



**Wales Centre for Public Policy**  
**Canolfan Polisi Cyhoeddus Cymru**

# **Poverty and social exclusion: review of international evidence on youth services**

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# Summary

- Youth services play an important role in helping young people negotiate the transition to independence and offer an opportunity for early intervention for young people who are struggling. They help to reduce social exclusion and address some aspects of poverty.
- Access to youth services can be critical for disadvantaged young people. Ensuring that services are open access can avoid labelling and stigmatisation.
- Youth services are likely to be increasingly important due to the disruption of the Coronavirus pandemic on the lives of many young people, affecting their transitions to independence.
- There are connections between youth services and policy areas covered in other reviews, for instance:
  - **Transport disadvantage;**  
**Neighbourhood environment:**  
Good transport links are critical for young people to participate in youth services. Neighbourhood planning can help ensure local and accessible services.
  - **Take-up of cash-transfers:**  
Participation in youth services can provide an opportunity to offer assistance to young people who might need help to access services and benefits.
- We conclude the review with some promising actions that can support the role of youth services in improving the life chances of disadvantaged groups in Wales, namely:
  - Open access provision promotes inclusivity and avoids the stigmatisation that often arises from targeting services to the most disadvantaged.
  - Meaningful youth participation in youth services requires active engagement and real influence, as opposed to passive presence or token roles, and can lead to service improvements and benefits to young people.
  - There is good quality evidence that participation in youth service decision-making leads to better social skills (efficacy and empathy). Leadership or decision-making opportunities lead to greater feelings of ownership and empowerment and higher levels of attendance.

# Background

The Wales Centre for Public Policy (WCPP) was commissioned by the Welsh Government to conduct a review of international poverty and social exclusion strategies, programmes and interventions. As part of this work, the Centre for Analysis of Social Exclusion (CASE)<sup>1</sup> at the LSE was commissioned to conduct a review of the international evidence on promising policies and programmes designed to reduce poverty and social exclusion across twelve key policy areas. This report focuses on youth services.

The key questions addressed in each of the twelve policy reviews are:

- What effective international poverty alleviation policies, programmes and interventions exist?
- What are the key or common characteristics/standards and features of these different approaches?

The questions are addressed by providing:

- The Welsh context of each policy area and main initiatives being undertaken by the Welsh Government;
- Detailed information on the relationship between the policy area and poverty and social exclusion;
- A summary of evidence of lived experience, which could help to understand how people may experience and respond to policy interventions;
- An overview of the international evidence of policy effectiveness (including case studies); and
- Challenges and facilitating factors associated with policy implementation.

In addition to the twelve policy reviews, we have produced an overview report which summarises the key evidence from each of the individual reviews, highlights connections between different policy areas and reflects on all the evidence to make a number of policy recommendations, or promising actions, within each of the twelve

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<sup>1</sup> The Centre for Analysis of Social Exclusion (CASE) at the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE) was established in 1997. It is a multi-disciplinary research centre exploring social disadvantage and the role of social and public policies in preventing, mitigating or exacerbating it. Researchers at CASE have extensive experience in conducting policy reviews covering evidence in the UK and international literature.

areas. Please refer to the Annex for detail on methodology, including how the twelve policy areas of focus were chosen.

This work forms part of a suite of reports produced by WCPP as part of its work on poverty and social exclusion for the Welsh Government. As well as this work by CASE, there are two reports on the nature, scale and trajectory of poverty and social exclusion in Wales – one focusing on quantitative data and evidence, and a second focusing on lived experience evidence (Carter, 2022a; 2022b). WCPP also commissioned the New Policy Institute to conduct a review of international poverty alleviation strategies (Kenway et al., 2022) which examines overarching governmental approaches to tackling poverty.

## Introduction

Youth services play an important role in helping young people negotiate the transition to independence and offer an opportunity for early intervention for young people who are struggling. They help to reduce social exclusion and address some aspects of poverty. Concerns have been raised about substantial cuts in funding to youth services since the 2007/08 financial crisis and the impact this will have on longer term poverty and social exclusion risks for disadvantaged young people (Jervis, 2018).

The Welsh Government directs local authorities to provide, secure the provision of, or participate in the provision of youth support services. These are services defined as enabling and assisting young people (aged 11-25):

- a.** 'to participate effectively in education or training,
  - b.** to take advantage of opportunities for employment, or
  - c.** to participate effectively and responsibly in the life of their communities'
- (Welsh Government, 2019).

This review will cover traditional open-access youth services which provide learning opportunities and leisure, cultural and sporting activities, but also targeted service provision which largely serve very vulnerable people, often experiencing (or at risk of)

multiple disadvantages, from material deprivation to educational exclusion,<sup>2</sup> violence or crime.<sup>3</sup>

A number of recent reports on the state of the sector stress that traditional open-access youth service provision (e.g. leisure, cultural, sporting and enrichment activities, non-formal and informal learning experiences, often based around youth centres and including community-based and street-based work) has witnessed a decline in allocated funding and availability, with third-sector organisations at times replacing local authorities in the provision of these services (CYPE, 2016; Estyn, 2018; Jervis, 2018). In contrast, there has been an increase in targeted, referral-based interventions, for instance focused on young people not in employment, education or training (NEET) but also through sexual health services, youth justice teams, homelessness support and drug and alcohol misuse services. This shift in attention has also coincided with fragmentation of services, with young people being referred to several different intervention services (Estyn, 2018), while the approach risks labelling young people in stigmatising categories (Jervis, 2018), focusing on problems in a way that potentially entrenches social exclusion.

## Policy context

The Youth Work Strategy for Wales focuses on youth work as a key core element of youth support services (Welsh Government, 2019). The strategy reaffirms the commitment to a rights-based approach in line with the Welsh Government's adoption of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). It puts emphasis on a participatory approach involving young people in the design and delivery of services and incorporating mechanisms to enhance their voice on decision-making in this policy area (e.g. through youth networks, youth councils, youth-led action at local levels as well as through evaluation based on questionnaires and surveys with young people). The strategy also confirms commitment to a range of measures to strengthen professionalism within the sector workforce for both paid and voluntary staff, for instance, through:

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<sup>2</sup> The review will not cover aspects of youth work which overlap with the review on further education and skills which forms part of this series.

<sup>3</sup> It is beyond the scope of this rapid review to cover youth services for young offenders but this is clearly an important policy area which deserves its own policy review to see what further lessons can be learnt from different international approaches. Youth services have a key role to play in the prevention, protection, care and treatment of young offenders.

- Its framework of youth work qualification and support for professional development activities;
- The work of the Education Workforce Council (established in 2017 as an independent regulator in Wales for youth workers); and
- Support for the Council for Wales of Voluntary Youth Services which provides training, advice and networking opportunities for the voluntary sector.

The strategy also includes a £10 million investment via the Youth Support Grant – this includes £2.5m to support young people’s mental health and well-being, and a further £3.7 million to help prevent youth homelessness. This must be understood in a context where funding of youth services has been recognised as the greatest concern for the sector in recent years (Jervis, 2018).

Youth services in Wales are funded from a variety of sources. The main contribution from the Welsh Government is through the Revenue Support Grant, but local authorities also receive funding, for instance, for well-being or youth homelessness through the Youth Support Grant. Spending on youth services has witnessed a decline, albeit less dramatic than in England, where it was reported at 71% between 2010/11-2018/19. O'Donnell et al. (2019) showed a decline in Wales of 34% of funding in real terms between 2011-2018, aligned with figures reported by YMCA (2020) who estimated a reduction from £50 million in 2010/11 to £31 million in 2018/19 – a 38% decrease in real terms spending. These numbers conceal regional variations, with all areas seeing a reduction of at least 25%, but some experiencing sharper decreases e.g. in the order of 58% in West Wales (YMCA, 2020).

Within Wales, funding for youth services is included in the education budget, accounting for 2% in 2010/11 and 1% in 2018/19. The latest figures on youth work funding for 2019/20 showed an increase to £37.7 million. The total of the core youth work budget was £15.7 million (representing an actual decrease of 11% from the previous year), while £22 million came from other sources, such as Families First and the Youth Work Strategy Support Grant (Statistics for Wales, 2021). Latest figures show that 15% of 11- to 25-year-olds are registered members of statutory youth work sector provision, stable from the previous year (Statistics for Wales, 2021) but lower than the 20% registered in 2013/14, with the earlier fall described as an alarming downward trend (CYPE, 2016).

In addition to its focus on youth work and youth services, the Welsh Government priorities tackling Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs). ACEs refer to traumatic events or circumstances which happen in childhood, including child maltreatment (physical and emotional abuse and neglect) and wider experiences of household dysfunction (domestic violence, parental separation, substance misuse, mental



illness or parental incarceration). These experiences can result in poorer physical and mental well-being, lower educational outcomes, poorer relationships with others and economic disadvantage. They can also increase the likelihood of coming into contact with the criminal justice system. The more ACEs a child experiences, the greater the risk of poorer outcomes later in life. This means that ACEs create a barrier to all children having the best possible start to life. This is an area of policy which is still evolving but key elements are the establishment of an ACE Support Hub for Wales, ensuring that public services are ACEs aware (including youth and youth justice services) and supporting families and parents to reduce ACEs.

## Relationship to poverty and social exclusion

Vulnerability and disadvantage experienced at an early and critical stage in people's lives can have far reaching consequences and scarring effects. There is strong evidence of the impact of the cumulative effects on life outcomes of different forms of disadvantage in early life (Strandh et al., 2014; Nelson et al., 2013). Research on the experience of social exclusion in the UK among 16-24-years-olds shows that young adults are more likely to experience deprivation across dimensions of the Bristol Social Exclusion Matrix (B-SEM; Levitas et al., 2007) in relation to material resources (including subjective poverty) but also in terms of living conditions and economic and social participation (Fahmy, 2017; 2018) – see the Annex for more information on the B-SEM.

A comparison of young people's vulnerability to income poverty and to multidimensional deprivation shows that the proportion of those vulnerable to the latter is significantly higher than the former – this likely reflects inequalities in how resources are distributed within the household and the higher likelihood of multidimensional deprivation affecting young women. Negative experiences have scarring effects in relation to a range of dimensions of social exclusion also because of the array of important transitions occurring at this critical stage of people's lives. Youth transitions see people move from full-time education into the labour market, attain a degree of independence from their family of origin and move away from the parental home, while social and leisure activities shape social networks that influence young adults' social identities and (perceived and actual) opportunities. For some, paths into criminality and drug-use further shape youth transitions (Webster et al., 2004; MacDonald, 2006).

Young people in the UK have suffered disproportionately post-financial crisis, being more exposed to unemployment, job insecurity and in-work poverty (Fahmy, 2018;

Cooper and Hills, 2021). For instance, Padley and Hirsh (2014) have shown that vulnerability to low income has been greater and growing most quickly for younger adults. Obolenskaya and Hills (2019) examined changing economic outcomes in the decades between 1995-2005 and 2005-2015, and showed that in the second decade younger adults faced the greatest falls in levels of pay in real terms while over the two decades they also experienced the slowest median income growth compared to other age groups, and this growth all occurred in the first decade.

Welfare reforms have significantly hit this segment of the population, for instance through cuts in social security which have been shown to have most severely affected (especially large) families with children, while social security spending and policy have largely favoured those above state pension age (Cooper and Hills, 2021). Young adults have seen the greatest falls in real earnings after the crisis and were hit the hardest by changing housing costs (Cooper and Hills, 2021). Increasing welfare conditionality and sanctioning have also had the effect of driving young people to accept low-quality, low-pay, insecure work, entrenching poverty and disadvantage (Fahmy, 2017). Meanwhile, in the last decades, UK youth policy has largely focused on a narrow understanding of social exclusion, and on activation policies to boost economic participation in particular, rather than policies that focus on poverty. Underlying these approaches emerges a 'belief that income and wealth redistribution are inappropriate responses to poverty, especially in relation to the situation of youth' (Fahmy, 2017, p.44).

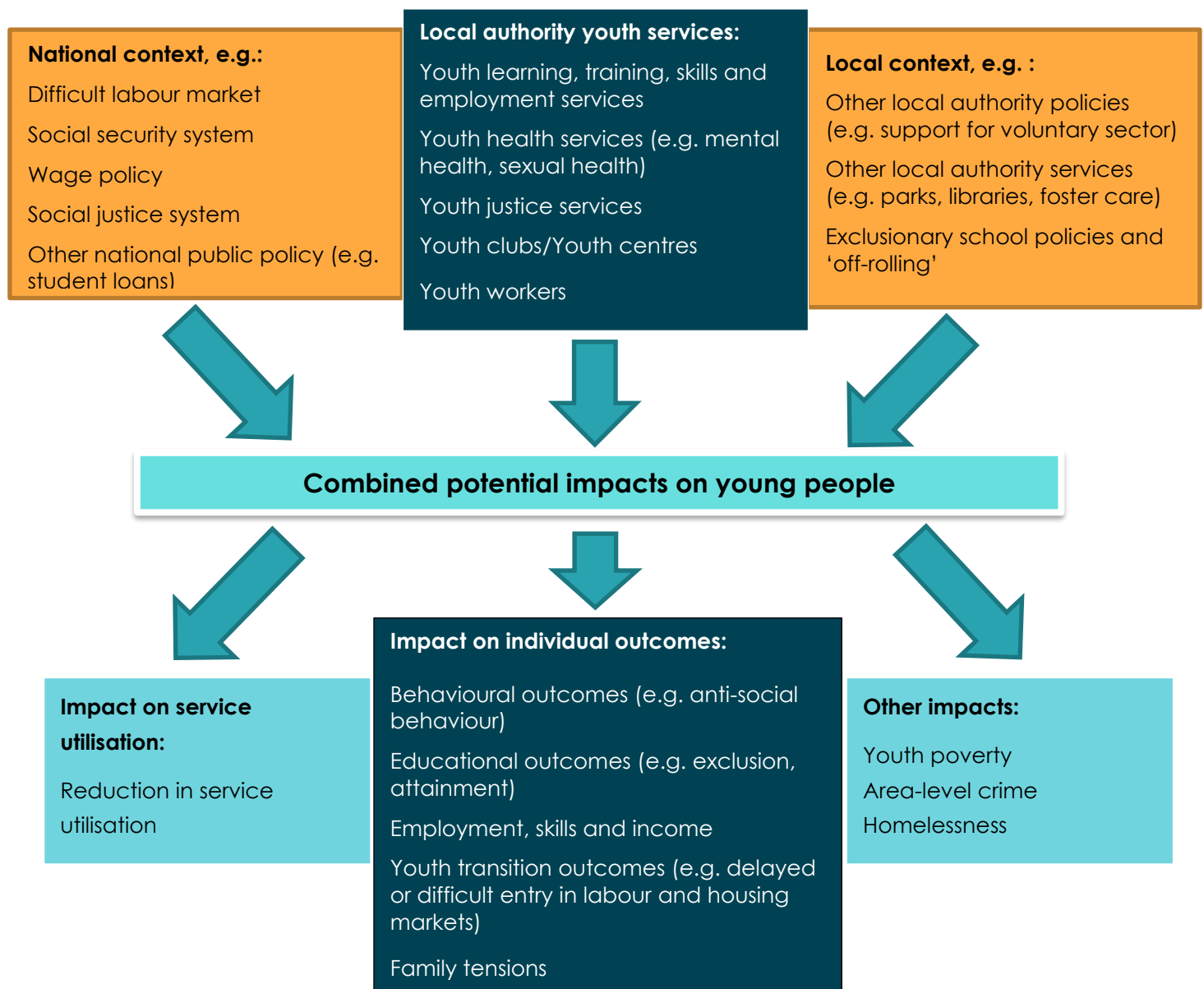
Youth services and youth work can contribute to ameliorating a range of phenomena that lead to social exclusion. For instance, the provision of non-formal training and learning opportunities can increase motivation and equip with new skills, serving as a springboard towards acquiring formal qualifications, while also fostering social networks that can assist with school-to-work transitions (European Commission, 2013; Hill, 2020). However, despite children and young people being central to the social exclusion policy agenda, most social exclusion initiatives were and are still designed, delivered and evaluated by adults (Hill et al., 2004).

Advocacy and legal aid services can foster integration of young people experiencing exclusion and discrimination, and contribute to removing the barriers based on actual or perceived unequal treatment to accessing key services. These services can be especially important for young people at risk of educational exclusion – which is widely connected to a range of negative short-term outcomes (e.g. educational attainment, attendance, anti-social behaviour) and long-term outcomes (e.g. contact with the justice system) (Welsh and Little, 2018).

Youth services providing open access to social and leisure activities can contribute to integration, foster a sense of community, expand social networks and produce

positive peer-effects (European Commission, 2013). Youth work can therefore contribute to personal development and contribute to social participation in a broader sense, by fostering social skills, support networks, and providing a safe place to be (Hill, 2020). This is especially important given the key protective role played by social support networks in relation to particularly damaging phenomena such as homelessness (Bramley and Fitzpatrick, 2016). Figure 1 outlines the complex array of factors that bear on outcomes for young people, highlighting how youth services are embedded in the various local and national factors that affect poverty and social exclusion.

**Figure 1. Youth services, contextual factors and impacts on young people**



Source: Adapted by the authors from Fitzgerald et al. (2014)

# Relationship to lived experience of poverty and social exclusion

Research on the lived experience of disadvantaged youth has long depicted social exclusion as a cumulative process. Young people can struggle to overcome multiple hardships and their transitions to adulthood are often a complex set of twists and turns, with key turning points and critical moments – episodes of ill-health, parental separation or bereavement – while their experiences of poverty are often persistent. Webster et al. (2004) highlighted how, for this group, a flux of changes (in relation to housing transitions, formation of new partnerships, households and families, criminal and drug-using experiences), often contrasts with lack of progress in relation to education, training and employment. Despite displaying conventional attitudes and attachment to work, some young people get stuck in cycles of low-paid, insecure work at the bottom of the labour market, unemployment, and short-term, or sometimes unfinished, education and training of varying quality.

As experiences of cuts to funding and outsourcing have been widespread across countries in the past decades, a body of literature has investigated how these bear on the experiences and practices of youth service workers in different contexts. Largely, what emerges is a picture characterised by anxiety and distress in relation to the impact on service provision (Horton, 2016). As practitioners are asked to do more with less, changes are often perceived as jeopardising the range of goals these services try to accomplish (UNISON, 2016). Assumptions underlying policies, practices, and programme design largely construct youth as ‘troubled’, pathologising their actions and behaviours and largely supporting a deficit-based explanation of youth disadvantage (Davies, 2013; Finn et al., 2013). Practitioners and service providers cope in different ways with shifts in approach, and contestation in many cases gives way to adaptation and endorsement of new priorities and goals (Davies, 2019).

Different approaches to youth work can interpret the role of these services in relation to social inclusion differently. On the one hand, they can be seen as creating a ‘social forum’, enabling young people to question their social condition, articulate their needs, and engage actively and critically in their society for social change. A different approach would instead see youth work as an instrument for social education, citizenship training and other forms of preparation for adulthood (Taru et al., 2014). In practice, youth work has witnessed a progressively narrower interpretation which has led, across Europe in the past couple of decades, to a tendency to see youth work as a tool for enhancing young people’s employability (Pantea, 2015). This has coincided

with a ‘compartmentalisation’ of youth work and a focus on interventions targeted at groups considered to be particularly ‘problematic’ or ‘at-risk’ (Pantea, 2015).

The shift away from general, open-access services can label and stigmatise the segments of the population it serves, reinforcing dividing lines between young people and thus inherently hindering the inclusive potential of youth work (Verschelden et al., 2010). Stigma can alienate and further discourage participation of already hard to reach groups, and while diversity can generate tensions in open access youth work, there is also evidence that it offers opportunity for resolving conflict and that young people in these settings value diversity (Ord et al., 2021). There is also evidence that targeted work, often conducted in a context of limited resources and pressures to meet targets and prove effectiveness, further fosters a tendency to focus on those young people deemed most receptive (Kelly, 2012). This can result in practices focusing on less challenging cases, prioritising short-term interventions while also perpetuating negative representations of young people and neighbourhoods.

## Evidence of policy effectiveness

Intervention	Strength of evidence	Effectiveness
Youth participation	Strong (quasi-experimental)	Effective
Open access youth services	Mixed (reviews of evidence)  The results of inappropriate quantitative impact assessments are vulnerable to misinterpretation and can lead to damaging reforms.	Effective

This review covers evidence on youth participation in youth services, where young people are actively involved in developing programmes (i.e. not whether or not they attend), and open access youth work. The review covers examples of successful or promising initiatives in the international literature.

### Youth participation

Meaningful youth participation involves active engagement and real influence, not passive presence or token roles (Checkoway, 2011). As stated above, here we are interested in active participation, not whether or not young people attend youth

services.<sup>4</sup> Youth participation is very much in line with the Welsh Government's approach to youth services, as outlined in its Youth Work Strategy for Wales: 'Youth work in Wales is based on the voluntary engagement of young people as empowered partners.' (Welsh Government, 2019).

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) has been very influential in increasing young people's participation in matters that affect them (Hill et al., 2004). The treaty grants all children and young people (aged 17 and under) a comprehensive set of rights. Under Article 12 children have the right to express their views freely in all matters affecting them and their views should be given due weight in accordance with their age and maturity.<sup>5</sup>

In the literature on youth participation, reference is frequently made to Arnstein's (1969) 'ladder of citizen participation' in which each rung represents levels of participation corresponding to the extent of citizens' power to determine the end product. Hart (1992) adapted Arnstein's ladder to reflect child and youth participation and to show the different levels of participation (see Figure 2).

Checkoway (2011) makes the case that participation should be measured not only by scope, but also by quality. There are a number of other models of participation including Shier's (2001) Pathways to Participation which includes five levels:

- a) children are listened to;
- b) children are supported in expressing views;
- c) children's views are taken into account;
- d) children are involved in decision making; and
- e) shared child-adult decision making.

All these approaches stress the importance of meaningful participation. As Checkoway outlines:

**"Youth participation is important, because when young people participate, it draws upon their expertise, enables them to exercise their rights as citizens, and contributes to a more democratic society. It**

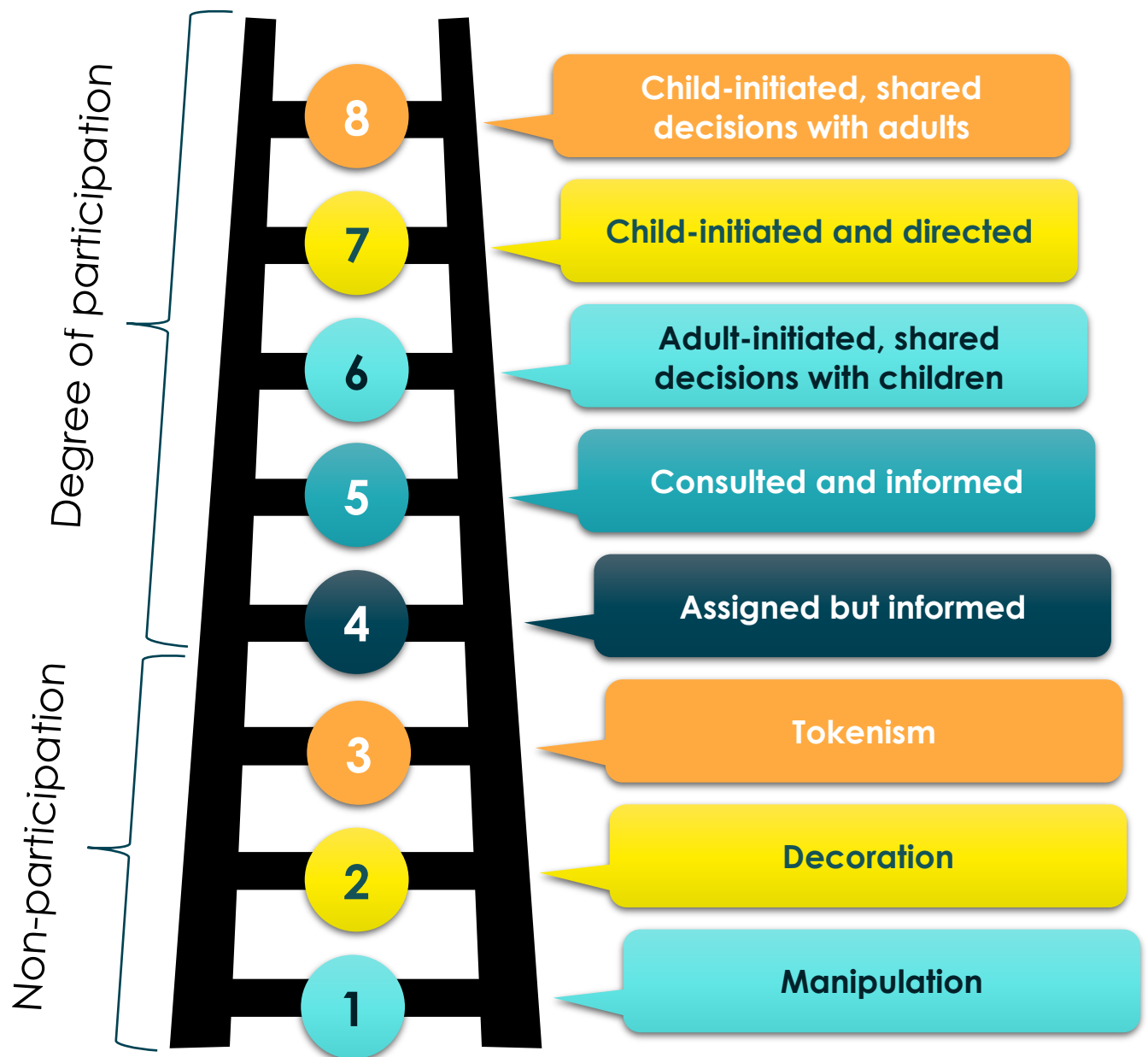
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<sup>4</sup> Youth services cover a range of out-of-school activities such as youth clubs, youth centres, voluntary youth organisations, youth action groups, etc.

<sup>5</sup> The Children's Commissioner for Wales is responsible for protecting children's rights in Wales as set out in the Convention. The post was established in the Children's Commissioner for Wales Act 2001 and the first Commissioner took up post in 2001.

also promotes their personal development, and provides them with substantive knowledge and practical skills.” (Checkoway, 2011, p.340)

Figure 2: Hart’s ladder of participation



Source: Adapted by the authors from Hart (1992), p.8



Youth participation has benefits for young people, adults, programmes and communities as a whole (Wheeler 2000; Flores, 2008). In relation to youth development programmes, there is evidence that involving young people in decision-making leads to more positive outcomes than traditional programmes which treat young people as recipients (Gambone, Klem and Connell, 2002).

Qualitative evidence from the US finds that actively involving young people in youth services helps to develop a sense of responsibility. This was more common in programmes with more structure and which placed greater ownership and accountability on young people (Wood, Larson and Brown, 2009). Evaluation of programmes also demonstrates evidence of positive benefits of youth participation (Kirschner and O'Donoghue, 2003). However, the impetus for wider participation can create tensions between 'hanging out vs. adult-led education' and 'letting the young be vs. participation' (Forkby and Kiilakoski, 2014).

Young people may also be more likely to participate in youth services when they can take a greater role in decision-making (Akiva, Cortina and Smith, 2014). Where there are greater leadership or decision-making opportunities, young people have reported greater feelings of ownership and empowerment (Larson et al., 2005) and higher levels of attendance (Deschenes et al., 2010).

Taru (2010) in a review of existing evidence concludes that the key elements of whether or not youth development programmes are successful include:

- Opportunities for youth engagement, voice, and decision making; and
- Involvement of young people in the design and delivery of youth development/ work activities.

There are a number of ways in which young people can participate in developing and influencing youth services and there are clearly different levels and types of participation. Involving young people in the development of programmes has the potential to enhance their success in meeting participants' needs. Allowing young people to participate in the development of solutions that affect their lives encourages youth ownership of these solutions.

**"The involvement and influence of young people in promoting and delivering positive activities is important both to increase and maintain levels of participation and also to maximise the benefits." (C4EO, 2010, p.2)**

One strategy for participation is youth-adult partnerships which are different from typical adult-led or youth-led youth development programmes. These partnerships involve youth and adults planning, learning and working together, with both groups



sharing equally in the decision-making process (Innovation Center for Community and Youth Development, 2003, cited in Subramaniam and Moncloa, 2010; Dupuis and Mann-Feder, 2013). In qualitative research exploring young people's perspectives on what was important for making these partnerships successful, they emphasised the following areas:

- i) Supportive relationships with adults and peers;
- ii) Positive attitudes, respect and a safe space for voice;
- iii) Mutual learning and skill building; and
- iv) Community impact (Subramaniam and Moncloa, 2010).

A quantitative study which looked at the impact of youth decision-making practices on social skills such as efficacy and empathy is shown in Case Study 1 (Akiva, Cortina and Smith (2014).

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## Case Study 1. Involving young people in youth service decision-making in the US

**This study investigated the prevalence and impact of youth service decision-making practices (Akiva, Cortina and Smith, 2014). The study followed 979 young people attending 63 multipurpose after-school programmes across four US states. The programmes offered a variety of activities including arts enrichment (crafts, music, drama, dance), other forms of enrichment (leadership, conflict resolution, cooking, technology), and sports.**

**The prevalence of shared decision-making practices was found to be relatively high, particularly for those involving low power sharing such as involving young people in selecting the activities a programme offers. Youth service decision-making practices were positively correlated with youth motivation to attend programmes. Positive correlations were also found between decision-making practices and:**

- **Youth problem-solving efficacy (for example, participants reporting that they 'try to think of many solutions when faced with a problem');**
- **Expression efficacy (for example, participants reporting that they 'can talk about their thoughts and feelings');** and
- **Empathy (for example, participants reporting that they 'try to understand how friends feel when they are angry, upset or sad).**

**Significant interactions with age suggested that correlations with problem solving and empathy were more pronounced for older participants.**

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# Open access youth services

Open access youth services refer to services that are universally available to young people irrespective of their background or needs (Robertson, 2005). Cuts to funding have put open access youth services under threat and one of the dangers is that young people who participate in a slimmed down service will be labelled and stigmatised, exacerbating rather than ameliorating social exclusion. A common form of open access youth services is youth clubs, which have been shown to benefit young people in terms of:

- Fostering peer relationships;
- Providing the opportunity for informal, respectful relationships with adults; and
- Offering participation and association (Robertson, 2000/01).

The diversity of terms used in the literature to describe this type of service presents a challenge in building up a body of evidence (Hill, 2020). They include universal provision, generic youth work, youth services, outreach, or positive youth activities (referencing McGregor 2015; Ritchie and Ord, 2016). Concerns about the increasing pressure to measure and demonstrate the impact of open access youth work provision have also been raised (e.g. Fyfe et al., 2018; Hill, 2020):

**“Open access youth work is by definition ‘open’, and flexible to the interests of young people, and therefore to seek to measure its impact restricts and ultimately shapes the nature of provision offered.”** (Hill, 2020, p.5)

Due to the nature of open access youth work, it is ill suited to types of quantitative experimental evaluation using ‘treatment’ and ‘control’ groups with pre-prescribed ‘outcome’ variables. There are also concerns that non-rigorous quantitative analysis can lead to confusion between correlation and causation. For example, Ritchie and Ord (2016) and others highlight the influential research by Feinstein, Bynner and Duckworth (2005) which reported that ‘at age 16 youth club attendance still showed up as a powerful predictor of being an offender’. This type of simple correlation can be misinterpreted as suggesting that youth clubs make offending more likely, whereas it is simply showing that those likely to offend are more likely to engage in or be referred to this kind of service. A focus on provision of services for which there is evidence of quantitative positive impact can therefore threaten the concept of open access youth work.

As a result of the challenges inherent in quantitative evidence relating to open access youth services, qualitative evidence has a strong role to play. Using evidence from a

variety of sources, Hill's (2020) narrative review of the UK and international literature (including systematic reviews) found that participation in open access youth work has positive influences across a range of different aspects of life, namely:

1. **Society** e.g. social cohesion, taking initiative, influencing local decision making, increased volunteering, cultural awareness and inter-cultural relations, political engagement, active citizenship;
2. **Personal development** e.g. self-esteem and confidence, personal identity, problem solving, social skills, conflict resolution, raised aspirations, broadened worldview and beliefs, knowledge of self, self-control, dealing with setbacks, strategic thinking;
3. **Relationships** e.g. trusting, non-judgemental, feeling believed in, feeling heard and listened to, feeling supported, acceptance, respect, overcoming isolation, building capacity for positive relationships in the future;
4. **Employment and education** e.g. training, developing social capital, entrepreneurialism, improving job chances, developing hard and soft skills for the workplace, voluntary or paid opportunities, developing non-cognitive skills, assistance with applications, preventing early school leaving;
5. **A safe place to be** e.g. getting away from home and tensions elsewhere, a place 'not like school', a place to socialise and have fun, a place accessible for free where they will not be excluded, a safe space away from challenges in the community, a place to just be, a sense of belonging;
6. **Skills development** e.g. opportunities to try new things, developing hard and soft skills, participating in music, dance, craft, art or sport activities, learning to present, organise, communicate and lead; and
7. **Health and well-being** e.g. reducing detrimental and risky behaviours (e.g. substance abuse), providing a place of respite and sanctuary, enabling good decision-making and considering risk, preventative approaches (e.g. gang activity), increasing self-care.

Hill also cautions that not all youth work projects should expect to see the same impacts, and some may be negative. This is because their aims, services available and the groups who participate can differ (Hill, 2020).

Evidence collected from young people finds that 'association' (which emphasises the relationships between young people and the generation of a 'club' environment) is a key driver of engagement (Ritchie and Ord, 2016). Young people value the relationships they form with youth workers and acknowledge the support and guidance offered to them which better enables them to reflect on and navigate what can be complex lives (Ritchie and Ord, 2016). The value that young people place on

the relationships they form may be missed from 'hard' quantitative impact evaluations focused on measurable effects such as educational attainment, criminal activity or employment. This is another reason why young people should be involved not just in determining types of provision but also the evaluation of interventions.

Youth clubs are the most recognisable forms of open access youth services. The implicit idea behind youth clubs is that they offer a space for diverse groups of young people and that they should be equally accessible for every young person irrespective of background (Kiilakoski and Kivijärvi, 2015). However, exclusion can occur (see Case Study 2).

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## Case Study 2. Open access youth clubs in Finland

**In keeping with the Nordic model of welfare, youth work is an integral part of welfare policy in Finland (Forkby and Kiilakoski, 2014). In Finland, local youth clubs (or 'youth houses') are largely funded and governed by local authorities. Recent estimates suggest that there are more than one thousand youth clubs in daily use in Finland, down from around 1,500 in 1989 (Gretschel, 2017; Forkby and Kiilakoski, 2014). Estimates suggest that 5-10% of young people regularly attend youth clubs (Kiilakoski, 2011 cited in Forkby and Kiilakoski, 2014). In addition, there are ten national youth centres specialising in adventure, nature, environmental and cultural education, camps and social and international youth work (Gretschel, 2017). Youth centres can also be differentiated from youth houses that are used during the day by their overnight accommodation facilities (Gretschel, 2017).**

**Despite the open access nature of Finnish youth clubs, there are challenges to maintaining open access in practice. Some studies have emphasised the 'cultural control' of particular groups in some youth clubs. In this situation existing users control the space through ignoring or excluding new young people (Forkby and Kiilakoski, 2014). This can diminish the youth club's accessibility, meaning youth workers need to pay more attention to exclusive practices by existing service users (Kiilakoski and Kivijärvi, 2015).**

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# Challenges and facilitating factors

A summary of the challenges and facilitating factors relating to youth services and their effectiveness in addressing poverty and social exclusion is provided in Table 1.

**Table 1: Challenges and facilitating factors**

Challenges	Facilitating factors
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Cuts in funding for youth services and greater targeting threatens the provision of open access services, which are valued by young people, and risks labelling those who participate. This in turn risks increasing rather than ameliorating social exclusion.</li><li>• Youth participation in decision-making in youth services has many benefits to young people but it is important that participation is meaningful.</li><li>• A focus on quantitative impact evaluation runs the risk of leading to narrow provision which is not valued by young people. It is important that young people are also involved in evaluation of youth services.</li><li>• Even open access youth services, such as youth clubs, can result in exclusions due to the behaviour of those already attending.</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child has been a positive vehicle for change and contributed to greater youth participation in the things that matter to them, including youth services.</li><li>• The Welsh Government's approach to youth service provision seeks to empower young people and involve them in decision-making.</li></ul>

# Conclusion

Youth services play an important role in helping young people negotiate the transition to independence and offer an opportunity for early intervention for young people who are struggling. They help to reduce social exclusion and address some aspects of poverty and are likely to be increasingly important due to the disruption of the Coronavirus pandemic on the lives of many young people, affecting their transitions to independence. Access to youth services can be critical for disadvantaged young people and ensuring that services are open access can avoid labelling and stigmatisation.

There is a growing understanding of the importance and value of youth participation in youth services. Participation is beneficial to young people in a number of ways including the development of social skills. Young people also have an important role to play in designing the evaluation of services so that these can reflect which services and what elements of those services are important to them. However, funding cuts have put open access services under threat.

## Transferability to Wales

This is an area of policy where the Welsh Government has been actively involved for some time, in a way that is consistent with a rights-based approach which encompasses youth participation. Access to youth services can be particularly challenging for young people living in rural areas where transport disadvantage can be a factor, meaning there are relevant overlaps between youth services and the policy review focusing on transport disadvantage.

## Promising actions

This section concludes with **promising actions** to consider in the Welsh context as emerging from the analysis of the international literature.

1. **Open access provision** promotes inclusivity and avoids the stigmatisation that often arises from targeting services to the most disadvantaged.
  - Experts have expressed concern about the **increasing pressure to measure** and demonstrate the quantitative impact of open access youth work provision which can lead to misinterpretation and damaging reform.
2. **Meaningful youth participation** which harnesses the lived experience of young people through their involvement in the design, provision and evaluation of youth

services can lead to service improvements and benefits to young people. Meaningful participation requires active engagement and real influence, as opposed to passive presence or token roles.

- There is good quality evidence that participation in youth service decision-making leads to **better social skills (efficacy and empathy)** and that leadership or decision-making opportunities lead to **greater feelings of ownership and empowerment and higher levels of attendance**.
- The **United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child** has been a positive vehicle for change, leading to greater active involvement of young people in matters that affect them.

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# Annex: Methodology

## Definition of poverty and social exclusion

For the purposes of this project it was agreed that a multidimensional concept of disadvantage, including social as well as economic dimensions, would be adopted. The Bristol Social Exclusion Matrix (B-SEM) (Levitas et al., 2007) provides the theoretical structure that underpins the selection of policy areas. The B-SEM uses the following working definition of social exclusion:

**“Social exclusion is a complex and multi-dimensional process. It involves the lack or denial of resources, rights, goods and services, and the inability to participate in the normal relationships and activities, available to the majority of people in a society, whether in economic, social, cultural or political arenas. It affects both the quality of life of individuals and the equity and cohesion of society as a whole.”** (Levitas et al., 2007, p.9).

It is structured around three main domains and ten sub-domains (see Table A1).

**Table A1: B-SEM domains and sub-domains**

A. Resources:	
<b>A1: Material/ economic resources</b>	Includes exclusion in relation to income, basic necessities (such as food), assets, debt and financial exclusion.
<b>A2: Access to public and private services</b>	Relates to exclusion from public and private services due to service inadequacy, unavailability or unaffordability. The range of services encompass public services, utilities, transport, and private services (including financial services).
<b>A3: Social resources</b>	Reflects an increasing awareness of the importance of social networks and social support for individual well-being. A key aspect relates to people who are separated from their family and those who are institutionalised.



## B. Participation:

### **B1: Economic participation**

Includes participation in employment – which is not only important for generating resources but is also an aspect of social inclusion in its own right. Whether work is a positive, inclusionary experience depends partly on the financial rewards it brings, and partly on the nature and quality of work. Work is understood broadly and includes caring activities and unpaid work.

### **B2: Social participation**

Comprises participation in common social activities as well as recognising the importance of carrying out meaningful roles (e.g. as parents, grandparents, children).

### **B3: Culture, education and skills**

Covers cultural capital and cultural participation. It includes the acquisition of formal qualifications, skills and access to knowledge more broadly, for instance digital literacy inclusion. It also covers cultural and leisure activities.

### **B4: Political and civic participation**

Includes both participation in formal political processes as well as types of unstructured and informal political activity, including civic engagement and community participation.

## C. Quality of life:

### **C1: Health and well-being**

Covers aspects of health. It also includes other aspects central to individual well-being such as life satisfaction, personal development, self-esteem, and vulnerability to stigma.

### **C2: Living environment**

Focuses on the characteristics of the 'indoor' living environment, with indicators of housing quality, inadequate housing and exclusion in the form of homelessness; and the 'outdoor' living environment, which includes neighbourhood characteristics.

### **C3: Crime, harm and criminalisation**

Covers exposure to harm, objective/ subjective safety and both crime and criminalisation. This reflects the potentially exclusionary nature of being the object of harm, as well as the exclusion, stigmatisation and criminalisation of the perpetrators.

Notes: the descriptions of the sub-domains are the authors' understanding of what each sub-domain includes based on Levitas et al. (2007).



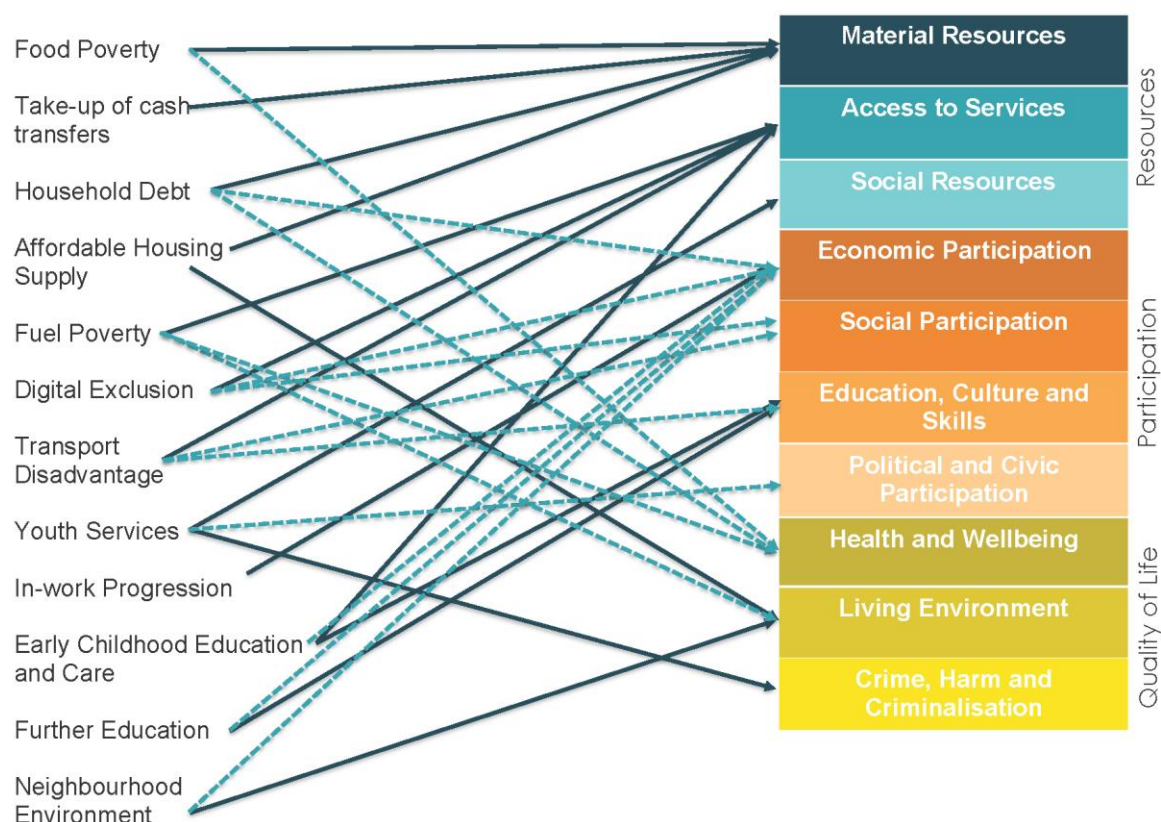
## Selection of policy areas

The first step involved the research team identifying a long list of 40 policy areas with reference to the domains and sub-domains of the B-SEM. The long list was, in part, informed by a review of key trends in poverty and social exclusion in Wales, across the ten sub-domains, conducted by WCPP (Carter, 2022a); a consideration of the Welsh Government's devolved powers across policy areas; and meetings with experts. From this long list a shortlist of 12 policy areas was agreed. The shortlisting process took into account advice on priority areas identified by a focus group of experts, but ultimately the final list of 12 policies was selected by the Welsh Government.

The final set of 12 policy areas covers a broad spectrum within the B-SEM, and most are related to more than one sub-domain within the B-SEM (Figure A1). However, the final selection should not be considered exhaustive from a poverty and social exclusion policy perspective. This is because some important policy areas are not devolved to the Welsh Government and, therefore, were not included. For example, while adequacy of social security is a key driver of poverty the Welsh Government currently has no powers to set key elements of social security policy (e.g. rates and eligibility criteria for the main in-work and out of work benefits) and this is the reason why we focus on one aspect of social security, take-up of cash transfers, that the Welsh Government has power to influence.

Another factor was the project's scope and timescales, which limited the selection to 12 policy areas and meant that other important areas had to be excluded (for instance, social care, health care and crime). To make the reviews manageable, it was also necessary to identify a focus for each of the 12 policy areas. The research team identified a focus for each of the reviews on the basis of a brief initial scope of the research evidence and consultation with WCPP who, where relevant, consulted sector and policy experts. This means that there are likely to be additional policies which could be included in a poverty and social exclusion strategy by the Welsh Government *within* the 12 policy areas and *in addition to* the 12 policy areas reviewed.

**Figure A1. The selected policy areas mapped to relevant B-SEM sub-domains**



Source: prepared by the authors

Notes: The figure outlines the mapping of the 12 selected policy areas to the B-SEM matrix: bold lines show the relationship between each policy area and main B-SEM sub-domain(s), light dotted lines identify selected secondary B-SEM sub-domains the policies are related to (a full list of these 'secondary subdomains' is included in the specific reviews).

## Review stages

In the 'evidence of policy effectiveness' section, while it was not possible to produce a full systematic review (although evidence from existing systematic reviews and meta-level analyses were included where available), a structured approach was adopted. This first involved an evaluation of the state of the relevant literature, focusing on whether effectiveness was assessed via methods standardly considered better suited to establish causality (e.g. on the basis of hierarchical grading schemes such as the Maryland Scientific Method Scale (Sherman et al., 1997) or the Oxford Centre for Evidence-Based Medicine's (OCEBM) levels of evidence (Howick et al., 2011) such as randomised controlled trials (RCTs), meta-analyses of RCTs and other quasi-experimental studies. While RCTs are particularly powerful in identifying whether a certain intervention has had an impact in a given context, other forms of evidence, such as quasi-experimental and observational studies with appropriate

controls may be better suited, depending on the type of intervention, to establish the range of outcomes achieved as well as providing an understanding of distributional effects and allowing sub-group analysis (i.e. ‘for whom’ did the intervention work). In the process of assessing evidence, case studies were selected to further elaborate some of the key findings resulting from the review and to identify specific examples of promising policy interventions.

In a few areas, the literature review highlighted a lack of robust evaluations – the reviews underscore this and present the best available evidence found along with an assessment of the strength of the evidence. Where possible, an evaluation of the underlying mechanisms of change was also considered, allowing an explanation of not just whether, but why a certain intervention works, thus also facilitating the identification of challenges and facilitating factors, which is crucial in thinking about not just ‘what’ should be done but also ‘how’ it can best be implemented.

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- improved our understanding of the transferability of policies to Wales; and
- informed our consideration of implementation challenges and facilitating factors.

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