

Cyflwynwyd yr ymateb i ymgynghoriad y [Pwyllgor Iechyd a Gofal Cymdeithasol](#) ar [Cefnogi pobl sydd â chyflyrau cronig](#)

This response was submitted to the [Health and Social Care Committee](#) consultation on [supporting people with chronic conditions](#).

CC36: Ymateb gan: | Response from:

Opera Cenedlaethol Cymru/ Welsh National Opera

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## **FAO The Health and Social Care Committee**

### **'Supporting people with chronic conditions'**

#### **Submission of evidence from Welsh National Opera**

22 May 2023

Dear Committee Members,

My name is April Heade and I am writing to you on behalf of Welsh National Opera, in response to the Health and Social Care Committee's inquiry into supporting people with chronic conditions. I am writing in my capacity as Arts and Health Producer in WNO's Programme and Engagement Team leading on the 'Wellness with WNO' programme, which is a singing and breathing intervention delivered in partnership with all 7 NHS Wales Health Boards, designed to support people with Long COVID living in Wales.

We wish to respond to the following question:

- **The impact of the pandemic on quality of care across chronic conditions.**

We would like to make you aware of the Wellness with WNO programme as an example of a new intervention in response to health issues arising as a result of the pandemic, and how it has and, we hope, will continue to make a significant contribution to supporting recovery from the chronic condition of Long COVID.

The Arts make a particularly powerful contribution to our health and wellbeing, and we have seen first-hand the significant positive impact these sessions have had on participants who have attended so far in terms of physical rehabilitation, restoring emotional well-being, reducing anxiety and creating a forum where patients can support each other peer to peer (as captured in our evaluation data, included below).

We believe there is considerable value in social prescription, and arts and health interventions can empower individuals in their approach to their healthcare, often encouraging a reduction in medication use, hospitalisation and bed hours within a hospital setting. Partnering with NHS Wales Health Boards through the Wellness with WNO

programme has not only enabled a more person-centred approach for individuals, but has allowed the delivery of a safe and expert intervention in a non-clinical setting (in this case, at home), reducing pressure on hospitals and clinics, shown by multiple examples of participants preventing hospitalisation by using the WNO exercises during periods of dangerously low oxygen levels.

We have a growing evidence base of positive results which captures both qualitative and quantitative data from those who have undertaken the Wellness with WNO programme as part of their rehabilitation, with headlines included below. We would be pleased to share our independent evaluation report from year 1 upon request.

## 1. The Need

During the pandemic in 2021, WNO were approached by a number of NHS Wales health boards who identified that our expertise and skillset could be utilised in supporting symptoms of Long COVID which had begun to emerge at the time – the predominant symptoms being breathlessness, fatigue and anxiety. Due to our singers' experience with lung utilisation during long on-stage performances through operatic singing and breathing techniques, the pilot phase intended to use these techniques to reduce breathlessness and support participants suffering from Long COVID to re-learn diaphragmatic breathing, equipping them with the tools to continue this work at home. In many studies singing has been shown to improve mood and wellbeing and the hope is that this programme brings together both the wellbeing aspect and physiological aspect of breath control, combining medical and musical expertise to also address the mental health and general wellbeing of participants. It was hoped that WNO could design and deliver a rolling programme to run alongside other needs-led interventions that the NHS Wales Long COVID services offer to individuals as part of their overall rehabilitation. Wellness with WNO was planned with NHS medical professionals and was originally devised in consultation with English National Opera based on their original *ENO Breathe* project although it has now evolved to become responsive to the needs of patients across Wales based on qualitative evaluation collated in the pilot phase.

The WHO estimate that 10% of positive COVID-19 cases result in Long COVID. Statistics from the ONS (4-week period ending 4/12/2022) showed that 111,000 people in Wales self-reported Long COVID symptoms. This represents over 3% of the population in Wales, suggesting significant societal impacts as a result.

## 2. The Approach

In the first instance WNO collaborated with 3 NHS Wales Health Boards and delivered a pilot programme from November 2021 to February 2022 with 31 participants, before

commencing a rolling 6-week programme in April 2022. Following successful outcomes cited by patients and observed by medical staff, the programme expanded into all of the remaining health boards in Wales and has been available Wales-wide since early 2023. Participants are referred to the programme following an assessment with their NHS Wales Long COVID Service.

Wellness with WNO supports individuals through six one-hour sessions on Zoom, led by WNO vocal specialists (professional opera singers who are experts in breath control) who each week share strategies for efficient breathing that they have cultivated throughout their careers. Sessions invite participants to join us in an informal setting, to explore techniques WNO use in singing and performing that may help towards symptom management, improving breath control, lung function, circulation and posture. The sessions also provide a space for participants to connect through shared experience and offer one another support. Beyond the 6-week programme, participants are given resources to help them continue their practice. We also hold twice-monthly drop-in sessions, open to all who have attended the 6-week course, where participants can continue to get together, refresh their breathing techniques and sing with us. With all sessions delivered online via Zoom, this makes the service more accessible, particularly for those who may struggle with fatigue. All participants are muted whilst singing, to create a safe space, free of inhibitions for them to sing freely without fear of being overheard.

Sessions are available in both English and Cymraeg. It is supported by the Arts Council of Wales via the Arts, Health, and Wellbeing Lottery Fund and the NHS Wales Health Boards.

### 3. The Impact

*'The course was helpful in many different ways - mentally, helped unlearn unhelpful breathing habits and made me feel more positive. The course providers were amazing and so helpful, compassionate and comforting. It was a ray of sunshine in this bleak and lonely illness.'* (A participant)

Evaluators Milestone Tweed were appointed to evaluate the first year of programme delivery using a variety of research tools including metric scales used by the Long COVID Services (the EQ-5D-5L and MRC Breathlessness scale).

The following was included in the year 1 evaluation report:

#### ***Changes to physical health included:***

- *improved breathing - 86% of participants reported the breathing techniques were effective or very effective. Many participants had had comparable experiences with other breathing programmes, both through the NHS and private providers. Of those participants who did try other programmes all said that they had found WNO's programme to be the most helpful.*

- *increased awareness of their breathing - at the beginning of the programme just under half of participants did not understand or were not sure about their respiratory health. By the end of the programme over three quarters reported they understood their respiratory health.*
- *three participants reported using the breathing exercises, taught by the vocal specialists, to increase oxygen levels and prevent hospitalisation during periods of dangerously low oxygen levels.*

**Changes to mental health included:**

- *feeling more informed and connected about their condition - at the end of the programme 88% knew where to find out information or who to talk to about their respiratory health, compared with nearly one half at the start of the programme.*
- *increased confidence in being able to communicate their understanding of their respiratory health to others - 52% of participants did not feel confident or were not sure they could explain their respiratory health to others at the start of the programme. By the end of the programme 81% were confident to do this.*
- *wanting to continue singing, joining choirs and karaoke sessions - approximately half following completion of the six-week course have gone on to attend the WNO drop-in sessions, with approximately another 10 people having contacted WNO saying they intend to attend.*
- *increased positive emotions.*
- *increased emotional wellbeing.*
- *reduced anxiety, depression, overthinking and panic.*
- *increased confidence.*
- *increased shared experiences and connections with others - valuing peer to peer support.*
- *increased feelings of loneliness – however this finding was seen as an outlier with possible other factors at play.*

- Milestone Tweed, January 2023

*'I've participated in various [Long] COVID rehab groups and activities since having Long COVID since March 2020. The WNO course was by far the best and most effective. As well as helping me manage my breathing and work towards strengthening my voice and diaphragm and showing me how to use my breath more effectively, it was uplifting. There's not much to smile or laugh about with Long COVID but I would look forward to the Zoom meeting every week. I knew I'd laugh, and sometimes cry, but the tears were tears of joy at being able to sing again after such a long time. Having the opportunity to learn new skills in such an uplifting way has been wonderful. The peer support really helps and [...] it's been a really wonderful heart-warming experience. I look forward to the drop-in sessions & would highly recommend this course to everyone.'* (A participant)

4. The Future

Through the Wellness with WNO programme, we can document that the breathing exercises and vocal techniques have promoted positive changes in breathing pattern, bypassed feelings of panic around breath control, increased participants' understanding of their respiratory system and encouraged a reduction in medication use and bed hours within a hospital setting. The other significant impact of the intervention that shouldn't be underestimated is the social context, normalisation and psychological benefits of the programme and the sheer joy that is created for participants, particularly during a time of great uncertainty and often isolation.

We hope to continue to support as many people as possible to access this programme for as long as it's needed, as well as exploring its adaptability in supporting other chronic conditions in the future. We are currently in discussion with other NHS services to look at providing similar interventions to support anxiety, breath control and chronic pain. This ongoing interest coupled with the positive outcomes of year one of our programme for Long COVID have affirmed our belief that the arts are in a strong position to support people living with chronic conditions in Wales, complimenting the existing NHS services and, as a result, helping to reduce pressure where they might be overwhelmed.