide good opportunities for children and young people to socialise with their friends and make new friends. This was described as a way of ensuring that

all young people have the opportunity to safeguard their mental health and wellbeing. One participant described the joy that children and young people who were seeking asylum found when they went to a weekly youth club that provided opportunities to learn languages and spend time with their family and friends. Others spoke about the need to ensure that there was sufficient provision of youth clubs and groups across all parts of Wales and for all age groups—there was a suggestion that clubs and groups may be focused more on younger age groups and that teenagers may feel “forgotten”.

13. Participants also spoke about the value of stability and certainty, including building networks and trusting relationships with teachers and school staff over time.

Question 3: When you need to access support for your mental health, how well do services meet your needs? E.g. How easy is it to access support, and is the right kind of support available in the right places?

14. Provision is patchy and inconsistent across schools, health boards and Wales, and across the type of services that people need. Issues can include long waiting lists, limited options in terms of the available services (“sitting down with a counsellor is not what everyone needs”), services not being available when they are needed (“services are only available Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays because of funding”), and a lack of focus on preventative services rather than just meeting needs once circumstances escalate. Some schools have been innovative in how they have approached mental health support, but it was suggested this may be because there is not enough guidance available, and that insufficient overall school budget allocations may mean that funding mental health results in other important school services being reduced.

15. Some participants felt that since the pandemic teachers are better prepared to recognise and respond to mental health issues that children and young people may experience, and to provide good advice, help and support. However, while good training for teachers is important, it was suggested that this should not be an alternative to having the right support and expertise in place to help children and young people just because there is not enough funding. One participant spoke about the role played by school welfare officers in supporting children and young people in building and sustaining good mental health and dealing with mental health problems.

16. CAMHS waiting lists and the level of service was described as one of the most significant issues. Participants described children and young people waiting for two years to be seen, and then being discharged without receiving help or support. One participant said that children and young people told them that CAMHS “never helps” and that it was seen almost as a joke

because people's experiences were so poor. One participant said that a young person had told them that after a long wait for help "CAMHS said that I should go for a walk or take a bath when I was telling them I was going to kill myself".

17. There were particular issues for people with disabilities in accessing CAMHS services; one participant said that young people with a disability or who were autistic or had ADHD often felt that their mental health issue was dismissed as just being part of their disability or neurodivergence.

18. Participants discussed where services were provided. They suggested that it would be helpful to have a range of options, as while in-school services can be helpful, it can be difficult or embarrassing for some people to access services in that way. Suggestions for services to help with mental health problems and support positive mental health included an anonymous online chat with a support service, and community hubs similar to the dementia hub in the Quadrant in Swansea (although there was some discussion about balancing accessible locations, privacy, and places that children and young people would feel comfortable going to). It was also suggested that when services are provided in schools, this needs to be in a comfortable environment not a classroom setting.

19. The language used to discuss mental health and wellbeing needs to be sensitive to the fact that different people will have different preferences and needs.

Question 4: What do you think is the most important thing the Welsh Government should do to improve mental health and wellbeing among children and young people?

20. Teacher training is important, but participants also highlighted the need to educate children, young people and families so that people are able to support their families and friends with their mental health, and help them to find other sources of support if they need them.

21. Services need to be tailored to meet individuals' needs – they can't be one size fits all.

22. There should be a one-stop shop approach, as there are many different services and organisations (including third sector) available, and people may not know where to go. People need to have one place to go where they can explain once what they are experiencing, and what they think might help them, so that they can be signposted to suggestions that might help.

23. Mental health support should be available where people already go, including sports clubs and youth groups. This could be done by training people as welfare officers, for example.

24. Services like the Samaritans may not feel accessible or approachable to children and young people. There need to be similar services available, but focused on what children and young people need and advertised in ways that appeal to children and young people. This could be linked to social media to make sure people know that there is somewhere available and welcoming to them.

25. It's important to talk more about the causes of mental health problems and about prevention. This will help to reduce stigma and help keep people well by reducing the risk that people won't seek help because "they aren't ill enough". But, this has to be done in a way that recognises that "everyone's journey is different", and that different people will respond in different ways to the circumstances they face.