NCMH
National Centre for Mental Health
Canolfan Iechyd Meddwl Genedlaethol

2020-21 Annual Report
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*Please note, some imagery included in this report features NCMH activity from before 2020.*
We’re pleased to present our 2020-21 annual report following an unexpectedly challenging but none-the-less rewarding year at the National Centre for Mental Health (NCMH).

For us all, the last year has been full of challenges the pandemic has presented.

The NCMH team have predominantly been working from home where possible, and we have had to adapt to a working life spent on Teams or Zoom.

This has been particularly difficult for our new starters - some of whom we will be introducing in this report – but we are incredibly proud of how all the team have adapted and made possible the positive stories from the first year of our new funding period you can read about over the coming pages.

Due to restrictions, recruitment to NCMH studies has been impacted dramatically but there have been opportunities in moving online as well.

We have worked to adapt our interventions to the new world of COVID, delivering our mental health education programme through online sessions and webinars.

We have also taken the opportunity of a pause in recruitment to look again at how we best deliver our research plans, so when research opens up again, we will be able to deliver the NCMH goals more efficiently, in new and exciting ways.

People with lived experience are central, of course, to all that we do at NCMH. Whether this be through the (Parternship in Research) PÂR group or our other involvement groups that help us ensure the voice of lived experience is heard in the planning and delivery of mental health research, participants who give their time to take part in research studies, or our research champions who do such fantastic work spreading the word about research opportunities and engaging with the public.

The last year has been particularly difficult for those with mental health issues, and we are particularly grateful for the ongoing support that we have received at NCMH.

We would also would like to thank Health and Care Research Wales for their continued funding, particularly for working with us so supportively to adapt our plans to the COVID environment. Thanks too must go to all those who have worked with us in the NHS, the third sector and academics from the wider research community.

The last year has been one of transition, to the goals of the new five-year funding period and to a post COVID world.

There has been a lot of talk of “building back better” and although sceptical of much that is discussed under this in wider society, we need to make this a reality for NCMH in the years to come. Working closely with all those mentioned above will be key to our ongoing success.

Together we really can make a difference for mental health.
Who we are

The National Centre for Mental Health (NCMH) brings together leading researchers from Cardiff, Swansea and Bangor University.

Our mission

To improve the mental health and wellbeing of the people of Wales.

Aims

- To advance mental health and learning disability research in Wales.
- To engage with patients, their families, the wider public and third sector organisations in Wales to increase understanding of mental illness and the need for research.
- To change the research culture in health and social care services.
Who’s who

The NCMH team is made up of academics, clinicians and professional support staff from three of Wales’ leading universities - Cardiff, Swansea and Bangor.

NCMH Executive Board
- James Walters
- Michael Owen
- Keith Lloyd
- Stephen Beyer
- Jeremy Hall
- Ann John
- Rob Poole
- Peter Huxley
- Arianna di Florio
- Alka Ahuja

Administration Team
- Sarah Knott
- Mark Coles
- Claire Baker
- John Tredget
- Catrin Hopkins
- Sarah Rees
- Naomi Marfell
- Tyler Savory
- Andrew Worsey

Recruitment Team
- Lawrence Raisanen
- Andrew Beazer
- Natalie Richards
- Christine Fraser
- Holly Pearce
- Alice Roberts
- Danielle Kitney
- Claudia Evison
- Chloe Apsey

Laboratory Team
- Ngoc-Nga Vinh
- Alex Evans
- Patrick Weller

SAIL Team
- Marcos del Pozo Banos
- Sze Chim Lee

Data Analysts
- Katie Lewis
- Catrin Lewis
- Amy Lynham
- Leon Hubbard
- Elen Thomas

Engage to Change
- Andrea Meek
- Elisa Vigna
- Jacob Meighan

Placement Students
- Martha Dempsey
- Jasmine Trotman
- Jennifer Lloyd

* Not directly employed by NCMH, but part funded in some cases
Over the last year, the team have worked incredibly hard, responding flexibly to the unexpected challenges the COVID-19 crisis has brought.

Whilst the pandemic has dominated the first year of the award, there are a number of highlights and successes we would like to share with you, which are detailed throughout this report.

Whilst we have had to pause our face-to-face recruitment of research participants, we have been busy developing new online opportunities to take part in research. We have launched a new area of work focusing on investigating the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on people with a diagnosed mental health condition (page 9).

More than 4,000 people have taken part in the survey, and we currently have a follow up survey in development focusing on the impact of the pandemic a year on. We hope that the findings of this study will help us better understand the particular issues faced by those with a mental health condition and inform the NHS and policy makers in responding to the challenges the crisis continues to bring.

We are delighted that NCMH Principal Investigator Dr Arianna Di Florio has been awarded a coveted grant from the European Research Council which aims to conduct pioneering research within the area of women’s mental health. We have been working together with Dr Di Florio to continue our work on postpartum psychosis and launch specific programs of work exploring premenstrual dysphoric disorder and the impact of the menopause on mental health (page 10).

It gives us great pleasure to report that Professor Jon Bisson, Deputy Director for NCMH, has been awarded the 2021 Lord Ashcroft Research award for the feasibility trial of 3MDR for Veterans with treatment related PTSD. Within our intervention development work package, we have also been working on the development of a digital guided self-help treatment for prolonged grief disorder (PGD) (page 12), collaboratively with people with lived experience of PGD as well as experts in the field in order to develop a program that will help meet the demand for PGD treatment.

Our psychoeducation programme, Bipolar Education Programme Cymru (BEPC), (page 11) has been incredibly successful in adapting to the COVID-19 crisis, offering both booster sessions to those who have previously taken part in the face-to-face programme as well as hosting a series of webinars, in collaboration with Bipolar UK, helping to reach even more people.

This past year has seen the appointment of Dr Lance Vincent Watkins as our new Clinical Research Lead for Learning Disability (LD). Dr Watkins will help to strengthen our links with clinical services as well as progress our LD work to date and provide strategic input on our future directions.

With these being just a few of our key highlights over the last year, we hope you enjoy reading all that we have been up to throughout the rest of the report.
Core Metrics
Reporting period: 2020/2021

Health and Care Research Wales infrastructure award to the group

- Direct funding awarded: £949k
- Jobs created through direct funding: 26

Grants won during reporting period

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<tr>
<th>Grants won</th>
<th>Led by group</th>
<th>Group collaborating</th>
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<tr>
<td>Number</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Value</td>
<td>£9.7m</td>
<td>£12.4m</td>
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<tr>
<td>Funding to Wales</td>
<td>£6.2m</td>
<td>£11.6m</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Funding to group</td>
<td>£6.1m</td>
<td>£11.5m</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Additional jobs created for Wales</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Additional jobs created for group</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8</td>
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Number of publications: 184
Number of public engagement events: 14
Number of public involvement opportunities: 22
This year we reached our 22,213th participant.

This incredible number of volunteers has enabled us to build the NCMH cohort as a world-leading resource for mental health research.

It underpins our research programmes aimed at better understanding biological, psychological and social factors contributing to mental health problems.

Volunteers are asked questions around a range of topics, including mental and physical health, lifestyle, employment and education.

During 2020 our study recruitment moved online. We were well placed to adapt to this change, with our well established online study already in place.

In June, we launched our COVID-19 survey aimed at understanding the impact of the pandemic on people living with mental health problems.

We’d like to thank everyone who has taken part in this initial stage and have also completed further studies into specific conditions.

Adapting to online recruitment
As well as launching our study into the impact of the pandemic we have launched several other research projects into a number of different conditions.

We have partnered with researchers from Cardiff University’s Child and Adolescent Psychiatry team to reach out to parents and carers of children with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) to learn how the pandemic has affected their families, as well as learning what research they would like to see in the future.

Working with Cardiff University’s School of Psychology, we have also launched a study into the impact of certain life events on mothers during the maternal period.

4,488 people took part in our research online
I joined the NCMH field team this year and I’m excited to be working with Dr Arianna Di Florio on the GASSP project, studying mental health disorders related to female reproduction.

Chloe Apsey
Psychology Assistant

Understanding Premenstrual Dysphoric Disorder

As part of Dr Arianna’s Di Florio’s Genetic Architecture of Sex Steroid-related Psychiatric Disorders (GASSP) research program, we are running the project PreDDICT: Premenstrual Dysphoric Disorder - Indicators, Causes and Triggers.

The aim of the project is to improve understanding how genetic and environmental factors can help to identify individuals at risk, with the long term goal of helping to improve the current approach to diagnosis, prevention, treatment and support for individuals experiencing PMDD.

The project involves recruiting participants who are currently experiencing or have previously experienced PMDD or extreme PMS symptoms.

These symptoms present around the week before the onset of menstrual bleeding (known as the ‘Luteal Phase’) and stop a few days into the period.

These symptoms include:

- Depressed/severe low mood
- Anxiety
- Decreased interest in usual activities (e.g. work, school, interacting with friends, hobbies)
- Lethargy, becoming easily fatigued, or a lack of energy
- Hypersomnia or insomnia

Participants will be asked complete an online questionnaire that asks about symptoms, treatments/interventions and about their general physical health.

Participants who are currently experiencing PMDD/extreme PMS symptoms will be then asked if they are happy to complete a Daily Mood Monitoring Diary that needs to be completed over two menstrual cycles (i.e. for around two months).

This will track the changes in mood in relation to the hormonal changes that occur during the menstrual cycle.

We will also be recontacting participants at a later date to gain a genetic sample in order to collate the data from the Questionnaire and Daily Mood Monitoring, with genetic factors.

We are working with a small but diverse group of people with lived experience of PMDD to ask their opinions of the current format on the Questionnaire and Mood Monitoring Diary.

One approved we will be starting the recruitment of participants, with the goal of starting the project around October 2021.
Developing interventions

The NCMH Intervention Development Workstream was set up to facilitate the development and evaluation of interventions to prevent and treat mental health problems.

In addition to 3MDR and RAPID, a range of other interventions are being developed and evaluated by NCMH.

These include:
- Bipolar Education Programme Cymru
- pregnancy planning for bipolar and postpartum psychosis
- treating anxiety to prevent relapse in psychosis
- antidepressants for the prevention of depression in first episode psychosis
- MoodHwb, a digital programme for mood and wellbeing in young people
- reducing neuroinflammation to treat depression in people who have not fully responded to standard antidepressant drugs
- the Rewind Technique for PTSD
- guided self help for the disturbances in self-organisation symptoms of complex PTSD

Developing new ways to support people with Bipolar Disorder

One way we have responded to the COVID-19 crisis is to build on the achievements of the Bipolar Education Programme Cymru (BEPC) with a series of ‘booster’ sessions for those who have been through the programme.

We have offered the online sessions to eight groups with more than 40 participants that have completed the BEPC course with excellent take up and feedback.

The two session ‘booster’ revisits the key self-management messages covered in the course and how they may be applied to life in lockdown.

In addition, we delivered a series of five webinars in collaboration with Bipolar UK to a wider audience, introducing some of the principles of self-management and psychoeducation.

We also offered a session for friends and family supporting someone with bipolar disorder, and a session on bipolar disorder and pregnancy.

The sessions reached a live audience of 410 and the recordings have been watched more than 2,000 times.

Lastly, during the last year we have received funding from the NHS in Wales to work with Virtual College to produce an online training package for those wishing to facilitate local BEPC groups.

This training has been uploaded to the NHS ESR training platform. We are also currently working on a follow-up tool to adapt the programme to train facilitators to run the course virtually, reaching even more people.
Although most people recover naturally from a bereavement, approximately 10% will go on to develop Prolonged Grief Disorder (PGD).

PGD is a mental health problem that is characterised by longing or preoccupation with the deceased, accompanied by intense emotional pain, which has lasted for six months or more and has significantly affected the person’s ability to function.

PGD is also linked with sleep issues, physical health problems and the development of other mental illnesses.

The risk of developing PGD may be more likely when people are unable to say goodbye to loved ones; they don’t have the opportunity to participate in rituals such as funerals; and they don’t have access to their usual social support networks.

All these factors have been present due to the pandemic and all are likely to affect an individual’s ability to grieve in the normal way, increasing the risk of PGD.

PGD is likely to be an important public health concern that arises from the COVID-19 pandemic.

To help tackle the problem, we are developing a digital guided self-help treatment for PGD.

Digital guided self-help involves the delivery of psychological therapy on an app or website, with regular guidance from a health professional.

Building on our research team’s experience of developing a similar treatment for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), the project aims to deliver a guided self-help programme to help meet the demand for PGD treatment.

The digital treatment will be developed in collaboration with people with lived experience of PGD and professional experts in the field.

A prototype will be pilot tested with groups of people with PGD and improved on the basis of their feedback.

We will then go on to evaluate it in a larger study known as a randomised controlled trial, to see if it is more effective in treating PGD than being on a waiting list.
Our team in Swansea is led by Professor Ann John and Professor Keith Lloyd, who are based at Swansea University.

The team, which also includes Data Science early career researchers, combines expertise in psychiatric epidemiology, suicide and self-harm prevention and mental health informatics.

Our work in Swansea includes securely and anonymously linking the data held in NCMH cohorts to routinely collected health and social care data (SAIL Databank) in people who have consented for this to happen. This allows for mental health studies bridging social, biological and psychological domains.

In 2020/21, they focused their efforts on investigating the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on the mental health of people in Wales and beyond.

They used linked healthcare datasets to depict trends in presentations to services (primary care, secondary care, and emergency departments) for mental health problems and self-harm between 2016 and 2020 and, more recently, vaccination uptake in those with severe mental illness.

The team also investigated the incidence of severe mental illnesses diagnoses (SMIs), by socioeconomic status i.e. area deprivation and urban/rural residence over time covering the period of the 2008 recession.

Linking genetic and health data
An exciting development included working with colleagues from the MRC Centre in Neuropsychiatric Genetics and Genomics (MRC CNGG) in Cardiff to anonymously link genetic data and health records from health services.

The Cardiff team collected data from individuals with schizophrenia.

These data were then anonymised and joined to NHS records held in SAIL databank, Swansea.

To our knowledge this is the first study that combines genetic information, administrative health records and sociodemographic data held in the SAIL databank to better understand a disease condition.

This study demonstrates the value of linking genetic data to routinely collected health data.

A new platform for mental health data
Through our collaboration with the MRC Mental Health (MH) Data Pathfinder initiative, we have supported the development of a UK-wide MH data platform through the integration of the Clinical Record Interactive Search (CRIS) system in Cardiff and Vale University Health Board.

CRIS will provide a health informatics platform to maximise the use of the Health Board’s mental health clinical records for both research and service improvement. Planned pilot projects for the CRIS system include the interrogation of CRIS data focusing on treatment resistant schizophrenia, and suicide, two critical areas of interest for both Cardiff University and the UHB.

We are currently working more widely with CRIS Trusts across the UK and are excited about the opportunities this will bring.
Overall, 2020-21 has been the most difficult year that most of us have ever experienced, and the difficulties are far from over.

Nonetheless, strong collaborations have endured, and we are in a strong position to continue to contribute to work that has a direct impact on the well-being of the population of Wales and beyond in 2021-22.

We have secured funding for the Social Outcomes of COVID-19 related Acute Psychosis (SOCAP) study, which is nearing completion. Professors Poole and Huxley are developing and evaluating a unique mental health clinical ethics forum with Cheshire and Wirral Partnership Trust.

Our links with Betsi Cadwaladr University Health Board have strengthened over the course of the year. We have gained long-term funding for a second research officer post and Dr Sadia Nafees has been appointed.

We have maintained our national profile, particularly with regard to our work on long term high dose opioids for chronic pain, social determinants of mental health and global mental health, with invitations to speak to Welsh, UK and international audiences on each of these subjects.

For example, Rob Poole gave a RCPsych President’s lecture by webinar in June 2020 “Psychiatrists and Prescribed Opioids”. 

The Centre for Mental Health and Society (CFMHAS) is based at Bangor University.

CFMHAS is a collaboration between researchers from social science and health backgrounds. It has a strong focus on social factors and social interventions in mental health.
The MRC Centre for Neuropsychiatric Genetics and Genomics (MRC CNGG) at Cardiff University conducts world leading research into how genetics can help us better understand mental health conditions and their causes.

This work would be impossible without the large and well characterised datasets brought together by NCMH such as the NCMH Cohort.

The Centre has risen to the challenge of the COVID-19 pandemic since early 2020 and our research has continued through the hard work of all our teams, from our early career researchers to our core lab and administrative support staff.

We have also received new funding and support from the Medical Research Council’s World Class Labs programme to enable us to work efficiently both in our labs and in our home environments. This support has enabled us to continue to lead advances in psychiatric genetics with the aim of improving diagnosis and treatment.

In the last year we have led important research in discovering new genetic risk factors (both common and rare genetic variants) for schizophrenia, bipolar disorder and dementia.

Our developmental psychiatry team has demonstrated the widespread physical and mental health implications for people who have genetic risk factors called rare copy number variants.

A key development has been our success in being funded to establish the Wolfson Centre for Youth Mental Health which brings in research collaborators from Psychology and Social Sciences, as well as the NHS and Welsh government, to advance children and young people’s mental health focussing on anxiety and depression.

Some of the best news in the last year has been the success of our early and mid-career researchers.

These highlights have included Dr Elliot Rees receiving a UK Research and Innovation Future Leaders Fellowship to take forward his work in schizophrenia genetics, Dr Katie Swaden-Lewis, who has received a Wellcome Trust fellowship to advance her research into the importance and nature of sleep problems in mental health conditions and finally Dr Arianna Di Florio who has received a European Research Council grant to investigate sex-steroid related mental health disorders.

Our commitment to training and supporting the next generation of researchers has thus continued and we are looking forward to welcoming the students to our MRC Centre Summer School in July this year to take this forward.

Professor James Walters
Director of MRC CNGG
Our Engage to Change Research Team evaluates the work of the Engage to Change (E2C) project.

While impacted by the pandemic this year, E2C has still worked with a total of 899 people with a learning disability (LD) or Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD), it has worked with 732 employers, provided 385 paid placements and 226 paid jobs, achieving an employment rate of 59% from placements.

We have produced three reports on internships and qualitative reactions to the programme, from families and young people and delivered an Impact Study on this project for Cardiff University’s 2021 Research Excellence Framework submission.

Achieving a sustainable system for employing these young people was one of the goals of this project and we have produced policy briefing documents on the need for a National Job Coaching Service and a National Supported Internship offer and on the potential role of the NHS as an “anchor” institution in sustaining jobs for people with a learning disability and ASD, post-pandemic.

We have also joined together with researchers, third sector organisations and self-advocacy groups to deliver a UK national study of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on people with learning disabilities.

The research is being delivered over one year and results for the first wave of interviews are being disseminated now.

Sharing what we’ve learned
We are using data from the E2C project to inform policy through our membership of Welsh Government’s Disabled People’s Employment Group and through presentations to Welsh Government policy, and Learning Disability and Autism Strategy, groups.

Our learning disabilities team have co-sponsored and presented at a Wales National Autism Team Employment Symposium, a Women in Work Event, and co-produced and delivered on multiple occasions a workshop entitled “Neurodiversity: Our lived experience”.

The presentation explores the concept of neurodiversity through lived experience, focusing on interns’ abilities and strengths. The interns who developed the talk have presented to more than 120 people so far.
Without the voice of lived experience, NCMH simply wouldn’t be able to make a real difference. We are committed to actively increasing opportunities for the public to shape all aspects of our work.

We are working hard to include more diverse groups of people in our public involvement activities. This includes ensuring that young people have a voice.

In November 2020, we were pleased to form a new group - the NCMH Youth Advisory Group (YAG), in collaboration with DECIPHer. The group was formed to facilitate public involvement by young people aged 14 to 19 years old with lived experience of mental health and neurodiverse conditions.

Over Zoom meetings, researchers have approached the group for a lived experience perspective on everything from research ideas to engaging the public in disseminating research findings.

The new Youth Advisory Group adds to our existing portfolio of advisory groups, including the well-established Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) Public Advisory group that continues its excellent work in shaping the development of new interventions.

Some of our latest public involvement work has expanded to involve individuals with mental health conditions relating to reproductive events, seeking those with lived experience of Premenstrual Dysphoric Disorder (PMDD) or extreme Premenstrual Syndrome (PMS).

We believe public involvement should happen at all stages of the research process and continue to support the mental health research community to incorporate public involvement from the very beginning of their projects.

One of the ways in which we do this is through the research clinics run by our PÂR lived experience group, for those applying to the Research for Patient and Public Benefit (RfPPB) scheme from Health and Care Research Wales.

We are excited to be prioritising this important area and look forward to working with more members of the public with lived experience in future.

I joined the centre this year and one of my key tasks is the development of an involvement strategy, to help shape our future public involvement activities.

Dr Sarah Rees
Public Involvement Lead
Innovative events

While our event calendar was looking drastically different for 2020-21, the NCMH team rallied brilliantly and quickly adapted to develop several online activities.

In July we partnered with Bipolar UK and launched our first Bitesize BEPC webinar, an online taster session of our Bipolar Education Programme Cymru (BEPC).

We would go on to hold five sessions altogether, covering topics from lifestyle and self-management, to bipolar disorder and pregnancy.

We were thrilled to reach 410 people live and 2,000 have since watched the sessions on Youtube.

We partnered with the Healthy Schools Network in south east Wales to offer teachers and staff workshops on sleep and mental health. Dr Katie Lewis hosted the sessions, reaching over 50 members of staff and offering tips for improving young people’s sleep.

For Children’s Mental Health Week 2021, we shared blogs and resources, and hosted three talks featuring researchers from NCMH and the MRC Centre for Neuropsychiatric Genetics and Genomics.

Dr Rhys Bevan Jones shared insight to young people’s mood and wellbeing, and his upcoming study to develop a new digital tool to support young people with depression and anxiety.

Dr Ruth Sellers spoke about how young people’s mental health is being affected by living in a digital world. From her work with the eNurture project she was able to offer some great resources.

Dr Katie Lewis also offered a workshop providing tips for sleep-deprived teens.

In February 2021, we launched a new animation to share the results of the 3MDR study, a randomised controlled trial of a new virtual reality therapy for veterans with PTSD. Funded by the Forces in Mind Trust and supported by Health and Care Research Wales, the animation enabled us to easily share the promising results of this exciting new treatment.

All these sessions and resources can be accessed on our Youtube channel.
The way forward

We are very proud of what we have achieved but are aware that this is the result of close collaboration with all involved with NCMH – our academic partners, clinical services, the third sector and, most importantly, those with lived experience of mental health conditions.

We are also aware of the challenges we have faced, and will continue to face, from the pandemic. COVID-19 has had a big impact but we have come up with new ways of working to respond.

Our challenge over the coming years is to maintain the benefits and new approaches, pushing on to deliver the NCMH mission of improving the mental health and wellbeing of the people of Wales.

Over the coming years we will continue to develop our activity in three key ways:

1. We will link our activity more closely with the priorities of NHS Wales, focusing recruitment, policy and intervention work in areas of new service development that map onto our areas of research excellence.

2. We will move to less labour-intensive models of recruitment and assessment that work at scale, at distance and at lower cost.

3. Last, but certainly not least, we will increase focus on translating our research activity into real world impact, building on our excellent track record of intervention development to improve the health and wellbeing of those in Wales and internationally.

We recognise the difficulties we will face.

Mental illness is complex, multifactorial, and there are no easy answers.

But we will build on what we have achieved, working together, to understand biological, social and psychological factors in mental health and to translate this understanding into interventions that will truly make a difference for people with lived experience.

Together we can make a difference for mental health.
The National Centre for Mental Health is funded by Welsh Government through Health and Care Research Wales.

Mae’r adroddiad hwn hefyd ar gael yn Gymraeg. I ofyn am gopi, cysylltwch â info@ncmh.info