

**Cross-Party Group on Suicide Prevention – sponsored by Lynne Neagle MS**  
**Tuesday 28<sup>th</sup> April 2020 3.30pm – 4.30pm**  
**Meeting held by video conference**

**Attendees:** Lynne Neagle MS, Angela Burns MS, Jayne Bryant MS, Delyth Jewell MS, George Watkins – Admin and Communications Officer for Jenny Rathbone MS, Eleri Cabbage – Senior Research and Communications Officer for Lynne Neagle MS, Sarah Stone -Samaritans Executive Director for Wales, Liz Williams – Samaritans Cymru Policy & Communications Officer, Professor Ann John – Swansea University, Laura Frayne – Assistant to Executive Director for Wales – Samaritans Cymru.

**Apologies:** Dai Lloyd MS, Adam Price MS.

**1. Welcome and introductions**

Lynne thanked everyone for attending the meeting. Apologies had been received from Dai Lloyd MS and Adam Price MS.

**2. Minutes from the previous meeting and matters arising**

The minutes from the meeting had been circulated in advance of the meeting for information. There were no matters arising.

**3. Professor Ann John, Clinical Professor in Public Health and Psychiatry, Swansea University & National lead for suicide and self-harm prevention, Public Health Wales**

Lynne thanked Professor Ann John for attending the meeting and providing the group with some further information in relation to Covid-19 and suicide risk. Ann explained that there are complexities involved in looking at the potential risks of the virus. Ann commented that much of the focus from governments has been on physical health and advised that we need to ensure we are taking steps to mitigate against the risks to people's mental health.

Ann added that there is some previous data related to the SARS outbreak and the influenza outbreak with some evidence on the impact on mental health and emphasised the importance of collecting data now. Ann explained how Wales needs to be looking at collecting real-time data on this and she will be contacting coroners in Wales to discuss further.

Ann talked about work that Swansea University are doing with Bristol University to look at Google searches and what that is telling us about the impact of Covid-19 on mental health. This data is being looked at on a weekly basis and will be used to identify people's concerns and then adapt public messaging as needed. There is also a concern that some will not seek help for mental health issues during the current crisis due to concerns around social distancing, accessing remote care and not wanting to burden the NHS. Ann advised there need to be very clear pathways in place for how those in crisis can get support.

Ann added that many third sector services are seeing an increase in demand for their services at a time when they may not have their usual capacity available. Going forward there will be issues around bereavement and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Ann commented that many services are taking place remotely but that will be challenging for some and there is a need to ensure there is the necessary evaluation of these services in place and that apps with an evidence base are being recommended. Ann talked about the impact of financial stress and how unemployment and debt already has a huge impact on men's mental health (evidence exists) and the young people living in

those households. Ann also talked about domestic abuse and how we need safe spaces for people to go and how young people living in households where there is domestic abuse are at risk of mental health issues and their consequences.

Ann explained how alcohol can exacerbate a lot of the risk factors for suicide and this is a time when some people are drinking more than usual. There is also concern for the impact on children and young people as the suicide rates have been increasing in recent years. However, Ann highlighted that suicide is preventable and a rare outcome in this age group. A lot of the peer support young people may have had access to has gone and some schools are trying to maintain support services such as school counselling services for those pupils they know need support. However, we need to consider the young people we do not know about who may need support and we need to reach children and young people who may not already have support systems in place. Ann also talked about the need to proactively reach out to young people living alone such as single parents and care leavers.

Ann talked about the impact on deprived communities and the need to reach out there and explained that what is needed is what we already do as part of suicide prevention work. We should consider how we can be proactive in the current situation. Real time data is really important and Ann has two analysts in place who will explore the use of the SAIL Databank for real time surveillance and also be making links with the regional forums and coroners.

Ann added that there are case studies which show there can be an issue of stigma with having Covid-19 which can make people feel more isolated. There have also been concerns around how some media reporting of suicide has taken place during this time with reports attributing suicide to Covid-19. The attribution of suicide to a single cause contravenes Samaritan guidance. Ann showed the group a chart of areas which need to be addressed to mitigate suicide during this time and will share this with the group. Ann explained that there are a lot of unknowns at the moment, but we need to be proactive on lots of the risk factors of suicide.

#### **4pm: Questions and next steps**

Lynne thanked Ann for attending and the research she is doing and asked whether anyone had any questions or comments. Lynne explained that she has been worried about the way some suicides of young people have been reported during this time and asked what Members of the Senedd can do about this. Lynne also added that the Children, Young People and Education Committee have just launched a consultation on how young people are being impacted by Covid-19.

Ann explained that there is a need to publicise what organisations are out there and what is available to help young people. Swansea social services are putting together a document to support young people and looking at how to reach those they do not know about and Ann will make sure this is shared with the work the Children, Young People and Education Committee are doing.

Jayne Bryant MS asked Ann about the impact on older people and explained some constituents who are in their 60's and 70's with underlying health conditions are worried about their risk of dying of Covid 19. Jayne also asked about work being done on how to reach out to the BAME (Black Asian and Minority Ethnic) community and how best to share information. Ann explained that there are lots of unintended consequences from the measures in place at the moment and that the Mental Health Foundation have been doing a survey every few weeks to see how people are coping and this has around 100 respondents from Wales each week. The survey has found that levels of loneliness have increased but also saw a sharper increase of this in young people. Ann commented that this may be linked to the resources young people have available to them to cope.

Ann added that research will tell us about the impact of the shielding letters on people's mental health and we have to be mindful of how things are communicated. Ann explained that we know that the BAME community can have different views when it comes to health and highlighted the

number of BAME people who have contracted Covid-19 and have been admitted to intensive care is concerning. We do not yet understand why this is.

Ann advised that in Wales we need to make sure that materials around Covid-19 are translated into Somali and Bengali and that having information available for people to access is good way to deal with fear and anxiety but we need to ensure resources are accessible for those whose first language is not English.

Angela Burns MS said a concern for some of her constituents is that older people will have to shield for longer before they can leave lockdown and asked Ann how she is involved with looking at the psychology of lockdown and discussions with Public Health Wales. Angela also asked about concerns around stigma surrounding Covid-19. Ann explained that she is part of a group creating evidence briefings related to suicide and self-harm as it emerges and feeds this work back through the national Advisory Group and Public Health Wales colleagues. Ann added that messaging around Covid-19 has focussed mostly on physical health and more needs to be done to highlight the impact of all of this on our mental health and that Members of the Senedd could help by raising this as something that needs to be built into all plans and campaigns. Ann added that it is likely the Covid-19 pandemic and its consequences will widen inequalities and the impact of that will be felt differently across our society.

Sarah Stone added that Wales Alliance for Mental Health are meeting with Welsh Government each week to discuss the impact of Covid-19 on mental health. Lynne asked the group what next steps should be taken and it was agreed a letter would be written to Welsh Government to raise that mental health needs to be considered in all plans for Covid-19.

#### **4.10pm: Topic for next meeting and close**

Lynne explained that as we are unsure of where things will be by the next meeting in July, we will see how things progress over the coming weeks. The focus of the next meeting will be on further discussions on Covid-19 and its impact.

Lynne thanked everyone for attending and closed the meeting.