



Poverty and social exclusion: Overview of the international evidence

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) 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 briefing summarises and synthesises the findings from the twelve policy reviews.

Inequality and poverty are intrinsically linked and high levels of inequality make tackling poverty and social exclusion more challenging.

Introduction

Poverty and social exclusion blight the lives of all those who are affected. Poverty has a negative impact on a range of outcomes, with intergenerational and societal consequences. There are multiple drivers of poverty and social exclusion and therefore no single policy is sufficient to reduce them. What is required is a strategy which includes a range of policies designed to address the multidimensional nature of poverty and social exclusion.

The advantage of a strategy is that in selecting a policy mix, synergies between the policies can be exploited and the overall effectiveness can be greater than the sum of its parts.

Policy areas

The full evidence review (summarised in this briefing) covers twelve key policy areas. The selection was informed by the theoretical structure of the Bristol Social Exclusion Matrix (B-SEM), consultations with experts and guidance from the Welsh Government. The twelve policy areas should not be seen as an exhaustive set of policies required to reduce poverty and social exclusion.

The twelve areas are:

1. Food insecurity
2. Take-up of cash transfers
3. Household debt
4. Affordable housing supply
5. Fuel poverty
6. Digital exclusion
7. Transport disadvantage
8. Youth services
9. In-work progression
10. Early childhood education and care
11. Further education and skills
12. Neighbourhood environment

Four main take-away, cross-cutting findings from the twelve reviews are detailed below.

Interconnections between policy areas

Several policy areas are fundamentally connected (e.g. household debt; fuel poverty; food insecurity; transport disadvantage; affordable housing supply) and effective strategies will be required to address 'upstream drivers' such as low income. This means that, for instance, beyond specific interventions in a given policy area (say, debt relief and advice services or financial literacy in relation to household debt; community-provision in relation to food insecurity) broader strategies to increase and maximise household disposable income available to disadvantaged families are necessary to make progress in each area.

Interconnections and synergies between the policy instruments available in each policy area should be assessed. The kind of comprehensive, multi-sectoral thinking this requires can be found in, for instance, the Welsh Government's Child Poverty Income Maximisation Action Plan. The possibility of establishing a 'Welsh Benefit System', as proposed by the Bevan Foundation, is another example that could help tackle interconnected challenges.

'One-stop', multi-agency services in the community that promote service coordination and provide diversified support are useful in face of the range of interconnected needs and vulnerabilities people can experience. Evidence shows that these are most effective when they are non-stigmatising and leverage trusted relationships in the community that help with expanding their reach.

Across policy areas, it is clear that a recurrent challenge is the diminished role of the UK social security system in functioning as an effective safety net against poverty. The Welsh Government does not have the powers required to change key elements of the system (e.g. related to Universal Credit design or the two-child limit), but acknowledging their shortcomings can lead to improvements in the assistance and support that can be made available through alternative policy instruments.

Evidence gaps

In several policy areas there are evidence gaps and a tendency for producing weak evaluations, especially in relation to localised interventions.

When these interventions may serve a range of purposes beyond tackling poverty and social exclusion, it is particularly important that evaluations go beyond assessing outputs (e.g. number of referrals, caseload etc.) and effectively focus on the impact on poverty and social exclusion, including analysis of how different disadvantaged groups may be affected (e.g. people with disabilities, people from ethnic minority backgrounds, single parents, care leavers). In some areas it may be more appropriate to estimate social values rather than quantitative impact assessments (e.g. in the case of community transport and open access youth services).

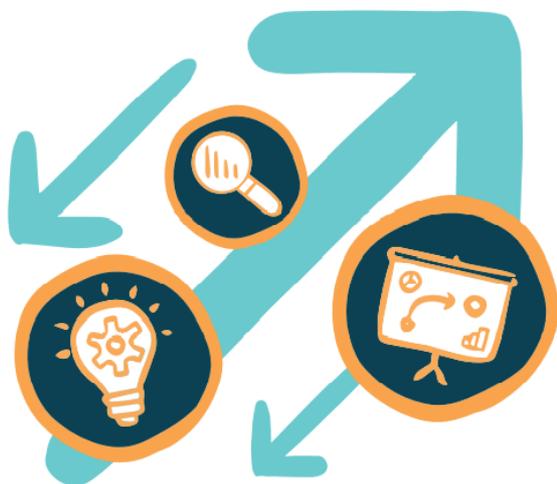
Opportunities for data sharing

Across a number of areas, emerging opportunities for data sharing can contribute to multi-agency working, promote synergies, simplify administrative processes and ensure a greater number of people access the services they need and benefits they are entitled to. At the same time, insight into the lived experiences of claimants and service users is needed to understand barriers to access faced by different groups (and hence the range of options and alternatives needed to ensure inclusion).

Participatory approaches

For a number of policy areas (e.g. digital exclusion, youth services, neighbourhood environment), participatory approaches are emerging as a way to enhance the success of interventions and programmes in meeting people's needs and addressing challenges on the ground. Ensuring authentic and meaningful participation means supporting participation in producing real influence, not just passive presence or tokenism. It also means recognising that poor and disadvantaged citizens are more

likely to experience barriers to participation, hence effective engagement strategies will need to take into consideration community composition and dynamics. Simply 'opening up' deliberative spaces can lead to an over-representation of already influential voices, thus failing to create genuinely inclusive participation.



Conclusion

International evidence on the effectiveness of these twelve policy areas shows that they could be important elements of a successful anti-poverty and social exclusion strategy for Wales. It is not an exhaustive selection of policies and others should be considered, such as: policies addressing poor physical and mental health and the social determinants of poor health; access to affordable social care; crime reduction, criminal justice and effective rehabilitation; reducing homelessness; and improving the quality of jobs, particularly at the lower end of the labour market.

In addition, inequality and poverty are intrinsically linked and high levels of inequality make tackling poverty and social exclusion more challenging. Therefore, any strategy needs to bear this in mind.

Find out more

For the full report see Bucelli, I., and McKnight, A. (2022). *Poverty and social exclusion alleviation: overview of the international evidence*. Cardiff: WCPP.

About the Wales Centre for Public Policy

Here at the Centre, we collaborate with leading policy experts to provide ministers, the civil service and Welsh public services with high quality evidence and independent advice that helps them to improve policy decisions and outcomes.

Funded by the Economic and Social Research Council and Welsh Government, the Centre is

based at Cardiff University and a member of the UK's What Works Network.

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