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Inquiry into mental health inequalities in Wales.

**Evidence from Sport Wales to
the Health and Social Care
Committee.**

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The Response from Sport Wales to the Health and Social Care Committee inquiry into mental health inequalities in Wales.

1. Overview

- 1.1. Sport Wales welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Health and Social Care Committee's inquiry into mental health inequalities and recognises the challenges facing those who face mental health inequalities in Wales. Our data relates to the provision, access, and enjoyment of sport and physical activity of people of all ages in all areas of Wales. We believe our insight can support the committee by developing its understanding of the benefits of engaging in sport and physical activity across the broad spectrum of mental health.
- 1.2. The Vision for Sport in Wales is the platform for cross sector engagement in sport and physical activity, and seeks to transform Wales into an active nation, where everyone can have a lifelong enjoyment of sport and physical activity. The Vision is not just a mission for Sport Wales to work towards. Rather, it is the platform for cross sector engagement in sport and physical activity, and was co-produced with a wide range of stakeholders to represent the voice of the people of Wales. It is our collective vehicle for transforming Wales into a truly active nation; and we consider the impact that sport can have on supporting mental health and reducing mental health inequity as a key part of this. We would be happy to discuss more on The Vision for Sport in Wales with the Committee.

2. Which groups of people are disproportionately affected by poor mental health in Wales? What factors contribute to worse mental health within these groups?

- 2.1. Sport Wales recognises the 'triple barrier' of mental health inequality, which affect individuals and communities across Wales. The individuals and communities particularly affected by mental health inequalities are also at risk of lower engagement in sport and physical activity, and higher instances of poverty and barriers to accessing services.
- 2.2. By taking steps to build the 'elements of engagement' - motivation, confidence, awareness, opportunities, resources, and experiences - of individuals and communities in

relation to sport and physical activity, we believe sport and physical activity can help people facing mental health inequalities secure better individual outcomes.

- 2.3.** For many, sport and physical activity is a crucial way to manage mental ill health and enable sustainable recovery from periods of mental illness.¹ However, if there are barriers preventing individuals from engaging in sport sustainably, the ability to address mental health ill health via sport and physical activity will be limited.
- 2.4.** We know poverty and deprivation impacts engagement in sport and physical activity. The National Survey for Wales for 2021-22 found 24% of households living in material deprivation participated in sporting activities three or more times a week (24% in material deprivation, 35% not in material deprivation).² This was reaffirmed in the most recent iteration of our ComRes survey, which found those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds were twice as likely as those from higher socioeconomic backgrounds to have done no exercise in the past week.³ The survey also found those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds were less likely to exercise to help manage their mental health (ABC1 – 70%; C2DE – 61%).⁴
- 2.5.** The data collected from our School Sport Survey also demonstrates poverty or deprivation can impact engagement in sport and physical activity. In 2018, those with the highest level of free school meal eligibility were 9% more likely than their peers with low eligibility to do no frequent activity (31% low level of eligibility, 22% high level of eligibility). Further, the data shows that 42.2% of those with a high level of free school meal eligibility exercised three or more times a week, compared to 54.7% of those with low eligibility.
- 2.6.** Sport Wales understands, from research by the BMA and the WHO, that there is a connection between poverty and low levels of wellbeing. These can partly be explained due to the stresses associated with poverty.⁵ As poverty can also create barriers to

¹ Sport Wales, Evidence Paper: Mental Health (June 2021).

² National Survey for Wales Results Viewer, 'Participation in sporting activities three or more times a week (FG indicator), by Household in material deprivation (FG indicator)' (2021-22).

³ Sport Wales, ComRes Survey 4 - SocioEconomic, 'Participation' (August 2021), <<https://www.sport.wales/research-and-insight/comres-research/comres-survey-4-august-2021/socioeconomic/>> (accessed 28/01/22).

⁴ Ibid, 'Values'.

⁵ The British Medical Association (BMA), Health at a Price – Reducing the Impact of Poverty, (2017) <<https://www.bma.org.uk/media/2084/health-at-a-price-2017.pdf>>; the World Health

accessing sport and physical activity, a key way of addressing mental ill health, those facing mental health inequalities may be further impacted by material deprivation from employing sport and physical activity to improve mental health.

2.7. However, there is a demonstrable interest amongst those who do experience mental illness to engage in sport and physical activity and to volunteer. The fourth iteration of our Savanta ComRes survey (completed in 2021) found that adults with a longstanding mental health condition or illness were more likely to exercise most days (5+) in the last week, than those adults without longstanding health conditions (32% of those with a mental illness compared to 29% of those with no longstanding condition). But those with mental health conditions were more likely to feel guilty for not exercising more (60% compared to 50% of those without a longstanding health condition).

3. For the groups identified, what are the barriers to accessing mental health services? How effectively can existing services meet their needs, and how could their experience of using mental health services be improved?

3.1. The data we hold indicates that poverty, which impacts those facing mental health inequalities to a greater extent than the general population, also impedes these individuals from engaging in sport and physical activity, a key way of improving mental health sustainably.⁶

3.2. The research and data also shows:

- There are disparities in access to sport and physical activity in Wales, which are largely impacted by poverty and deprivation. 1 in 4 people in Wales live in poverty,⁷

Organisation, Breaking the Vicious Cycle Between Mental Health and Poverty, <https://www.who.int/mental_health/policy/development/1_Breakingviciouscycle_Infosheet.pdf>

⁶ Sport Wales, Mental Health Evidence Paper, (June 2021).

⁷ Oxfam, 'Poverty in Wales', <<https://oxfamapps.org/cymru/poverty-in-wales/>> (accessed 28/01/22).

and 1 in 3 young people in Wales are growing up in poverty.⁸ Families living in poverty have as little as £3.21 to spend on sport and leisure every week.⁹

- National Survey for Wales data for 2019-20 found that 12% of people would be encouraged to do more sport if they 'didn't have a disability, illness, or injury that prevents me from taking part,' and 12% would be encouraged to do more if there were more facilities or clubs in their area.
- The National Survey for Wales also identified reduced cost as something which would encourage more people to do sport, with 15% of respondents in 2019-20 saying they would be encouraged to do more sport 'if it cost less.'

3.3. Further, Covid-19 has impacted the mental health of children and young people. A key priority for Sport Wales identified by our Youth Panel and Young Ambassadors is the impact of the pandemic on young people's mental health. Improving access to services, including mental health services but also sporting facilities will help address the long-term impact of the pandemic on the mental health of children and young people.

3.4. For some experiencing mental health inequalities, recovery may be impacted by barriers to their engagement in sport, limiting the opportunity to sustainably improve their mental health through the medium. Therefore, the committee must examine barriers to engaging in sport and physical activity as a contributing factor to mental health inequalities.

4. To what extent does Welsh Government policy recognise and address the mental health needs of these groups? Where are the policy gaps?

4.1. Sport Wales recognises the role of the Mental Health delivery plan in improving wellbeing and mental health in Wales and believe sport and physical activity should be considered as part of a package of holistic responses to mental ill health.

4.2. Sport Wales endorses the preventative approach to health, including mental health. Examples of social prescribing demonstrate a potential way forward for employing physical activity and sport as a means of preventing mental ill health, as well as

⁸ Street Games, 'Family Engagement Project', <<https://network.streetgames.org/sites/default/files/Family%20Engagement%20Project.pdf>> (accessed 28/01/22).

⁹ Ibid.

promoting recovery from periods of illness. We believe the application of a joined-up preventative approach which employs sport and physical activity could go some way to addressing mental health inequalities.

4.3. However, we recognise the complexity of mental health, and understand individuals may require holistic interventions, care, and support over a longer period of time. Therefore, the development of any policy should:

- Involve those with experience of mental health inequalities and accessing services to ensure a wide-ranging, insight led discussion can be had around the problems and solutions relating to mental health inequalities in Wales.
- Encourage the collaboration of a variety of actors to secure the development of a holistic intervention which is responsive to needs and addresses gaps.
- Test a variety of solutions which place needs and care for individuals at the heart of any programme for change, recognising solutions may be different for different individuals and communities.

5. What further action is needed, by whom/where, to improve mental health and outcomes for the groups of people identified and reduce mental health inequalities in Wales?

5.1. The evidence has repeatedly demonstrated sport and physical activity can prevent and support mental health across the lifespan. Yet for those experiencing mental health inequality, sport and physical activity can be inaccessible due to the impact of poverty and disadvantage.

5.2. Many people have entrenched barriers to achieving the elements of engagement, and as such they cannot take advantage of sport and physical activity as a way to improve health sustainably and for the long term.

5.3. Early intervention is therefore key to building the skills and confidence for people to have a lifelong enjoyment of sport. Early, preventative intervention which prioritises creating positive, quality sporting experiences, which develop physical literacy amongst children and young people is a crucial action which could improve mental health in Wales for the long term.

- 5.4. Much greater recognition should be given to sport and physical activity as a medium which promotes overall health and wellbeing. Sport and physical activity is an under-utilised intervention and further prominence and funding is needed to fully realise it as an effective preventative and remedial intervention to mental ill health.
- 5.5. Further, a cultural shift should be supported, whereby the stigma around mental health is addressed, and mental and physical health are treated with parity and viewed no differently to each other. This could be supported by the creation of spaces for cross sector collaboration, the expansion of 'mental health first aiders' in community settings, and the development of holistic interventions encouraged so as to ensure all people experiencing mental ill health have access to every tool which can help prevent illness and promote recovery.
- 5.6. Research and insight which places those facing mental health inequalities and mental ill health at the centre must be developed to ensure all solutions prioritise addressing need, and tailor effective care and support to individuals and communities. Without needs specific research and insight, the development of new policy responses and services may not be sustainable or focus on wellbeing, and as such will not address the challenge of mental health inequalities.

6. What is Sport Wales doing in this area?

- 6.1. At present, Sport Wales is working to further understand how communities access sport and physical activity, and how access to sport can be improved for all people. In line with our strategic intents and the Vision for Sport in Wales, we are seeking to ensure sport and physical activity is accessible to everyone for the long term, and that we are person-centred, with individual needs leading the delivery and design of our sporting offer. We are ensuring this in a variety of ways:

6.2. Creating Active Education Settings

- The Welsh Government has funded our pilot project to develop 'Active Education Settings Beyond the School Day.' Active Education Settings are schools which open their facilities to their pupils and communities, before, during, after the school day, in the evenings and during the summer holidays.
- By opening the quality facilities which are accessible to communities, but often locked away after 3pm, we believe communities will have increased access to a

quality sporting offer which is in their local area, affordable, and engaging, enabling them to improve their mental health by engaging in sport and physical activity.

- Active Education Settings will address key elements of engagement for children and young people, providing quality experiences, opportunities for engaging in sport, and the motivation to stay after school to 'do' sport, encouraging a preventative approach and enhancing physical literacy across communities.

6.3. Developing Sports Partnerships

- Through Sport Partnerships we are planning for future generations by taking steps to prevent inequalities in participation in sport and physical activity across Wales.
- Tasked with bringing about system change they will be the catalyst to tackling 2 long standing issues
 - Ensuring there is the right support and opportunities in place for those who are not regularly physically active with a clear focus on removing barriers for those who need the most help.
 - Taking steps to meet the high latent demand from those who are active but want to do much more.
- A Sport Partnership will bring together key stakeholders within a defined region who understand the importance and have a focus on delivering the benefits sport and physical activity. They will be led by insight and provide strategic leadership and planning at a regional level, with a common purpose that at a local level, everyone has equal access to sport and physical activity through a range of opportunities that best meet their needs.

6.4. The Sport Wales Youth Panel and Young Ambassadors

- Sport Wales are working directly with our Young Ambassadors and Youth Panel to support them to develop their leadership skills in sport. A key concern held by the panel is young people's mental health, and as such we are working to support them to inspire other young people to get involved in sport and physical activity as a way of addressing mental ill health.

6.5. The School Sport Survey

- The fifth iteration of the School Sport Survey is due to be delivered from the Spring of 2022. Within this iteration of the survey, the data will include insight

relating to participation and demand for sport across the economic scale, and identify where the opportunities for improving services lie across Wales.

6.6. Working within the Sport Sector

- Our person-centred approach to athlete development ensures that mental health and wellbeing are placed at the centre of consideration for those involved in our performance pathways. In addition to this, we recently facilitated a 'Mentally Healthy Cultures' course for sector CEOs and have developed resources, facilitated coach training sessions and regularly provide one-one and group expertise on this topic, through our psychology services.

6.7. Our wider work

- At the start of 2022, Sport Wales partnered with Mind Cymru for the purpose of creating a digital campaign to showcase how physical activity can help some people manage and get through tough times. The campaign took a different approach to the usual 'new year, new you' messaging around sport and physical activity, and sought to raise awareness of how charities like Mind Cymru value and encourage physical activity as a way of supporting good mental health. You can view the campaign outline [here](#), and follow the links to watch [Shekira's story](#), [Bob's story](#), and [Alex' story](#).
- We worked closely with the charity to ensure the campaign clearly communicated the stories of three individuals put forward to take part in the campaign.
- The campaign received a positive response on social media, and also within Mind Cymru's networks, achieving an overall engagement with 7490 people. We continue to explore how we, as an organisation can look for collaborative opportunities like this to learn from expert organisations, utilising our resources to best deliver to those population groups we know sport and physical activity can have a positive impact on.

7. Final Overview

- 7.1.** Sport Wales welcomes the committee's inquiry on mental health inequalities and hopes to support the committee by sharing any data or insight which could improve their understanding of how mental health inequalities impact communities in Wales.

- 7.2.** We are working across the sector to address inequalities in sport and physical activity in line with the Vision for Sport in Wales, as well as increasing the amount of data and insight we hold in relation to mental health, poverty, and deprivation to ensure we are constantly learning and improving.
- 7.3.** We understand the provision of sporting activities and opportunities, and our commitment to creating cohesive, safe communities where vulnerable people can meet and exercise with others will be crucial, in our view, to addressing mental health inequalities and access to sport sustainably in the long term
- 7.4.** Sport must make up a part of a collaborative policy response to the challenge of mental health inequalities. Such a response should be informed by insight and research relating to lived experiences, encourage preventative measures, encapsulate need, care, and support for individuals and communities, and include the ambitious aim to provide all people with the tools they need to prevent and recover from periods of mental ill health in a sustainable manner over the long term.