

Pwyllgor Newid Hinsawdd, yr Amgylchedd a Seilwaith /  
Climate Change, Environment and Infrastructure Committee  
Blaenoriaethau ar gyfer y Chweched Senedd / Priorities for the Sixth Senedd  
PR91  
Ymateb gan Coleg Brenhinol y Seiciatryddion / Evidence from Royal College of  
Psychiatrists

We are pleased to be given the opportunity to respond to the committee's consultation on its forward workplan.

In May of this year, the Royal College of Psychiatrists declared a climate and ecological emergency. The disruption to life posed by climate and ecological degradation is a crisis which presents an unprecedented threat to human health, and the College calls for immediate, radical action to address these issues.

Whilst the therapeutic and mental health benefits of nature are well-known, there is also clear evidence that increasing rates of climate-related hazards are exacerbating existing mental health problems and leading to psychological distress and the onset of new episodes of mental illness (Beaglehole et al, 2018). We also know that vulnerable groups are disproportionately affected by Climate change, pollution and biodiversity loss, including persons with pre-existing mental illness and children.

In addition, extreme weather events damage health infrastructure, and impact upon the functioning of health and social systems (IPCC, 2014). Heat waves, cyclones, floods, hurricanes and droughts are all increasing in frequency and severity as a result of human-induced climate change (IPCC, 2014). These events, when combined with sea-level rise, wildfires and land use change all contribute to livelihood losses, uncertainty and, in the longer term, forced migration.

The mental health effects of floods are significant, with one UK study of flooded households showing that 20% of participants who had been flooded had probable depression, 28.3% had probable anxiety and 36% had probable PTSD at one year (Waite et al, 2017). Follow-up studies of this cohort have continued to show a persistently elevated prevalence of these mental disorders several years later (Mulchandani et al, 2020).

There is evidence of an association between long-term exposure to air pollution and depression and anxiety as well as a possible association between short term exposure and suicide (Braithwaite et al, 2019) and dementia (Chen et al, 2017). Exposure to traffic-related air pollution is associated with increased mental health service-use among people recently diagnosed with psychotic and mood

disorders such as schizophrenia and depression, a study on data from over 13,000 people has found. The research, published in the British Journal of Psychiatry, found that increased use of mental health services reflects mental illness severity, suggesting that initiatives to lessen air pollution could improve outcomes for those with these disorders and reduce costs of the healthcare needed to support them.

### **Proposals for the Committee's Priorities**

We will use this opportunity to call on the committee to make the mental health impacts of climate change a central consideration and area of focus over the next 12-18 months. We feel that the Committee can help support this by;

- **Undertaking research into how the mental health of different vulnerable groups are affected by climate-related hazards, pollution and biodiversity loss, as well as the co-benefits to mental health of taking action against climate change, biodiversity loss and pollution.**
- **Calling on the Welsh Government to base decisions on changes to land and water usage on tools which include assessment of prospective impacts to mental and physical health.**
- **Calling on the Welsh Government to introduce a new Clean Air Act for Wales which commits to tackling air pollution as a public health imperative.** A new Act that will protect our 'right to breathe' by enshrining World Health Organization (WHO) air quality guidelines with the mandatory requirement to produce a statutory air quality strategy every five years, which will be assessed against legal air quality guidelines by an independent monitoring and assessment board.
- **Championing a model of mental healthcare that is protective and preventative rather than reactive.** The NHS across all UK nations is a major contributor to carbon emissions. A sustainable and positive vision of mental health services will require a greater understanding, adoption and integration of preventative principles and interventions.

We hope that these suggestions will be useful to the Committee as it determines its key priorities. We would be pleased to discuss the areas we have outlined in this letter in further detail if that would be helpful to the Committee. If you have any further questions, please don't hesitate to contact us.

Kind Regards,

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