LESSONS FROM COVID-19 INTERVIEWS WITH SENIOR MANAGERS AND DECISION MAKERS

March 2021

SUBSTANCE USE RESEARCH GROUP
CENTRE FOR CRIMINOLOGY
UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH WALES

FOREWORD

The Lessons from COVID-19 project has been a wonderful example of partnership working in Wales. It has brought service users, practitioners, commissioners, policy makers and academics together to work towards a common goal of learning lessons from the pandemic to help optimise services and improve outcomes for service users in a post-COVID world.

The project emerged early on in the pandemic, shortly after lockdown, when it became clear that treatment as usual would no longer be possible. Services had to move fast. They had rise to the challenge and find new and innovative ways of supporting people in compliance with strict rules of social distancing during a period of national lockdown. It was a difficult time for everyone. But, through partnership working and close collaboration, services evolved and found ways of providing high quality support to people in need.

As the name suggests, the aim of the Lessons Learned from COVID-19 project was to look closely at what happened to substance misuse services during the pandemic to identify what lessons might be learned for the future. Importantly, the project examined the issues from a variety of perspectives and enabled us to identify ways of improving things for service users, staff and those working in more strategic positions.

This report is the final report in a series of three that present findings from the Lessons Learned project. The first two reports concentrate on service users and service providers, respectively. This report, however, shifts away from the frontline and focuses on the issues from the perspective of senior managers and decision-makers.

The Lessons Learned project has been inspirational and I feel privileged to have been involved. Partnership working has always been good in Wales, but the pandemic has served to strengthen these connections and has paved the way for closer collaboration in the future.

DR KATY HOLLOWAY
PROFESSOR OF CRIMINOLOGY
SUBSTANCE USE RESEARCH GROUP (SURG)
UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH WALES

2

The interviews

During the autumn of 2020, in-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with fifteen senior managers and decision-makers working in the field of substance misuse in Wales. The aim was to gather the views and experiences of people working in strategic and managerial positions through the COVID-19 pandemic .

Interviewees were recruited through email invitations distributed to our networks of contacts. The sample was purposive in that we approached people with specific characteristics. In other words, we targeted people working in strategic roles in the substance misuse field in Wales.

The interviewees included people working in a variety of senior roles within a range of different organisations including: third sector treatment agencies, Welsh Government, Public Health Wales, Area Planning Boards, and Criminal Justice organisations. On average, the interviewees had been in their current senior roles for nearly ten years, but this ranged from two years to more than twenty.

The interviews were all conducted by the same senior researcher, which allowed for some consistency in the discussions. But, this also facilitated the exploration of new and emerging issues with subsequent interviewees.

The Interviews Cont.

Most of the interviews were conducted by telephone but a small number were conducted over Teams or Zoom. All of the interviews were digitally recorded (audio only) and later transcribed verbatim by a secure and professional transcription agency. The transcripts were analysed using specialist software for qualitative data analysis (NVivo), which enabled the identification and coding of examples (i.e. quotations) that were representative of key themes.

On average, the interviews lasted for more than an hour (76 minutes), but some lasted for considerably longer. The interviewees were incredibly helpful and answered a wide range of questions exploring their experiences of working as a senior manager or decision-maker in the period immediately before, during and after the first lockdown.

We ended up with nearly 20 hours of discussions and many pages of rich interview data to analyse and code. The results of this analysis are presented in the pages that follow. The findings are divided into the seven key themes that emerged from the analysis, namely: awareness, preparation, working patterns, partnerships, challenges, opportunities, and long-term concerns. The report ends with a section in which lessons for the future are identified.

To protect the identity of our interviewees, we have avoided using gendered pronouns. We have also opted against including interviewee ID numbers after each quotation to prevent readers from linking quotations and potentially identifying the people who said them.

Awareness and Preparation

Awareness

Interviewees varied considerably in terms of the point at which the COVID-19 pandemic first appeared on their professional radars. Some indicated that they had been aware back in December 2019.

"Well, I definitely was aware of it at the end of December when it broke"

"Well, I started... Not worrying about it, but I suppose it came on the radar in December"

Most interviewees, however, only became aware of the potential impact in February and March 2020.

"...people may say, "Oh I knew it was going to end up like this." I didn't. I absolutely didn't. I think that you watch the news... I think the first time that I went, "oh my God", actually was in February."

"So, it was very early on in March and from that point I suppose going from... and it was only speaking to a colleague who works in another area and is connected to schools that things were ramping up with her"

"to be honest I did not give the matter a great deal of thought until Boris Johnson stood up on, I think the 23 March."

Among some interviewees there was a sense of denial and disbelief that the virus would make its way to the UK.

"So, watching it go through China and then get to Italy, and think, "Oh, that doesn't look good," but not any understanding that obviously, obviously that was on its way"

"Yeah, you get these little things every so often and they never turn out to be as dreadful as you think they're going to be. So, you have that feeling to start off with and then you started to see what was happening in China and you could do the "oh well it's a long way away." And then it becomes … France and Italy and you start going, "sh*t" … I remember having this sense of "this could actually end up with me having some of my staff die. This could end up with me losing family members.""

"I think like lots of people, you kind of think it's going to happen everywhere else and not here. "

Interviewees with family members living abroad, those with an interest in international affairs and those whose lives had been affected by other epidemics in the past became aware of the pandemic earlier than others.

"Not worrying about it, but I suppose it came on the radar in December, because I remember the flu epidemic from before. My grandmother actually died during one of those flu epidemics so I suppose…"

"Well, it probably started off from me reading about it, because I'm quite interested in the health matters across… and what are the trends coming. I think that it was then that we started saying, "right we're going to have to start thinking about what we're going to do about this"

"… but I suppose when I absolutely was aware of it was going to Malaysia … Then you saw it moved across out of China and even though there wasn't high numbers in Malaysia, you just looked at it and thought "Oh my God, it's going to be really bad if we hit a winter with it", which we're just about to."

Preparation

The interviewees described how their organisations had existing 'disaster' or contingency plans that they could draw upon in emergency situations. However, these plans were not particularly helpful as they were designed to guide action in response to events such as snow, fire, flood or loss of buildings rather than a global coronavirus pandemic.

"Yeah, part of our plan is how to operate under certain conditions then, if you like. So, we didn't have anything specific in there about a pandemic as such, from what I can recall, but we had a disaster recovery plan then, if you like. But, I don't think we were thinking on the scale of something like COVID-19. I think we were thinking more along the lines of some other kind of disaster, if you like, like fire or even loss of buildings for commercial reasons, if there was any kind of issues with leases, or how are we going to deliver if we haven't got buildings?

Furthermore, the messages within the plans were felt to be far too simplistic (e.g. 'wash your hands' and 'simple things') and did not provide the detailed kind of guidance that a response to COVID-19 warranted. In preparing those plans, it was understood that nobody in their 'wildest dreams' had imagined the Coronavirus pandemic.

"**I think we would have had a far more comprehensive pandemic business contingency, because the last one was nothing. It was just, wash your hands and just simple things.
You know, wildest dreams have got that in the risk register about a pandemic, being a substance misuse organisation. "**

Working Practices

The impact of the pandemic on working lives was a theme that dominated the interviews. Prior to the outbreak of the pandemic, all of the interviewees described having busy working lives that involved extensive amounts of travel across Wales and sometimes further afield. Like so many people around the world, when lockdown was announced on 23rd March 2020, they all switched to online working. The majority stayed at home but a small number went into work for various reasons including a perceived need to provide 'strong management', to show 'a visible presence and leadership' and to 'open the mail'.

Being aware early on in the pandemic enabled people to contemplate change a little earlier than others and get 'ahead of the curve' in terms of taking action to help prepare.

"So, we'd already put some big orders in with... I think that was towards the third week of February, asking for a wide range of PPE before things got a bit too mad. So, gazing on the horizon is one of the things I'm charged with to do with work. **We could see this coming."**

"I was probably aware quicker than most people. **I was much more alarmed by it than even the UK government I would say** ... So, we probably, as an organisation, we were probably more prepared than most. Thinking about face masks, we knew... we picked that up really quickly, way before Welsh government or anyone else was telling us to. So I think we were pretty ahead of the curve as well."

Working Patterns

The benefits of attending virtual meetings rather than travelling long distances were widely recognised among the interviewees and it was hoped that this format would continue into the future post-COVID-19. However, there was broad agreement that some physical and face-to-face meetings were important and necessary.

"... everything's on Teams these days, which is great because you're not wasting time travelling and I'm hoping that, to a degree, although it is nice to get out and to go and see people face-to-face, if some meetings at least can continue via Teams, that would be good moving forward. "

" In terms of the travel, in terms of lots of different meetings. I think we can... we realise how we don't have to travel and that we can connect very easily. So I think that will be have changed forever, albeit, I think, I'm not saying that we won't ever have physical meetings because I think that's important and it's good, but the balance will be, do I need to drive 2½ hours to do something that I could do online? "

After lockdown, for some interviewees, their working days became longer while for others they became harder. Everyone described working in new and different ways. Some of the interviewees felt that there was far more pressure on their time because they had to squeeze far more work into their working day.

"when lockdown started, my working day just doubled basically, and got very, very busy."

"So, when we went into lockdown, I don't ever remember being so busy. I literally was on the computer and the phone from 8:00AM until six, seven o' clock ... I'm not saying necessarily I worked longer hours, because I always work... I've always worked more hours than 37 and a half hours a week. But I worked hours in a different way."

WORKING FROM HOME

The potential benefits of going to work rather than working from home were also reported by other interviewees. One reflected on the difficulty of applying a one-size-fits-all policy to working arrangements and highlighted the need for flexibility in finding the 'right solution' for each staff member.

"Everybody's got a different set of circumstances, which might revolve around their domestic situation, or their personal motivation, and so on. I've got people here who would be horrified, they said, "Oh, thanks for letting me come to work," because from a mental health point of view it's just beneficial. "

This same interviewee flagged up a significant 'gender issue' in relation to childcare arrangements during lockdown. This interviewee commented on the difficulties faced by female employees when a partner **'either won't or refuses to take a fair share in responsibilities'**. Concerns were raised that the female workforce was being disadvantaged by such 'domestic inhibitors' and the interviewee questioned what could be done to help without causing 'domestic strife'.

The impact on family life was notable, particularly among those with babies and young children. One interviewee commented emotionally, 'You feel it in your soul, that constantly batting your child away …' . This interviewee also described the challenge of juggling multiple tasks while taking part in an online meeting. It is easy to see why for some it was easier to go to work than to stay at home.

"… a homeless Zoom meeting, making a pyramid out of a cornflake box, and then my daughter walked in and asked me to help her multiply some fractions. I was like – I can't do this … I found it easier to be in work than being at home, because the home suddenly turned… I found… I think it might have been the worst time of my whole life. I found it horrendous."

Working from Home

Importantly, it was not only home schooling and childcare that presented problems in the home-working environment. Some interviewees described difficulties in terms of finding an appropriate space to work at home.Others, commented on the technological challenges of trying to find a broadband connection somewhere in the house.

In some cases, the challenges of working from home were insurmountable and resulted in missed meetings and, frustratingly for one interviewee, two complaints.

"People who have a spare room have enjoyed the lockdown much more than those of us who don't … I was at the dining room table, the kitchen table, **I was on the floor at one point**, I was on the sofa, and the rest of my family … could hear my working life."

"Just at home, try and find a broadband somewhere. Moving around, trying to find the best place to be, avoiding my husband and two children."

"I missed two meetings where I got complaints. I missed one … massive IT failure, and another one where I just got... Something happened in my personal situation, and I just got overwhelmed with that and didn't let someone know I wasn't calling on, et cetera, and I got a complaint"

Video Calls

All of the interviewees described how their working days filled up with online meetings and one commented that it was like living in a 'twilight world of Zoom, Skype and Teams' . There was a tendency for meetings to be scheduled one after another with no breaks within them or between them.

"They were so like... we're focusing aren't we because we've got no distractions and we're focusing and what I was finding... I should have said "We need to have a cup of coffee break here, let's break for ten minutes ... Because you forget don't you when you're round a table, you have a break don't you. But when you're on this it's just constant"

The all-important 'journey time' during which people have time to prepare for and reflect on meetings was lost and the distractions that often lead to breaks in the real world were absent. This meant that there was an unwavering focus on work, which resulted in many interviewees feeling 'absolutely and utterly exhausted' by the end of the day.

"I used to spend a fair bit of time driving around, and then you have time to reflect on and process decisions while you're driving, or while I'm on the train or whatever, whereas now I don't give myself that time. So, I go from one meeting into another into another into another, and sometimes I quite easily start work before 8:00, and finish work after 5:00."

"Zoom fatigue was the main problem for me to be honest. "

14

Meetings

One interviewee noted that attendance at meetings was greater now that travel was unnecessary.

"And actually I think in terms of virtual meetings, membership of these meetings is bit better attended because people are not rushing around now, you can literally just have your meeting and then come off. "

However, on the downside, a larger audience was not always welcomed. For some, large meetings hindered the opportunity for proper conversations and limited the scale and depth of debates.

"Even the meetings themselves, they're functional but they're not... I never feel you have a proper conversation. Especially larger meetings. ... it's terrible. ... Yeah, a few is fine, but yeah, any large number there's no detailed conversation is there or kind of debate? You have to be functional. I think sometimes you miss a lot then. "

"People don't like to talk in large groups with everyone that they work with on the same screen; it's really not conducive to detail."

Meetings were also problematic in that meeting overload resulted in other work building up. By the end of the day, there were tasks that needed to be completed but no time in which to do them. Work therefore started creeping into the evenings, which limited opportunities for rest, relaxation and family time.

"... now that thinking time tends to seep into an evening."

"if you end up, as I'm sure other people you've spoken to do, have said, literally doing back to back MS Teams meetings all day, you get to the end of the day and you've just got a long list of things to do. "
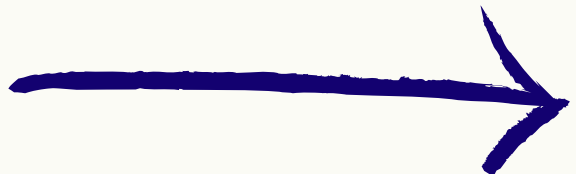
15

Meetings

While overload was clearly an important problem for interviewees, concerns were also voiced about the loss of synergy, chemistry and creativity that resulted from online meetings. One interviewee described in graphic terms what can happen when people meet face-to-face in a room.

Similarly, other interviewees spoke about the lost opportunities and benefits of meeting informally with colleagues before or after formal meetings. These ad hoc meetings were recognised as useful opportunities to discuss broader work issues and non-work related things that help build rapport and strengthen relationships.

From a slightly different perspective, another interviewee commented on how difficult they were finding the social distancing rules when engaging with street drinkers. Not being able to show kindness and compassion by shaking their hands or putting a hand on their shoulders, was a source of particular concern.

"I suppose, it's sad, because it's the synergy that you get from seeing a team together. You know, there's almost a chemical in the room, isn't there, that you get from people working together, and the spark that you have between them. So, that's… You can't replicate that, no matter how hard you try. I don't think you can replicate it on screen. So, that's a tricky one."

"The great thing you can do is to get physically close enough to them to put a hand on the shoulder or offer your hand, and say, "I don't care how dirty your hands are, I don't care what anyone else thinks of you. I'm here to hear what's bothering you," and then to shake hands like any normal person would. You can't do that now."

Partnerships

The benefits of working in partnership with others both inside and outside of their own organisation during the pandemic was a key theme that dominated the interviews.

External Partnerships

For many of the interviewees, external partnerships that existed prior to the pandemic were built upon and strengthened during lockdown. Most of the interviewees described having regular meetings with external partners that enabled them to share concerns and either co-develop or share strategies to help one another achieve common goals. One interviewee described how relationships with partners **'really thrived'** as a result of partnership working during lockdown.

... I think we've developed phased strategies and we'd agreed a lot of those with our consortium partners as well ... because it's the same partnership agencies, and we've been able to feed off each other

But yeah, it felt that there were lots of groups really pulling together, really trying to do the best thing

The partnership working really, really picked up at that point and in terms of partnership working, it has been strengthened, particularly in XXXX ... But I think everybody realising the importance of other people's roles and how the team works together and helps is definitely one of the positives that's come out of this.

I think they've, in some ways, grown closer. I think definitely the XXXX, which was a real task-and-finish group, left us with some better relationships around homelessness, some stronger relationships

I would say, in fact, some of our ideas were used by other services, because we weren't going to keep hold of... We weren't precious about it. If we... It was kind of... So, I was sending our briefings out to the commissioning teams and saying, "This is what we're doing. If it's helpful for anyone else, then happy for you to share it."

External Partnerships

One interviewee explained that the partnerships created a 'secure base' in which difficult decisions could be made and innovative ideas brought to life.

"If you're a parent you provide secure... you provide emotional, you provide physical, home and all these things that you provide. You provide love, you provide care, you provide all these things, so that you hope that people come from a secure base so that they feel that they can take risks and do things and innovate and I think that was very important. And that senior management team work well together even though at times there were... we didn't all agree, we didn't all have the same view on things... But we are a good team. We're a good consortium mix. We've good commissioners. So all of those things made us have that secure base for XXXX, for partners, for services"

External Partnerships

While many spoke of the pandemic helping to cement existing relationships, some interviewees noted that the pandemic had created opportunities to develop new relationships.

"So, I think actually, in terms of engagement with different organisations, it was quite positive. But mainly it was positive because it linked in with Scottish and English counterparts I wouldn't have done before. "

It was interesting to note that through lockdown, external partners became a source of guidance as well as strategic and emotional support. Being able to disclose, in confidence, feelings of fear, sadness and vulnerability with colleagues in similar roles was hugely beneficial for the senior managers and decision makers.

"Because it's very difficult to say those words, "I'm scared," isn't it? "Oh, by the way, I'm scared." I can remember saying to XXXX the one day, "I have no idea what I'm doing." You know, people who you can say that to. So, my peers were really important. My peers in other organisation who were doing the same kind of job as me and trying to make the same kinds of decisions, they were really, really important."

"We ... have a WhatsApp group across Wales, so we were confidently "What are you doing about this in your area?" and it was just learning on the hoof all the time, just getting... which was great, brilliant"

Relationships with Welsh Government

Across the board, Welsh Government (WG) staff were applauded for their early and quick decision-making as well as their support during lockdown. Their actions were described as 'clear', 'supportive', and 'courageous' at a time when decisive action was needed. Their increased visibility and accessibility was also welcomed by interviewees.

" ... but in fairness to Welsh Government, the substance misuse team, with us, they made courageous decisions that it [Buvidal] could be a major asset across Wales, and we're the only home nation to do that. "

"I've never seen the substance misuse team as much as I've see them in the last six months in the last 17 years. I've seen more of people in Welsh Government... The only time I ever see people in Welsh Government really is when we're getting told off for something, or something's not so good. ... so they were much more visible than they've ever been, ever. Really ever. "

"I suppose maybe it's improved our relationship with the Welsh Government because they were really good. "

" We had meetings with Welsh Government every week, with XXXX and XXXX. That was really helpful. We had all these communication channels."

21

Relationships with Area Planning Boards

Like Welsh Government, some Area Planning Boards were also praised for their actions during lockdown. However, the praise was mainly in relation to APB members being contactable and for their support rather than any bold decision making. Indeed, several interviewees commented on the fact that APB members left services to come up with their own plans rather than directing particular courses of action.

"The Area Planning Boards all just went to working from home, but they were all contactable. Very supportive if you rang them with an issue. "
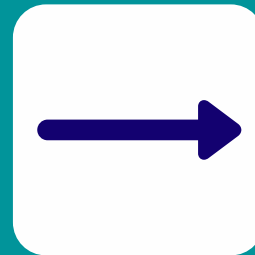
And we had nothing from our Area Planning Boards, apart from meetings and that, but we didn't... they were, "What are you doing?" Basically, "what are you doing? Let us know." Rather than, "this is what we want you to do." It was very much, we were the drivers, throughout it all, through every stage.

They [the APB] asked us for our recovery planning document in the beginning, and then they said, "Oh, this is comprehensive, thank you very much." ... So, there was no... They were, I suppose, in one way asking us, "Well, what do you think you could deliver?" But when you're a commissioner, surely you should be actually not directing, but advising on treatment services that can't stop.

Relationships

While interviewees were quick to praise the support of some organisations, there was also a recognition that some could (and perhaps should) have done more to help. Indeed, some were noted to be conspicuously absent during lockdown.

At times, the strength of feeling about the perceived poor performance of some organisations was notable.

"Yes, some XXXX. Well, I would say, XXXX and XXXX stand out as being… they've been great. All the way through, it's been really great, and you feel that everything that you're doing is being supported, broadly speaking. XXXX and… the others were conspicuous by their absence in certain things. … when you're making fundamental changes to the way in which you deliver services, you'd expect a bit more, wouldn't you."

"So, XXXX, for example, early on just shut down all the phone lines, closed the doors, stopped communication, and stopped all grant administration, which for me was unnecessary and definitely undesirable. That irritated the hell out of me …. "

"Some examples of what's happened during this time have been just truly awe inspiring, and others have been "oh my God; I cannot believe how badly people behave.""

"I would say XXXX have been useless throughout and even now they're useless. They've just… it's probably to do with underinvestment, I don't know. But they just are absolutely clueless."

"XXXX have not been great. Not been their finest hour in relation to us as substance misuse providers. They didn't give guidance, they didn't check in to see what they could do."

It is important to note, however, that views on specific organisations were often mixed with some expressing praise while others were more critical. The explanation may be linked to miscommunication or even a lack of communication. Indeed, one interviewee suggested that relationships with some organisations had broken down largely because they were not being kept in the loop and did not know what was happening. **A simple message explaining 'Look, we are being taken [away], we're doing this, but we want you to know we are here' could in some cases have made all the difference.**

Partnerships

A few interviewees commented on the lack of communication between different areas and spoke of a divergence in responses to the pandemic. Area differences and a lack of joined-up working seemed to make things more tricky for those people working across a number of different geographical spaces.

"I know that we cannot assume that each health board is going to approve the same route and the same access. So, it's very much of a sharing what we know... Because they don't talk to each other, the health boards, at all in any shape or form at that level. There's no, "This is okay, or this isn't okay.""

"Oh my God... it's just ridiculous, and you just think "what is going on?" ... you know there are areas that are doing a lot worse than others."

"I think there are some health boards who have been more responsive and supportive than others."

Internal Relationships

Internal relationships grew stronger for some and in a few cases the strengthening emerged out of debates and challenges within the team.

Internal partnerships were hugely beneficial in a number of respects but particularly in helping to share the burden of difficult decision-making. Senior staff were anxious to do the right thing and collaboration with close colleagues helped them reach decisions as a team and alleviated concerns that they might be doing the wrong thing.

"I would say the senior management team then came into their own, and was a really strong team debating some really serious... Making some serious decisions, really debating and discussing and working our way through, and challenging each other as well about what would be the best thing to do. So, then we put the communication out to all the staff of what was happening. We briefed service managers then, and then did a formal briefing for the staff as well."

"Definitely... I mean, I've got a great team here, and a close team. I think we're even closer now as this has panned out, because we have to trust each other, trust each other's decisions, and invite criticism. You know, with things... "Oh, I've over-egged it here, haven't I, getting it wrong?" So, I'm asking that question far more often than I'm normally disposed to ..."

" It wasn't me making decisions on my own, it wasn't XXXX or XXXX. It was all of us making decisions. Sometimes, I'd be like, "Hmm, I'm not sure about that", but the consensus would be, so we'd go with that, so you have to... You can't pull rank. You've got to go with the consensus. "

Making connections

Humour also helped unite staff and was described as a particularly useful coping mechanism. Laughter helped to lighten the mood of what was a dark and deeply worrying time for many.

"… one of the clinical assistants. His guitar was in the building, been in the building for ages, so he got his guitar out and at lunch he was playing songs with his guitar. He's a really good guitarist. I said, "Have you brought your guitar to work?" I said, "Oh God, how David Brent is that? You can only bring your guitar if you can play the True Love Highway." I can remember going to get my lunch and he was playing it, and **they were all laughing.** It was like one of those moments when everyone was all a bit… And we used to shut the door at lunchtime, and everybody would do that, "Oh God." You know? "

"We had the managers on, so we were quite a lot of us on this meeting twice a week, and that was, I suppose, a bit of a lifesaver initially amongst all the chaos, because I think **one particular person I can think of has got a really brilliant sense of humour, and I think that really helped.** "

"Oh, we called it… that's right, because everybody was on about you have gold, silver and bronze levels of escalation, don't you? And sometimes you go up to platinum escalation. Well we decided to go above platinum and we called it titanium. **So, they were the titanium meetings once a week. … Then became the tit meeting.** So once a week we had a tit meeting. "

Honesty was similarly important in supporting good working relationships. Indeed, staff were noted to be appreciative of transparency even when senior managers were unsure of what was going on or what to do.

"But I think I've learned that it's okay to say to staff, "Yeah, I'm not really sure what's going on. I'm trying my best here." **It is okay at certain times. They'll understand that.** So, I learned that."

Bringing Teams Together

One key benefit of the switch to online meetings was the reduction in silo working. Bringing colleagues together who had previously worked independently of one another helped new relationships to flourish. This created new opportunities for the 'cross-fertilisation of ideas' as well as the opportunity to help each other (e.g. through sitting together on interview panels).

Online meetings that brought whole teams together were described as a valuable way of communicating and connecting with colleagues and the workforce as a whole. One interviewee reflected on their value and explained that they would have introduced them far sooner if they had known the benefits earlier.

"... every Monday we would have a team meeting via Teams, all to get together, where we are, what's happening, and for me as a manager as well, that was useful to be able to, there were so many tasks, designate tasks, what do you need help with, and we still have those every Monday".

"I think maybe it was only after about eight weeks we were having whole-staff Zoom meetings. We'd have definitely put them in quicker, definitely, because they were really useful ... because it was difficult at that time. I think it would have helped staff to come on and log in and see someone. I can remember the first time we did it was after about six or seven weeks, actually. It was quite an emotional meeting. I was like, "Oh, love everybody," and "Oh, hello." I think that might have helped if we'd had them sooner. "

"Once we made the decision, we'd gone, actually "this is what we're going to do, this is how we're going to do it", and we brought everybody together and we explained it all. I did a big organisational Zoom. "

"In terms of connecting a workforce that's right across Wales ... that was always a challenge, and the Zoom option is actually quite helpful in that regard. So, you know, there's a couple of little rays of sunshine amidst the gloom, and that's certainly been one of them, the ability to use this technology. ... We have got closer as an organisation. The technology's helped, no doubt "

"I've been able to have with staff, I've probably had more staff interaction because of this, because you can do these... that's where it's really useful, the multi Zoom calls with staff teams and stuff. It's been really good. So, I think that has been really positive. "

Communicating

Communication emerged from the interviews as the key ingredient of ensuring successful working relationships during the pandemic. At a time when many staff members were working from home, regular communication between colleagues became hugely important both from a professional point of view but also in terms of health and wellbeing. One interviewee described how their organisation used competitions to help boost morale, lift spirits and keep staff engaged and connected with one another. Another commented on the benefits, for some, of online social events.

"**It existed already, but we ramped it up considerably.** We have regular competitions, different things, keep people engaged, you know, who can grow the tallest sunflower in the summer, who's... a pumpkin carving competition. We've got XXXX Has Got Talent running at the minute, the shortlist, so we're running that **just to try and lift the gloom somehow.** It works for some people."

"There were a number of online socials set up which were very beneficial for some staff. Not all staff enjoyed them, but **they did help some people.**"

Communicating

Other methods of communication included the creation of WhatsApp messaging groups that were, reportedly, used both inside and outside of the work setting.

"Yeah, and **they've found ways themselves to keep each other going,** to egg each other on, and they've been brilliant. Some of that stuff's been done outside of work, I'm sure, as well. I don't know, people probably on social media pages in groups together, and WhatsApp and things. So, yeah. Yeah, that's something that we just need to keep hold of. "

"Very quickly, they set up group staff meetings, WhatsApp groups with each other, all that kind of stuff, because I knew that would be a challenge in terms of staff's mental health and wellbeing. **The keyworkers were really good at that, putting stuff in place where staff felt connected** "

While there were clearly many positives to the use of WhatsApp and text messaging services, there were also some drawbacks. Indeed, one interviewee commented on how the 'ping' of new notifications was a constant reminder of work and impacted on his ability to relax.

"I am occasionally encouraged by colleagues to join WhatsApp groups, so work-related WhatsApp groups, and that just means that wherever I am, whatever time of the day it is, there might be a little pinging noise in my pocket, and it's a reminder to think about work. Particularly with WhatsApp, because it's a kind of reply all format, so you get to hear the random thoughts of whoever's in the group. **For me, I think that's quite destructive.** "

28

Communication through email was also described as a double–edged sword, particularly in the early days of the pandemic when there was 'chaos' and lots of 'mixed messages' being circulated. To improve the situation, interviewees described using particular strategies to ensure consistency and clarity as well as to ease pressure on email inboxes.

COMMUNICATION

"I suppose at one point, I did worry that we have all this information that everybody's having, it was so much for people to take in almost, and the changes and that constant… and I know that people say the number of emails, because of course now you're not round a desk even a conversation with the team ends up with about ten emails. But hence my thinking about the Area Planning Board and how the members, how busy they were, let's only do this every couple of weeks "Here I am so far, this is where we're going. This is the decision I need now." Yes. better communication. Making sure communication was appropriate and as and when needed."

"… that's how you communicate with people, clearly, and you avoid any confusion. One source, in and out. Every question that's asked is answered to everybody rather than individually. XXXX emailed me, I'd go, "We'll answer this in the briefing." Otherwise, we'd all be answering queries. Every question was answered by us all as the senior management team."

"So, we made a decision, if we were sending a communication if I were sending… We had this phrase, "This is official communication on COVID-19, no other information. If it hasn't come from this official route, then it isn't official information," so staff knew they couldn't get told in a base we weren't doing that anymore by somebody. It had to come… I think XXXX were using the phrase, we were using the phrase, XXXX were using the phrase."

One interviewee, commented on the value and usefulness of the 'constant communication' between workers and within organisations.

"I'm struggling to think of a word to say how impressive it was actually, but it was all hands on deck to get done what we had to do. "

Challenges

The interviews investigated key challenges experienced by senior managers and decision makers during lockdown. A number of important issues emerged from these discussions and the interviewees spoke of them in depth and, at times, with passion.

Challenges

A source of enormous concern and frustration was the disparity between how third sector services and statutory NHS services were treated during the pandemic, particularly at the start when trying to get access to PPE and COVID testing. One interviewee described vividly how early in the pandemic his role was 'very much about begging, borrowing, stealing, finding, sourcing any kind of PPE' . Another interviewee commented in frustration that 'Public Health should be Public Health, not just NHS help' . The strength of feeling on the issue was palpable.

"The one thing that I still stand by that was massively let down is, we have no access… We had no access to PPE. That is something that XXXX and our partners had to source for ourselves from day one, had to get. We kept hearing all of the news that PPE was being made available, but that just was not the case. "

"This was one of the challenges … we weren't being treated equitably, so we weren't being treated like a statutory service. So, the statutory health services were provided with protective equipment, and I'm talking masks, hand gel, gloves, in some cases aprons, and we couldn't access those basic pieces of equipment, and so we had an ongoing battle with various strategic people about getting hold of that equipment, or getting supplies of that equipment ourselves."

"The really big challenges early on were, we couldn't get testing "

Challenges

One interviewee explained that the disparity in treatment of the third and statutory sectors had been reported back to colleagues in Welsh Government. It was recognised as an important lesson to learn for the future.

"I think as well the whole understanding the workforce in the third sector about what… they are the equivalent of social workers and health workers and people need to recognise that. I would say that's a real thing that I would… we've done lots of stuff feeding back to the Welsh Government about lessons learnt and what they would do differently and I would say that a common understanding right from the start about what their contribution is and what recognition they require and they've provided the same PPE, access to testing, statuses of their colleagues in statutory services."

Not being defined and recognised as essential care workers was a source of bitter frustration for interviewees, some of whom were 'really disappointed' that their staff were 'being treated differently' and inequitably to others. In some respects, it seems that the stigma that is so often experienced by people who use drugs was also being experienced by staff and services working to support them.

"So, I thought, "Right, that sounds good, and richly deserved." So, people working in the care sector get a £500 bonus. So, in principle, great idea, and say thanks to all those who are on the front line. But it just wasn't thought through. The first issue was nobody clocked it was taxable. So, a good proportion of that Welsh grant money just went straight into HM Treasury as tax. An own goal, that was. Second, it became apparent that the award was to a very small, comparative, group of people under very strict regulations."

"One of the things that we were really disappointed about was, our workers are considered care workers, and yet they weren't given the £500 bonus that all the other care workers were given … so that made us very angry"

Challenges

The disparity between the treatment of the third and statutory sectors was clearly at odds with the excellent work of the third sector, which was stepping up, going above and beyond the call of duty, 'staying open' and providing an important 'front door' to connect with people in need.

Some interesting comments were made about the differences between the two sectors. Third sector services were described as 'nimble', 'flexible', 'responsive' and 'reactive', which meant that they 'could make decisions a lot quicker'. They were like 'a nippy little motorboat' whereas statutory services (including health and criminal justice) were more like the 'Titanic' and 'tankers' because they were difficult to steer in a different direction.

"... because in Wales criminal justice is not devolved, so criminal justice is led by England and Wales, by the Home Office, everything is much slower to respond. "

"I think there are a lot of organisations that are slow in its response. I think probation was another one. Ministry of Justice were pretty poor."

"I think health really struggled. The statutory agencies I thought were very poor and slow, particularly Criminal Justice."

34

One interviewee speculated that the reason for slowness within the statutory sector was related to the chain of command and the need to wait for directives to work their way down from high up in the chain.

"I think some of our other statutory partners didn't act as quickly, and I know... I can remember getting an email from probation saying its 'business as usual', thinking, "How the bloody hell is it business as usual? It can't be business as usual," and being quite... But I think that's probably because they have to wait for directives, and their directive is often, you know, right up the chain."

One interviewee reflected on the way in which plans had been shared with staff and thought that 'a lot more straight communication would have been more helpful'. With the benefit of hindsight this interviewee recognised that individual letters to staff outlining the situation and risks could have been a better course of action.

Many interviewees expressed pride in the flexibility of the third sector and felt it was in a position to 'hold its head high'. One interviewee called for people to stand up for third sector services, which in their view, had been 'relegated' and 'disparaged'. This interviewee urged for more assertiveness in supporting and lobbying for third sector workers. Similarly, another interviewee reflected on the need to stand up for people with substance misuse problems.

"I wonder whether we should have pushed more ... I mean I don't know whether that would've got me anywhere. I think maybe with hindsight you look back and this thing of almost rolling over and playing dead by saying, "Yeah, okay guys, your [guys] are more important than mine" was, with hindsight looking back on it, was a load of b****s because actually ... maybe we would've got them in earlier and obviously there's accumulated extra healthcare issues in the meantime. You wonder about that. You think, well actually why is that less important. "

Challenges

Other challenges reported by interviewees included bureaucratic recording and auditing practices. Demands for the same information from different but connected organisations was a particular frustration for one interviewee, as too was the battle between organisations in terms of the responsibility for funding particular initiatives.

"... but there was a time with the APB where XXXX was constantly asking, "Can you give me this data? Can you give me that data?" Then the XXXX would ask you for it. Then XXXX would ask for it. ... to have all these agencies virtually asking for the same information and when you say to them, I gave virtually this identical set of data to the APB yesterday, they just go "Can we have it from you now?" and it's like, can you not communicate and somehow can there be some central repository system because this is just ridiculous. So that would've been helpful. "

" That's what we need. We don't need this faff with APB and Welsh Government going, "Are you paying for it? Can you put it in writing that you're paying for it? How much are you paying for? What you doing with the money? Where's the money going?"

Benefits and Opportunities

BENEFITS AND OPPORTUNITIES

While the pandemic brought plenty of challenges for substance misuse services it also had a number of benefits and created a variety of opportunities. For some, the pandemic brought about changes in outlook and confidence as well as a greater appreciation of the small things in life.

"I will say, actually, on the positive I would say I do actually feel tremendously grateful for an awful lot of things nowadays. I'm standing in my office now and there's a tree blowing around in the wind outside my office, and it's brilliant."

"I almost sort of matured in that way in my whole way of working in that I could go to XXXX if I needed to, but I would look at guidance, legislation all our decision making tools and I could normally come to that decision making. And whereas I would have gone for reassurance perhaps before, I could reassure myself because of the ways of working and the process we have in place."

"it's probably forced one to be more reflective, which isn't my natural thing.   That's one thing by forcing me not to be so social; it's meant I've had to have that more reflective process. That's a positive. It doesn't feel much like a positive until the end of it."

"I think it also, from everybody's personal point of view, probably crystallised some personal thinking about why you work, how you work. Work-life balance and all that, really, and how you live your life, because when life is at risk these things intrude."

Benefits and Opportunities

Lockdown also brought with it increased opportunities for professional development and training.Indeed, one interviewee described learning more about their organisation as a result of taking on some of the administrative roles including opening letters, scanning and sending documents. Another commented on how lockdown had given them the opportunity to review their induction programme, create webinars, hold CPD days and improve their social media presence.

"And we've done loads of training. We've reviewed our induction; our induction is so much better. It's always been like, "How can we not get our induction right?" Even that... we've done webinars, we've done CPD days. In terms of learning and development, it's been wonderful. ... I think the other things that have improved are our campaigns, our social media, the way our tools... I think it's really made us focus on what we do and how we do it."

"They've actually been accessing a lot of online training that the staff normally wouldn't have an opportunity to do."

"It brought some benefits, because I used to open every letter that came into the organisation for a while, so all the accounts stuff and everything, and the things I uncovered, Katy, were amazing. "Why are we doing this?" You know? So, I quite enjoyed that in a peculiar sort of way, and I learned new skills, about how to scan and send things... and all the Zoom stuff and all this. So, very much a little voyage of getting some practical improvement, self-improvement going on as well. "

The pandemic also created opportunities for rapid innovation and positive changes in service delivery. One interviewee described how the work in getting services up and running and delivering online support was 'very much like five years of work done in a week'. The introduction of Buvidal was a topic that was discussed in many of the interviews and, for one in particular, there was a sense of pride that it was happening across Wales.

" in fairness to Welsh Government, the substance misuse team, with us, they made courageous decisions that it could be a major asset across Wales, and we're the only home nation to do that. "

However, not everyone was equally as enthusiastic about the investment in Buvidal. Indeed, one interviewee was concerned that it would involve 'parking people' and could mean relegation of the 'rest of the treatment stuff'.

Service Delivery

Lockdown and the restrictions placed on movement created an opportunity to reflect on the usefulness of some long-standing treatment practices. The need for daily pick-ups of prescriptions, for example, was described by one interviewee as 'beyond stupid' in hindsight. The issue of trust was linked to this, and emerged in several interviews. The fact that issuing take-out medication, after years of mandating daily pick-ups, had not resulted in a huge spike in overdoses and negative outcomes, was viewed as an important lesson for the future.

"We are working with very chaotic, high risk clients. So, we've been 15 years of... not mistrust, but scepticism I guess in terms of making sure people... so, I guess that's been a really positive learning, part of it for us, is actually, people have got on. We've done clinical reviews since and pulled in some people where they've slipped a bit, but in general, the service user group have done very well. ... I don't want to revert back to having hordes of people coming to site for daily methadone if there is no need to do that. Because I think we've learnt from that."

"So, we've had the opportunity to say, "Wait there, we can give these people take-home doses. Nobody died. We did have one person arrested for selling a dose, but one person, that's all we've had." So, in terms of outcomes and reviewing our treatment systems, we know now that we have to have a different approach."

"The biggest thing is that we should remind ourselves that we can trust our service users to look after themselves more than we think we do. The issue is that when it goes wrong, it goes horribly wrong. So, if a service user overdoses and they die, they're dead, and there's no going back from that. But the reality is that across Wales, hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of service users were given weekly or twice-weekly pickup. We didn't suddenly have the entire population high as a kite, dying of methadone that they bought from a mate. We didn't suddenly have massive numbers of overdoses rocking up in hospitals, and we didn't suddenly have loads of people falling out of treatment. We actually had very few people falling out of treatment. They turned up and they got their dose for take-outs."

41

Service Delivery

Lockdown clearly brought the opportunity to test out new ideas, treatments and modes of delivery. Interestingly, one interviewee thought that with hindsight more could have been done to test out new ways of working prior to the pandemic

'Try this client here, a little bit of a pilot there. We could have done that.'

There was a general recognition that online support worked well for some but was less useful for others. Some interviewees emphasised the importance of actually seeing people (**'you have to clap eyes on them'**) in order to assess their health and wellbeing. There was also a call for online work to be formalised and structured and not just a brief 'hello, how are you'. It was recognised that structure was needed in order to bring about change and for outcomes to be achieved - **'there's got to be structure because that's where change comes'.**

It was noted that the pandemic had created an opportunity to **develop a more tailored, individualised approach** rather than a blanket 'one-size-fits-all' approach to substance misuse treatment.

"And I think also one beautiful thing, and it touches on the Buvidal as well, is the recognition that holding people on OST for pick up or for anything, you know it's allowed some greater distinction between individuals who require treatment; where are they in their life; do they need to actually come in and pick up, and they don't. You know actually their life will benefit from not having to do the same structure as we had before, because that's what we've always done."

42

Long Term Concerns

Long Term Concerns

Interviewees were asked to comment on any concerns that they had for the long-term in a post-COVID world. A common theme described by interviewees related to economics. Wales, with its high levels of poverty and deprivation, was thought to be particularly vulnerable and thought likely to take some of the biggest economic hits. Of particular concern for one interviewee was the potential for many job losses.

"We all know there is going to be quite a big economic shock and obviously for people working in substance misuse, we know the impact that might have on people's substance misuse, and sadly, Wales has got some very poor communities already **who will probably take some of the biggest economic kicks.**"

"Because there's going to be more job losses isn't there? It's going to be **horrendous** isn't it?"

Mental health concerns were widely reported among the interviewees as their biggest concern for the future. Some interviewees were also worried about potential increases in substance misuse problems, which one interviewee described as a symptom of a range of other problems.

"I think my major concern at the moment is about **the long-term mental health impact** on the general population of the lockdown."

"I think the impact of COVID on poverty, on employment and unemployment, on mental health, on young people and mental health, but also other ages and on future opportunities, **we are going to be reaping that whirlwind for many years to come.** And that might sound pessimistic, but you know even from a health perspective, if we only take a health perspective, the fact that there is an enormous amount of unmet need in terms of acute chronic health conditions, that has not been addressed for a year, that alone will have huge implications. ... **drug and alcohol use is very often a symptom of other issues**. It's one of the first things that comes to hand ... by that very token we will have huge challenges on services."

Long Term Concerns

Funding of services in the future was another commonly mentioned issue and while some had fairly general concerns, others expressed more specific concerns about what was going to happen with Buvidal in the future given its high price.

"It's like Buvidal, that funding is only for a year. What will we do next year?"

"The Buvidal, we're desperate, desperate to get the funding to keep it going, desperate to, because we're seeing some really, really good outcomes."

"Well I think my concerns for the future are how we're going to pay for all this and what impact that will have on funding in terms of professionally and work."

One interviewee unpacked the funding issue and identified potential problems with buildings and leases – the main thrust of the point being that with a shift to online working and support, paying money on leases for buildings may not be money well spent. This interviewee also expressed concern for the workforce and flagged up the possible losses that might occur when people reflect on their lives and future careers post-COVID.

"Estates is a concern, because we've got leases with a number of properties throughout South Wales that are obviously paid up front, and we really have to consider our use of buildings, I think. And **how we manage to keep people motivated and well**, and also how we manage to keep our staff as well, because potentially some of them have had some life changes and may be making different decisions about their careers and things. So, I think it's just about **thinking about the buildings and the workforce**."

Long Term Concerns

Another interviewee was concerned about the workforce in a different way and reflected on the potential drawbacks of working at home and the intrusion of work into people's homes and personal lives.

The impact of the pandemic on society more broadly, was flagged up by some interviewees, particularly in terms of its effect on social relationships. One interviewee noted that so much of what we do these days is online (e.g. banking, shopping, working, healthcare) that there is a danger of us becoming disconnected from one another.

In a similar vein, another interviewee expressed concern about social isolation and the difficulty of expressing emotion when wearing face masks.

I suppose the one thing that I would say is, we all strive for, and we all talk about, and we all say work-life balance. That's what we say. But I just wonder what the outcome is about bringing so much of our work into our homes.

"So, I do worry about people having a front door to go to for support, you know, with a lot of things moving online. I think they could be... we could build... yeah, as a society, we could be building up to be quite a disconnected society, couldn't we? You know, with people doing their banking online, doing their shopping online, doing their support online, doing their work online. I just think you become quite a society that's not connected with each other. "

"It's that social isolation, and I suspect the majority of the country is feeling that. It's the social... Because we are social animals, aren't we? Seeing that face and the body language, the facial expressions. Even now, you've got to wear a mask in the shop, you know, you generally smile at people. You can't see that now. It's the wider impact long term, I think, is going to affect people for quite a while. "

Lessons from COVID-19 for the future

The interviews generated a wealth of information from which a number of important lessons can be learned for the future. For clarity, the lessons and associated recommendations are presented under the broad theme in which they were discussed earlier in the report.

Lessons from COVID-19 for the future

Awareness

There are clear benefits to international awareness and 'horizon gazing'. Those with an international outlook were ahead of the curve and in some respects better prepared for the pandemic when it arrived. Keeping an eye on international affairs may therefore be a useful investment of time.

Preparation

Nobody in their 'wildest dreams' had anticipated a pandemic of this nature or magnitude and existing disaster plans were of little use in guiding responses. What did prove helpful, however, was being flexible and able to respond quickly and decisively to the challenges as they arose.With this in mind, agile systems, involving networks of partners, that facilitate speedy responses and the development of bespoke plans, may prove more useful than relying on generic 'disaster' plans that may not be fit for purpose. Sharing such plans with staff in a timely and personalised way may help to alleviate any concerns and help staff to feel involved, protected and safe.
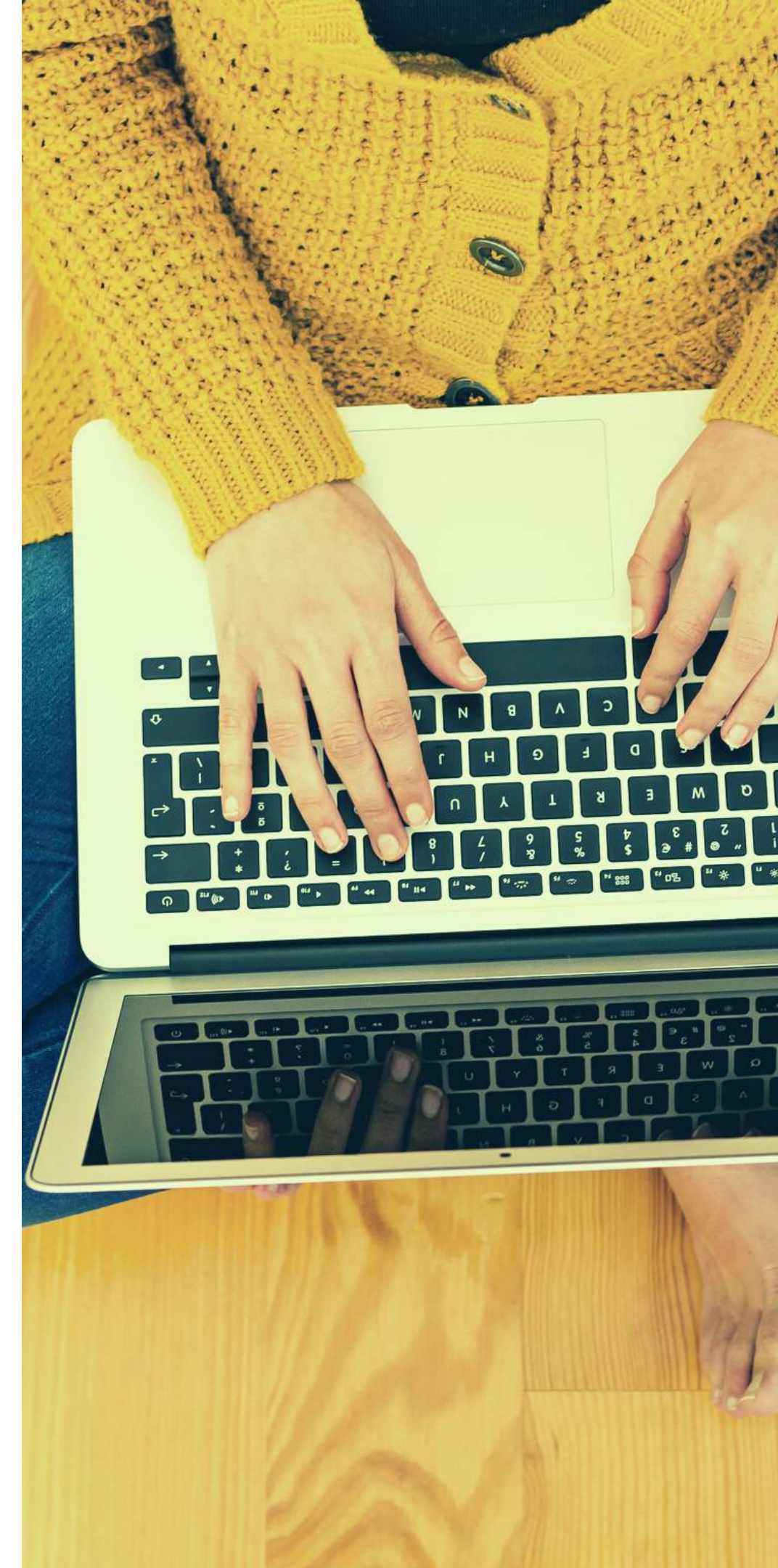
Lessons from COVID-19 for the future

Working patterns

Online meetings are useful in many respects, particularly in terms of cost and time savings. But, these need to be carefully planned and managed in order to maximise their efficiency. While back-to-back meetings are physically possible when travel is not involved, this does not mean that they are sensible. Regular breaks are needed both within and between meetings to help attendees maintain focus, become less exhausted and prevent other work from piling up and creeping into downtime.

For some staff, home working is ideal as it makes life simpler and more economical. For others, however, home working is challenging and stressful. A flexible policy that recognises that there is no one-size-fits-all approach could help organisations to find the right solution for each staff member. Any such policy must also recognise that home working is not always perfect and that IT and personal problems may emerge and cause disruption at any moment. Complaints must be carefully managed (e.g. through clear complaint processes or decision maps) to help protect the health and wellbeing of staff.

Human beings are creatures of habit who often stick to known patterns of behaviour. Ensuring that there are regular reviews of the need for online meetings might help to free people to meet face-to-face more quickly than they otherwise might. The benefits of meeting up physically to 'walk and talk' may help with creativity as well as with mental health and wellbeing. However, the importance of choice is key as meetings of one kind will work well for some but less well for others.

Lessons from COVID-19 for the future

Partnerships

The benefits of partnership working were widely recognised among the interviewees. Existing external partnerships provided a secure base from which to make difficult decisions and share fears and vulnerabilities with others in similar roles. A key lesson here is that partnerships are worth nurturing. Investing time and effort into them will help to ensure that valuable support systems are there should they be needed in the future.

The pandemic also led to the development of new relationships that would not otherwise have developed. Given the usefulness of these new relationships, thought might be given to finding alternative ways of bringing staff from different disciplines and services together. In a non-pandemic situation, this might be through ventures such as the New Front Door (one-stop-shop) initiative that was developed in Gwent in response to the Healthier Wales agenda prior to COVID-19.

Some partners and organisations were praised for their support, visibility and courageous decision-making, while others were noted to be conspicuous by their absence. The strength of feeling about the lack of engagement from some organisations was notable. Ensuring that all partners are involved in the conversation and regularly communicate with one another (even if only to explain that they have limited time due to competing demands) may go some way to maintaining relationships during times of pressure.

Internal partnerships were a source of enormous support for interviewees. Humour and honesty were important factors that helped to maintain and strengthen these relationships. At the heart of it all, however, was the need for consistent and regular communication between colleagues. In practice, this was achieved through multiple methods including social media, online social events, webinars, emails, text messaging and telephone calls. A key lesson here is that there is a need for options and variety as what works for one may not necessarily work for another.

Lessons from COVID-19 for the future

Challenges

More needs to be done to ensure that the third sector is recognised for its excellent work in supporting people with substance misuse problems. There also needs to be parity in the way that the third sector and statutory sector are treated and closer partnership working between them. A more assertive stance has been called for to address the apparent stigma and to stand up and lobby for services that have been 'relegated' and 'disparaged' during the pandemic.

Some interviewees described the challenge of meeting the demands of multiple organisations. One way of reducing the burden may be to develop a centralised recording system where information can be accessed by all relevant organisations. This would eliminate the need for duplication and reduce the burden on those working under pressure. Clarifying the short and long-term funding arrangements of new initiatives from the outset would also help to alleviate stress and avoid conflict.

Lessons from COVID-19 for the future

Opportunities and benefits

While the pandemic brought many challenges it also brought opportunities. It led some to change their outlooks and helped them to appreciate the simpler things in life. Others became more confident in their decision-making and less reliant on others. It is difficult to draw lessons from this but one suggestion might be for organisations to find ways of enhancing the professional development of senior staff. This might be through access to professional coaching or other confidence-building methods or a broader reflection on the continuing professional development of senior staff.

The pandemic and lockdown created a unique opportunity to test out new interventions and ways of working. It demonstrated what could be done when the need arose. But, why wait for a crisis to innovate? Might something be done to encourage innovation more routinely? One idea might be to be seek innovation from organisations when they bid/tender for contracts. Another might be for the creation of an Innovation Fund that supports the development of new interventions and ways of working within the field of substance misuse.

Lessons from COVID-19 for the future

Long-term concerns

Interviewees flagged up a number of worries that they had for the future. Of particular concern was the economic impact of the pandemic and the knock-on effect this might have on mental health and wellbeing as well as on the misuse of drugs and alcohol. With this in mind, it is important that services work together to ensure that people are able to access the appropriate support. It is also important that services are equipped with sufficient resources to respond effectively to any increase in demand. To this end, there need to be regular contract reviews to ensure that services are not operating beyond their capacity.

Concern was also expressed about the long-term impact of the pandemic on the substance misuse workforce. One key worry was that some staff might reflect on their lives post-COVID-19 and decide to pursue a different career. Thought might therefore be given to making a career in the field of substance misuse as attractive as possible (e.g. through the development of a clear career path).

Of even greater concern was the impact of the pandemic on the health and wellbeing of staff. Several interviewees were fearful that home working might, for some, result in a blurring of boundaries between work and home life and lead to mental health and relationship problems. To help defend against such problems it is important that appropriate home-working guidance is provided and that managers consider these issues routinely during any supervision sessions.

Acknowledgements

A positive way to end this report is with some of the heartfelt comments that were made by our interviewees about their colleagues. The pride with which the senior managers and decision makers spoke of their colleagues and services is clear to see.

"Everybody was extraordinary through it; I've got to say really."

"There were some examples of amazing support, joint working, and good practice that we had with our colleagues"

"... it really came through about how amazing staff on the ground actually are. Everybody stepped up to the mark collectively."

"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."

"Hats off to them, to support some of those users in the community. I don't know how they did it."

The sentiment expressed in this final quotation about moving forward together, is a fitting way to draw to a close this part of the Lessons Learned from COVID-19 project.

"If I look back I'm incredibly proud of what everybody's continued to do and we will learn and we'll all move forward and we will take every step all together."

Thanks

We would like to thank all of the senior managers and decision makers who kindly gave up so much of their time to be interviewed for the Lessons Learned project. We are very grateful to them for their frank and candid accounts of their experiences of working through the COVID-19 pandemic.

Thanks must also go to Caroline Phipps for her expert guidance and support throughout the project and to Natalie Savery for turning a very bland Word document into this colourful report. We are very grateful!