

Senedd Consultation

Inquiry into the impact of the Covid-19 outbreak, and its management, on health and social care in Wales

Wales Co-operative Centre response, June 2020

About the Wales Co-operative Centre

The Wales Co-operative Centre is a not-for-profit co-operative organisation that supports people in Wales to improve their lives and livelihoods. We are working for a fairer economy. We help to create and retain wealth within our communities through the growth of co-operatives and social businesses and by providing people with the skills to take more control of their own lives and strengthen their communities.

Our projects are as follows:

- *Social Business Wales* provides intensive, one-to-one support to new start social businesses as well as those which have ambitions to grow and a viable business proposal.
- *Digital Communities Wales: Digital Confidence, Health and Well-being* works with organisations across Wales, in order to help people increase their confidence using digital technology so they can improve and manage their health and well-being.
- Our *Communities Creating Homes* project offers support and advice to new and existing organisations looking to develop co-operative community-led housing schemes in Wales.

We also deliver a range of paid consultancy services which are in line with our values and corporate aims.

Introduction

The Wales Co-operative Centre welcomes the opportunity to respond to this inquiry. The Covid-19 crisis has transformed the lives of people in Wales, in a number of different ways. One important example of a dramatic change has been the sudden digitalization of many aspects of our lives, including managing our health. It must be acknowledged that while some people have been able to access the opportunities that digital adoption offers, there is the potential for those who are digitally excluded to be further marginalized. The National Survey for Wales 2018/19 found that while 89% of adults in Wales used the internet, that means 11% of us did not. The rapid growth in digital technologies, both before and after the Covid-19 crisis began, brings amazing opportunities for people to become more active partners in their own care, but there is also a serious risk that people who are digitally excluded get left behind. Through the work of Digital Communities Wales during the Covid-19 crisis, we can offer a valuable insight into the barriers that lead to digital isolation, what can be done to address these inequalities, and the benefits of encouraging digital adoption among those most in need of accessing health and care services. The Wales Co-operative Centre would also like to note that we would be delighted to provide further oral evidence on this subject.

Summary

- The development of digital services within the Health and Social Care sectors necessitates the consideration of digital inclusivity – and this process has been

brought further into focus by the Covid-19 crisis, and the essentiality of accessing digital services.

- The Digital Communities Wales team and its partners have been at the heart of efforts to ensure digital services are accessible among care homes in Wales, allowing residents to manage their own health at this crucial time
- Barriers to digital inclusivity have been identified, ranging from infrastructure and connectivity issues to skills, motivation and cost.

Digital Inclusion and the Health and Social Care Sector

The NHS in Wales has a vision for digital health and care in Wales – online access to records, appointment bookings and prescription requests, healthcare apps, wearables, online self-management and video consultations. National programmes for public facing services are being rolled out alongside initiatives being implemented by individual health boards.

But, people who are most in need of health and care (including older people and those with long term conditions and disabilities) are the least likely to be online.

- Only 74% of people in Wales with a long-standing illness, disability or infirmity use the internet, compared to 90% of those without such a condition.
- Just 75% of men and 68% of women aged 65-74 use the internet, compared to 97% of 16-49 year olds.
- Fewer people in Wales use the internet to manage their health than in the rest of the UK.

The business case for digital inclusion in health and care so far is encouraging. Evaluations have shown that interventions, including digital skills training:

- Improve people's confidence in using digital health tools
- Boost take-up of services such as online appointment bookings
- Increase self-care for minor ailments
- Save time and money

Public Health Wales' 2019 survey suggested that two thirds of people in Wales use digital technology to support their health, through finding information about general health (57%), tracking personal health goals (18%) and booking appointments (14%). However, there is significant variation across demographics – while 87% of 16-29 year olds reported using digital technology to support their health, this fell to just 24% of those aged 70 and older (the group most severely impacted by the pandemic).

Digital Communities Wales, The Benefits of Digital Inclusion and Covid-19

The Covid-19 crisis has brought these issues even further into focus. According to Robin Knowles, CEO of Digital Leaders, COVID-19 had rapidly accelerated the process of digital transformation, "in 8 weeks achieving a degree of digital adoption that would usually have taken two years". Knowles has also pointed out, however, that this has the potential to

further marginalise those who are already digitally excluded. GP practices in Wales have launched a new system of online appointments with doctors and other healthcare professionals, extending video consultations to secondary and community care.

As a result of the Coronavirus pandemic, our care homes have been in lockdown. Residents are unable to see health professionals face-to-face and are also unable to receive visits from family and friends, with significant implications for wellbeing. Digital devices are now the main way people can access important health consultations or stay in touch with loved ones.

DCW has been working with care homes for many years, but the Covid-19 crisis has created an unprecedented and urgent need for our support. We're proud to be working alongside NHS colleagues, TEC Cymru and other partners to help care home staff.

Thanks to additional funding from Welsh Government, we are loaning tablet devices to care homes. The tablets come equipped with mobile data, if required, and a range of useful apps. We have delivered and will continue to deliver training to care home staff so that they can help their residents use the tablet devices. In the next few weeks, we have offered training to over 1000 care homes across Wales.

This support is being offered to ensure that care homes have everything they need to use the NHS Wales Video Consulting Service. This service is delivered via a communication platform called 'Attend Anywhere', and will be used by general practices, hospital outpatients departments and other healthcare settings, allowing residents to access medical consultations from the home without needing to travel.

Case Study

A care home that has received digital devices as part of the tablet loan scheme is Millbrook Residential Home in Blackwood. The devices have enabled the home to have video consultations with a GP. The residential home's local GP, Dr Rizwan Hussain said:

"Remote video consultations have quickly become a game changer for managing care homes patients during the Covid-19 pandemic,

"They have proved invaluable for assessing patients in conjunction with physiological measurements taken in the home, as well as for assessing skin lesions. Video consultations have helped to initiate treatments promptly and reduce hospital admissions.

"I look forward to having three-way conversations with care home patients and their families, who may well be at a different location, in the future."

What We Can Learn From

As well as the clear positive impact this project has had, it has been an opportunity to develop a deeper understanding of the barriers leading to digital isolation in care homes in Wales. Some of these barriers are infrastructure or connectivity issues:

1. In some locations, high speed broadband has been available, but there has been poor wi-fi signal across the property. Many care homes are old buildings with thick

stone walls, which exacerbates this problem. A solution identified by our DCW team is investment in the technical support needed to extend the network in the building.

2. Some care homes had such low bandwidth Broadband available, that there was little chance of running video messaging services. Investment is needed to explore alternatives for connectivity (including mobile data) - 4G signal strengths vary widely across the topography of Wales (especially rural Wales).
3. Some locations had 4G available outdoor, but the signal is too weak indoors. In some cases a Mobile Data booster can significantly improve bandwidth, however, these devices require installation at a high position. Access to the building is required for installation, and this has not always been available.
4. Some locations had no broadband and only 3G coverage - 3G upload speed was too slow to run a video messaging service. Investment is needed to explore alternatives for connectivity (including mobile data)

As well as these infrastructure issues, there are separate barriers that have led to some people not adopting digital services, both within care homes and among the general public. Connectivity is just one of the four main barriers to participation have been identified; as well as Motivation, Skills, and Cost. The Covid-19 crisis has had the most obvious impact in terms of motivation, as people are suddenly forced to go online to do things they have always done, including managing their health. However, there is significantly more work to be done on ensuring that people across Wales, especially those most in need of access to health services, have the skills necessary to do so. As well as these specific skills, the Good Things Foundation have discussed the importance of trust and partnership in building digital inclusion.¹ Finally, Robin Knowles, CEO of Digital Leaders, has noted that while the cost of digital devices has gone down, the cost of connectivity has gone up, and “data poverty” is becoming a prominent issue.²

Conclusion

Clearly, the Covid-19 crisis has had a dramatic influence on the lives of people in Wales in a number of different ways, and the impact on people’s access to healthcare has been a considerable part of this. Digital Communities Wales and its extensive work in this area has allowed for a deeper understanding of the impact of work in this area, and the barriers facing its implementation in all communities in the country. The Wales Co-operative Centre would welcome the opportunity to further discuss the impact of this project on health and social care during the pandemic and the insights that have been developed from it.

¹ <https://www.goodthingsfoundation.org/news-and-blogs/blogs/why-scaling-trust-matters-in-digital-inclusion>

² <https://medium.com/@DigiLeaders/digital-inclusion-two-steps-forward-and-one-step-back-5a5e70fb781b>