

Inquiry: Mental health inequalities - [Health and Social Care Committee](#)

Deadline 24 February 2022

Response on behalf of Learning Disability Wales

Learning Disability Wales is a national charity representing the learning disability sector in Wales. We work with people with a learning disability and their families, Welsh Government, local authorities, disabled people's organisations and the voluntary sector to create a better Wales for all people with a learning disability.

Contact

Dr Grace Krause, Policy Officer: grace.krause@ldw.org.uk

Response

While we do not have specific evidence of wider mental health inequalities for people with a learning disability in Wales, we have strong reasons to believe that people with a learning disability struggle more with their mental health and struggle more with getting appropriate support than other people. We do not have specific data for Wales but a UK wide study in 2007¹ found that 52% of people with a learning disability had mental health issues. Scottish census data from 2011 indicates that mental health conditions were reported for 21.7% of people with learning disabilities compared to 4.3% of other people². We would like to draw the Committee's attention to work done by Mencap UK³ and Public Health England⁴, outlining some of the reasons why people with a learning disability are more likely to struggle with their mental health than other people.

¹ Cooper, S.A., Smiley, E., Morrison, J., Williamson, A., & Allan, L. (2007). Mental ill-health in adults with intellectual disabilities: Prevalence and associated factors. *The British Journal of Psychiatry*, 190, 27–35.

² Hughes-McCormack LA and others. Prevalence of mental health conditions and relationship with general health in a whole-country population of people with intellectual disabilities compared with the general population. *BJPsych Open*, 2018

³ <https://www.mencap.org.uk/learning-disability-explained/research-and-statistics/health/mental-health>

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https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=&cad=rja&uact=8&ved=2ahUKewjNgJbTgpT2AhURO8AKHRTthCF8QFnoECAQQAw&url=https%3A%2F%2Ffingertips.phe.org.uk%2Fdocuments%2FHealth%2520Inequalities_Mental%2520health%2520problems.pdf&usg=AOvVaw3ncUEefxGCMbkZmkAoTt5s

There are a few factors that might contribute to people with learning disabilities having poorer mental health outcomes than other people:

1. We know that people with a learning disability are more likely to be unemployed than other people as well as more likely to live in poverty than others. We know that both of these factors are strongly correlated with poor mental health.
2. We also know that people with learning disabilities often have very limited social networks and few opportunities to socialise or have relationships. They are also more likely to face abuse and anti-social behaviour in the community. These factors can have a major impact on people's mental health.
3. We know that throughout the pandemic disabled people have been disproportionately affected by measures and loss of support systems. As the Locked Out Report⁵ highlights, disabled people have experienced very significant limitations in their access to all kinds of health care. Drawing on data from the ONS, the Locked Out report writes that "Almost half (47%) of disabled people [in September 2020] reported high anxiety compared with less than a third (29%) of non-disabled people. Furthermore, disabled people reported more frequently than non-disabled people that the pandemic is affecting their well-being because it makes their mental health worse (41% for disabled people and 20% for non-disabled people); they feel lonely (45% and 32%); they spend too much time alone (40% and 29 [...] Factors such as isolation, loneliness, restrictions on movement, withdrawal of established social and statutory support, inaccessible services and public spaces, poor socio-economic living conditions, confusing public messaging, etc. played significant contributory roles. High levels of 'worry' and anxiety were reported among disabled people (ONS)"
We strongly recommend the Committee studies the Locked Out report closely in order to understand the way that the mental health of people with a learning disability has been affected over the last 2 years.
4. Similarly, a study⁶ about the experience of people with a learning disability in Wales found that people with a learning disability experienced very significant challenges to their wellbeing during the pandemic. In January 2021, 84% of the people in the study reported being sad or worried most or all of the time. The level of distress experienced by people with a learning disability will have long term consequences in terms of their mental health going forward.
5. Diagnostic overshadowing: For many people with a learning disability, as well as for many neurodivergent people, diagnostic overshadowing can pose a real issue in accessing mental health support. Mental

⁵ <https://gov.wales/locked-out-liberating-disabled-peoples-lives-and-rights-wales-beyond-covid-19-html>

⁶ <https://udid.research.southwales.ac.uk/news/living-through-pandemic-impact-covid-19-people-learning-disabilities-wales/>

health professionals may not understand the difference between behaviours and feelings that have to do with the learning disability or neurodivergence and those resulting from distress or mental illness. This lack of understanding means that people will often not get appropriate mental health support. Mental health professionals need better training and education in how mental health difficulties may present in and affect people with learning disabilities and neurodivergent people.

6. People with a learning disability and autistic people face restrictive practices in some mental health settings. It is important to note that at a time when they are in the greatest distress, mental health facilities are often not safe spaces for them and that mental health issues can be escalated and made worse through the treatment that people with a learning disability and autistic people sometimes experience in these settings. In order to make sure people with a learning disability can get the mental health support they need, the Reducing Restrictive Practices Framework⁷ must be fully implemented. In particular, it is important that behaviours that people may have because they are distressed or struggling with mental illness is not reacted to in a punishing way that can lead to increased distress.

⁷ <https://gov.wales/reducing-restrictive-practices-framework>