

the 66 99 project

using creativity to talk about suicide

Inquiry into suicide prevention in Wales

Response from Mark Smith of The 66 99 Project, July 2018

Introduction

- The 66 99 Project is a campaign that is in the early stages of its development. The campaign will make it easier for people to talk about suicide, and to raise awareness of the issue, through the use of the arts and creativity.
- The name of the campaign comes from a [2014 report from the World Health Organisation](#), which said someone, somewhere in the world ends their life every 40 seconds. This equates to 99 people every 66 minutes. [The campaign will use those numbers, from that statistic, as speech marks](#) which can be used to place creative content between that will create a body of work that will be a safe, positive and constructive platform for expression and discussion. This will subsequently lead to a social movement on the issue of suicide.
- The 66 99 Project will be developed and available online, through a website and social media, and in person through workshops and at events, in a formal (clinical) setting and a less formal (community) setting.
- I have met with representatives of Samaritans Cymru, Gofal, Mind Cymru and the Royal Glamorgan Hospital, discussed the campaign with them, and received a positive response.
- It is intended that The 66 99 Project will work in partnership with existing organisations and campaigns, on a co-operative basis.
- As founder of the campaign, I'm in the process of identifying sustainable funding options, delivery partners and stakeholders, to help develop the idea, with a view to launching a pilot within the next year.

Summary of key points

- All known evidence points to an ongoing crisis in suicide rates, whether globally, in the UK, or here in Wales. With suicide rates across different demographics showing increases of varying severities over the last ten years, it's clear that past and current strategies require new approaches. A new emphasis needs to be placed on the ways

in which people can be encouraged and supported to express themselves around suicide.

- The Talk to Me 2 strategy includes objectives on public awareness campaigns and innovative approaches to addressing the issue of suicide in Wales.
- The arts and creativity in relation to mental health are becoming more accessible, a more recognised route for awareness raising, expression, therapy, and an alternative or complementary approach to medication and talking therapies.
- The arts and creativity can lead to discussion, awareness raising and engagement around mental health in ways that other approaches cannot, therefore creating innovative approaches.
- Platforms for expression and discussion around mental health have never been stronger in Wales, with the Time to Change Wales campaign one of the main drivers.
- Welsh Government can support public awareness campaigns and innovative approaches to addressing suicide rates in Wales, but specific resources are needed beyond the current strategy.
- While Welsh Government has a key role, it cannot do this alone. A range of partner organisations across the private, public and voluntary sectors need to be involved in order to maximise the success of such efforts. This should include a wider group of organisations and individuals that may not be currently involved. This can be achieved through a collaborative approach that is based on co-production.
- Action is undoubtedly needed to reduce suicide rates in Wales, and this is a real opportunity for us to do something different and innovative to address this issue, in a way that isn't being done elsewhere. The arts and creativity can help to provide solutions to these challenges.

Creating safe, positive and constructive spaces for expression and discussion on suicide in Wales

All known evidence points to an ongoing crisis in suicide rates, whether globally, in the UK, or here in Wales. With suicide rates across different demographics showing increases of varying severities over the last ten years, it's clear that past and current strategies require new approaches.

A new emphasis needs to be placed on the ways in which people can be encouraged and supported to express themselves around suicide, and discuss the issue more openly. This is for people who have attempted suicide, have had suicidal thoughts, have lost someone to suicide, have experienced mental ill health and are concerned they might have suicidal thoughts one day, or are supporting someone who falls into one or more of these categories.

This is particularly the case for men, those of a certain age, and those who may live in communities - or have worked in certain industries – that have been the hardest hit in the last decade. As a 42-year-old man who has experienced suicidal thoughts on a regular basis in the last ten years, I can totally relate to others and the wider problem at hand.

The Talk to Me 2 strategy includes objectives on public awareness campaigns and innovative approaches to addressing the issue of suicide in Wales. I, Mark Smith, feel The 66 99 Project could help politicians and other decision makers meet these objectives, while supporting the strategy's efforts to reach and engage people in the worst affected demographics and communities.

Platforms for expression and discussion around mental health have never been stronger in Wales, with the Time to Change Wales campaign one of the main drivers. This particular campaign has increased awareness of mental health, leading to attitudinal changes in the general public, since its launch, but without having a dedicated approach to suicide.

The arts and creativity in relation to mental health are becoming more accessible, a more recognised route for awareness raising, expression, therapy, and an alternative or complementary approach to medication and talking therapies. More organisations are making such activities and services available on a community level for general wellbeing and low level mental ill health, such as anxiety and mild to moderate depression.

In 2012, I set up a volunteer-led organisation called Making Minds. Over the last six years it has explored mental health through the arts and creativity across a number of projects and events. During these, I noticed that many participants grew in confidence and self-esteem. Others developed new skills, revisited old ones, made new friends and formed their own groups. People also reacted positively to work displayed, or that they engaged with, that sparked new conversations around mental health.

This can be achieved through The 66 99 Project by working on inpatient wards (alongside Occupational Therapy teams), or in small groups outside of the hospital environment, through Community Mental Health Teams, peer support groups, places of work, and through other people's events and activities. This could also be achieved through public art projects and arts festivals, through various art forms.

Such activities would be supported by people and organisations that can provide on-the-spot assistance if required. Therefore, it's essential that all those involved in the direct delivery of The 66 99 Project are ASIST (Applied Suicide Intervention Skills) trained.

In 2015 and 2016, I co-founded and co-organised the first ever arts festivals in Wales that were dedicated to the theme of mental health. Both saw dozens of events and activities held around Wales in October and November. Efforts are underway to bring the festival back in 2020, on a more sustainable footing, with key partners including Gofal and Disability Arts Cymru. That festival can include suicide as one of the issues it covers in its programme.

In recent years, organisations in Wales such as Arts 4 Wellbeing, Valleys Kids, Ynys Mon a Gwynedd Mind and Head 4 Arts have all been involved in local projects through the arts and creativity, to improve mental health and wellbeing, or to raise awareness.

Social prescribing is at an embryonic stage in Wales, but is also for people at the less severe end of the mental health spectrum. Equivalent support and opportunities for those at risk of suicide is less evident, yet are arguably the most valuable, due to the challenges facing those who could engage with a relevant offer or service.

The arts and creativity can lead to discussion, awareness raising and engagement around mental health in ways that other approaches cannot. Examples such as [Inside Out in Ipswich](#), various projects that have been supported by [Time to Change in England](#), and the [Scottish Mental Health Arts and Film Festival](#) all show how this can be achieved, and the benefits of doing so.

All of these examples show how those engaging with such projects and activities are connected through communities – geographical and of interest – with links to other bodies such as health providers, voluntary organisations and businesses/employers. Those links can support people at risk of suicide who feel disconnected, helpless, hopeless, or do not have an immediate support network.

Communities not only exist in person, but online with social networks. Social media platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, Twitter and Tumblr are useful tools for raising awareness and discussion, but they can also be places that are [unhealthy for those experiencing mental illness](#).

This is particularly the case for younger users, who may view content that makes issues such as suicide, self-harm and eating disorders 'competitive' in nature, with advice on how to end your life, and some users encouraging others to do so.

[Campaigns such as The 66 99 Project would work to infiltrate this space with more constructive, healthy and helpful content](#). A campaign website would offer resources for those in need, signpost to other support organisations (particularly those that are available 24 hours a day), and provide a 'gallery' of the work that participants have created for use by The 66 99 Project.

The arts and creativity as an innovative approach to addressing suicide levels in Wales

Use of the arts and creativity to help people talk about suicide more easily, for whatever reason, would be an innovative step to address this issue in Wales.

The arts and creativity can reach people who are not known to health providers or voluntary organisations that can support those in need, while working with those who are known to such bodies but who would benefit from sustaining activities between appointments and interventions.

The likes of the [You Matter campaign](#) in the US, [the Buddy Project](#) also in the US, Welsh social enterprise [Heads Above The Waves](#) and the [Semicolon Project](#) (again in the US) have all reached people in their own way, to support them around suicide prevention and other mental health related issues, in creative ways.

Going back to the point about engaging with men around this issue, a new public awareness campaign in Wales such as The 66 99 Project, could reach individuals across organisations that they are already engaging with. This could be across all sectors, including GPs, Community Mental Health Teams (CMHTs), mental health outpatient and inpatient units, Prison and Probation Services, Job Centres, employers (HR departments), unions,

bereavement services, community centres, local sports clubs and organisations such as Men's Sheds. The likes of the Welsh Rugby Union and Football Association of Wales would also be useful organisations to have on board, because of their profile and reach. That would also help to achieve celebrity backing.

Another starting point could be people who are already somewhere in the health system. [Research has shown](#) that 23% of suicides in Wales, between 2003 and 2013, were completed by people already in contact with mental health services.

Any new public awareness campaign will need full support from the Welsh media. One reason is that journalists, producers and editors will gain a better understanding of how stories around suicide could and should be told. Also, by having a range of media organisations on board, over a period of time, a campaign would stand a better chance of reaching people who are at various points of their involvement with the issue. Samaritans, for example, have produced guidelines on how stories around suicide should be told. This could require a change in the language used, where terms such as 'committed suicide' may need to be challenged.

Opportunities to dovetail a new campaign with existing providers will need to be identified, to avoid duplication and to help associated services to make savings, or at least to avoid making further budgetary reductions.

Welsh Government can support public awareness campaigns and innovative approaches to addressing suicide rates in Wales, but specific resources are needed beyond the current strategy. With innovation comes risk. Risk comes in the form of funding and other resources, to try new approaches to addressing the issue of suicide.

From my perspective, the vast majority of available funding goes to the same organisations all the time. These organisations do great work, across a range of issues and services, but they do not have all the expertise or all the answers. Now is the time for politicians and decision makers to give smaller organisations and individuals a greater chance to show how they can make a difference and an impact in addressing this issue.

While Welsh Government has a key role, it cannot do this alone. A range of partner organisations across the private, public and voluntary sectors need to be involved in order to maximise the success of such efforts. This should include a wider group of organisations and individuals that may not be currently involved. This can be achieved through a collaborative approach that is based on co-production.

Action is undoubtedly needed now to reduce suicide rates in Wales, and this is a real opportunity for us to do something different and innovative to address the issue of suicide, in a way that isn't being done elsewhere. While action is needed now, we also need to take a long-term view on this, which goes beyond one electoral cycle – suicide is a generational issue that is some way behind discussions we can have about cancer, HIV and diabetes.

The 66 99 Project can work across ministerial portfolios and governmental departments. It needs to. [Our approach in Wales needs to](#). There are so many external factors that can lead someone to take their life, including those that may be particular to certain demographics –

e.g. economic downturn of 2008 leading to mass unemployment, housing, education, community issues etc.

Wales can take ownership of this campaign, link up with those in other countries and work to make this campaign available elsewhere. By using a statistic from a global report on suicide, we can quickly show how Wales is leading the way on this issue.

To conclude, I think we would be missing a big opportunity if Wales were to continue to only do what's been done before, in terms of raising awareness of suicide. We are not making enough progress in reducing the numbers, or in the time it's taking to do so. That means something needs to change.

Make use of existing best practice, for sure, but then look to other potentially innovative solutions, including those put forward in this document, that can save lives, make people's lives easier but, in some cases, to ease the grief felt by those that have lost someone in this way.

We have a lot of strong communities in Wales, and a lot of lost ones – solutions to the suicide crisis we are experiencing lie in working with both, with the arts and creativity being one vehicle that can enable progress and act as a leveller on various fronts.

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The 66 99 Project is happy to provide any further information on the points raised in its response, and for its response to be in the public domain.