**WEN Café podcast: From carrots to kindness: the impact of Covid-19 on neurodiverse women**

**15th July 2021**

**Summary of discussion**

**Interviewer:** Catherine Fookes, Director, WEN Wales

**Speakers**:

* Ffion Poole, Caerphilly People First
* Selena Caemawr, Aubergine Cafe
* Joanna, Dawn, & Zarah, Cardiff People First
* Cath Lewis, Learning Disability Wales

In our first WEN Café podcast, we interviewed women and non-binary people to discuss how the Covid-19 pandemic has impacted the lives of people with learning disabilities (LDs) and/or autism in Wales.

* Lockdown has been a mixed experience for neurodiverse women and non-binary people. Some struggled with the change to their routine and missed meeting people face-to-face. Others reported that lockdown offered a welcome relief from having to perform societal roles and was less disruptive to their lives due to an existing preference for socialising online.
* Speakers reported struggles with mental health issues such as anxiety and depression during lockdown, but they also proactively developed ways of coping. For instance, they took up new hobbies, learned new skills and created online activities and spaces to stay connected. This attests to the inspiring creativity, autonomy and resilience of people with autism and/or LDs that can go unnoticed in mainstream debates. Neurotypical people can learn a lot by listening and by being curious.
* However, not all people with LDs and/or autism were able to use online platforms effectively and many are anxious about the transition back to “normal life”, for instance due to being out of practice in performing neurotypical social skills or having lost confidence in their ability to navigate public transport.
* The pandemic has highlighted experiences that neurotypical and neurodiverse people have in common and that only differ in how frequently/intensely they are experienced, such as anxiety over socialising, sensitivity to loud noise or struggling to keep up with changing guidelines. This is an important opportunity to foster more understanding and learn from neurodiverse people. For instance, resources designed for neurodiverse individuals, such as quiet spaces and opportunities to transition gradually back into normality, can benefit neurotypical people who experience mental health difficulties or are otherwise vulnerable.
* Accessible information on Covid rules and guidelines is a key concern. Our speakers reported being confused and overwhelmed by the pace of change and the lack of accessible information. Public Health Wales’ and Welsh Government’s commissioned easy-read documents from Learning Disability Wales, which demonstrates awareness and willingness to provide accessible information. But data shows that 4 in 10 people with LDs found it hard to find this information. Our speakers suggested various ways to address this, e.g. through circulating hard copies of easy-read guidance and briefings to people with LDs and by providing verbal resources such as dedicated helplines and step-by-step online videos.
* Employment was another main worry. Many people with LDs and/or autism were worried about their future employment prospects. Some felt that traditional employment methods such as CVs can disadvantage neurodiverse people and they practice alternative models such as getting to know potential employees first. It was emphasised that, just as there should not be a pay gap between men and women, there should not be a pay gap between disabled and non-disabled people.
* Data showed that half of people with learning disabilities have health conditions that make them vulnerable to Covid. This meant the pandemic had a huge impact not only on people with LDs/autism but also on their family carers and paid support workers, who reported increased stress and mental health problems. Generally, the health of people with LDs suffered as many appointments were on hold during the pandemic. It is uncertain when health services will catch up and how this will impact the health of people with LDs in the long term.
* The [Disability Equality Forum’s *Locked Out* report](https://gov.wales/locked-out-liberating-disabled-peoples-lives-and-rights-wales-beyond-covid-19-html) provides detailed research and recommendations regarding the impact of Covid 19 on disabled people’s lives and rights. The First Minister committed to establishing a taskforce to address the issues highlighted in this report. The work of the taskforce needs to be progressed as a matter of urgency.
* Overall, our speakers’ insights echoed the social model of disability – the problem is not that neurodiverse people are impaired by being different, but a lack of understanding and removal of social, physical and organisational barriers. Many said that life under the pandemic has been hard but with the right support it could be better. The examples of neurodiverse communities creating their own ways of coping with the challenges of the pandemic shows that their lived experience is a valuable resource for policy-makers, it just needs to be tapped into.

***Key policy solutions proposed in the discussion:***

* Explore ways to improve the accessibility of Covid guidelines and regulations, for instance through circulating hard copies of easy-read guidance and briefings to people with learning disabilities and/or autism, and by providing verbal resources such as dedicated helplines and step-by-step online videos.
* Progress as a matter of urgency existing plans to implement the recommendations of the [Disability Equality Forum’s *Locked Out* report](https://gov.wales/locked-out-liberating-disabled-peoples-lives-and-rights-wales-beyond-covid-19-html) through a Minister-led taskforce.
* Welsh Government continue to re-affirm its commitment to the social model of disability and ensure this is embedded in decision-making and service-delivery.
* Explore ways in which recruitment and employment can be made more accessible and take steps to address the disability pay gap, such as mandatory pay gap reporting for large employers.
* Ensure that policy development and implementation is fully informed by the perspectives and lived experience of neurodiverse people.