

Cynulliad Cenedlaethol Cymru
Y Pwyllgor Iechyd, Gofal Cymdeithasol
a Chwaraeon
Ymchwiliad i iechyd meddwl yng
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Ymateb gan Samaritans Cymru

National Assembly for Wales
Health, Social Care and Sport
Committee
Inquiry into Mental health in Policing
and Police Custody
Evidence from Samaritans Cymru

National Assembly for Wales: Mental Health in policing and police custody

Samaritans Cymru response

Samaritans' vision is that fewer people die by suicide. We work to achieve this vision by making it our mission to alleviate emotional distress and reduce the incidence of suicidal feelings and suicidal behaviour. A core focus of our work is the identification of high-risk groups for suicide and working collaboratively across Wales to reach out and help those who are struggling to cope.

In Wales and the UK, there is an increased risk of suicide and self-harm during periods of detention and we are working with police forces across Wales to mitigate this.

In 2017/18, there were 57 apparent suicides following police custody in England and Wales. Of these, 55 were men and 2 were women. The average age of those who died was 40 and the most common age was between 41 and 50, followed by 31 to 40. The youngest person was 18-years-old. Significantly, nearly three-quarters of the people had known mental health concerns and two had been detained under Section 136 of the Mental Health Act. Other mental health concerns included; depression, schizophrenia, post-traumatic stress disorder, bi-polar, psychosis, previous thoughts or incidents of suicide attempts and self-harm. 14 apparent suicides happened on the day of release from police custody, 28 were one day after release, and 15 happened two days after release. Police forces are not always told about a suicide after detention in custody and therefore we can presume there may be more deaths than those included in this data.

Samaritans Case Study – Partnership working with the Police Service

The South Wales Valleys include communities with some of the highest levels of socioeconomic deprivation in Wales and the whole of the UK. We know there are barriers to the use of Samaritans' services by those on low incomes and those in most need are often the least likely to seek help from any type of service.

In 2015, the Waterloo Foundation funded the Samaritans to develop the 'South Wales Valleys Pilot Project' over three years. At this time, Samaritans currently had no branch located in the South Wales Valleys area. The project aimed to:

- Improve understanding of the emotional support needs of the Valleys' communities
- Increase awareness of existing Samaritans services
- Increase access to and availability of the Samaritans emotional support service by providing it locally
- Increase awareness of the importance of help-seeking and of ways to enhance emotional resilience; and
- Share its learning widely so it could be used to develop a UK and Ireland wide Samaritans service

During the first year of the project, we formed an invaluable partnership with South Wales Police. Project staff worked with South Wales Police to develop a system of custody cell referrals in Merthyr Tydfil Bridewell Suite.

- If an officer suspects that a detainee may benefit from receiving emotional support, they can offer the individual a phone call with Samaritans directly in the holding cell over the cell's intercom.
- Custody sergeants are able to offer those leaving custody a phone call from Samaritans in the next 24 to 48 hours, as well as Samaritans promotional material to take with them.
- In addition to the referral service, weekly emotional support shifts are run by the project in which volunteers visit the custody suite to provide face to face emotional support to detainees wanting this service.
- All 42 cells in Merthyr Bridewell have been spray-painted with our Samaritans phone number and key message (funded by Chief Constable of South Wales Police).

This partnership has proven to be highly successful. In February 2017, Channel 4 news produced a television feature of the project which resulted in very positive feedback and further collaboration. We have been given access to people who are desperately in need of emotional support at a very difficult time. This means we can be there for them when they need it which is so important for this high-risk group.

"I've been a Samaritans volunteer for over 20 years and the shifts in custody are the most meaningful I have ever done" – **Samaritan Volunteer**

The project is very worthwhile as the people coming into contact with us aren't necessarily those who would usually pick up the phone or approach our local branches for emotional support. Volunteers from the project speak to more

individuals who express suicidal feelings than the national Samaritans average (30% compared to 22%). Because we're here for them at this stage of their lives, it means that we can offer support and sometimes open the door to them seeking emotional support in the future, therefore increasing the chance of building resilience.

The partnership with South Wales Police was highlighted in the Swansea University evaluation of the Samaritans South Wales Valleys Project and stated collaboration with the South Wales Police 'had resulted in direct Samaritans support given to vulnerable individuals in custody suites but also a possible "cultural shift" in the attitude of police officers towards matters of emotional health.

"We were talking about a meeting [project member] had with South Wales Police; and how the police were now as a result of, I think some of the things we've done, talking very easily in terms of the vulnerability of the people they are dealing with. And that's a cultural change that is immense. Absolutely immense... .. right from the chief constable down, people are now talking about the vulnerability of those who come into custody... ..and are willing to invest time and effort and training in doing something about that." - **Samaritans volunteer**

This change in attitudes was affirmed by a police officer who had direct experience of working with the project. This officer also highlighted how, for the force, the collaboration was doubly beneficial, in that it not only helped to those in custody in need of emotional support, but also relieved pressure on staff:

"We were very naive about what their aims were and what they did. Um, so, you know, the training that we had from [project member] was very good in—in, um, increasing our understanding and seeing how they could fit in with us and we could work together, really to—One, to alleviate, uh, pressure on police staff; but also then assist the people in the cells, 'cause a lot of the time it is just about, um you know, talking their problems out... .. [A] lot of the time is—is—you know, a low level intervention that Samaritans can give just by speaking to people over the phones—um, will—will make their time whilst they're in custody that much bearable [sic], that much easier... .. it makes the whole process run a lot smoother, it may well have prevented people self-harming in the cells—so it has big impact [sic] then on staffing as well for police, 'cause if we—if by having a low level intervention then it prevents, uh sort of escalated behaviour that would tie up staff for a great deal of time." - **Police officer**

Due to of the success of the Valleys Project in Merthyr Tydfil, this initiative had also been rolled out and extended in other branch areas in Wales, including Gwent, Swansea, Rhyl, Powys and Bridgend.

In addition to this, a number of branches, including Bangor, Swansea and Powys, provide emotional support to their local Approved Premises (AP). Due to the increased risk of emotional distress, self-harm and suicide during detention, it is crucial we encourage local partnership working and collaboration between police, health and third sector agencies. We also need to extend the provision of quality

mental health and suicide awareness training for all staff in order to promote a compassionate working culture in which they are better able to respond to those in distress.