Innovative Lottery funded project: Stories of Wales'



The three year “Hidden Now Heard” project will capture the living memories of former residents and staff from six of Wales’ long-stay hospitals which closed in 2006.

This is the first pan-Wales project of its kind and will capture a hidden and often painful part of Wales’ history which is at a risk of being lost forever unless it is recorded. During the three year project, six regional museums across Wales will display exhibitions based on captured memories and research undertaken to give a voice to the stories of former patients and staff at these hospitals that were previously silenced. Working in partnership with the National History Museum a permanent exhibition will be created in St Fagan so that information about Wales’ long-stay hospitals will be available and accessible to the public, creating better understanding of a previously underrepresented part of our society.

Jennifer Stewart, Head of Heritage Lottery Fund Wales, said: “This is a one-of-a-kind project that will capture a part of our national heritage that historically has not been well recorded or preserved and we are very pleased to be able to support it. The project provides an excellent example of how diverse HLF-funded projects are; we want to ensure all parts of our rich heritage are preserved and maintained, not only the physical heritage. This project ensures that a hidden element of our history will now be shared with all for many years to come.”

“The project funding comes at a critical time”, explains Mencap Cymru Director Wayne Crocker, “as many older people with a learning disability who lived in long stay institutions are dying or suffering from dementia and we are at risk of losing their invaluable histories which we believe can increase awareness of the lives they lived and help us reduce the ignorance which can lead to disability related hate crimes in Wales”

Hidden history

The story of people in Wales with a learning disability has mostly remained hidden, reflecting the isolation and marginalisation of this group in society over the past century in particular. In 1913, the Mental Deficiency Act called on local authorities to certify all ‘mental defectives” and establish long-stay institutions for people with both mental health and learning disabilities. With around 65,000 people living in these institutions, dubbed ‘colonies’, many were misdiagnosed and became isolated from society.

The period between the establishment of these institutions until the introduction and implementation of the All-Wales Mental Handicap Strategy in 1983 had long-term implications on how people with a learning disability were, and continue to be, perceived in society with so called ‘patients’ experiences mostly remaining invisible.

Welcoming the grant award Lord Dafydd Wigley, Mencap Cymru Vice President, said: “Many people in Wales have a connection to this, at times, uncomfortable part our history and are aware of the stigma attached to long-stay hospitals. This project will hopefully help change perceptions and create better understanding of people with a learning disability and their families whilst also ensuring that this important part of our history is recorded and remembered.”

Real Stories

The three-year project will focus on six long-stay hospitals in Wales, including Hensol in the Vale of Glamorgan, Llanfrechfa in Torfaen, Bryn y Neuadd in Conwy, Ely in Cardiff, St David’s in Carmarthenshire and Denbigh Hospital, Denbighshire. Over 80 people will be interviewed from across Wales with their testimonies contributing towards the creation of a clear picture of the impact of care policies on many lives between 1913 and 2006, when the last long-stay institutions were closed.

Donna Edwards, Mencap Cymru Ambassador and Pobol y Cwm actress, whose brother Ken has a learning disability, has highlighted the importance of documenting this history and reflecting on its effect on people living with learning disabilities today; “We as a family were lucky, our brother Ken was able to live in his local community and worked and contributed to our household income, but I have met during my time as Mencap Cymru Ambassador many people who were not so fortunate and were locked away in these institutions. Their hidden lives have left a legacy on our communities across Wales, particularly in relation to how people with a learning disability are valued and although the way they are treated by society today has improved, it is so important that greater understanding and awareness is raised about this key part of our history.”

Notes to editors

This £292,900 grant has been awarded by the Heritage Lottery Fund to Mencap Cymru.

About Mencap

- Mencap Cymru campaigns and lobbies to ensure that people with a learning disability and their families are valued equally, listened to and respected across all parts of Welsh society.
- Mencap also provides services to support people with a learning disability to live independent lives. These services include training and support to find employment, domiciliary services and short-term breaks for parents

and carers.
- Mencap Cymru operates a free Wales Learning Disability Helpline funded by the Welsh Government to offer impartial information and advice, on 0808 808 1111 or via helpline.wales@mencap.org.uk

History of learning disabilities in Wales

- There are 1.5million people in the UK with a learning disability including 65,000 in Wales and they are one of the most marginalised groups in society. Historically, the experiences and heritage of people with a learning disability have not been recorded, preserved or adequately represented in museums.
- The Mental Deficiency Act of 1913 required local authorities to certify all 'mental defectives' and set up special long-stay institutions or 'colonies' for people with both mental health and learning disabilities to live in. At the height of operation of the Mental Deficiency Act, over 65,000 people were placed in "colonies" or in other institutional settings where they were often misdiagnosed and discriminated against. Furthermore, as these institutions were set up to be self-sufficient, this group of people became isolated and cut-off from society with their lives in long-stay hospitals went unrecorded for many years.
- The implementation of the All-Wales Mental Handicap Strategy from 1983 precipitated the closure of these long-stay institutions but the last remaining long-stay hospital in Wales did not close until 2006.

Plans for the project include:

- This three-year national project's main focus is to capture the memories of former residents and staff of six long-stay hospitals in Wales including Hensol in the Vale of Glamorgan, Llanfrechfa in Torfaen, Bryn-y-Neuadd in Conwy, Ely in Cardiff, St Davids in Carmarthenshire and Denbigh Hospital in Denbighshire.
- Mencap Cymru will work in partnership with the National History Museum - St Fagans who will provide a repository for the recordings as well as permanently embedding some of the artefacts gathered during the project in their new exhibition galleries once complete in 2017.
- Temporary exhibitions based on the oral histories will take place in a rolling programme in each of the six regional partner museums. Volunteers, including people with learning disabilities, will be recruited to assist with all aspects of the project and will receive training in oral history collection, research and interpretation.
- 80 people throughout Wales will be interviewed over the course of the project and their testimonies will form an important record of the impact of care polices on the lives of people during the period 1913 to 2006.
- Educational packs will be produced for Key Stage 3 and 4 pupils.
- Social media pages will be created to encourage people to contribute their memories and photographs.

Further information

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