Wales Centre for Public Policy
Canolfan Polisi Cyhoeddus Cymru

Planning for Economic and Social recovery from the Coronavirus pandemic:

Annex 3: Public services

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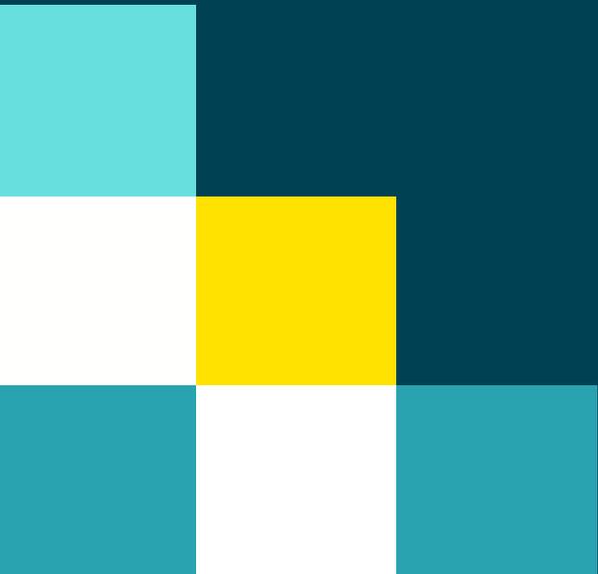
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The Wales Centre for Public Policy helps to improve policy making and public services by supporting ministers and public service leaders to access and apply rigorous independent evidence about what works. It works in partnership with leading researchers and policy experts to synthesise and mobilise existing evidence and identify gaps where there is a need to generate new knowledge.

The Centre is independent of government but works closely with policy makers and practitioners to develop fresh thinking about how to address strategic challenges in health and social care, education, housing, the economy and other devolved responsibilities. It:

- Supports Welsh Government Ministers to identify, access and use authoritative evidence and independent expertise that can help inform and improve policy;

- Works with public services to access, generate, evaluate and apply evidence about what works in addressing key economic and societal challenges; and

- Draws on its work with Ministers and public services, to advance understanding of how evidence can inform and improve policy making and public services and contribute to theories of policy making and implementation.

Through secondments, PhD placements and its Research Apprenticeship programme, the Centre also helps to build capacity among researchers to engage in policy relevant research which has impact.

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Welsh Government is the devolved government of Wales, responsible for key areas of public life, including health, education, local government, and the environment.

Contents

Introduction

This annex presents the conclusions of two expert roundtables convened in May 2020 by the Counsel General and Minister for European Transition to consider the impacts that the Coronavirus pandemic has had on public services and the role that they will play in the recovery from it.

The annex and the report which it accompanies were commissioned to help inform the Welsh Government's planning, but we hope that they will also be useful to public services and other organisations that are developing their own strategies for restart and recovery.

Roundtable 1

Participants in the first expert roundtable were asked to consider the differential impact of the pandemic on public services, including the health service and post-16 education, and examine necessary remediation measures and opportunities for change.

Overview

The Coronavirus pandemic is throwing in sharp relief and exacerbating some pre-existing challenges for public services and those who are most dependent on them. But there are signs that it has also unlocked and accelerated changes which the Welsh Government has been seeking for a long while. Public services have adapted to new ways of working at pace and showing a capacity for agility, collaboration and innovation. Capturing and learning from this will be important as Wales moves beyond the immediate crisis. A focus on intergenerational fairness and open dialogue with the public will be important in informing the changes that are needed in post-pandemic public services.

The crisis has seen some public services embrace on-line delivery of services to a greater degree than before. It is important that digital is not seen primarily as a technological issue. It is, in fact, a means of transforming organisational cultures and relationships with service users. Service transformation through the use of digital needs to be based on evaluation of its effectiveness and limitations. In some services and for some service users, digital tools cannot replace human contact and increasing digital inclusion needs to be a priority.

It will be important to take account of the differential impacts of the pandemic on different groups and different communities, and a place-based approach to the recovery will be important. There could be profound implications for town centres which may have fewer people working and shopping, and there may be a role for public services in providing

community hubs. There is a need to think more broadly about public services as economic actors and agents in local communities, and the role of governments in re-shaping procurement through public services. Universities have a key role in driving economic activity in their geographic region and there may ways to incentivise higher education to focus on the needs of the localities in which they are located as part of any government assistance to the sector. In health and social care, it was argued that there is a role for the Welsh Government in supporting integration and attempts to reimagine social care in the home.

Resilience and Reform

The Coronavirus pandemic is likely to pose issues about future funding across all public services and for universities. Higher education faces a double whammy of falling student recruitment particularly from overseas and a decline in research income. It may be that the current funding structure will not be sustainable. It was argued that, given their importance to young people's prospects, universities should be protected but that the current structure and number of universities in Wales may need to be rethought as well as the balance of research and teaching in different institutions.

Public services have adapted quickly and at scale and have succeeded in overcoming boundaries that have in the past prevented or slowed change. There was a consensus that learning should be taken from this to develop new ways of working that empower local change makers, with leadership from the Welsh Government, to reduce bureaucracy and encourage greater agility. The complex governance framework in Wales (850 community councils, 22 local authorities, seven local health boards and four regional partnership boards) was seen as inefficient, leading to duplication and some participants argued that it is in need of reform to enable new ways of working. Importantly, there is a need to look critically at how effective changes have been, for example in health understanding excess deaths from non COVID-19 causes.

Open dialogue with the public about the issues and choices facing Wales will be key in shaping change. There could be a role for universities in facilitating this. The World Bank's concept of 'One Health', which focuses on strengthening human, animal and environmental public health systems at their interface, was floated by one participant as an ambitious future model and an opportunity for Wales to be an exemplar. Another suggested a new Beveridge Report incorporating abolishing tuition fees would be a welcome commitment to equality and intergenerational fairness.

Digital transformation

Strategies for digital transformation should be based on rigorous evaluation of where services how have adapted in the context of the pandemic, the impact of moving to digital

delivery, whether services have improved, and if they have how governments can scale up and roll out digital tools. The discussion touched on learning from the rapid digitisation of death certificates as one example of overcoming resistance to a new ways of working. Learning could also be taken from examples of successful digital transformation in crisis situation – for example the administration of the employers subsidy scheme introduced in Christchurch following the 2011 earthquake.

Some key enablers for digital transformation were highlighted including: the need for a clear rationale and focus on user experience, including developing a common language that is user led, and common standards for design and delivery. Users need to experience a consistent look and feel, no matter what agency they come into contact with and the experience needs to be an improvement on others such as face to face or phone. The Centre for Digital Public Services is beginning some of this work to improve digital skills and capability in the Welsh public sector, putting digital skills into public services as part of multi-disciplinary teams. However, there are few of these roles in Wales. The discussion touched on Scotland as an example, given that it has been developing digital skills for six years.

The importance of human contact and a balanced representation of benefits and limitations of new ways of working should be reflected in any digital strategy, including for example the limitations of remote GP and outpatient consultations - particularly for frail older people, mental health services and speech therapy. And the potential for negative impacts on clinical care and user experience needs to be taken into account. It was suggested that the rapid digitisation of death certificates may have detracted from an accurate understanding of cause of death. And it was pointed out that remote learning cannot replace the other important roles that schools fulfil such as socialisation, free school meals and safeguarding, which are particularly important for vulnerable children. It is also important to understand the obstacles to remote learning that many children and young people face including a lack of tablets and PCs in the home and a lack of space and parental support for home-based learning. For other services though, digital offers a good option. The availability of on-line legal services has, for example, improved uptake by victims of domestic violence sheltering in refuges.

There was consensus across the experts about the need to pay particular attention to the importance of digital inclusion, including the need to recognise that all ages and demographics can be digitally excluded and for different reasons. Barriers include skills and confidence, access to and affordability of internet and/or devices, and the poor coverage and quality of broadband (particularly in rural areas). One-to-one training and financial help for those with low incomes may help. It is important that services for digitally excluded do not become inferior residual offerings, and that traditional support services continue to be provided for the large minority in Wales who are at risk of being digitally excluded. The risk that 22 local authorities redesign processes in isolation was raised, and it was argued that we need to find ways to avoid duplication and to encourage public services to work together on digitally based service transformation. Suggestions that were floated included a digital

inclusion strategy for Wales and a digital inclusion Tsar, to provide political leadership over the long term.

Place-based public services

The impact of the pandemic will vary between communities and were therefore place-based responses that are attuned to the needs and assets of different localities. There is potential for more empty retail spaces, less office spaces and more home working, meaning fewer people in town centres and a slow recovery for businesses in the hospitality and retail sectors. It was argued that public services may be needed to provide an anchor for town centres, for example community hubs, offering services and space for community activities, or a collection of public service institutions offering affordable spaces. Changes to patterns of travel will have an impact on the suitability of public transport. It was suggested that a more flexible 'oyster card style' system could be used to offer more affordable transport.

There is a need to think about public services more broadly as economic actors and agents in local communities (e.g. healthcare, education, utilities) and to maximise their potential to support local economic activity through public procurement and supply chains. Universities have a key role in driving economic activity in their geographic region, as well as in community and civic engagement. Any strategy for higher education should consider the potential for restructuring and perhaps rethinking the balance between teaching and research in some institutions. There is potential for universities to provide greater support to local economies through purchasing services locally and building capital in local economies and communities, whilst recognising that in some cases it may be more expensive or take longer.

There are a number of challenges facing care homes. In the short-term, the impact of the pandemic on occupancy rates, funding and workforce may threaten their financial viability. In the longer-term, many buildings are old and will be unfit for purpose within the next 10-15 years and many owners are approaching retirement age. It was argued that there is a role for governments in supporting strategies to reimagine care homes as part of communities, to scale up progressive commissioning for new models of home care, and to accelerate integration of health and social care. The discussion also touched on the need for better data to properly understand the impacts of the pandemic on social care. The role and future funding of the voluntary sector, and the need for better support for carers, were also raised as key challenges.

Participants

Chair: Jeremy Miles
Counsel General and Minister for European Transition, Welsh Government
(with responsibility for future recovery work)

Experts participating:
Professor Elwen Evans QC
Head of College of Law, Swansea University

Sally Meecham
Interim Chair of the Centre for Digital Public Services

Sir Emyr Jones-Parry
Former British Permanent Representative to the United Nations and former UK Permanent Representative on the North Atlantic Council

Chantal Patel
Head of Inter Professional Health Studies & Chair of the Clinical Ethics Committee at Swansea Bay University Health Board

Professor Karel Williams
Professor at Manchester University, Director of Research on socio cultural change

Professor Miriam Lips
Professor digital government at Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand

Professor Allyson Pollock
Director of the Newcastle University Centre for Excellence in Regulatory Science

Welsh Government: Ian Butler, Gareth Williams, Jane Runeckles, Jonathan Price, Claire Bennett, Gareth Bevington

Wales Centre for Public Policy: Laura Bennett, Steve Martin, Emma Taylor-Collins

Roundtable 2

Experts participating in the second roundtable were asked to advise on how public services might need to be reconfigured in response to the pandemic, with a particular focus on health and social care, education and post-16 learning, housing and homelessness, and public transport.

Key themes

Recovery from the Coronavirus pandemic presents a wide range of challenges. The Welsh Government needs to identify clear priorities and be realistic about the best ways to use its powers, influence and funding. It will be important to invest in those policy interventions and economic support packages that are the most effective in addressing these priorities.

Public services have responded well to the immediate crisis. There has been an increase in joined up working and a transformation in the way that some services are delivered. We need to scale up new ways of working rather than returning to previous models of service delivery. A MAPS (Mainstreaming, Acceleration and Policy Support) approach could be a useful way of doing this.

Remote working and digital public services do not suit everyone. Service transformation needs to be informed by robust evidence and user experience to ensure those who cannot access services online do not receive residual, inferior services.

There are significant barriers to joined up working including differences in terms and conditions, concerns about the capacity of PSBs and local authorities, and departmental silos within the Welsh Government.

The Coronavirus pandemic has highlighted and exacerbated inequalities. Recovery policies need to promote equality of opportunity, access to paid work and rewards. There is a need to protect jobs and manage the labour market actively. The Coronavirus pandemic has raised the profile of key workers and there is an opportunity to revalue their economic and social contribution. But this will require significant additional investment, particularly in social care.

Responses to the Coronavirus pandemic need to address the different needs of different generations. Older people will need to continue to shield for the foreseeable future, are at particular risk of loneliness and social isolation, and are less likely to be able to access online services. Young people have missed out on important learning opportunities

and are most at risk of the long-term scarring effects of an economic downturn, and in previous recessions job insecurity has been linked to a rise in suicide.

BAME groups are at a comparatively higher risk of mortality from COVID-19 than those who are White British, and may be particularly concerned about easing of restrictions. It is important to avoid categorising all BAME people as having the same needs. We need impact assessments to understand and mitigate the impacts of the pandemic as well as research to understand why BAME people have been disproportionately affected.

There has been a groundswell of community-based activity to support vulnerable people. We have seen an emergence of natural community leaders, an increase in volunteering and the development of new partnerships with the private and voluntary sector. The Welsh Government and local government should encourage asset-based, people-centred, bottom-up approaches that build on the goodwill and agile working that has been shown in these responses to the crisis.

Health and social care

There is an opportunity for bold changes, maximising the recent extraordinary outpouring of support for the NHS and recognition of the challenges facing social care. However, remote delivery of care will not suit all patients and is not suitable for all conditions. Service transformation needs to be based on robust evidence and an understanding of its limitations and unintended consequences in terms of access, quality of care, and widening inequalities.

The Coronavirus pandemic has highlighted and exacerbated challenges facing social care. It is a mixed sector that includes small owner-managed providers and a relatively small number of larger providers. The additional cost of the pandemic in terms of PPE and covering staff sick leave and shielding has been significant and some smaller providers have struggled financially. The system will need more funding in order for some providers to survive, also raising the case for broader reform. A move to outcomes-based commissioning that allows providers greater flexibility and autonomy to determine the best way to structure and deliver services would also help.

There is an opportunity to revalue the work and improve the occupational status of carers and other key workers, for example by ensuring that they receive the real living wage. There has been a very positive response to recent recruitment drives for temporary staff, which has helped to manage risk and increase capacity in the short-term. We need to build on this to secure the workforce in the long-term.

The third sector provides vital services in areas such as mental health and suicide prevention. Some estimates suggest up to 40% of small charities could disappear through

loss of funding if there is a significant economic downturn, and many of these have played an important role in providing mental health and suicide support. We need to safeguard vital third sector services and consider how to support the development of social enterprises in areas like domiciliary care. This will require support from local commissioners and additional resources.

The Coronavirus pandemic has highlighted existing health inequalities including the relationship between social class, physical activity and obesity. There is anecdotal evidence that those who did little exercise prior to the lockdown are doing even less now, while those who were already physically active have continued to exercise. But there may be an opportunity to embed the habit of taking daily exercise which has been encouraged during the lockdown to promote longer-term behaviour change.

Job uncertainty and unemployment could lead to an increase in suicide rates. Suicide rates in young people have been rising across the UK since 2010. Evidence shows a rise in suicide rates often happens before unemployment rises because of job uncertainty, which is currently a concern for self-employed people in particular. Short-term financial safety nets and long-term active policy on labour market and employment will be key, as well as an evaluation of childcare offers in light of changed circumstances.

Education

The longer-term economic impacts of the Coronavirus pandemic will be disproportionately felt by the young in terms of education, jobs and the economy. It is important to provide accurate information about the training and education options available to them along with good career advice.

The teaching profession adopted remote learning very quickly and there are some positive changes that could remain. However, education is not only about sharing information, and learners at all levels are missing out on wider learning and experiences that are gained through being in school. As is particularly the case in more deprived communities, schools are important hubs and parents rely on them for advice and support.

There is an opportunity for schools to play a wider role in economic and social recovery, building on the resources, trust and relationships they have in their communities. There is also an opportunity to reimagine schooling[1], which could, for example, mean extending the school day and working with a range of sectors to contribute to artistic, cultural and sports activities for young people.

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[1] The work of the Welsh Government's Re-imagine Schooling Expert Panel could inform this.

Young people are facing heightened anxiety and uncertainty in terms of exams, use of predicted grades and their options for further and higher education, as well as loss of access to advice and support from teachers. Young carers have been particularly affected by not attending school or college. Young people from BAME backgrounds fear that they will be adversely affected by unconscious biases in predicted grades. Strategies to support young people and avoid increases in those who are NEET should involve local community groups with existing relationships with young people, and ensuring those groups have the required resources to engage young people. Some children and young people, for example those at risk of bullying, will need support to overcome anxiety about returning to school. There is also a need for mental health support for young people with early intervention at a local level.

Universities are important to secure a well-educated and skilled workforce for the future, and they may need support. But there is also a need to invest in further education and community-based learning which can provide opportunities for young people for vocational training close to home. We need to reverse cuts in funding for further education and invest in a wider range of training including, for example, in creative industries. We also need to provide improved financial support for learners. It may be time to extend the compulsory age of education to 19 to support young adults. Industry will also have an important role to play, particularly in terms of the provision of apprenticeships.

Transport

Social distancing measures and remote working have alleviated traffic congestion but also dramatically reduced the use of public transport. However, there is a lack of public transport alternatives for commuters in South East Wales and if people are fearful of using bus and rail, there will be significant congestion in peaks hours in the Cardiff/Newport/Bristol travel to work area.

A long-term shift towards remote working could help reduce long distance commuting and might provide an economic boost to towns if people chose to work at home or in local hubs. But remote working is not an option for workers in many key sectors such as health and social care, retail, hospitality, construction and manufacturing. There is therefore a need to develop realistic alternative options to car travel, including active travel. This should form part of a broader package of investment in 'green infrastructure'.

Buses struggle with low profit margins and low passenger numbers but maintaining a bus network is critical for people without access to cars and there is a need to support cross-country services so that people are able to travel between towns (not just within cities).

Housing and homelessness

The Coronavirus pandemic has highlighted the importance of ensuring people have safe and decent homes. Changes to regulations that have made it easier for services to function during the immediate crisis have been welcomed by providers and should be continued. Investment in social housing and refurbishment, such as retrofitting to higher efficiency standards, could improve the quality of housing and create jobs. The sector has guaranteed not to evict tenants in the short-term but is concerned about the risk of arrears, antisocial behaviour and domestic violence.

House building has the potential to provide economic stimulus and create jobs and homes. Current house building programmes are not set to meet demand and we are likely to see increased demand for affordable housing. There is an opportunity to think about what we build, in terms of decarbonisation and designing homes for increased homeworking, for example through higher space standards. There is also an opportunity to think about where to locate future homes, and to make the case for land to be made available for affordable housing.

Participants

Chair: Jeremy Miles
Counsel General and Minister for European Transition, Welsh Government
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Experts:
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Prof Phillip Brown
Distinguished Research Professor in the School of Social Sciences at Cardiff University, Chair of the Independent Review of Digital Innovation for the Economy and Future of Work in Wales

Lawrence Conway
Chair of Sport Wales

Amanda Davies
Group Chief Executive at Pobl Group

Prof Ann John
Professor of Medicine at Swansea University, Chair of Welsh Government Advisory Committee on Suicide and Self Harm Prevention

Gaynor Richards
Director of Neath Port Talbot Council for Voluntary Service

Lord Burns
Chair of the South East Wales Transport Commission

Rhian Morgan Ellis
Former Headteacher, Ysgol Cwm Rhondda

Welsh Government: Ian Butler, Gareth Williams, Jane Runeckles, Jonathan Price, Claire Bennett, Gareth Bevington

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