Recovery from COVID-19: Note of the expert roundtable on public services

The Counsel General and Minister for European Transition chaired an expert roundtable on 5 May, that was convened to consider:

> *The differential impact of the COVID 19 pandemic on public services, including the health service and post-16 education, and an examination of necessary remediation measures and opportunities for change.*

This note, which has been prepared by the Wales Centre for Public Policy, outlines the main themes that emerged from the discussion and should be read alongside the discussion paper and briefing paper that we prepared in advance of the roundtable.

Overview

The COVID-19 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-COVID-19 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 COVID-19 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.

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Resilience and Reform

Covid-19 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 won't 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 so how governments scaling up and rolling out of 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

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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 on 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's 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 COVID-19 will vary between communities and we 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.

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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.

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Attendees

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 Health and Social Science Department, Swansea University and Chair of Swansea Clinical and Ethics Committee

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: Steve Martin, Emma Taylor-Collins, Laura Bennett

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