

Report of the Our Health in Our Hands Event

An event was held at the Royal Welsh Show on Wednesday 24 July 2019 to discuss Our Health in our Hands, which explored some of the key health challenges facing the population in Wales and the contribution that individuals, governments and organisations can make to address these challenges. The event was attended by some twenty people and included representation from six federations, Hafal Cymru, Cancer Research UK, Public Health Wales, YFC Cymru, Carmarthenshire County Council and Helen Mary Jones AM.

Mair Stephens, Chair of the Federations of Wales welcomed everyone to the event and gave a bit of background about the WI and its contribution to the health and wellbeing agenda. Mair Stephens focused on some of the current campaigns such as mental health, alleviating loneliness, food poverty, exercise and cervical screening, and explained that the campaigns had a multi level approach consisting of education, informed behavioural change and where necessary campaigning for legislative follow through to support people to make healthier choices. Also mentioned were the projects such as Get Cooking which worked with diverse groups in communities to teach them how to cook healthy, nutritious meals on a budget; the Walking Netball project which was being delivered in every federation in Wales and encouraged women to remain active, and the Our Health in Our Hands project with the Bevan Commission which engaged WI members is helping to make prudent healthcare a reality by sharing their experiences, knowledge and ideas around health and care services, to create a social movement for change to ensure that the very best health and healthcare services are created now and for future generations.

The first speaker was Rhiannon Beaumont-Wood, Executive Director for Quality, Nursing and Allied Healthcare Professionals, Public Health Wales. Rhiannon Beaumont-Wood gave an overview on the health of the nation, she explained that in Wales the life expectancy for women was longer than men, that the trends for increased life expectancy in Wales had slowed down since 2011 and that Public Health Wales were watching the trend with interest to see if it would plateau in the future. Living longer brought with it many challenges with more illness and health conditions that needed care. There was a 'Burden of Disease' with conditions such as heart disease, muscular skeletal problems, mental illness and neurological disorders leading to disability within the population. In addition behavioural risks such as smoking, alcohol abuse, poor diet and lack of exercise were also contributing factors to poor health in Wales.

Clinical risks could be influenced to change and there were four key risks that Public Health Wales were focusing on:

- Reducing systolic blood pressure
- Reducing body mass index
- Reducing total cholesterol
- Reducing fasting plasma/glucose

However, Public Health Wales, when undertaking new initiatives had to consider whether they would widen inequality in Wales. In areas of high deprivation they knew that smoking had doubled, consumption of fruit and vegetables was lower, women and men had poorer health and were more likely to die 9 and 7 years earlier than average. Children were half as likely to have been breast fed and women were twice as likely to have a low birth weight baby, and less than half were likely to leave school with no skills and education.

Obesity was another issue of concern with 1 in 8 children obese and 10,000 more adults becoming obese each year. Being obese increased the risk of developing diabetes, cancer and muscular skeletal problems.

Rhiannon Beaumont-Wood explained the prudent healthcare approach and the four principles and went through Public Health Wales' 2018-2030 priorities and 'Working to Achieve a Healthier Future for Wales' and its seven areas. Rhiannon Beaumont-Wood explained that Public Health Wales knew what the evidence told them, but there was a need for constant monitoring and working with communities to capture future evidence, she finished by saying that to achieve a healthier destiny, everyone must work together.

Katie Davies, Wales YFC Vice-Chairman was next to speak about mental health in rural communities. Katie Davies explained that 1 in 4 suffer with mental health issues, and most could be treated, however, the stigma associated with mental health often prevented people coming forward and talking about their mental health. Whilst many thought that living in a rural area was idyllic, it did have its disadvantages with poor access to key services increasing stress amongst agricultural workers. Agriculture as an occupation had the highest rate of suicide, however, this was not recognised and therefore agricultural workers did not receive the treatment and practical support they needed. Stigma was still present, but Katie Davies praised the organisations that were doing work to reduce the stigma. She asked how many times do we ask someone 'How are you?' often when a farmer is asked this question they will tell you about the weather, or the condition of the crops, but they won't say how they're feeling, and yet they are under great pressure with the demands of their daily lives. The Wales YFC was very aware of this and had provided mental health awareness training to many of their members. They had been working with DPJ Foundation and the Yellow Wellies Farm Safety Foundation and had a DPJ Foundation Counsellor at the Young People's Village every day of the Royal Welsh Show; as pressures on young farmers were huge due to succession issues, rural housing, and many do not leave the farm unless it is to attend their local YFC.

Wales YFC members had been doing a series of activities and events to raise awareness of mental health and had raised funds by doing the 3 Peaks Challenge for charities such as MIND and the DPJ Foundation. The County of Radnor held walk & talk events to encourage members to open up and the Wales YFC Chairman, Dafydd Jones, had hosted a conference on mental health. Katie Davies said that it was brilliant to see what other organisations were doing and what help was available. They received referrals from RABI and their Welfare Officer had also done the mental health awareness training.

Whilst there was still a stigma around mental health, young people were more willing to talk about it now, however, a survey undertaken by the Farmers Weekly reported that although farmers were in good physical health, their mental health and wellbeing was only average. Living in a close knit community was sometimes prohibitive with people unwilling to seek help, but young people were changing this and mental health was an important issue for Wales YFC going forward. Everyone had a role to play, but often people were too busy to look out for each other, but it was important to catch up often for your own and others' mental health and wellbeing, and break down the stigma.

There was a long way to go, but by working together, it would be possible to break down the stigma. Katie Davies finished by asking 'How are you?'

The final speaker was Beca Lyne-Pirkis, Cook, Writer and TV Presenter who spoke about the role of food in health and wellbeing. Beca Lyne-Pirkis explained that 6 years ago she had been a

contestant on the BBC's Bake Off show. She was a Mum to two young girls and her husband was currently serving in Afghanistan. Baking and food were important to her and she loved to share food with her family and friends. Even though Beca Lyne-Pirkis had been heartbroken to lose in the semi-final of Bake Off it had led to some wonderful opportunities; she now had her own cookery show on S4C, taught cookery, wrote a book, worked with Borough Market in London and the Welsh Government in developing the Healthy Weight, Healthy Wales consultation document, and was an Advisory Committee member on the FSA as a food champion for consumers. She was also studying for a degree in Human Nutrition and Dietetics at Cardiff Metropolitan University.

Beca Lyne-Pirkis saw food as fuel, food was also love, and comforting when lonely, something Beca often felt when her husband was serving overseas. During lonely times she reached out via social media by taking pictures of her food and using the #solosuppers. This struck a chord with many and she was blown away by the number of responses she had to her posts, so many were in a similar situation and were on their own, and her posts inspired people to make a nicer supper for themselves instead of having a piece of toast. She explained how she had to eat well to keep herself healthy for her daughters, as often she was the only parent at home. Beca Lyne-Pirkis explained how fortunate she was of her upbringing, and being taught to cook by her parents, and said that many of her friends could not cook. The skills she had learnt had enabled her to influence Welsh Government policy and opened many doors. Beca Lyne-Pirkis was also aware of the link between food and mental health, her husband had previously suffered with PTSD and she had helped him through it, but she was aware of the stigma around mental health. The messages around health issues such as obesity, cancer and smoking cessation could sometimes be confusing and care needed to be taken sometimes e.g. many in deprived areas could not afford the Eatwell plate, the campaign by Cancer Research had caused a Twitter storm, but there were organisations out there who were trying to make a difference and provide positive messages, and the Welsh Government were trying to spread the word on healthy eating and getting people to work together, the 'Eat Them to Defeat Them' campaign had been a successful one and encouraged children to eat more vegetables. It had been interesting to hear the views of everyone in the communities Beca had worked in, and she had been inspired by Rhiannon and Katie's presentations.

QUESTIONS:

Theresa Lloyd related that her daughter had not been taught to cook in school; children were no longer taught the basics and leave school with no cookery skills. Beca Lyne-Pirkis said that she found this frustrating and that schools should pass on the skills if parents don't. There was a need to join the dots and link subjects e.g. cooking to numeracy. Going forward wellbeing would be on the curriculum and it would be interesting to see how food would feature in it.

Jenny Longland said that young people do not have any basic skills; she'd had to show her grandson how to fill a bowl with water to clean out cupboards. Another member said that when her dishwasher broke she didn't replace it so the children had to wash dishes by hand.

Julie George, Cancer Research Wales, said that they had received a lot of reaction to their campaign on obesity. Research told them that 4 out of 10 cancers could be prevented, and 1 in 10 people born after 1960, would get cancer. There were opportunities to target young people to get them to cook healthy meals e.g. when they went to university, perhaps cookery sessions could be delivered during fresher's week. There was interest among young people as Cancer Research had noted a spike in demand for vintage cookery utensils, bowls and jelly moulds in their shops. There was a way forward but it was frustrating getting the right message to young people. Not

only do they need good budgeting skills, they also need practical cookery skills and need to be shown how to cook, there was a missed generation, but youngsters did want to do the right thing but did not know how to. Mair Stephens related a story about her son going to scout camp; he had been the only child to take ingredients to make a stir fry as he had been taught how to do it.

Pat Jones said how good and successful the Get Cooking project had been, but the skill level was very low and initially people had to be taught how to peel potatoes, but by the end of the course they cooked a Christmas Dinner. Beca Lyne-Pirkis had worked on a project in the valleys, teaching parents and children how to cook healthy meals; she said that the Get Cooking project was a great initiative.

Rhiannon Beaumont-Wood said that the Flying Start initiative was picking up gaps in society, they were taught cooking skills but it also developed friendships and contacts in the community. Jenny Longland said that Pembrokeshire worked in a pop in centre and taught people basic meals such as Sheppard's pie, but some didn't have a clue how to cook.

A person present related the story of her son who was farming 400 acres, the stress on him was enormous and Katie Davies' presentation had struck a chord. It was a serious situation; he had an inheritance claim against him, was working long hours, he was unwell and not eating properly and she was very worried about him. Katie Davies said how sorry she was to hear about his predicament and that there was a correlation between food and mental health in rural areas, it was too easy to buy ready meals and fast food.

Jenny Longland mentioned the knock on effect of cuts in services on health in communities. There used to be geriatric nurses calling on older people in their homes but they had all gone now. Julie George expressed her concern about pregnant women and new Mothers, the role of the Health Visitor had diminished. Rhiannon Beaumont-Wood said that Health Visitors still existed and that there was a universal health service, however, it was possible that the link to the community had gone in the wrong direction with the development of Health Child Wales. The WI could be a massive asset as the services could not meet all the needs out there, but what could be done together to support people, the WI were good as supporting people.

Beca Lyne-Pirkis said that some people were not good at reaching out, and some would not want to, but there was a need to talk and reach out and social media could be a force for good, however it sometimes was a bad influence. Katie Davies said that social media was huge in a sense of what impact it could have to get messages out but it could also be demoralising seeing friends having a good time and posting on social media when someone was working hard on the farm. There were also pressures to engage with it and get as many 'likes' as possible. What was seen on social media was not always the reality. But it was also a means of keeping an eye on someone and checking if they were active on social media, but it was also important to meet up from time to time.

To finish Mair Stephens thanked everyone for their contributions and said that the discussions had only scratched the surface of the many issues, but if each person took one item back from each of the speakers and took action on it, then it would make a difference. She asked members to talk to their WIs and discuss what each could do to make a difference, and feed it back to the Bevan Commission; it would all help towards the social change that was needed.

Rhian Connick, July 2019