

Eluned Morgan MS, Minister for Mental Health, Wellbeing and Welsh Language

Dyddiad | Date: 10 December 2020

Pwnc | Subject: **Inquiry into the impact of COVID-19 on children and young people**

Dear Eluned,

Thank you for attending our meeting on 26 November as part of our ongoing inquiry into the impact of COVID-19 on children and young people.

You will already be aware that the mental health and well-being of children and young people is a significant priority for us.

As part of our continuing work, we have reported evidence that children and young people could suffer more from the collateral damage and unintended consequences arising from the COVID-19 restrictions than from the virus itself. As such, we are very concerned about the potential negative impact of the pandemic on children's mental health, especially at a time when the NHS and other public services are under significant pressure.

We continue to have concerns about the potential disconnect between what the Welsh Government and health boards' ambitions are for mental health support, and the reality that children and young people tell us (and others) they are experiencing on the ground.

We are also very aware of the key role that social services have in supporting and facilitating access to children's mental health services during the response to COVID-19 and would emphasise the need for joint work between Ministers and across the Welsh Government to ensure this is being taken forward on a strategic level.

Set out in the annex to this letter are our key concerns which we have identified as relevant to your portfolio. We intend to return to these early in 2021. By then we will have had the opportunity to reflect on the Welsh Government's response to our *Mind over Matter: Two years on* report and the associated Plenary debate.

The annex also sets out a request for further information about the arrangements between health boards and the Welsh Government for monitoring mental health service capacity during the pandemic.

I trust this is a helpful update and look forward to your response. Given the shared interest, I have copied this letter to the Chair of the Health, Social Care and Sport Committee.

Yours sincerely,



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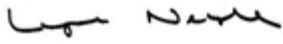
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Lynne Neagle MS
Chair

Cc Dai Lloyd MS, Chair of the Health, Social Care and Sport Committee

Croesewir gohebiaeth yn Gymraeg neu Saesneg | We welcome correspondence in Welsh or English.

Annex A: Inquiry into the impact of COVID-19 on children and young people

Key issues as of November 2020

Set out below are our key areas of interest at this point in our inquiry as relevant to your portfolio. This is not an exhaustive list but is intended to highlight where we have identified that more assurance is needed or where we intend to monitor progress.

Mental health services

Our *Mind over Matter: Two years on* report sets out that managing the impact of COVID-19 on children and young people has to be a clear priority for the Welsh Government and public bodies. It also says that maintaining—and in some areas, increasing—momentum for delivery of Mind over Matter’s recommendations must be prioritised between now and the end of this Senedd.

Mental health has also been a key issue in the evidence we have received from children and young people about COVID-19.

Furthermore, in oral evidence, the Children’s Commissioner suggested there have been both successes and failures in terms of mental health support to children and young people in recent months. She told us of concerns raised with her that there is a lack of knowledge among children, young people, their parents and carers about how to access services. We subsequently wrote to all health boards asking for assurance about access to mental health services for children and young people during the pandemic. All seven health boards provided responses which sought to reassure us in this regard.

We note your evidence that:

- mental health services are an essential service;
- there should not have been a difference in the services provided in recent months other than them being accessed on-line.

We welcome your efforts to gather further information about the apparent ‘disconnect’ between the data you are collecting and the experiences of those trying to access services.

As part of our ongoing work on Mind over Matter we will continue to monitor access to services and gather ongoing evidence of experiences on the ground.

Monitoring mental health service capacity

We asked you about the work being done to monitor referrals to mental health services and to obtain assurance about the capacity of services to meet demand. You advised us that you will be establishing a new group to look at the impact of COVID-19 on mental health.

We are aware that a ‘mental health COVID-19 monitoring tool’ was developed to provide assurance about the capacity of services to fulfil their key functions during the pandemic. On 13 May 2020, the Minister for Health and Social Services told Members in Plenary that:

Health boards are required to submit monitoring information on a weekly basis, which is considered by our mental health incident group. The information provides a live picture of the capacity of mental health services to enable us identify where additional support, advice or guidance is needed. While service models will have adapted during the pandemic, health boards and partners have reported that they've continued to meet mental health needs during this period.

We would be grateful if you could provide further details about the arrangements in place to monitor referrals to mental health services and the capacity of those services to meet needs, including information about the role of the Mental Health Incident Group established by the Welsh Government. We would also be grateful for additional information about the new group you will be establishing as referred to in your oral evidence.

As part of our continuing work on Mind over Matter we will continue to monitor access to services and gather ongoing evidence of experiences on the ground.

Perinatal Mental Health

Since publishing our report on 'Perinatal Mental Health in Wales' in October 2017 we have consistently undertaken follow-up scrutiny and pressed for progress to be made. It is clear that the COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in disruption to some health services.

We share the Children's Commissioner's concerns that the re-deployment of Health Visitors could have a detrimental impact on maternal mental health. You told us that there had been early redeployment of Health Visitors but that this had now come to an end.

We note your evidence that community perinatal mental health services are still providing support and that you have requested information from health boards which you offered to share with us, in January 2021.

We very much welcome progress on the six-bed interim Mother and Baby Unit in Tonna and news that it is on track to be operational by March 2021. You also told us that WHSSC are in discussion with North West England NHS to access their perinatal mental health inpatient services.

We would be grateful if you could provide further details about the work WHSSC is undertaking in relation to discussions with North West England NHS to access their perinatal mental health inpatient services. We would welcome further details on the timescales for this work, the type of services being discussed, and the populations that they hope to serve.

As part of our ongoing work on perinatal mental health we will continue to monitor access to these services and gather ongoing evidence of experiences on the ground.

Learners' mental health

You will already be aware that the mental health of learners is a significant priority for us. This includes the impact their educational settings may have on them, and the important opportunities that exist to provide learners with essential support. We have also written to the Minister for Education setting out our concerns.

I want to inform you that between December 2020 and February 2021, we will be undertaking work to hear directly from learners within higher education settings about the ongoing impact that the response to COVID-19 is having on both their learning experiences and their mental health and well-being. Our findings will be published in due course and will also inform the next stage of our inquiry.

We recognise the clear commitment from the Minister for Education to taking forward this agenda as set out in her letter to us in August 2020. In that, the Minister set out the importance of supporting the mental health and emotional well-being of our children and young people at this time. She also reiterated her aim to meet the physical and mental health needs of children and young people in line with the whole school approach.

We will continue to monitor this important issue as part of our ongoing inquiry into the impact of COVID-19 on children and young people.