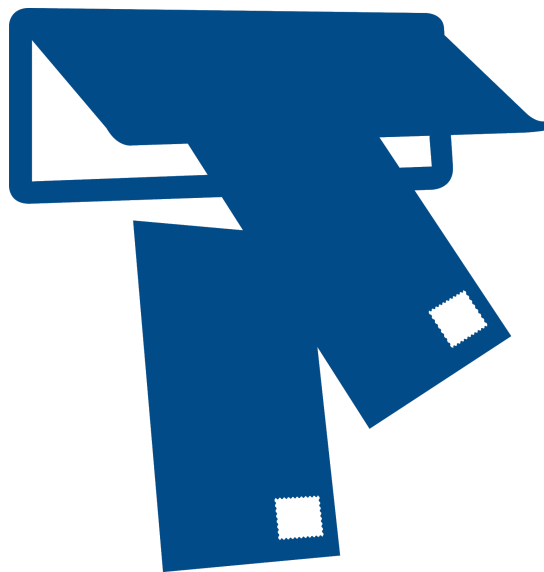


Help when I need it

How people with mental health problems interact with local authorities across Wales



Contents

Summary and Background	2
Research Method and Findings	3
Identifying core needs	4
Who is responsible for services?	6
Complexity and volume of communication	6
Timely help	7
Supporting people with mental health problems	8
Advocates for support	10
Conclusion and next steps	12

Summary

Revealing Reality undertook in-depth interviews with people with mental health problems across Wales on behalf of Citizens Advice Cymru. The aim was to identify any barriers they had in accessing local authority services and to identify any support needs.

Overall, we found a general confusion about what local authorities do and which services they are responsible for, resulting in a lack of clarity on who to contact and when.

Our research participants did not want special treatment, they just wanted clear information and easy to access services. They also wanted to know more about when to contact the local authority and when it is appropriate to tell them they have a mental health problem.

Background

In Wales, during 2017/18 we helped 101,911 people with 405,304 problems. Nearly half of all clients we've helped had a long term health condition or disability, the most common of these is mental health with 24% voluntarily declaring a mental health problem.

At Citizens Advice Cymru we see a growing number of clients who have mental health problems. Over the past year there has been a 12% increase in clients who self-declare a mental health issue. We wanted to identify ways in which more effective support can be provided to those clients and talk to the service providers they interact with, including their local authorities.

Our research identified problems or barriers faced by people experiencing mental health problems when attempting to engage with local authority services (including where people find it impossible to engage at any level). We explored positive experiences of engagement and what made these good. We have also highlighted the impact engagement with local authority services has on people's day-to-day lives and wellbeing.

Living with a mental health condition can impact on people in various ways, part of our research looked at living with a mental health condition.

Research method

The research featured in this report was undertaken by Revealing Reality on behalf of Citizens Advice. The methodology covered three stages:

- **Stage 1.** Desk research, including a study of recent legislation, local authority mapping and a review of mental health organisations in Wales.
- **Stage 2.** Expert interviews, 5 frontline staff delivering local authority services in Wales and 5 experts working in mental health.
- **Stage 3.** 24 in-depth interviews across Wales aimed at understanding people's experiences of local authority services. The interviews covered 16 areas and 11 local authorities.

The research was carried out between November 2017 and February 2018.

Findings

The aim of the research was to develop our knowledge of the experiences of people with mental health problems as they go about their everyday activities and interactions and in particular their experiences of local authority services. This is part of a wider piece of work about supporting people with mental health problems.

Citizens Advice Cymru wanted to develop a thorough understanding of experiences to:

- Identify problems or barriers faced when engaging with or attempting to engage with local authority services (including where they find it impossible to engage at any level).
- Explore positive experiences of engagement and what made these good.
- Highlight the impact engagement with local authority services has on people's day-to-day lives and wellbeing.

We wanted to explore how local authorities can work with residents who have mental health conditions and provide the right support at the right time. For local authorities, one of the key challenges identified through our talking to our research participants was that they had a diverse set of needs that local authorities have to meet.

Identifying core needs

Our research participants wanted to know where to get information and assistance, but they didn't always want to be treated differently to others.

Julie's story

Julie contacted Citizens Advice webchat service requesting guidance on how to help her sister with debt problems, her sister had been hospitalised due to mental health problems.

The stress of her debt situation, including council tax arrears, had contributed to her mental health problems, which sadly resulted in an attempt to take her own life.

Julie provided their local council with with medical evidence of her sister's health issues, but the council refused to discuss the account with her and stated that they must discuss it with bailiffs that had been instructed.

During this already difficult time for Julie's sister and their family, the stress and frustration at trying to resolve the matter, with no sensitivity from the council, did not help their situation.

The local Citizens Advice advisor felt that vulnerable debtors could be dealt with more sensitively to avoid greater stress.

Dafydd's story

Dafydd is single and has been living in a shared house. He had a council tax debt which was passed to bailiffs.

He has had mental health problems and when he visited Citizens Advice was on the verge of a breakdown. He provided medical evidence to his local council and following this, they took the debt back from the bailiffs.

Even though the local authority were aware that Dafydd was being treated for a mental health problem and medical evidence had been provided, the council did the same thing again and passed the debt on to bailiffs.

Dafydd does not deal with conflict well and became scared to go outside his door in case the bailiffs call.

The local Citizens Advice advisor felt that there is no flexibility for people and everyone is treated the same, whether they suffer with mental health problems or not.



Who is responsible for services?

Our research found that people weren't clear about the boundaries between the council and wider services and where to go for help with their issue.

- Most were uncertain about which services were provided by the council versus other providers
- Most were unclear about what departments were responsible for and who could assist them
- Most had contacted the wrong department, sometimes on multiple occasions, without resolving their issues
- People often gave up before they reached the correct level and type of help



John, schizophrenia and depression

"I'm not sure what the council is responsible for?"



Mental Health Advocate, Torfaen

"The hardest things for people to deal with is being shepherded from person to person without help or guidance...people give up when this happens, and that's when things get worse. People who work in these services don't realise because they understand the system, but people outside of it have no idea."

Many people struggled with 'information overload' from their council - the volume of contact and complexity of the content.

- Most had periods when they struggled to process information
- Some received high volumes of letters and bills from the council - leaving them feeling overwhelmed
- Many had moments when they ignored anything they found challenging or thought would be too difficult to resolve
- Most found even the correct information complicated & impossible to decipher

Complexity and volume of communication



Helena, anxiety and depression

"I can never find a direct number for the housing department. I either just phone any number I can find on the website and ask to be put through, or I have to go down to the council offices in town to book an appointment. I have no idea which days they are open. And then I have to go back again for the actual appointment."

Some people lacked the confidence and capability to communicate more complex experiences or issues

- Most felt anxious about their ability to communicate and articulate the challenges they faced
- Some spoke of being 'tongue-tied' when they are asked to explain
- Some were concerned they would not be believed
- Most often, they found it hard to 'prove' their circumstances
- Some people experienced 'fuzziness' during difficult times (e.g. hospital stays, staying with friends and family or medication)



Gwen, PTSD, depression and anxiety

"They offered me a council house which was too far from my GP and chemist. They thought I was being fussy but I felt like I wasn't being listened to... I ended up screaming down the phone like a mad person - I felt like that was the only way they'd listen to me."

Timely help

Many people faced unexpected long waits or changes in process - which exacerbated anxiety

- Most experienced long waits to get through to services which exacerbated any 'ostrich effect'
- Everyone found delays or changes caused stress and anxiety (which was sometimes exacerbated by side effects like paranoia)
- Some people felt their health declined because of these changes and concerns about what was happening
- Most problems seemed to stem from councils not communicating well about changes in process



Alex, anxiety, depression and bipolar disorder

“When my support worker has been on the phone to the council, they’ve sometimes been on hold for half an hour. Just waiting. I get so worried and stressed about the phone bill.”

Supporting people with mental health problems

Some felt that the council was ‘closed off’ or didn’t give the impression it would be willing to support people with mental health problems

- Most people felt their local council was unapproachable
- People often related the council with large, intimidating buildings
- Most saw the council more as an unfriendly organisation and felt it lacked a human side
- Although, some felt the council was on their side

Most felt they could benefit from extra guidance or help, but felt anxious or didn’t consider coming forward about issues

- Some respondents’ outlook and perspective focused on being able to cope
- They rarely wanted to admit they needed extra help
- They wanted their council to see them as ‘coping’ and ‘doing well’
- They didn’t always feel like their need for extra help was legitimate (e.g. their situation wasn’t ‘bad enough’)
- But all recognised moments when they could be better supported or achieve more with extra help



Lucy, bipolar disorder and depression

“I do sometimes feel fraudulent, making a fuss. In good periods, I sometimes think - am I making this up? Is it all an act?”



Expert, national organisation

“There are some special requirements in place for people who need them, e.g. private discussion rooms but individuals need to be aware of them and have confidence to ask for them.... Shouldn’t be embarrassed to ask for it.”

Most people didn't want to be continuously defined by their condition but recognised there might be value in the council understanding it

- Many of our respondents had not told their local authority about their mental health condition
- 'Disclosure' was a troubling idea for people who had not been formerly diagnosed with a condition
- People did not necessarily want to feel like they had been labelled - but knew there might be benefits of telling staff they dealt with
- Most weren't clear if there was a process for telling the council



Alan, bipolar disorder and depression

"Most people are quite understanding... I don't shout it from the rooftops though"

Some respondents didn't know how their disclosure would be used and were worried that their condition would define them

- Some people were frustrated about having to 're-explain' their condition to different services
- While others continued to be frustrated by being labelled with their conditions, they knew there might be benefits to sharing
- The processes around information sharing and storage were unclear for most people
- They rarely felt confident that the professionals they spoke to had any clear system for managing their 'disclosure'
- This meant some people held it back - and would need a lot more confidence in the system if they were to tell staff

Many of our respondents felt local authority staff had stereotypical or outdated perceptions of 'poor mental health' - this was reflected in how people were treated. Some respondents felt that staff lacked a basic understanding of different types of mental health.



Jane, PTSD, depression and anxiety

"I'm too high functioning for them to take me seriously."

Many of our respondents felt like they were accused of creating problems themselves. There was a common view that while most of them were trying to play by the rules, during episodes or less stable times, they needed a more human and flexible approach. Most were able to interact well with council services the majority of the time and people recognised that they sometimes made mistakes when they were in bad periods.

They did not expect 'a get out of jail for free card' every time they struggled, however, our respondents felt that the council were sometimes inflexible and didn't listen to reasons why things were not going smoothly. Many hoped for a more personal, investigative approach.



Beth, borderline personality disorder and depression

"When I take too much on, my head gets in a mess and my house gets in a mess and I can't sort anything out."

Advocates for support

People with mental health problems who are coping tend to have stronger support systems in place - which means their needs aren't always visible to the council.

External support can mitigate some of the issues that people with mental health issues face. Many rely on family members on a day to day basis to manage 'everyday life' tasks. Some of our research participants had help from family to make phone calls or keep them on track with things like payment and rubbish collections. Others have children or volunteering roles that motivate them to stay on top of things.



June, anxiety and depression

"It's good that I have a daughter because I have to do things... I give myself a stern talking to... you have to sort it out, it's only a phone call, you'll feel better afterwards."

For some of our participants, their support systems were precarious. Some had tense family relationships (often caused or strained by their mental health) which put their support system at risk. External support services reported feeling under pressure due to all the people who are asking for help.



Counsellor, mental health support group

"There is a thin line between supporting someone and someone relying on you. *We try to be the scaffold at the side of them.*"



Conclusion and next steps

Most of our research participants with poor mental health didn't want to be treated any differently. However, they recognised there were times when they need extra support. They didn't feel encouraged to come forward about what they were struggling with and often when they did speak to someone about their condition, they felt they were dealt with insensitively.

Most people didn't want to be continuously defined by their condition but recognised there might be value in the council understanding it. External support can mitigate some issues that people with mental health issues face, many rely on others such as family members to manage 'everyday life' tasks.

Overall, our research shows that there are barriers for people with mental health problems in accessing vital services provided by local authorities and it is clear that some changes could be made to improve support and develop a better understanding of how best to deal with vulnerable people.

What needs to happen next?

Following our research, we believe that local authorities and all partners, including the third sector and health services, should be working towards:

- Building clearer communications
- Developing respectful interactions
- Encouraging contact by service users
- Enabling an investigative approach

Citizens Advice Cymru want to work with local authorities and people with mental health conditions to develop good practice and a recognised pathway for people with mental health problems when engaging with local authority services. Best practice already exists but pulling it together in one easy to use format will enable us to learn and improve services for people with mental health problems.

Recommendations for local authorities

To achieve the above aims, these practical steps should be taken by local authorities and community partners across Wales:

1. **Replicating best practice** - Around Wales there are public services who work well for people with mental health including local authorities. We would like to see local authorities sharing that best practice to create a consistent approach across Wales. One example could be signing up to the Time to Change Wales organisational pledge.
2. **Staff training** - Mental health charities provide a range of training for staff, helping them to handle difficult situations with people who may be experiencing mental health problems. Local authorities should commit to arranging this training for public-facing roles. It is also important that support is in place for staff that are dealing with vulnerable clients to help manage their own mental health and wellbeing.
3. **Navigating and accessing services** - People experiencing mental health problems can go through periods in which they will totally disengage with services and may not have networks they can rely on for support during this time. People with mental health problems can sometimes struggle with complex or high volume of communications. Some people also struggle with phone calls. Local authorities should look at alternative communication channels such as online chat systems or face to face contact for those who want or need it. All communications should be looked at to make sure they use clear and simple language and administration systems should be looked at to avoid unnecessary errors and duplicating letters and correspondence.
4. **Advocates** - People can find it challenging to be proactive in their communications and interactions with service providers even when the cost of inaction is high. If people experiencing mental health problems struggle to interact with local authorities, local authorities should actively promote the option for people to nominate an advocate to support them and attend meetings or make phone calls.

Free, confidential advice. Whoever you are.

We help people overcome their problems and campaign on big issues when their voices need to be heard.

We value diversity, champion equality, and challenge discrimination and harassment.

We're here for everyone.



citizensadvice.org.uk

Published August 2018

Citizens Advice is an operating name of The National Association of Citizens Advice Bureaux.

Registered charity number 279057.