

Conwy and Denbighshire PSB Mental Wellbeing Priority _ Coronavirus Pandemic March to August 2020 supplement

Situation

The coronavirus pandemic has resulted in an unprecedented situation whereby in order to respond to the health emergency, and where possible mitigate its effects, a number of complex and challenging decisions have been made in rapid and compressed timeframes. Of key significance has been an extended period of 'lockdown' from late Mar 2020, whereby a number of businesses and educational settings have closed resulting in home working and family isolation.

Restrictions are slowly being lifted. However, risk of them being reintroduced, according to localised and national disease incidence, remains and the country will have to live with the effects of coronavirus and it will remain a challenge for the foreseeable future.

One of the main concerns of the pandemic is the impact that lockdown measures and anxiety over contracting the disease is having on the mental health and wellbeing of people of all ages. The impacts of the pandemic may exacerbate existing mental health and wellbeing issues or trigger new ones.

Background

Risk factors for poor mental health in adulthood include unemployment, lower income, debt, stressful life events and inadequate housing (Royal College of Psychiatrists, 2010). All of these factors have been heightened during the initial pandemic response which has seen job losses, reduction in income, uncertainty over incomes and finances. This has been added to by staying at home, making it more difficult to escape from stressful and abusive relationships, access support networks and services, whilst routine activities and coping mechanisms, such as going to school, exercise forums and socialising, have been placed on hold or diminished.

An Office of National Statistics study looked at depressive symptoms in the same group of self-reporting adults prior and during the pandemic response (Office for National Statistics, 2020). The study highlights a doubling of those experiencing some form of depression (19.2%) during the pandemic in June 2020 compared to 9.7% prior to the pandemic in July 2019. One in eight (12.9%) developed moderate to severe depressive symptoms during the pandemic, with only 1 in 25 adults (3.5%), seeing an improvement over the same period. The study found that adults aged 16-39 years, females, and those unable to afford an unexpected expense, were the most likely to experience some form of depression during the pandemic (Office for National Statistics 2020).

The Health Foundation (2020) identified the following drivers of worsening mental health during the pandemic:

- Job and financial losses
- Social isolation
- Housing insecurity and quality
- Working in a front-line service
- Loss of coping mechanisms – contact/.exercise/work
- Reduce access to mental health services.

Factors influencing mental wellbeing

Mental health problems are more prevalent in areas of high deprivation, unemployment and low levels of educational attainment. Individuals in lower socioeconomic groups have been found to be disproportionately impacted by coronavirus due to factors such as a low skilled employment and pre-existing health condition. A survey by Public Health Wales (2020) found that those in the lower socioeconomic groups are more likely to be very worried about their mental health, with 30% of people in the most deprived fifth being very worried compared to 17% in the most affluent fifth.

People in lower socioeconomic groups are also more likely to be very worried about their job/unable to find one (18%) compared to people in more affluent groups (12%) and are more likely to be very worried about their finances; 23% compared to 14%.

Denbighshire has the highest proportion (12 LSOAs) of LSOAs in the most deprived 10% LSOAs in Wales; Conwy has 6 LSOAs in the most deprived 10% LSOAs in Wales. Rhyl West 2 and Rhyl West 1 in Denbighshire are the most deprived areas in Wales according to the Welsh Index of Multiple Deprivation (Table 1).

Table 1: Percentage of LSOAs by deprivation fifth, Betsi Cadwaladr UHB & unitary authorities, 2019

	Most deprived 10% LSOAs in Wales (ranks 1 - 191) (2)	Most deprived 20% LSOAs in Wales (ranks 1 - 382) (3)	Most deprived 30% LSOAs in Wales (ranks 1 - 573) (4)	Most deprived 50% LSOAs in Wales (ranks 1 - 955) (5)
Betsi Cadwaladr UHB	5	11	20	38
Isle of Anglesey	2	14	18	39
Gwynedd	3	5	8	34
Conwy	6	13	20	41
Denbighshire	12	16	22	47
Flintshire	3	11	20	32
Wrexham	7	12	28	41

Source: Welsh Government, WIMD 2019

Research by MIND found that loneliness was a key factor in poor mental health during lockdown. Feeling of loneliness have made nearly two thirds of people's mental health worsen during the last month (MIND 2020).

A Public health Wales survey (2020) during lockdown found that people in the most deprived groups are more likely to report feeling isolated (29%) compared with the most affluent (18%). Prior to the pandemic, in Denbighshire and Conwy, 14.1% and 14.2% respectively, of people reported feeling lonely; amongst the lowest percentage in Wales and below the national (16.7%) and BCUHB regional average (15.5%). The survey also found that younger age groups and female gender significantly reported the negative impact of isolation.

Table 2: Percentage of people who feel lonely, 2016/17-2017/18

	%
Wales	16.7
Betsi Cadwaladr UHB	15.5
Isle of Anglesey	17.2
Gwynedd	15.5
Conwy	14.2
Denbighshire	14.1
Flintshire	12.6
Wrexham	19.8

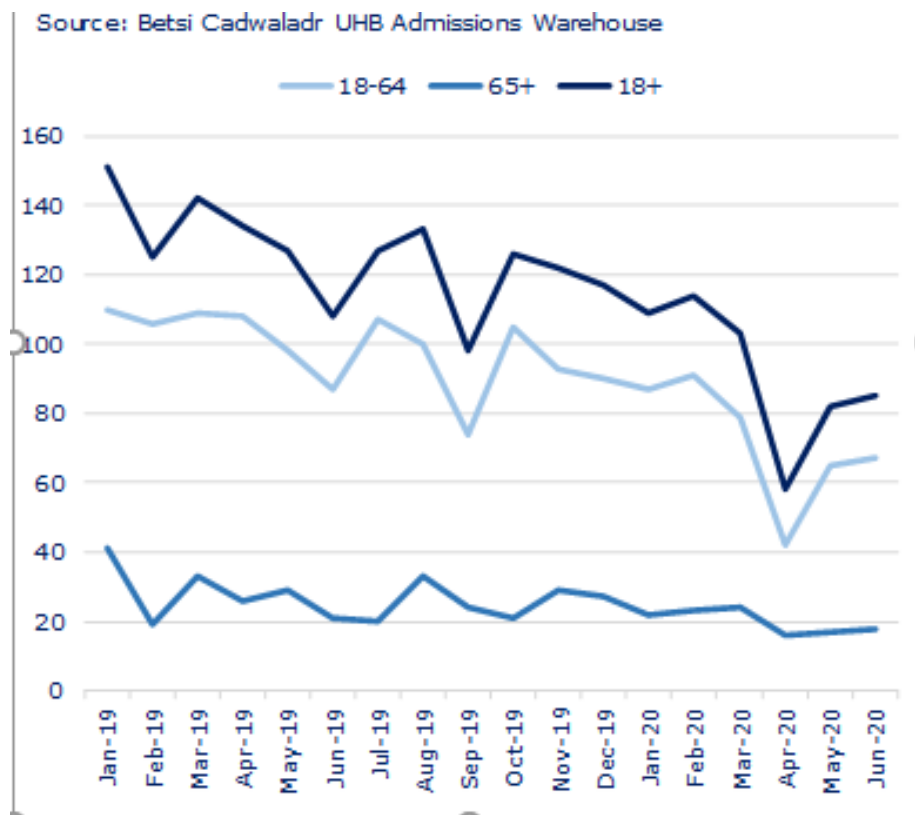
Source: Public Health Wales, PHOF

A survey of UK mental health doctors on the impact of the pandemic on mental health services conducted by The Royal College of Psychiatrists had 1,300 responses and showed that 43% of psychiatrists had seen an increase in their urgent and emergency caseload and 45% had seen a fall in their routine appointments (The Royal College of Psychiatrists 2020).

The psychiatrists expressed concern that many patients were staying away from mental health services until they reach crisis point. There was a concern that self-isolation, shielding, school closures and fear of visiting hospitals during lockdown were impacting on the numbers of patients accessing treatment for mental health.

Figure 1 shows the number of adults admitted into BCUHB adult mental health wards between January 2019 and June 2020. There was a rapid drop off in 18-65 year old admissions in Mar 20, starting to rise again in May 20.

Figure 1. Number of admissions into mental health wards(excluding learning disability and forensic units), persons aged 18 years and over, Betsi Cadwaladr UHB – 1st January 2019 to 30 June 2020.



A survey of 2,111 young people by Young Minds looked at the impact of coronavirus on young people with mental health needs and their ability to access support during the pandemic (Young Minds, 2020). In the survey 32% of respondents agreed that the coronavirus had made their mental health much worse; 51% agreed it had made a bit worse; 9% reported no difference in their mental health. The three most common concerns about coping during the pandemic were isolation/loneliness; not having enough food/supplies; and managing their mental health or deterioration in mental health.

Only a small proportion of respondents (1%) reported their mental health had become much better during the pandemic and 6% reported their mental health had become a bit better. Improvements in mental health were related to having a difficult relationship with school; feeling positive about the response to lockdown and being proactively contacted by friends and family; and finding their anxiety now had a clear focus and was shared by others (Young Minds, 2020).

Of those that has access to mental health services prior to the pandemic lockdown, 74% of respondents said they were still able to access some form of support. The remaining 26% reported they were no longer able to access support; the main reason being that it was difficult or impossible for them to receive support at home as the service was not established to work remotely; lack of private space in their home for therapeutic conversations; or because they did not think digital support would be effective.

A consultation by the Children's Commissioner for Wales found that the main impacts of the stay at home rules on how young people aged 12 to 18 years were feeling were; not being able to spend time with friends (72%), not being able to visit family members (59%), and school or college closing (42%) (Children's Commissioner for Wales, 2020).

Recommendations

The principle concerns of the pandemic are anxiety relating to contracting the virus and risk of mortality to self and family members and the lockdown measure that have been put in places resulting in isolation and reduced or altered access to health services and support networks. The consequence of the pandemic may exacerbate existing mental health problems or trigger new ones in the population.

Organisations such as the NSPCC have reported increased demand for counselling services during lockdown and professionals, such as psychiatrists, have reported changes to the way individuals are accessing services, for example, presenting later when they are in crisis.

It has been widely reported that some groups are disproportionately affected by the pandemic; these groups are also experience poorer mental health, for example people in low income groups; those living in insecure housing; and people from BAME communities. Conwy and Denbighshire has some of the most deprived areas in Wales, which also have the highest proportion of social rented housing and estimated HMOs. Within the counties there are also significant pockets of children living in poverty.

Following consideration of the impacts of the coronavirus pandemic the four identified potential projects for the PSB Mental Wellbeing priority remain extant as they provide support to maintaining and improving adult mental wellbeing across a range of settings. It is recommended that the proposed potential projects remain unchanged. However, the evidence suggests that the pandemic has had, and continues to have, considerable impact on children and young people's mental health and wellbeing. The proposed schemes only obliquely align with supporting mental wellbeing in children and young people. It is therefore recommended that an option

specifically relating to children and young people is incorporated into the proposed projects. A way to do this would be to focus on educational settings.

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