



Response by the National Federation of Women's Institutes- Wales to the Health, Social Care and Sport Committee inquiry into the impact of the Covid-19 outbreak, and its management, on health and social care in Wales.

BACKGROUND TO THE WI

The National Federation of Women's Institutes (NFWI) is the largest women's organisation in the UK with more than 200,000 members in over 6000 WIs across England, Wales, and the Islands. In Wales, we have about 16,000 members belonging to 500 WIs.

We are an educational, non-party political organisation, established to ensure that women are able to take an effective part in their community, make new friends, widen their horizons, and together influence local, national, and international affairs on issues that matter to them.

Mental Health

There is evidence from mental health charities that, during the lockdown, people with mental health problems faced difficulties in accessing GP services and community mental health teams and that some people were unsure where to go for support.

As the restrictions ease, there is concern about the pressure on mental health services as people reach out for support.

During the pandemic, the mental health of the population will have been impacted by factors such as violence against women, digital exclusion, loneliness and social isolation, health inequalities, poverty and the economic downturn.

In a member survey by the NFWI about the impact of Covid-19, 27% of the 364 respondents living in Wales stated that their mental health and wellbeing was worse as a result of the pandemic and 6% responded that it was much worse.

In a separate survey undertaken by the NFWI last year as part of our 'Make Time for Mental Health' campaign, a number of members told us that they chose not to see help through the NHS because they either didn't want to admit to themselves that

they could have a mental health problem or because they didn't want their friends and family to find out. Evidence from research undertaken by other charities in the sector has identified that some people have not been accessing support during the pandemic as they have not considered their issue serious enough which is concerning.

We are also particularly concerned about the impact of the lockdown on carers. Carers Wales has highlighted that during the Coronavirus pandemic, unpaid carers have had to take on additional caring responsibilities due, for example, to less people being able to access clinical services as well as practical support services such as domiciliary care at home and access to care settings within the community.

In our member survey about the impact of Covid-19, we asked members about how their caring responsibilities had been affected. Fourteen percent of the 364 respondents living in Wales stated that they were spending more time caring for others and 12% stated that they had been unable to care for someone they usually supported.

Fifty-nine percent of members from across England and Wales who took part in the NFWI's survey on mental health in 2019 revealed that they had provided unpaid care and support for a friend or a family member with a mental health problem.

What the WI is calling for:-

- Removal of the stigma surrounding talking about mental health by improving public understanding of mental health problems so that it is as acceptable to talk about mental health issues as much as physical health issues.
- Parity between mental health and physical health.
- Investment in mental health services to ensure that people with mental health problems can access mental health treatment for as long as they need it and get the right care for their condition.
- Unpaid carers have access to the support they entitled to and know where to access information and support.
- Investment and action focusing on the prevention of mild to moderate mental health problems.
- Increased access to psychological therapies for all.

Loneliness and isolation

During Covid-19 we have seen individuals and communities coming together to support each other and those in need in their communities. From the outset of this crisis, WI members have been sewing PPE for hospitals and care homes, collecting items for food banks, supporting vulnerable people and coming up with creative ways to keep up the spirits of their communities during this difficult time.

Some WIs in Sir Gâr/Carmarthenshire Federation have set up buddy systems to keep all members connected. Several WIs on Anglesey have made laundry bags for nurses uniforms and two WIs made scrubs for the local hospital. In Ceredigion, a small group of Llanddewi Brefi WI members and friends made over 100 items including headbands, hats and laundry bags for the Scrubs for Bronglais Hospital Sewing Team. In Gwent Federation, one of the WIs delivered a goodie bag to each member once a month which contained a craft item, a food item or a drink, a note and an

uplifting poem or similar. Members with special skills set up sessions via Zoom such relaxation techniques, craft sessions and yoga in order for members of their WI to enjoy and benefit from.

These acts of kindness and solidarity have spread positivity, alleviated loneliness, and lifted people's spirits through what has been an incredibly challenging time. However, we are aware that this is not always the case, and in many instances the lockdown and social distancing measures have exacerbated feelings of loneliness and vulnerability.

What the WI is calling for:-

- Removal of the stigma associated with loneliness.
- Increased public awareness of loneliness and the available support.
- Ensure that those who are, or who become lonely and socially isolated, are able to access the support they need.

Cervical screening

Following a temporary pause on cervical screening, we are pleased that screening recommenced in June. We do recognise that it could take months to catch up with the screenings that were paused during lockdown.

As part of 5 Minutes that Matter campaign, over the past months our priority has been to ensure that our members have had access to up to date accurate information about how cervical screening services have been impacted, and know where to turn to for support.

To help increase understanding of why many women are not attending cervical screening, the NFWI recently launched a survey inviting people to share their views and personal experiences of screening. This study aims to explore a wide range of issues, including barriers to cervical screening attendance and personal attitudes towards strategies designed to improve uptake. The survey will also enable us to gather feedback about how views, experiences and preferences with regards to cervical screening may have changed as a result of Covid-19.