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Lynne Neagle, MS
Chair, Children, Young People and Education Committee
National Assembly for Wales
Cardiff Bay
Cardiff
CF99 1NA

20th October 2020

Dear Lynne Neagle, Chair of Children, Young People and Education Committee,

We are writing as a collective to highlight our concerns about the impact the COVID-19 pandemic is having on perinatal mental health, and parent-infant relationships in Wales.

We are in an unprecedented time, facing a global public health crisis. What is becoming increasingly clear is that the mental health needs of pregnant women and new parents, and their babies are being overlooked¹. This is despite emerging international evidence which suggests that women are at increased risk of developing mental health problems in the perinatal period due to the COVID-19 pandemic², and the detrimental impact it is having on the wellbeing of babies and toddlers³.

Before the pandemic, up to 1 in 5 mums and 1 in 10 dads experienced mental health problems during pregnancy and after birth. Since the outbreak of COVID-19, the subsequent lockdown requirements and social distancing measures, parents are facing unrepresented pressures, heightened anxieties and are struggling to access family support and the mental health services they need. For parents, poor mental health in the perinatal period can make it difficult to provide sensitive and attuned care and form crucial relationships with their babies, potentially affecting a child's overall development.

The impact of COVID-19 on parents & babies in Wales

- The Babies in Lockdown (2020) research showed that for 66% of respondents from Wales, parental mental health was cited as a main concern during lockdown, and only 26% felt confident that they could find help for mental health if they needed it

¹ Thapa, S. B., Mainali, A., Schwank, S. E and Acharya, G (2020) Maternal mental health in the time of the COVID-19 pandemic. *Acta Obstet Gynecol Scand.* 99 (7): 817-818.

² See for example: Babies in Lockdown: listening to parents to build back better (2020). Best Beginnings, Home-Start UK, and the Parent-Infant Foundation; Das, R (2020) COVID-19, perinatal mental health and the digital pivot. Findings from a qualitative project and recommendations for a 'new normal'. University of Surrey; Davenport, M.H., Meyer, S., Meah, V. L., Strynadka, M.C and Khurana, R (2020) Moms Are Not OK: COVID-10 and Maternal Mental Health. *Frontiers in Global Women's Health.* 1 (1): 1-6; Thapa, S. B., Mainali, A., Schwank, S. E and Acharya, G (2020) Maternal mental health in the time of the COVID-19 pandemic. *Acta Obstet Gynecol Scand.* 99 (7): 817-818

³ Babies in Lockdown: listening to parents to build back better (2020). Best Beginnings, Home-Start UK, and the Parent-Infant Foundation

- The Babies in Lockdown (2020) research showed that 69% of parents in Wales felt the changes brought about by COVID-19 were affecting their unborn baby, baby or young child. 41% of the respondents reported feeling unconfident that they could find help with baby's wellbeing and development if they needed it
- Early findings from the first 100+ women in the Born in Wales study shows that 6 in 10 pregnant women report periods of low mood, including feeling down and depressed⁴. The majority of women (7 in 10) reported a negative pregnancy experience, feeling 'isolated', 'alone', 'lonely' 'distant' and 'not supported'
- 'COVID 19 - new parents in Wales' survey by Bethan Sayed MS, showed that of those who had given birth during lockdown (N=187), 90% (N=168) felt isolated as new parents, and 63% had not received their 6-week post-natal check

Without the right support, perinatal mental health problems, and difficulties in the parent-infant relationship can have serious immediate and long-term consequences for families. Before the pandemic, there were already significant gaps in specialist perinatal mental health services, with only two out of the seven (29%) health boards in Wales meeting CCQI perinatal quality network standards⁵, and an absence of a mother and baby unit for families needing specialist inpatient support. The Rare Jewels (2019) report also highlighted the lack of specialised parent-infant relationship teams in Wales⁶. With concerns rising about the anticipated surge of need for families requiring perinatal and infant mental health support as a result of the COVID-19 crisis, urgent measures are needed to support the mental health of all expectant and new parents and their babies.

As we face a second wave of COVID-19, families need care and support from sufficiently staffed and resourced perinatal mental health, maternity, health visiting, primary care, and parent-infant services. These services are unique, and play an essential role in safeguarding and promoting the welfare of mums, dads/partners and the healthy development of infants, which means they must be protected and resourced.

We are calling on Welsh Government to:

- Give assurances that the midwifery, health visiting, perinatal mental health and infant mental health workforce will be protected from redeployment throughout the COVID-19 crisis
- Prioritise existing commitments to improving access and the quality of perinatal mental health services⁷, including sufficient funding to ensure all community perinatal mental health services can meet CCQI quality standards, and progressing the interim mother and baby unit as a key priority

⁴ Brophy S, Todd C, Toomey S. (2020) Early findings from first 100+women in Born in Wales <https://ncphwr.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Born-In-Wales-Newsletter-Sep2020-1.pdf>

⁵ See: <https://maternalmentalhealthalliance.org/campaign/maps/>

⁶ Sally Hogg (2019) [Rare Jewels: Specialised parent-infant relationship teams in the UK](#). Parent Infant Partnership UK

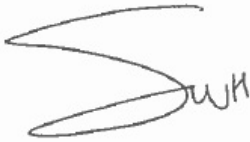
⁷ As outlined in the [Review of the Together for Mental Health Delivery Plan 2019-2022 in response to Covid-19](#)

- Provide additional investment for perinatal mental health services and voluntary services to cope with the increase in demand as a result of COVID-19
- Provide investment to grow specialised parent-infant relationship services across Wales, to support and strengthen the important relationships between babies and their parents or carers

As part of its follow up inquiry on the impact of COVID-19, we urge the Committee to consider the impact that the COVID-19 pandemic is having on perinatal mental health, and parent-infant relationships in Wales.

As a collective, we would welcome any opportunities to support the Committee’s work in this area, and we are available to provide further written or oral evidence, should this be useful.

Kind regards



Dr. Sarah Witcombe-Hayes
 Senior Policy Researcher, NSPCC Cymru/Wales
 Wales Coordinator, Everyone’s Business Campaign, Maternal Mental Health Alliance



A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Ian Jones', with a large loop under the 'n'.

Professor Ian Jones
Professor of Psychiatry
Director, National Centre for Mental Health,
Cardiff University