



Recovery from the Coronavirus pandemic: Digital public services and intergenerational fairness

Introduction

This paper was written in July 2020. It is one of a series of six briefings commissioned by the Counsel General and Minister for European Transition to inform and challenge the Welsh Government's strategy for reconstruction and recovery from the Coronavirus pandemic.

The briefings focused on topics that were selected by Ministers. They built on [our work to support earlier roundtable discussions convened by the Minister](#) and helped to frame and inform the work of an [Expert Group](#)¹ which met with the Minister between July and September 2020. We wrote up Group's conclusions which fed into Cabinet discussions about the Welsh Government's priorities for tackling the economic and social impacts of the pandemic.

This paper focuses on digital public services and intergenerational fairness. It considers:

- how Wales can build on the acceleration of online service delivery during the pandemic;
- step up support for digital inclusion; and
- promote intergenerational fairness with a particular focus on the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children and young people.

Key messages

- The acceleration of online delivery during the pandemic provides an opportunity to take stock of what worked and what did not work to inform policy decisions.
- Moving public services online must be part of a wider transformation of organisational cultures, internal processes and inter-organisational collaboration. This requires political leadership and investment in technology and skills.
- Wales needs a digital inclusion strategy that is tailored to the challenges faced by different groups, and that recognises that some individuals will need to continue to have access to high quality in-person services.



¹ The Expert Group comprised four standing members: Torsten Bell (Chief Executive of the Resolution Foundation), Rebecca Heaton (UK climate change committee), Paul Johnson (Director of the Institute for Fiscal Studies) and Miatta Fahnbulleh (Chief Executive of the New Economics Foundation).

- Government support should focus on the most vulnerable and those most at risk from the economic and social impacts of the pandemic; recognising that age is a poor proxy for vulnerability to the effects of COVID-19 and the societal response.
- Decisions about universal age-related benefits should examine cost impacts and any potential adverse effects, and form part of a broader assessment of how to use devolved tax and welfare powers.
- The Welsh Government should prioritise targeted support for early years, childcare and youth services and families experiencing multiple risk factors.
- The education system needs to be mobilised to provide sustained, intensive, targeted provision for vulnerable children and young people to enable them to recover the ground lost as a result of disruption to schooling.
- Ministers should consider how to strengthen capacity and capability for delivery of support for vulnerable people; focusing on leadership, governance and coordination at national, regional and local levels.

Digital public services

The Coronavirus pandemic has accelerated moves to online delivery of some public services. It is important to embed and build on these changes by taking stock of what has worked and why and use this to inform future policy decisions and implementation.

We need to understand the impact of digital public services on the quality of care, patient safety, patient experience and clinical outcomes, and to be clear about which services can be provided online and which cannot. Digital services are not appropriate for vulnerable patients requiring complex, multi-disciplinary care but are useful for providing public

information and making payments. Where social care services have to be provided in person, digital can improve internal processes by facilitating data sharing and scheduling home visits.

Digital technology has huge potential to transform health and social care, such as through electronic health records, e-prescribing, shared care records, remote monitoring, and falls detectors.

Harnessing the full potential of digital technology is not just about moving services online. It needs to be part of a wider transformation in organisational cultures, internal processes and inter-organisational collaboration. Ministers and public service leaders need to invest their time in this broader agenda and provide adequate investment in technology and skills.

Local government

The use of digital technology in local government can increase efficiency by streamlining internal processes, improve procurement, facilitate co-production and personalisation of services, help predict the need for early intervention, and enable collaboration with other agencies (Benton and Simon, 2016; LGA, 2015). Councils in Wales offer a wide range of online services (Downe and Taylor-Collins, 2019). However, some councils are seen as playing catch-up and some senior managers do not understand how digital technology can transform their organisations and services (Price et al., 2020a).

It is important that councils work together to pool resources and develop shared platforms rather than 'reinventing the wheel'. There are

examples of this being done effectively in Wales (e.g. Wales Community Care Information System which supports case management in health and social care (Care Works). But there is potential for more joint working of this kind.

Health and social care

Digital technology has huge potential to transform health and social care, such as through electronic health records, e-prescribing, shared care records, remote monitoring, and falls detectors. Historically, uptake has been slow in Wales but the pandemic has accelerated the adoption of 'digital-first' services, particularly in primary care.

The barriers to and enablers of digital innovation in health and social care are well known. Obstacles include data and privacy issues (IPC, 2020), incompatibility with existing systems, and disruption to complex clinical workflows (Greenhalgh et al, 2017). Enablers include funding, training, buy-in from senior clinicians and managers, user engagement and inter-agency working (Maguire et al, 2018).

People of all ages are at risk from the economic and social impacts of the pandemic... [and they] will be felt by older people at least as much as young people

It is vital that digital tools are part of an integrated and holistic approach to care, and not treated as an optional add-on to other services which then creates added complexity (Wharton et al, 2019); and pursued in light of the evidence on their potential role:

- Digital technology is a useful tool for improving population health. However,

uptake varies significantly between population groups (Davies et al, 2019).

- Digital technology can help to manage a range of long-term conditions; enabling sharing of health information, supporting self-care; and facilitating communication and co-ordination among multi-disciplinary teams.
- Telephone triage and video consultations can reduce clinical workloads and improve patient satisfaction by cutting waiting times (Castle-Clarke and Imison, 2016; Newbould et al, 2017) but they do not work for all conditions and all patients (Greenhalgh et al, 2020), and there is a lack of definitive evidence about the impacts on clinical outcomes, quality and accessibility (Lake et al, 2017).

Digital inclusion

Prior to the pandemic, one in ten of those aged 16 and over in Wales did not use the internet. The vast majority of these were aged over 65. Other groups at particular risk of digital exclusion were those with a disability, social housing tenants, those experiencing homelessness, and households in disadvantaged areas (Welsh Government, 2019a). It is important that Wales' digital inclusion strategy is tailored to the challenges faced by these different groups and addresses four key barriers:

1. **Motivation** – The most commonly cited reason for a lack of internet access at home is not needing it (64%) (ONS, 2019). It will be important to understand whether and how behaviours and associated attitudes have changed during the pandemic.
2. **Infrastructure** – Access to broadband remains a problem in some areas but has been improving.
3. **Skills** – Bridging the digital divide depends on equipping those who do not

currently operate online with the skills to do so.

4. **Affordability** – Cost remains a significant barrier for some households, and this is likely to increase (both in prevalence and intensity) in light of the anticipated drop in living standards caused by the economic impacts of the crisis.

Some people will never be willing or able to use digital technology and many of them are among the most dependent on health and social services and welfare payments. They will need continued access to high quality face-to-face services and/or to intermediaries who access online services on their behalf.

Intergenerational fairness

Government support should focus on the most vulnerable and those most at risk. Some commentators suggest that younger people have been asked to make ‘sacrifices’ to protect older people from Covid-19 and that we now need ‘intergenerational reciprocity’ (Social Market Foundation, 2020: 6). However, age is a poor proxy for vulnerability. People of all ages are at risk from the economic and social impacts of the pandemic; and effects of the shift to digital provision, the disruption to routine health care, and the isolation caused by ‘lockdown’ will be felt by older people at least as much as young people.

Older people were among the groups most at risk from the scaling back of routine services and worsening mental health and wellbeing during lockdown

Policy responses to the pandemic need to take account of the intersectional nature of

disadvantage and the shared interests that all generations have in a prosperous, fairer, greener Wales.

Ministers need to consider how to strengthen national and local capacity and capability to deliver effective support to all vulnerable groups in Wales. For example, recent research by us and others has highlighted the need for better oversight, challenge and support for local and regional decision making to improve provision for victims of sexual violence and domestic abuse (WAO, 2019; Price et al., 2020b). There is a risk that the splintering of agency and accountability between different departments within the Welsh Government, and between local government, health boards, and other local agencies, leads to similar problems in supporting those who are most at risk from the economic and social fallout of the pandemic.



Older people

Older people were among the groups most at risk from the scaling back of routine services and worsening mental health and wellbeing during lockdown (Green et al., 2020: 5). For example, housing adaptations have been paused, and given the already long waiting times for Disabled Facilities Grants this will have an impact on the quality of life for many older people. Tackling these and other backlogs will help to avoid conditions worsening and costing more to treat in the long-term.

Many people aged 50+ are still in employment. They are overrepresented in key worker roles and in sectors that are vulnerable to a recession (Business in the Community, 2020). Past experience suggests that those who lose their jobs will find it difficult to find alternative employment and risk entering retirement without financial security (Centre for Ageing Better, 2020). Targeted support enabling older workers to retrain and reskill may be needed and flexible working and workplace support for those with health conditions could assist them to return to work safely. Entitlement to carers' leave could help older carers to stay economically active (Business in the Community, 2020).

The pandemic is likely to have adverse effects on children's health and early development

Decisions about the future of universal age-related benefits should be part of a broader assessment of how the Welsh Government deploys its powers over tax and welfare spending to achieve its objectives and be rooted in a robust assessment of the savings and potential adverse impacts.

It may be preferable to target or reduce age-related benefits rather than removing them altogether, and an effective campaign to maximise uptake of Pension Credit in Wales could help to mitigate the impact at minimal cost to the Welsh Government.

The recent repurposing of Wales' Free Swimming scheme offers useful insights. Funding for free swimming is now targeted primarily towards young people in disadvantaged communities, where previously it was provided for all under-16s and over-60s. Councils feared a significant backlash from people aged 60+. However, a combination of subsidised (as opposed to free) sessions for the over-60s and clear communication by frontline

staff about the reasons for changes has meant that most older people have embraced it.

Children and young people

It is clear that vulnerable and disadvantaged children and young people are at a particular risk from the effects of the lockdown including disruption to their education.

The closure of early years provision to most children will have had the greatest impact on low-income families whose home environments may be less suitable for learning. Despite support, there are concerns about the viability of some childcare providers, particularly if parents are afraid to send their children back (Montacute, 2020). Contraction of this sector would cause significant problems for working parents.



The pandemic is likely to have adverse effects on children's health and early development, with delays in seeking care for non-Covid-19 illnesses, delays in or missed immunisations, and potential missed detection of delayed development usually identified in routine health checks or early years settings. Mitigation strategies including prioritising those children most at risk and providing appropriate public health messaging to support families to access necessary services safely will be needed in the recovery phase (Chanchlani et al., 2020).

Early intervention and youth services have warned that vulnerable children and young people may be 'dropping off the radar' through lack of contact with teachers, social workers and youth workers during the lockdown. Providing additional funding to local community groups with strong pre-existing relationships with children and young people could help to mitigate this risk.

School and college closures have exacerbated existing educational inequalities. Estimates suggest that this may have reversed a decade of progress in closing the attainment gap

Voluntary youth services play an important role in supporting disadvantaged young people but have been badly affected by the pandemic. Continued financial support to retain skilled workers and ensure the continuity of services will be especially important for smaller organisations.

School and college closures have exacerbated existing educational inequalities. Estimates suggest that this may have reversed a decade of progress in closing the attainment gap (EEF, 2020a). There are concerns about the quality of some remote teaching and differential levels of access to it (EEF, 2020b). Research in England has also shown that provision varies by school type with private and state schools in affluent areas more likely to have a pre-existing online learning platform and provide children with laptops and tablets (Sutton Trust, 2020).

Intensive support for those who have been least able to benefit from online learning will be vital (Major and Machin, 2020). It requires a significant and sustained mobilisation of funding and staffing to provide catch-up provision for disadvantaged students who will be at greatest

risk of absence once schools re-open (EEF, 2020c).

As discussed at a previous meeting of the Expert Group, those entering the labour market for the first time face significant challenges and may be at risk of long-term 'scarring' effects from unemployment/underemployment.

There is an opportunity to consider new approaches to providing financial support for young people. Proposals have included a 'citizen's inheritance' in the form of grants towards the costs of education, training, housing, long-term savings or starting a new business (Bangham, 2018). But there is a risk that Asset Based Welfare initiatives (Bynner and Paxton, 2001) like this disproportionately benefit young people from affluent backgrounds, as happened in the case of the UK-wide Help To Buy scheme (National Audit Office, 2019).

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Author details

Steve Martin, Laura Bennett, Emma Taylor-Collins and Manon Roberts – Wales Centre for Public Policy

Our other work on the Coronavirus pandemic

We have conducted a range of projects to provide policy makers and public services with independent evidence on economic and social recovery from the Coronavirus pandemic. In addition to papers prepared for the Expert Group convened by Welsh Government Ministers, we have led a comprehensive assessment of the evidence on Supporting Public Services for the UK Government's initiative on 'Rebuilding a Resilient Britain' led by

Sir Patrick Vallance; published [the conclusions reached by six expert roundtables](#) on recovery from the pandemic; published an analysis of [responses to the Welsh Government's consultation](#) on 'Our Future Wales'; and produced [a series of blogs](#) on key issues including: [loneliness in the lockdown](#), the [implications for the Welsh economy](#), the [importance of a green stimulus to aid recovery](#), and the [future of health and social care](#).

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For further information contact:

Professor Steve Martin

+44 (0)29 2087 5202

steve.martin@wcpp.org.uk

Wales Centre for Public Policy

Cardiff University, 10/12 Museum Place, Cardiff CF10 3BG



www.wcpp.org.uk



029 2087 5345



info@wcpp.org.uk



@WCfPP



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