

Mental health inequalities: visit

23 June 2022

Background

1. As part of our [inquiry into mental health inequalities](#), on 23 June 2022 the [Health and Social Care Committee](#) visited EYST Cymru in Swansea, and the Barnardo's Cymru Beyond the Blue project in Neath.
2. We are grateful to both organisations for their warm welcome, and to their staff and service users for sharing their views, experience and expertise with us.
3. This note summarises emerging issues and themes. Reference to an issue does not necessarily represent endorsement either by all participants or by the Committee.

EYST Cymru

Issues affecting mental health and wellbeing

4. People from ethnic minority communities can face racism and discrimination in everyday life. This can have a significant impact on their mental health and wellbeing.
5. People contacting EYST often have multiple problems, and it can be challenging for staff to know which issue to address first. Many of the problems people are experiencing – e.g. health, housing, problems with the benefits system, family breakdown – have significant impacts on mental health.
6. Ethnic minority communities may face barriers to education and employment opportunities. There needs to be greater representation of these communities within schools and further/higher education and in the wide range of careers. Young people need role models they can identify with.



Impact of community projects

7. EYST provides a safe space where people feel they belong and can be themselves, without having to answer intrusive questions about, for example, how they look, what they're wearing. This applies to service users and to staff employed by EYST.

8. EYST is a lifeline for the communities it supports, and is often the first point of contact for people needing help. There is great diversity within and among the communities EYST supports. EYST also provides support to other organisations who need their expertise.

Impact on staff and service providers

9. EYST staff often have to work/provide services outside their core role due to lack of other service provision which meets the needs of diverse communities. Two key examples are providing translation for people when accessing healthcare and other public services, and the lack of culturally-aware counselling services. EYST staff find themselves needing to provide counselling to people they support, even though they're not trained to do so. Providing translation or counselling for traumatic events can have an effect on EYST staff, often making them relive their own traumatic experiences with consequences for their own mental health and wellbeing. There is a need to make sure that staff also feel supported, as well as service users.

Engagement with public services

10. There is a lack of cultural awareness/competence among public services' staff (and a lack of diversity). This is a key element of the success EYST has in supporting people from diverse communities – its staff are relatable to the person they support and also have an understanding of that person's culture and what's important to them.

11. EYST's youth support workers can however struggle to get statutory services (e.g. social services) to engage with them in a timely way, and feel they don't always have the credibility/recognition they deserve – and need – in order to secure the help that's needed for the people they're supporting. Early intervention is key, and getting people the help they need before problems escalate. We heard distressing accounts of people ending up in the criminal justice system or dying by suicide because the right support wasn't available at the right time.

12. We also heard positive examples of EYST and other agencies working well together to provide effective, timely support to young people in the Gwent area. It was noted that there can be significant geographic variation in access to support and services.

Translation services

13. The lack of translation services is a significant issue. It's not uncommon for young children to have to translate for their parent at a medical appointment for example. This is particularly distressing and traumatising when having to discuss issues such as rape. Also, medical language can be difficult for people to understand and interpret, and this can have serious consequences if people then don't receive the correct treatment or incorrectly take medication for example. As noted above, despite not being trained translators, EYST staff may find themselves needing to provide translation, sometimes in their own second or third language. There was discussion of the need for a medical translation service. There's a significant language barrier with health triage systems, including GP appointments systems and the NHS 111 system - these can be very difficult for people to navigate.

Mental health: understanding and terminology

14. Different communities may have different understandings of 'mental health' (and different language around this). Mental health is often stigmatised. In some communities for example, a person with mental health problems may be thought to be possessed. 'Possession' may actually carry less stigma than mental illness in these communities.

Impact of the pandemic on mental health

15. There's been a big increase in mental health difficulties among the communities EYST supports as a result of the pandemic. This includes rates of self-harm and suicidal behaviour. Loneliness and isolation has also increased. The support of family and community is really important among ethnic minority groups, and this plays a vital role in protecting people's mental health and wellbeing. The pandemic restrictions significantly reduced that support.

Funding sustainability

16. Demand for EYST's services far outstrips its capacity to provide those services. There's no shortage of people to recruit, but more longer-term funding is needed. The lack of sustainable funding is a key issue. Significant staff resource goes into preparing new funding bids for projects at the end of their funding period, even when those projects have already proved themselves to be successful. Core funding would enable EYST to develop services further, and make more effective use of staff resources.

Asylum seekers and refugees

17. Asylum seekers and refugees may already have experienced significant trauma. The struggles they can face once in the UK compound this. This includes difficulties accessing healthcare and other services (including dentistry and optometry), but also loneliness, having no support networks, and not feeling as though they belong. Asylum seekers face lengthy waits

while their claims are processed, and are left in limbo during this time. As well as the anxiety this causes, it also has wider impacts in terms of people losing skills etc. while not able to work.

18. Having to keep repeating their story to different people/agencies is re-traumatising. Many refugees from other countries (e.g. Afghanistan, Syria) perceive that they are less 'welcome' in the UK or worthy of support as Ukrainian refugees, and this unfairness also has a negative impact on their mental wellbeing. Free public transport should be reinstated for all refugees.

Barnardo's Cymru Beyond the Blue

The role of community services

19. There is a real need for community-based services which provide an alternative to more traditional NHS mental health services in clinical settings or schools-based counselling. Many children and young people may prefer to attend a community service as there's less stigma attached. Such services can sit between the NHS and social services, and help to meet the needs of the 'missing middle' as identified by the Fifth Senedd's Children, Young People and Education Committee.

20. This is also important when taking into account the more holistic approach to 'wellbeing' which is available at Beyond the Blue. Children, young people and their families are able to benefit from a number of different approaches and intervention styles all from one service, in a way that is bespoke to them and meets their needs.

Whole family approach

21. It is very important that support is focused on the wider family, not just the child in question. Beyond the Blue has seen this have a positive impact, cut down on siloes in supporting a family and deliver results. Children seem to enjoy visiting the centre and taking part in the activities there. Parents also valued the service.

Access to support

22. The families we met had travelled to Beyond the Blue by bus. If transport links are not available, the people most in need of support services may have the most difficulty accessing them, further exacerbating existing inequalities.

23. An alternative to families travelling to the centre is 'outreach' i.e. the service going to people's homes. Beyond the Blue has carried out a great deal of outreach work to help children, young people and their families access services with the fewest barriers possible. This has included practitioners meeting young people in their homes, going for a walk or sitting in the

garden for a session. There has also been (and continues to be) a great deal of virtual work, which has been particularly successful when running groups for parents who no longer need to arrange childcare or travel in order to attend a parenting support group. The pandemic made many of the usual practices of the service more difficult in the first instance, but the team quickly adapted and is now able to offer more options to service users in terms of their access the service in different ways, based on what has been learned from this period.

24. The families we met were accessing play therapy at Beyond the Blue. This therapy is difficult to provide on a 'mobile' basis because it requires a wide range of play and creative resources and materials. This is also an expensive intervention to provide and so in order to make best use of the funding Beyond the Blue have these therapies based in the YMCA and the therapist can then see more families and not spend limited hours on travelling, setting up and packing up these resources in order to reach different areas. This therapy also requires continuity of venue and environment as a key part of the approach to treating trauma.

Service availability

25. There doesn't seem to be a clear 'map' of this sort of service provision across Wales. It isn't clear whether there is a strategic approach (for example across or within regional partnership boards) to developing such services. The NEST/NYTH framework developed by the Together for Children and Young People Programme may be helpful in this.