

# Lessons from COVID-19

Senior managers &  
decision makers

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# Introduction

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## Focus

- Shift away from the frontline to the senior manager perspective
- In-depth interviews with 15 people
- Many years of experience in senior roles (strategic/operational)
- >20 hours and many pages of interview data
- Early stages of the analysis, but I'll highlight some emerging issues
- Keeping to 10 minutes ...

# Awareness and preparation

## Awareness

- When did COVID-19 first appear on your professional radar?
- Varied from December through to mid-March – ‘oh well, it’s a long way away’
- International interests, personality, prior experience – ‘I remember the flu epidemic’, ‘gazing on the horizon’
- Enabled them to contemplate ‘change’ a little earlier than others – ‘we were pretty ahead of the curve’

## Preparation

- Existing ‘disaster’ plans not helpful – ‘fire or even loss of buildings’, ‘wash your hands’
- New, bespoke plans were needed – ‘wildest dreams’
- Quick thinking, fast action and partnership-working facilitated this action
- ‘We could have written individual letters to our staff ... outlining the situation and the risks’

**Lessons:** international perspective, agile planning systems, partnerships, early communication

# Working patterns

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## Online overload

- Hours became longer and/or harder – ‘I worked hours in a different way’
- Days filled with online meetings – ‘twilight world of Zoom, Skype and Teams’
- Breaks forgotten - ‘we’ve got no distractions and we’re focusing’, ‘utterly exhausted’
- Work piling up and creeping into downtime – ‘thinking time seeps into an evening’
- Loss of synergy, chemistry and creativity – ‘a chemical in the room’, ‘the spark’
- Lost benefits of pre/post meeting conversations – to ‘talk about broader work things ...’

**Lessons:** journey time, plan breaks, review the need, ‘walk and talk’

# Partnerships

## External

- Existing partnerships built upon and strengthened – ‘really thrived’, ‘secure base’
- Source of guidance and support (strategic/emotional) - ‘it’s ok to share vulnerability’
- WG and some APBs applauded for early and quick decision-making – ‘clear’, ‘supportive’, ‘courageous’
- Area differences – some ‘were conspicuous by their absence in certain things’

## Internal

- Shared burden of difficult decision-making – ‘I didn’t want to make the wrong decision’
- Reduced silo working and forged new relationships - ‘Cross-fertilisation of ideas’
- Usefulness of whole-staff Zoom meetings – ‘We’d definitely put them in quicker ... really useful’

**Lessons:** nurturing partnerships, speedy decision-making, sharing the burden, whole-team engagement

# Challenges

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- Disparity between third sector and statutory sector
  - PPE – ‘beg, borrowing, stealing, finding, sourcing any kind of PPE’
  - Testing – ‘The really big challenges early on were, we couldn’t get testing’
  - Essential care workers – ‘really disappointed’, ‘being treated differently’
- At odds with the excellent work of the third sector
  - Stepping up, ‘staying open’, providing a ‘front door’ to connect with people
  - Nimble, ‘flexible’, ‘responsive’ and ‘reactive’ – ‘we could make decisions a lot quicker’
- Statutory services = ‘a machine’, ‘like the turning tanker’
- Third sector services = ‘a nippy little motorboat and off we go’

**Lessons:** stigma, stand up for ‘disparaged’ services, get ‘a little more assertive’

# Opportunities

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- Rapid innovation in service delivery – ‘five years of work done in a week’
- To reflect on the usefulness of long-standing practices – ‘6 days a week they pick them up .. that’s beyond stupid’
- To test new ideas – ‘Try this client here, a little bit of a pilot there. We could have done that’
  - Online works for some, but for others ‘you have to clap eyes on them’
  - It needs to be structured – ‘There’s got to be structure because that’s where change comes’
- To develop a more tailored, individualised approach

**Lessons:** no ‘one-size fits all’ approach, blended delivery, developing and testing new interventions



# Long-term concerns

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- Economic – ‘Wales has got some very poor communities already who will probably take some of the biggest economic kicks’
- Mental health – ‘we are going to be reaping that whirlwind for many years to come’
- Substance misuse – ‘drug and alcohol use is very often a symptom of other issues. It’s one of the first things that comes to hand’
- Funding – ‘huge challenges on services’, ‘no idea of what the cost of all this is going to be’
- Society – banking online, shopping online, support online, work online ‘you become quite a society that’s not connected with each other’



# Lessons from COVID-19

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- Benefits of international awareness and ‘horizon gazing’
- New approach to disaster planning – agile systems V specific plans
- Make online meetings more manageable
- Routinely reflect on current practice
- Test out new ideas and interventions
- Nurture external partnerships
- No ‘one size fits all’ approach for workers or service users
- Statutory sector to be ‘more flexible and work with us’
- Address the stigma and ‘be more assertive’

# Thank you!

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‘I’m so, so proud. I’m nearly crying. So, so proud of the staff, because of the passion and the determination and the commitment that the vast, vast majority of them have had throughout this whole thing, not just to our service users but to each other as well.’