

Resilience, Flexibility and Community

An insight into managing
social care support in Wales
during the coronavirus
national lockdown





We have been supporting the health and social care workforce for over 20 years helping to confidently lead, manage and deliver sustainable services to ensure the well-being of people in communities.

We are aware that this paper has been published during a time where there has been another significant shift in the context of the national response to Covid-19. Nevertheless, it highlights there are valuable lessons to be explored further by practitioners and organisations in shaping their future ways of working.



Practice Solutions created the Developing Healthy Organisations Programme to help participants critically examine their aspirations for the health of their own organisation. This is an insights-based programme of collaborative research, intended to build partnerships with a range of public, third sector bodies and private organisations.

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Introduction

There is no doubt the Covid-19 pandemic has impacted on everyone, with some more affected than others. During the national lockdown, people supporting social care and other related public services found themselves thrust into the centre of the outbreak and have stepped up to provide a response which supports the most vulnerable people in our communities.

Leaders involved in providing services for vulnerable people are used to managing difficult scenarios but at this time they knew their response quite literally meant the difference of life and death. The uncertainty surrounding this period created a wave of emotions as many grappled with emerging priorities and conflicting demands on their time.

Practice Solutions have carried out conversations with 31 senior managers, in the public and third sectors, all of whom are central to leading and managing services that supported people in their communities during lockdown. The majority of these people are managers and/or leaders in the social care sector. These conversations were carried out over a period of 4 weeks, July/August 2020, just as the national lock down restrictions were lifting.

Conversations were informal using a series of guide questions. We wanted these conversations to be supportive, to give people the opportunity to open up about the challenges they faced on a personal level as well as an organisational one. For this reason, none of the comments are attributable to any one individual. The findings give a valuable insight into what it was like keeping services going at the height of the pandemic and how well the sector coped with the intense challenges it faced.

The questions posed were broadly around the following themes:

- What changed in the way you worked?
- What is the main thing you learnt about yourself, your organisation and your leaders during this time?
- What has gone particularly well?
- Are there any things you have done differently that you will continue?
- What are the three things that cause you greatest concern at this point in time?
- What systems/mechanisms are in place to capture learning over the past few months and how are you evaluating how effective the changes you have made have been?



Changes to ways of working

There have been significant changes in the way people have worked in response to the pandemic, with the greatest impact being on the increased and improved use of digital platforms and technology and the need to work from home. While in the early stages, some organisations were not geared up for home working, most people reported surprise at the speed in which organisations were able to adapt to this new way of working and introduced improved communication technology.



The need to work from home meant that there are time/cost savings with a reduction in travel to meetings and some reporting an improvement to their organisations carbon footprint. However, the downside to this was clear with an impact on the workforce, many of whom found the new way of working very intense and pressured with little time for breaks and 'thinking time'. The longer hours worked from home, 7 days a week in some cases meant that the work/life balance was lost. This would not be sustainable for longer periods of time. Some reported that the long hours sitting in front of a screen could result in unforeseen consequences with people's physical fitness and an increase in muscular skeletal problems as people initially working without full Display Screen Equipment (DSE) assessments. Not everyone had the luxury of a desk set up, in a quiet room to carry out team meetings or work uninterrupted.

An impact that emerged further into the lockdown was a loss of the 'watercooler' conversations that many take for granted as a way to find innovative or creative solutions to difficult issues, the true impact of this will take a longer time to emerge.

In the early days, well established bureaucracy was swept away in favour of speedy decision-making. Governance became lighter and some took the opportunity to re-educate corporate partners helping them to understand the importance and value of social services, alongside other departments, in the support of citizens. In particular there was recognition at the highest level of the contribution that social services could and did make to the well-being of the whole community. There was an increased emphasis on the role of Statutory Director of Social Services as corporate colleagues realised the consequences of not getting this right and the impact of the personal responsibility for the impact and outcomes of day-to-day operational decision-making. This was an entirely new situation. Initially, the seriousness of the situation was not fully recognised or understood by all at a corporate level, which did result in some early divergences but this seems to have been dealt with quickly by organisational leaders so that there was less bureaucracy and a greater appetite for risk to make things happen quickly.

Communication with and between organisations benefited as did relationships with key partners. The absence of financial pressures during lockdown was seen by some as providing the catalyst for the improvement in partnership working between health and social care. A number of examples described how staff were flexible and prepared to be redeployed to areas of greatest need.

Attitudes were reported as changing across sectors by staff at all levels to a 'can do' approach, with improved working between statutory and voluntary sector partners in their response to the pandemic. One respondent in the voluntary sector reported that they were impressed with their organisation's ability to step up and respond "overnight". Links with the community improved with communities coming together in self-help. The positive response of communities and volunteers to the range of challenges presented by the pandemic was key to service delivery. Third sector voluntary organisations had the local infrastructure in place which made the reaction to Covid-19 more effective. In particular the number of volunteers recruited within a short time and the ability to arrange them into teams quickly was cited.

Staff wellbeing was recognised in all conversations as being a priority. The individual contribution made by people at all levels to ensure that services didn't buckle under the immense pressure, was highlighted and the impact of Covid-19 on care services was described as devastating. People previously described as strong and robust were distressed and highly anxious, with a reported massive burden of loss falling on the care workers who experienced an increase in deaths in the care homes they worked in. This workforce needed round the clock support to ensure they could carry on delivering services in extremely challenging circumstances.

Personal learning and development

The term resilience was used by many of the contributors. Many described how surprised they were to learn how resilient they were in the crisis and the importance of looking after their personal well-being so that they could continue to provide the support needed by their workforce.

In the initial stages any work/life balance seems to have been lost. Responding to the crisis was paramount and seen by some as a personal development opportunity. Keeping flexible and adaptable to change was vital as things were changing on an hourly basis as new information became available. Good communication was vital and whilst the use of technology was important, many found the virtual medium couldn't replace real time interaction. There were fewer incidental conversations happening about people's lives in general, so it was important to make time for these types of conversations and provide the support for all staff, especially those that were alone in their homes without anyone to offload to. The amount of work was relentless as there wasn't time in between meetings to catch up, normally a drive or walk after a meeting would provide thinking time.

Generally, it was felt good to have flexible working, but the benefits are lost if it is not managed well. Contributors recognised they needed to get the balance right. 'Look after yourself – sustain energy levels and your expertise'.

The importance of using technology and new digital platforms were highlighted as a huge learning curve, many learning by 'osmosis and experience'. The new skills acquired were essential to keep the service going.

The sense of urgency created by the crisis meant that it was easier to be more focussed and all partners were working towards delivering a common purpose which resulted in decisions being made more quickly, with a lot more being achieved in a short timeframe.



Organisational learning and development

Organisations had to react quickly to meet the challenges of the pandemic. Whilst some seem to have reacted well from the start, others took a little longer to respond effectively.

It seems that those organisations with good partnership arrangements already in place with high levels of trust fared best. Several contributors reported the suspension of political decision making resulted in delivering the changes required at a fast pace and for the right reasons with no hidden agendas or party politics in play. Everyone was working to the same agenda with tough decisions being made. Financial support was made available as needed and whereas prior to the pandemic there were often disagreements between partners about 'who pays', this was never an issue and resulted in far more being achieved. Some reported that the usual local authority governance arrangements needed to be relaxed but in the early days of the pandemic there was some confusion about relationships and roles until the priorities were clearly identified.

Organisations were described as a lot more collaborative than they were before the pandemic with departmental Directors meeting more often and intentionally sharing their learning. As mentioned previously, the pandemic pushed social care to the top of everyone's priority list, with all understanding that it was a priority and trusting the Director of Social Services to get on with it and do whatever was required. Staff were redeployed across organisations and given new skills to support the sector as needed.

The need to communicate regularly in rapidly changing situations was highlighted. As was the importance of accurate timely information and explicit acknowledgement of the boundless effort and untiring commitment of colleagues to build on the collective effort and resilience.

There was significant potential to strengthen existing systems and operational practices, staff working from home, went beyond the call of duty and worked far longer than they might have done in a traditional office environment. There was a greater degree of trust of colleagues and they were empowered to do what was necessary.

There was a greater reliance on communities to make significant differences to the lives of vulnerable people and families living in fear of Covid-19.

Those organisations that had previously invested in technology were able to respond rapidly. There was a view that if this investment had not been made, they would not have coped, as was demonstrated more by those organisations that had to play catch up with their technology systems.

Reflections on leadership

Leadership style during the pandemic was raised by a number of contributors and identified as being central to success. Some described an open, supportive and empowering leadership style as the way to build effective, courageous, flexible, hard-working teams. Others found they had to change their preferred collaborative leadership style to become more directive and take the style of command and control to respond to the challenges of emergency situations.

Timely decision making was seen as essential. It was reported by leaders we spoke to in local authorities that corporate colleagues and the political leadership recognised the ability and resilience of staff in social services and their willingness to go above and beyond and take a central role in the response to the pandemic. The most effective responses were seen when the leadership gave autonomy where needed, underpinned with understanding and trust, sensitive to the practicalities of need. The sacrifices made by individuals to ensure service continued unabated was also recognised and supported. Others reported leaders willingly listened, offered support, and gave encouragement and guidance. Feedback from teams was encouraged and leaders engaged in open communication and where possible clarified and interpreted directions from above. Despite immense pressure to deliver services the leadership continued to be informed, strong in the values of trust, integrity and respect.

Many of the contributors said they had become more confident in their leadership role, stronger in giving directions and supporting individuals throughout the organisation. They reflected on themselves as leaders and learnt about personal resilience in the face of significant challenges and the ability to manage significant pressure. They also described the importance of leadership throughout the organisation with dispersed leadership in their teams helping to get things done.

There was little time to get involved in detail and the ability to delegate and empower others was critical, trusting the people reporting directly to them



to do what was required. One person reported they achieved more in 3 months than in the last 3 years.

Partnership working was strengthened with an explicit focus on putting the needs of citizens at the heart of joint action, there was real evidence of the strength of this commitment during the early stages of the pandemic. The quality of and the depth of this relationship changed with a recognition that a strong partnership could deliver effectively and overall, the levels of trust improved markedly.

Senior management teams were described as being more effective; creative ideas have created a legacy and will now be used as best practice.

Maintaining the benefits of the changes

There were numerous reports that the status of social care increased across organisations and that its reputation was enhanced with all partners supporting this function.

This had the effect of a much quicker response and implementation of changes needed. Social Care was valued as the key public service whereby this view was perceived as not being held prior to the pandemic. A number of people stated that they hoped this attitude and approach would continue post pandemic.

The improved partnership working had certainly made a difference in achieving enhanced service delivery with a recognition and willingness of the need to work locally. The need for good, reliable communication was enhanced through the shared access to virtual communication. This resulted in positive relationship building, increased trust between agencies and better understanding of the various and complementary roles of colleagues and partners. It has also demonstrated and strengthened shared core values and a common purpose.

The use of digital communications has resulted in significant reduction in travel time and travel costs. This in turn resulted in improved efficiency, more consistent communication with quicker access to colleagues. The remote technology to enable home working has improved hugely over the period of working from home, initially in some areas access was reported as patchy but a big investment in IT means it is now much better.

There is a recognition that the 9-5 work day no longer exists. Staff operate at different times to meet other pressures from home life. Recent staff surveys are reporting that the majority of staff want to work from home for at least one day a week. For those workers who have traditionally worked away from the base they felt more of a part of the organisation because the rest of the workforce was having to adapt to remote working, and therefore the workforce appeared more inclusive. Contributors reported that partial home working will become more prevalent in the future, but there needs to be a sustainable, blended solution to work which will be different for everyone.

The value of face to face contact in the office was also flagged as important and this aspect was very much missed during the national lockdown. Each member of staff will need an individual assessment to decide the best way, location and times for them to work. People are being more open and contributing more at virtual meetings, communicating via the chat box to ensure all 'voices' are being heard. Some people feel less intimidated communicating in this way.

Staff are encouraged to be flexible and agile and remove barriers to issues rather than put barriers in the way. The right mindset for staff is to be open to challenge themselves to understand how the organisation can continuously improve. With the increased pressure being faced by staff, putting staff wellbeing as the priority is important if services are to be sustained.

Some people accessing services, who previously needed support have found other ways of coping without the extent of the service they've had previously. It is not clear what impact this will have in the longer term and whether this is because family/friends have been able to fill any gaps in service while their work patterns had changed. One view was that pre - Covid-19, people had come to expect too much. Lockdown has provided an opportunity to further embed the principles of the Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act across their corporate customer services who are now focussing on asking people "what they can do for themselves rather than what do they need?" This may have the effect of looking in more detail at the amount of time spent on assessments with a stronger focus on the most vulnerable.

Examples of practical changes introduced

Identifying details of developments introduced in response to the pandemic was beyond the scope of this paper. However, the conversations highlighted some specific developments within a range of contexts which would seem to have potential for positive sustainable change. From our conversations with leaders in Social Care the following examples were noted:

- **Good Turn Scheme** – Good Turn Schemes had been identified in the Older People's Strategy and the plan was to develop this over 2 years. The pandemic gave this increased impetus and there will be 10 up and running in the next 2 months. The local authority moved quickly to get the governance arrangements in place, funding for mobiles, lap tops and training for telephone coordinators.
- One Authority is developing **Digital companions for those 80+** living in the community who don't have access to the internet and don't use the digital technology. This has been accelerated and a website will provide a direct line to a virtual community hub and connect a digital champion to the individual.
- **Push to talk monitors** are being explored. These can be used by 85+ technology and will enable two people to link with each other where the monitors connect.
- Further development work has taken place on the **'Newid' App**, (a Children's Services App only available on i-pad) for families and key workers. Key workers are able to share screens and do activities with the families over the App, this has worked really well and families have enjoyed it. Other Local Authority areas have also started to use this App.
- **IT hardware in care homes** – A voluntary organisation has assisted care homes with obtaining IT hardware quickly, configured for ease of use. Systems were quickly put in place to ensure this was done safely. A central tracker is now in place and records who needs to access the office at any time, allocates a socially distanced desk with standard protocols for cleaning, etc to ensure staff are able to safely work in the office when they need to.
- The Social Care **Workforce Register** was extended and worker ID cards with benefits for registered staff similar to the blue light benefits has been developed. There has been a significant increase in the numbers on the books and the intention to improve communication links with all these people will help in the predicted second wave.

From our conversations with leaders in Education the following examples were noted:

- **School hubs:** Work could not happen in the same context; 12 schools were repurposed as Hubs in order to be able to offer support to two cohorts of children/young people a) those with parents who are key workers and b) those who were identified as being vulnerable. Three of the hubs were established to specifically meet the needs of vulnerable learners.
- **Consultation:** a dedicated helpline was set up for pupils, a phone line was established for contact with professionals who maintained direct contact with each hub in order to enable services to support schools in their work with children/young people and families. A triage service was established and signposted schools to the relevant service. When necessary, Education Welfare Officers undertook home visits to support families.
- A **Vulnerable Children's Register** was established; this represents a key development during the lockdown period. The Local Authority worked with the police and health and other services; schools also contributed to the process of setting up the data base.
- **Innovation:** Care leavers have set up remote cookery sessions, walks, wildlife clubs, watching films together. We've put together packs about mental health and wellbeing. This has brought families together, working together, cooking together, the Authority has encouraged new families via digital communication. This approach has given a blended way of working that wouldn't have created without involving others and the improved technology. Google classrooms sessions have been established for disabled children and families with user friendly advocacy packs. The positivity from families and the reputation that the organisation now has is because we've been able to act quickly.

If you would like more information about any of these examples please let us know and we will be happy to facilitate a conversation to ensure you are able to find out more.



Evaluating the impact of changes

The general view by most contributors is that it is too early to evaluate the effectiveness and sustainability of the impact of the changes introduced during lockdown.

There is some good anecdotal evidence of what has gone well but a more structured approach needs to be adopted to determine what aspects of new ways of working will continue to add value and should be kept as organisations move into a new world.

Some contributors reported that their organisation has established new Boards or Working Groups to review how effective the changes have been. These Boards are exploring the following questions as part of a review to assess what worked well during the national lockdown:

- What did we stop that now needs to restart?
- What did we stop that needs to remain stopped?
- What did we start that now needs to stop?
- What did we start and should be kept?
- What did we start that needs to be adapted for the new normal?

Some organisations carried out wider staff surveys to identify the practical changes that have made a difference. Others have established a process of reflective workshops to identify what has worked well. These have the added benefit of providing support for staff who take part in these sessions.

Learning from stories/case studies was also identified as an effective way of capturing lessons learnt and disseminating these more widely.



Future concerns and issues

A concern raised by most contributors was the impact of recent increased levels of public expenditure on future social care services. During the national lockdown, funding was not an issue in response to the challenges.

There is a genuine concern by most that the cost of the pandemic will have a long-term effect on investment in social care services and insufficient resources will impact negatively on people in greatest need.

Third Sector organisations in some fields have suffered a significant decrease in funding during lockdown. Contributors expressed concerns about how they continue to be sustainable with a potential future deep economic crisis. Some posed the question 'How can we secure jobs to make the organisation viable and respond to the needs to vulnerable people with this scale of reduction in resources?'

The impact on people using services was the greatest concern raised, with the following areas highlighted:

- The future sustainability of care homes, given the high number of deaths in this sector.
- The impact on children and young people's emotional health and well-being, being damaged by the experience of the pandemic.
- Young people's mental health with predicted increase in suicide / increase in "serious reporting" and the impact on the care leaver population.
- The impact on the under 2s and under 5s, babies being born during this period with no health visitor, baby clubs or children and family centres open and children in their early years who will have missed out on key skills such as speech and language,
- Safeguarding: Notwithstanding the good relationships between Education and Social Services as well as between Education and schools... with schools not being fully operational, how do you know what you don't know?
- The significant changes to care for older people with many finding the isolation in lockdown intolerable.

- The predicted continuing increase in referrals, including from those families not previously known to social services, as the impact of job losses and the increased waiting time for support from both public and third sector is felt more widely.
- The impact of not giving the people using services voice and control in their care. Things had to move at pace and one of the consequences of this was not listening to people's concerns as services were provided.
- The high number of digitally excluded people, including learners who have not been able to access services.
- Has the use of digital platforms been rolled out without fully assessing the impact on service users and the workforce and whether all can engage using this technology? Are we creating a two-tier service?

The impact of the pandemic on the workforce should not be underestimated. The fear and anxiety caused by Covid-19 as staff had concerns for their own health, the health of their family, friends and service users. Many reported higher anxiety levels emerging among their staff, especially as lockdown continued. If there is no immediate return to the office environment, this may impact more widely on staff wellbeing. Remote working is tougher for some than others, especially those living alone with family further away. There was concern that staff are being asked to do difficult jobs without the existing support mechanisms in place to protect their personal wellbeing.

The ability to support some isolated workers dealing with stressful and difficult situations must be prioritised and new ways of providing support which is meaningful and empathetic must be found, if this is carried out remotely. There is the risk of continued stress as staff struggle to recover, some respondents believed that many of them may develop a form of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder.

The intense pressures during the height of the pandemic on leaders to maintain service delivery, protect the most vulnerable and support the workforce were felt by many of the contributors, who were surprised by their own resilience during this time. Some felt this was made possible by the increased status of social services within their corporate management teams and the wider support given to them. Concern was expressed that a reversion to the old business as usual model, with a more corporate culture would undermine the progress that had been made.

Another issue raised related to a possible enquiry into how Covid-19 was dealt with across the Country. It was recognised that if this happens it will place an additional workload on staff who are already overstretched. There is also the concern that this could result in a re-emergence of a blame culture which would be destructive to partnership working and mean that the barriers that have been removed during the pandemic would be rebuilt. This would have a negative impact on the people and organisations who have successfully worked so closely together to achieve a common goal. This was described by a number of people as a potential return to silo working of the past. The absence of financial pressures during lockdown was seen by some as providing the catalyst for the improvement in partnership working between health and social care.

The relationship between local authorities and the private sector was described as good in terms of care homes, but in some instances the trust and confidence between the care homes and the health service had been significantly damaged. This will need to be rebuilt following the early decisions regarding the discharging of patients from hospital to care homes. This will not be easy to achieve as care homes are much more cautious about accepting patients from hospitals following the experiences at the start of the pandemic.

Of grave concern was how the sector will cope if/when there is a second wave of Covid-19 infections and how this will impact on communities. This was seen as being more difficult to manage with the additional demands from winter pressures. One contributor said “We need to prepare for the dark evenings, cold days and the impact of a potential flu outbreak” The issue of the provision of adequate personal protective equipment was flagged as being of concern if there is a second wave of Covid-19.

Acknowledgement and Next Steps

Practice Solutions is very grateful for the time taken by the respondents during these conversations and the openness and willingness to share their views. Many of the contributors identified similar successes, issues and concerns and have expressed an interest in being kept up to date with the work PSL is doing to support organisations through these challenging times. We understand that any crisis provides an opportunity for significant learning and the development of positive and supportive relationships and we hope sharing this paper helps to stimulate further discussion and more structured action to reflect and learn on these experiences.

PSL will continue to support organisations with Good Practice Reviews and the Developing Healthy Organisations Programme as they find a new way of working in these challenging times.

Additional Reading

Please find below a number of related resources that support the learning and development of this paper:

- **Developing Healthy Organisations**
Practice Solutions Ltd and Neil Prior
<http://bit.ly/DHOreport>
- **Impact of Homeworking on Productivity**
Professor Alan Felstead and Dr Darja Reuschke; The future of homeworking and its effect on productivity
<https://www.propelhub.org/the-future-of-homeworking-and-its-effect-on-productivity/>
- **Impact of Homeworking on Health and Wellbeing**
Professor Kevin Daniels and Dr Helen Fitzhugh; Long-term isolated and confined working: the worst possible outcomes and how to avoid them
<https://www.propelhub.org/long-term-isolated-and-confined-working-the-worst-possible-outcomes-and-how-to-avoid-them/>



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