



Evidence briefing paper

Promoting equality and supporting vulnerable groups

This evidence briefing paper summarises some of the key challenges and opportunities for promoting equality; and reflects upon issues that we expect the incoming Welsh Government to face after the 2021 Senedd election. It highlights some of the key insights from our own research and the work we have done with expert partners. The paper looks specifically at inequalities in Wales; tackling poverty and economic inequality; improving employment and workplace practices; tackling inequality in health and wellbeing; improving housing; and effective governance and policymaking.

Key messages

1 There is no 'quick fix' for addressing inequality in all its forms. While other nations' experiences are useful to draw from, such as the work of Nordic nations in addressing gender inequality, there is no single blueprint for addressing inequalities. Action must be targeted at the specific challenges faced in Wales.

2 There are some major challenges to promoting equality in Wales. The Welsh Government has limited competencies in some key areas related to equalities, such as social security. A decade of austerity, Brexit, and the Coronavirus pandemic have exacerbated inequalities. These factors make achieving equality more challenging, and are likely to continue for some time.

3 Nonetheless, there are some structural levers that are within the Welsh Government's competence – education, health and social care, and housing – that have the potential to effectively address multiple inequalities.

4 Effectively tackling inequalities requires cultural and systemic change, as well as procedural changes. These will necessitate action on institutional, interpersonal and internalised biases, which can be ingrained, and hard to shift.

5 Leadership from government in explicitly acknowledging systemic inequalities, and committing to tackling them, is an essential step to promoting equality. This has already been demonstrated in the Welsh Government's ambitions in relation to achieving gender and race equality. Considering equalities in budgeting processes, for example through gender budgeting, is one way of activating the mainstreaming of equalities.

6 Promoting equality is not only the responsibility of government. High-level institutional support for evidence-informed policymaking, and engagement and co-production¹ with equality organisations and citizens, are required to achieve this vision. Public services, voluntary sector organisations, businesses, the media, and communities need to be supported and engaged in this work.

7 Co-production should be at the heart of developing new policies and services to address inequalities. Those with lived experience of inequalities should be partners in the design, implementation, and evaluation of any initiatives.

8 Social divisions based on characteristics such as race and gender do not operate along single axes. Policies designed to promote equality need to take account of how inequalities intersect. They need to reflect, as far as possible, that within any minority 'group', such as Black, Asian and minority ethnic people, there is a huge diversity of identities, contributions, and needs.

9 Implementation and delivery are as important in achieving equalities objectives as policy development and design. Further work is needed to understand effective delivery approaches.



¹ Co-production is an asset-based approach to public services, where citizens and service providers work in partnership to design and deliver public services. For more information, see: www.copronet.wales

Inequalities in Wales



The Welsh population is older, poorer, in worse health, and has lower educational attainment and skills than the UK average. Existing inequalities, particularly related to race, gender, socioeconomic status and disability have already been exacerbated by the Coronavirus pandemic, and this will continue in the recovery period and beyond.

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There has been progress in recent years in promoting equality, such as rising employment rates (before the start of the Coronavirus pandemic), an increase in the number of adults with qualifications, and greater representation of women in public life. The Welsh Government has also implemented multiple initiatives designed to promote equality, from equalities projects funded by the European Social Fund to action plans on gender equality and race equality.

However, there are areas that need targeted attention. We focus specifically on the need for tackling poverty and economic inequality, improving employment and recruitment practices, tackling inequality in health and wellbeing, improving housing, and effective governance and policymaking.

Tackling poverty and economic inequality

Nearly a quarter of the Welsh population lives in poverty – a higher proportion than in other UK nations. Children are particularly at risk, with around one in three currently in poverty. Poverty is likely to increase over the coming years owing to the Coronavirus pandemic and possibly to Brexit. The Wales Centre for Public Policy is in the process of conducting an international review of effective anti-poverty strategies to inform the development of the Welsh Government's response to this growing challenge.

Potential reforms that are within the Welsh Government's competence are numerous

Improving the social security system can address issues of poverty and economic inequality. Although the Welsh Government has limited powers over social security, it spends £400m annually on devolved schemes to support people in poverty. Maximising its existing powers could help to improve the lives of those in poverty. Potential reforms that are within the Welsh Government's competence are numerous, and could include – enhanced (and more joined-up) support to those claiming benefits, to address challenges with the current system; increasing benefit take-up; providing alternative or enhanced training to those administering benefits; and topping up existing benefits. The Bevan Foundation has recommended the creation of a Welsh benefits system, to improve the coherence of all forms of benefits.

The need to address rural poverty is a particular issue in Wales, with almost a quarter of the rural population living in poverty. **Rural communities, including those in the South Wales Valleys, are likely to be particularly vulnerable to the combined economic shocks of the pandemic and Brexit.** Evidence suggests that given the complex, interrelated causes of rural poverty, it is important to boost social, environmental, and health capital in communities alongside measures to increase economic prosperity. As well as providing welfare and health services, **coordinated action is needed to improve housing provision, transport services and the creation of worthy and secure employment opportunities.** Place-based interventions can enable a joined-up and participatory approach that is tailored to addressing local communities' needs and building local assets. However, they are unlikely to affect national poverty levels unless they are delivered widely and at scale.

For those on low incomes, accessing high-cost credit is sometimes the only way to make ends meet. However, this can lead to problem debt, which can further entrap people in poverty, and contributes to a range of poor physical and mental health outcomes. **Supporting the growth of the affordable credit market**, as well as improving education and advice services, ensuring the strategic use of regulation, and enabling innovation in affordable credit, could help those who are most likely to use high-cost credit, particularly in response to life shocks, which the pandemic will certainly have precipitated.

Improving employment and workplace practices



Insufficient or poor-quality employment is not only a key driver of economic inequality, but also where other inequalities and forms of discrimination can manifest and interact.

Labour exploitation, which covers the violation of human rights as well as minor breaches of employment law, is prevalent in 'unacceptable' forms of work (versus 'decent' work). Those in unacceptable forms of work tend to be groups already at risk of disadvantage, including women, migrants, those from ethnic minority backgrounds, and young people.

Workers in Wales (and the wider UK) are at risk from exploitation because of problems with enforcement of labour standards. Improvements in this area that are focused on the needs of Welsh workers, particularly around minimum wage law compliance, could help to reduce this risk.

Discrimination in the workplace is a key barrier faced by minoritized groups when seeking to sustain employment and progress. Tackling discrimination and racism in the workplace can be addressed through:

- Organisations implementing carefully co-designed diversity and unconscious bias training for staff at all levels, through an explicitly anti-racist lens;
- Fostering an inclusive organisational culture that has full support and commitment from senior and middle-level leaders; and that encourages allyship and bystander intervention, where people from privileged backgrounds proactively work to eliminate prejudice and discrimination in themselves, and when observed in their daily lives;
- Improving procedures for reporting incidences of discrimination, and managing disciplinary action; and
- Mandatory publication of data which can help to hold employers to account, such as on racially- and gender-based pay gaps, and other relevant occurrences, for example racist incidents.

Improving pay and conditions for those most likely to face discrimination could help to mitigate some of the potential longer-term effects of the Coronavirus pandemic. [A longer-term shift to remote working could create more inclusive working environments](#) for disabled people and people with caring responsibilities. However, one-third of workers in Wales are in low-paid sectors that are [often the least able to offer remote working](#). [Supporting women and ethnic minority people move into higher-paid sectors](#) could help to mitigate the adverse impacts of the pandemic on [racially- and gender-based pay gaps](#).

Ways to help women, ethnic minority and disabled workers in particular include [promoting job progression in low-paid sectors](#), through upskilling initiatives that are supported by local partners and employers – tailored learning opportunities, mentoring, and creating internal labour markets. Accreditation schemes, especially when attached to funding or other incentives, can also potentially help to encourage employers to improve pay, conditions, and progress among minoritized employees.

Improved recruitment and progression practices can increase both representation and [progression among minoritized groups](#). [More inclusive practices](#) include:

- Publicly setting and monitoring recruitment-related diversity targets;
- Careful consideration of the language used in job advertisements, and where advertisements are placed;
- Applications that do not include applicants' names and addresses, or mention specific institutions;
- Shortlists that reflect diversity;
- Recognition of wider forms of experience;
- Engagement with specialist networks, such as disability or ethnic minority organisations and groups;
- Improving the accessibility of interviews or development opportunities; and
- Support for new recruits such as mentoring, sponsorship and staff networks.

Tackling inequality in health and wellbeing



The pandemic has laid bare and exacerbated existing inequalities in health and wellbeing, especially those related to race and ethnicity. In Wales there are persistent racial inequalities in health, access to health and social care, and levels of loneliness, among other social and economic disparities. As well as tackling the socioeconomic drivers of health inequality, such as income and employment insecurity and overcrowded and poor-quality housing, changes to health and social care services are needed.

Strategies for addressing these issues include non-discriminatory, culturally sensitive and anti-racist health and care provision; and better data collection, monitoring and reporting. Such strategies can be supported by mandated organisational frameworks and certification schemes. Public health promotion and prevention communication, which is co-produced with communities and uses tailored and multi-channel messaging, is also important.

Loneliness is associated with a range of poor health and wellbeing outcomes. Younger people and those with a mental health condition or in poor general health are particularly vulnerable to loneliness

Better support for minority ethnic health and social care workers can help to tackle racial inequalities in the workforce. In the UK, those from ethnic minority backgrounds are over-represented in lower-paid and lower-status health and social care jobs. Strategies to improve diversity and inclusion in the health and care workforce include recruitment and progression targets, leadership support and accountability, as well as making recruitment and progression practices more inclusive. This needs to be combined with a focus on promoting psychologically safe workplaces.

Loneliness is associated with a range of poor health and wellbeing outcomes. Younger people and those with a mental health condition or in poor general health are particularly vulnerable to loneliness. Combating loneliness and social isolation intuitively involves face-to-face interventions.

However, when this is not possible, as has been the case in the pandemic-related lockdowns, technology-enhanced interventions such as videoconferencing can potentially help to reduce social isolation. Technology-enabled interventions are likely to be more effective if designed in line with key principles about 'what you do', such as connection through activities that are meaningful to people, and 'how you do it', such as co-design of the intervention between service users and service providers.

To avoid reinforcing existing inequalities, effective technology-enabled interventions need to be accompanied with strategies for addressing digital exclusion. Those most at risk of digital exclusion include the over-65s, disabled people, social housing tenants, those experiencing homelessness and those living in disadvantaged areas.

Improving housing



Housing quality, affordability and accessibility are key determinants of a range of health, wellbeing and poverty outcomes. In Wales, those who are poorer spend more of their income on housing than those who are more affluent – a trend that has been increasing for the past two decades. While the quality of social housing in Wales has been increasing in recent years, at least [10% of social housing still did not meet the Welsh Housing Quality Standard in 2018.](#)

Housing policy can be used to promote equality in several ways. Reducing housing costs can help to tackle poverty, including rural poverty.

[Government measures to alleviate rural poverty](#) include creating the conditions in which community-based initiatives can succeed, and providing the stability needed for the private sector to make long-term investments. This should be accompanied with **support for the financial management, planning, design, and building of affordable housing**, and the forging of effective partnerships between government and other stakeholders.

Increasing the supply of quality and affordable housing can also support ethnic minority communities, who are more likely to experience disadvantages in terms of housing than those who are white.

Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic groups are more at risk of being homeless than those who are white

Other measures to address this include ensuring a more central role for ethnic minority housing associations in providing targeted social housing and reflecting the needs of ethnic minority communities in [development plans and local housing assessments](#). **Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities have particular housing and accommodation needs which need to be better understood and addressed** by, for example, increasing the number of quality and well-located pitches available, including for temporary stopping places.

Though not the only factor, housing is certainly a key factor in the prevention of homelessness. The number of [rough sleepers in Wales](#) and the [number of young people who are homeless](#) have increased in recent years. [Youth homelessness can be addressed](#) through providing and protecting housing for at-risk young people, with subsidies and monetary support found to increase housing stabilisation. **Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic groups are more at risk of being homeless than those who are white.** Their needs should form part of the Welsh Government's homelessness strategy and refugees should be provided with access to [suitable move-on accommodation after a successful asylum claim](#).

Better support for those who are in housing-related debt to public services (i.e. council tax debt or arrears in social housing rent) can help to avoid court action, eviction (which can lead to homelessness) and repossession. Council tax debt in Wales has risen in recent years, with almost one-third of social housing tenancies in Wales in arrears in 2017. [Evidence shows](#) that positive actions to support those in debt to public services include personalised and proactive support, delivered through multi-agency partnerships; the building of trust between citizens and public services; early identification of problems and intervention; smooth referral pathways; and access to independent debt advice.

Investment in housing adaptations can help people to live at home safely for longer, which, in turn, [reduces pressure on health and social care budgets](#). Disabled people face long waiting times for Disabled Facilities Grants (DFGs), which support people to make adaptations on their homes. Changes to the way DFGs are delivered could help to reduce waiting times and ensure more people have access to the [adaptations they need](#). These include removing the means test for small and medium grants, and improving the use of occupational therapists and trained assessors, and the commissioning of contractors.

Effective governance and policymaking

The Welsh Government's approach to governance and policymaking can also help to promote equality. This includes integrating an equalities perspective in the budgeting process; ensuring representative public bodies; enabling co-production in policy design and planning; and addressing the 'implementation gap' in delivering on policies.

Many of the conditions necessary for Wales to adopt gender budgeting are already in place in policy commitments on social and economic equality

In terms of gender equality, research for the Welsh Government's Gender Equality Review found that achieving gender equality is not the responsibility of government alone, but also of public services, voluntary organisations, community groups, businesses, the media, and society at large. Gender mainstreaming – taking gender into account during the development of all policies and designing specific policies to promote gender equality – is a key mechanism for achieving gender equality. Successful gender mainstreaming requires culture change, political ownership, gender impact assessments, and capacity building among officials and Ministers.

Gender budgeting, whereby a gender perspective is integrated into the budget process, can activate gender mainstreaming and is currently being piloted in Wales. **Many of the conditions necessary for Wales to adopt gender budgeting are already in place in policy commitments on social and economic equality.** Scrutinising all budgets for their impact on other inequalities such as race, class and disability, and the intersection of these inequalities, could also help to advance wider equality objectives through the policymaking process.

Ensuring that public bodies are representative of the communities they serve is an important mechanism through which the Welsh Government can promote equality. Disabled people and those from ethnic minority backgrounds are currently underrepresented on the boards of public bodies. The Welsh Government's diversity and inclusion strategy for public appointments presents an opportunity for Wales to be a leader among UK nations in demonstrating best practice to achieve increased diversity in this area. **Strategies to increase diversity in public appointments include support for candidates such as mentoring, coaching, shadowing and observation opportunities, peer support and exposure to role models.** But this must be coupled with action to address the system-level inequalities certain groups face in daily life.

As well as ensuring that minoritized groups are represented among leaders and policymakers, **the policymaking process needs to actively involve those whose lives it seeks to improve.** Co-production should be at the heart of developing new policies and services to address inequalities, with those who have lived experience of inequalities involved in the design, implementation and evaluation of any initiatives. While this will not be appropriate at all stages, or in all aspects of the policymaking process, how, when and why policymakers can best involve and partner with 'experts by experience' should be considered across policy areas.

The success of any policy initiatives that address inequality will depend as much on their implementation and delivery as on the way that they have been designed and developed.

That many of the aspirations of equalities law, policies and strategies are as yet unrealised in practice testifies to a significant 'implementation gap' [race equality overarching report], and further research and experimentation are needed to understand how to overcome this gap. But key mechanisms are likely to include – prioritising a manageable number of priorities to focus on; investing significant time in planning and preparation and understanding the context; not being afraid to stop delivery or adapt it; setting visible, ambitious and locally meaningful targets which publicly hold leaders and organisations to account for delivering; the regular collection and use of robust monitoring and evaluation data; and designated and distributed leadership.

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You can read all of our work on promoting equality and supporting vulnerable groups [here](#).



About us

The Wales Centre for Public Policy helps to improve policymaking and public services by supporting Welsh Government ministers and public service leaders to access and apply rigorous independent evidence about what works. The Centre works 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 policymakers and practitioners at national and local level to develop fresh thinking about how to address some of the key economic, social and environmental challenges facing Wales.

The Centre's work covers a wide range of policies but is currently focused in particular on:

- Promoting equality
- Tackling loneliness and social isolation
- Children looked after
- Economy and skills
- Health and adult social care
- Effective governance and implementation

For further information and to download our reports and policy briefings on these and other topics please visit www.wcpp.org.uk

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