

## Chapter 10 Suicide

### Introduction

Suicide is a devastating event with far-reaching consequences. Each suicide represents both an individual tragedy and a loss to society. The factors associated with it are complex and varied.

Suicide can be described as a fatal act of self-harm initiated with the intention of ending one's own life. Although often seen as impulsive, it may be associated with years of suicidal behaviour including suicidal ideation or acts of deliberate self-harm. Suicide is the leading cause of years of life lost in England after accidents.

### Issues

There have been 300 suicides recorded in Herefordshire in the past 20 years. This is the equivalent of 15 – 20 suicides per annum. The number of suicides does not appear to be significantly different from the national average.

Men were nearly three times more likely to be recorded as having committed suicide than women. The highest number of suicides in men occurred in the age band 40-49 years (compared to 30-39 years in the national data), with the highest number of suicides in women occurring in the 70+ category (compared to 30-39 years nationally). Rates of suicide in the over 70s were markedly higher than seen nationally.

Suicide rates were highest in persons living alone (single, divorced, widowed) and so suggest that isolation is a factor in suicide locally.

Means of death showed a marked disparity in terms of sex, with men most likely to use asphyxiation (typically hanging) whilst women showed highest rates of poisoning or overdose. Men were far more likely to use “violent” means (Self shooting, self-injury, traffic collision, burning, jumping/ falling from heights), with men aged 70 and older being statistically more likely to shoot themselves than younger men in the county.

Agricultural and construction were the most represented occupational groupings for suicide in 1994-2014 although there were notable recording issues for persons recorded as unemployed, retired and “housewives”.

Overall, contact with services was poorly recorded.

### Facts and Figures

There have been 300 Suicides in the past 20 years in Herefordshire

Average of 15 per year, ranging from 11 to 22 suicides per year

Men are three times more likely to commit suicide than women

Suicide rates are highest in persons living alone

Men are most likely to hang themselves; women are most likely to take an overdose

Herefordshire has a markedly higher rate of suicide in the over 70s, compared to the UK average

Men aged over 70 years old are more likely to shoot themselves than younger men.

Men in agricultural and construction industries are at higher risk of suicide than other professions

## Recommendations

### **Tailor approaches to improve mental health in specific groups**

Given the intelligence contained in this audit, local measures should also be targeted at men, particularly those employed in agricultural, construction and low pay occupations; socially isolated individuals including unemployed and housewives, persons living alone and the elderly).

### **Reduce Access to the Means of Suicide**

Although the number of suicides is low, it may be possible to determine hotspots or environments that could be made safer to prevent suicide attempts. It is recommended that the location of suicides are mapped, both historically and going forward, to identify opportunities for 'safe by design' interventions.

Given the significantly high risk of suicide by self-shooting in men aged over 70, there is a need for awareness amongst professionals, particularly GPs, of the potential for suicide by older men who own firearms. There is a need to recognise the risk of suicide from prescribed medication for people with long term conditions. Both of these identified groups could be targeted for suicide prevention information.

### **Provide Better Information and Support to those Bereaved or affected by Suicide**

Suicides could be reviewed prospectively via Herefordshire Clinical Commissioning Group Mental Health Steering Group and that Group tasked with ensuring that effective protocols are in place to support family neighbours, school friends and work colleagues, but also people whose work brings them into contact with suicide – emergency and rescue workers, healthcare professionals, teachers, the police, and faith leaders.

### **Support the Media in delivering sensitive approaches to Suicide and Suicidal Behaviour**

Herefordshire is often cited as a beautiful place to live. The same media could be asked to participate in suicide prevention by printing / broadcasting awareness of mental health and post-suicide events including details of helplines and sources of help.

### **Support Research, Data Collection and Monitoring**

This Audit was unable to examine all elements in detail. To aid future understanding, Herefordshire CCG Mental Health Steering Group could support the Herefordshire Coroner's Office to improve recording of suicides via the use of available best practice proformas, in particular focusing on the recording of contact with services.