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The means: to change places for the better.

Stepping Up

How Covid-19 Tested the Resilience of Welsh Places

About the authors

The Means draws on over 20 years' experience of developing inspiring places for people to live and work. Recognised nationally and internationally as an organisation delivering innovative urban services and world-class business districts, our placemakers partner with residents, businesses and government to make great places.

Andy Regan is Policy and External Affairs Manager at the IWA.

About us

We are a think tank and charity, independent of government and political parties.

By bringing together experts from all backgrounds, we conceive ambitious and informed ideas which secure political commitments to improve our democracy, public services and economy.

We provide platforms for debate, opportunities for people to make their voices heard and agenda-setting research. We are funded by our members, income from our events and training sessions, and supported by trusts, foundations and other funding bodies. We are a proud Living Wage employer.

Our vision is to create a Wales where everyone can thrive.

For more information about the IWA, our policy work, and how to join, as either an individual or organisational supporter, contact:

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Foreword

Since 2018, the IWA is pleased to have chaired the Understanding Welsh Places consortium, a group of partners who have worked collaboratively to bring the website from idea to implementation. The purpose of the site is simple: it brings together publicly available data about all places in Wales with over 2,000 residents into an accessible front end. It makes data easier to visualise and interpret for people who don't consider themselves 'data geeks.

That's what it does. But what is it *for*?

We've always seen it as being about supporting and inspiring local communities, decision makers, planners and policy makers to make positive improvements to wellbeing in the places where they live and work. They can see what their place has, what it needs, and where it can get that from. It fundamentally comes from the idea that all places have assets, and therefore have opportunities, but that some of those opportunities are harder to spot without the evidence to highlight them.

As a result, we've never been prescriptive about what we think people should do with UWP.

However, as the pandemic began to unfold in 2020 we realised that we - as the IWA - also had an opportunity to use the site ourselves. As a policy organisation, interested in driving positive change at a national and local level in Wales, we decided to see how we could use UWP as the basis for a piece of policy work.

I don't want to preempt the report proper in this foreword, so I'll make a slightly different point. This report makes some suggestions about how we can improve community resilience for 'next time' (and we all know there will be a next time). However, what it also highlights is the value of investing in evidence, and - crucially - of making that evidence available to all, and making it meaningful.

Now that we have gathered positive examples of what worked in some parts of Wales, people in other places can use UWP to ask themselves 'What would my place need to achieve the same thing?'. They can go to the decision makers in their area armed with evidence of what their place needs and why.

I have always been excited about the potential of UWP, and this report - generously funded by the Carnegie UK Trust - is our first attempt to use it within our own policy work. I am pleased to say that the IWA is not even the first national policy organisation to make use of it in a report like this.

Knowledge is power, and we believe that power should be decentralised and democratised. That's what UWP does. For communities, for campaigners, and yes - for policy wonks too

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Auriol Miller
Director of the IWA

Executive Summary

Resilience vs efficiency?

This research began with a simple question 'What has Covid-19 taught us about the resilience of Welsh places?'. Like most simple questions, it didn't take much interrogation to see that we needed to clarify our underlying assumptions before we could go much further.

For this piece of work, the IWA defines resilience as the ability of a community to withstand shocks, stress and challenges. Resilience encompasses the ability to adapt and survive adverse circumstances such as environmental, societal, or economic shocks, or to cope and thrive given the challenges of everyday life.

Covid-19 has tested resilience, and has acted as a 'natural experiment' which allows us to potentially compare different places to see how they coped, and what helped and hindered them in doing so.

At the time of writing this in October 2021, it feels like the worst may be over, and the temptation may be to move on. However, our response at all levels merits examination, not to find fault, or to say which places did 'better' or 'worse' - but to see how we can learn, and could do better next time.

To begin pulling on this thread, we partnered on this project with the means, a consultancy with 20 years experience in understanding place-making, and with strong links to communities across Wales.

The means undertook the original fieldwork, evidence gathering and analysis for this report based on a series of interviews they conducted in mid 2021 with representatives of different sectors. Interviewees came from a selection of places chosen from the seven categories used by Understanding Welsh Places (UWP).

This work did not aim to be quantitative or definitive, but instead to look closely at specific examples of how places withstood the challenges of Covid.

We began by considering 'assets', the individual bits of small, local infrastructure which are counted on UWP. We assumed we would be able to tell a story of which assets are most valuable, but in fact what we heard significantly more about were *human* assets.

It was people that made places resilient, and by and large they made use of whatever physical infrastructure, and state-level administrative support they could access.

We have made broad recommendations below about how local government at both local authority and town and community council level could build on this work, using Understanding Welsh Places to build a more holistic picture of their own place's resilience.

However there is a larger conclusion we draw from this work, which is implicit in every story we were told, but whose DNA you would struggle to identify in any specific example.

It is this: places can prioritise efficiency, or resilience; but they cannot do both.

We cannot overestimate how different this crisis might have looked without the army of volunteers suddenly willing and able to be mobilised due to the enforced closure of many workplaces, and the financial support of the furlough scheme. At a local level, we should look at how to be better prepared to harness this support and focus it on what matters most.

At a national or UK level, why would we not look at short-term workplace closures and quick deployment of financial support (along the model of the furlough schemes) to enable people to quickly step up and help their communities respond to, say, flooding or other extreme weather events?

The community halls, centres, parks, and other spaces which were repurposed as food banks, vaccination centres and information hubs couldn't have been used for any of those things if they had been shut down, bulldozed, and replaced with investment properties.

We cannot have resilient places without the headroom that comes from spare capacity within the state, businesses, and civic society. Without community halls squatting on land which the market might value more highly as high rise flats. Without people able to help their neighbours, because their own short-term financial crisis has been averted by the pooled risk of state social security.

We make recommendations below, at a high level, for how all those involved in emergency planning can focus their strategic efforts on building in improved resilience now for the next crisis. All of these efforts can be assisted using the Understanding Welsh Places website, which can help planners better understand their own area, neighbouring towns, and towns further away with whom they might have more in common than they had previously realised.

The Understanding Welsh Places website indexes each place according to how independent, interdependent or dependent they are in relation to other towns. UWP doesn't present being independent as intrinsically positive or negative, but just another factor which helps people understand where they live. But Covid has surely taught us that understanding who we can turn to, and what we ourselves have to offer is also a key component of resilience.

We owe it to ourselves and our communities to better evidence and understand what we have learned about resilience, and build it into our societal infrastructure – both physical and human – with generosity.

If Covid has taught us anything it's that we can never know how much we may need it.

Andy Regan
Policy and External Affairs Manager, IWA

Recommendations

1 Understand local assets, and fill the gaps

Local authorities and / or town and community councils should undertake a light touch audit of community facilities in their area, noting the role they played in supporting people during Covid-19, and how replicable this might be in similar circumstances.

They should share this learning with similar places (based on UWP categories), to understand what additional or different things they could have done, and involve emergency services in this exercise.

This audit should be used to inform proactive decisions about what community facilities to develop and / or protect to ensure longer term resilience from future emergencies.

2 Make a plan to get people helping quickly

Almost overnight, Covid created a potentially huge bank of human resource from individuals who were unable to work. People wanted to step up and help, and our research found plenty of examples of this happening.

Managing and coordinating volunteers does itself require significant resources, and people ideally need to be mobilised around specific tasks which are identified as being the most strategically important.

Local authorities should explore how to create and securely store details of individuals in each area who are willing to act as coordinators and volunteers in emergency situations.

They should develop a plan for how to contact and mobilise these individuals around clearly defined tasks when needed. They should ensure they capture this data in a way which both complies with the relevant data protection requirements, but, importantly, also allows them to store it and keep it updated periodically until it is needed.

This plan should also carefully consider proportionate ways to ensure safeguarding issues are taken seriously, but wherever possible speed up processes to reduce avoidable delays.

3   Develop local networks to get the message out

The pandemic unfolded quickly, with complex rules and advice changing regularly, not always communicated in the most effective way by politicians in either the UK Government or the Welsh Government. This was further complicated by the overlap and divergence between reserved and devolved powers.

The examples we found of good practice in addressing these communications issues were largely rooted in amplifying messages from trusted local organisations within communities.

Those involved in emergency planning at a local level, and public health should identify, build and maintain relationships with individuals and groups within communities (whether of place, of background, or of practice) to ensure they are able to quickly distribute essential information.

Fieldwork report and analysis by the means Introduction

'There have been as many plagues as wars in history; yet always plagues and wars take people equally by surprise.'

Albert Camus, *The Plague*

For an event of the scale of the coronavirus pandemic there are few benchmarks against which to judge our response at an individual, institutional, community and national level. It remains possible that the biggest missed opportunity will be at the international level where the IMF[1] has estimated that a $50bn investment in a global vaccination and testing programme would generate $9 trillion of economic benefits.

Consideration of how resilient the response has been in our Welsh places first needs a definition of what is meant by 'resilience'. This, we would argue, goes beyond simply coping and describes a society's ability to continue to advance the interests of its citizens in the face of economic, environmental and public health adversity.

For this piece of work, the IWA defines resilience as the ability of a community to withstand shocks, stress and challenges. Resilience encompasses the ability to adapt and survive adverse circumstances such as environmental, societal, or economic shocks, or to cope and thrive given the challenges of everyday life.

In this respect resilience entails being more prepared for both things we can anticipate and for the unexpected. The future will subject us to more financial, industrial, meteorological and public health disruption. There are trends that can be analysed and tracked but the so-called 'Black Swan' events, that is, the most disruptive ones, arrive unheralded[2]. This is not to diminish the importance of data and its collection but to argue that we need other inputs to guide decision making in times of crisis.

At the individual level the full story will take time to emerge, but ONS is already reporting a doubling in those experiencing depression[3]. The ending of the furlough scheme could cause unemployment to spike to 5.2%[4] and the worst effects are being seen amongst the young. In addition to the tragic and quantifiable loss of life, there will be health and social legacies that we are currently unable to fully assess. The optimism of early summer 2021 could be remembered as a momentary resurgence. Alternatively, it may prove to be the case that the current crisis is different to those that have gone before, which were linked to war or the economic cycle. An upbeat reading is one in which there is no lasting structural damage to the supply side or to aggregate demand, and recovery quickly follows the lifting of restrictions.

1   A Proposal to end the Covid-19 Pandemic, Ruchir Agarwal and Gita Gopinath, IMF; May 2021

2   The Black Swan: Nassim Nicholas Taleb

3   Around 1 in 5 (21%) adults experienced some form of depression in early 2021 (27 January to 7 March); this is an increase since November 2020 (19%) and more than double that observed before the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic (10%). https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/wellbeing/articles/coronavirusanddepressioninadultsgreatbritain/januarytomarch2021

4   May 2021 Report; Bank of England Monetary Policy Committee

This is one of the reasons why it is important to capture different perspectives whilst experiences are still fresh in people's minds and have not been tempered by subsequent events.

In April and May 2021, The means conducted research on behalf of the IWA in places across Wales to gauge the immediate impressions of respondents from the public, private and voluntary sectors.

Using the *Understanding Welsh Places* website[5], an example town from each of their seven place categories was included. In total eleven towns were involved: Caerleon; Llandeilo; Llandovery; Llantrisant; Merthyr Tydfil; Pembroke; Pontypool; Porthcawl; Port Talbot; Pwllheli; and Rhyl. Fifty one people took part in to one-to-one structured questionnaires. 55% were from the public sector, 18% voluntary sector and 27% private. The findings are based on semi-structured interviews conducted by The Means, and the topic guide can be found at Appendix B.

The purpose of this research was to explore what factors or assets had contributed to resilience in different Welsh places, and understand where public investments could be made to strengthen resilience in anticipation of any future crises.

In the face of such disruption to our daily lives it is hardly surprising that, in our survey, 94% of respondents described the impact on their community as significant or very serious. Responses ranged from

a)   Very serious impact, highlighting important concerns that need addressing in order to be prepared for further challenges of this scale, to

b)   Significant impact, but it has proved manageable.
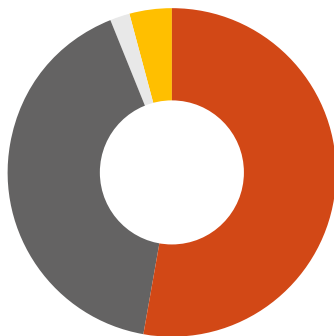
1 **What has been the impact of Covid-19 on your community?**

Very serious	**53%**
Significant	**41%**
Minor	**2%**
No long lasting	**4%**
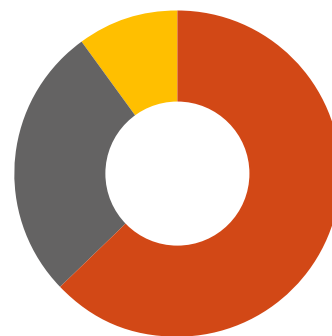
2 **To what degree has your organisation's resilience been tested?**

Severely	**63%**
Substantially	**27%**
To some extent	**10%**

90% felt that their organisations or institutions had had their resilience substantially or severely tested, both in terms of the immediate shock and challenges and in their ability to adapt and survive.

More difficult to interpret and important to understand is that, despite this, 94% considered that their community had been resilient. As described under our three themes later in this report, this reflects how effectively respondents considered

— community assets were used;

— voluntary crisis support from the private, public, and third sectors was mobilised; and

— the existence and availability of reliable and trustworthy sources of information (around covid measures, restrictions, support and vaccinations) were communicated locally.

3 **Makeup of interviewees by sector**

Public	**55%**
Private	**27%**
Voluntary	**18%**
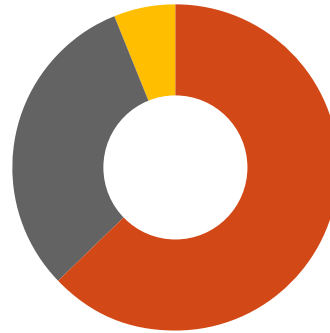
4 **Overall how resilient has your community been?**

|	
Very	**63%**
Adequately	**31%**
Barely	**6%**

This was a focussed, small-scale piece of work aimed at obtaining detailed qualitative insights, and we did not aim for a representative sample[6]. Roughly half of interviewees were members and officers in unitary authorities and community councils. The remainder were drawn from businesses and the voluntary sector. To some extent the view of events differed between these sectoral perspectives.

In answer to our question –

*Has the crisis exposed gaps in planning and service provision?*

71% of respondents from the public sector considered it has, but this rose to 91% of those from the private and voluntary sector. This points to a more critical view from the private and voluntary sectors around preparedness, planning and the need for early guidance.

5 & 6   **Has the crisis exposed gaps in planning and service provision? Perspective of different sectors**
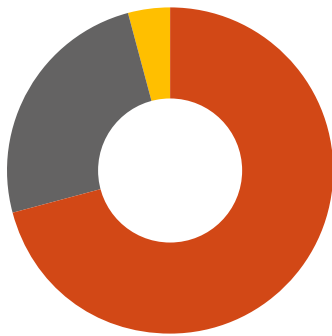
Public sector responses

|	
Yes	**71%**
No	**25%**
Not sure	**4%**
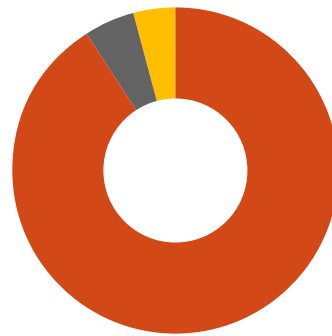
Private and voluntary sector responses

Yes	**91%**
No	**5%**
Not sure	**4%**

There was hardly a facet of life that the pandemic did not impact. There is no area in which we cannot learn lessons and improve practice. As a seismic disruption to the normal running of affairs, it has posed general questions across a broad range of topics:

— the desirability of maintaining spare capacity allied to community assets,

— commuting and work patterns,

— the role of our town centres and high streets,

— the robustness of our food supply chain,

— digital inclusion,

— social care,

— health inequality,

— trustworthy sources of information,

— macro-economic policy and

— the management of community assets.

The changes organisations have made to the way they deliver products / services and the need for new approaches to 'place' have been significantly influenced by our experiences during the crisis.
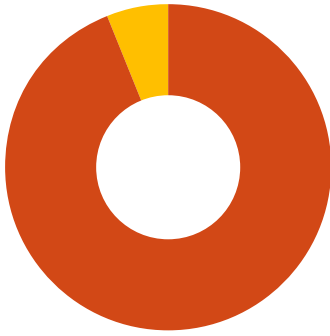
7 Has the crisis highlighted the need for new approaches to place?

|	
Yes	**94%**
Not sure	**6%**
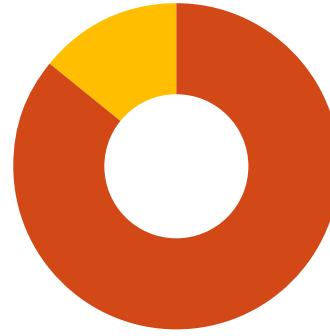
8 Has your organisation made lasting changes in the way it delivers products or services?

|	
Yes	**86%**
No	**14%**

In shedding more light on these considerations, the purpose of the many public inquiries that will surely follow must be to improve our state of preparedness for such abnormal events in the future. But they must also contribute to defining the 'new normal'. The pandemic has dislocated habits and challenged the way society is organised. The availability of new public resources dedicated to improving 'future-proofing' will be limited, and the imperative to use what we have to better effect will be reinforced.

The effectiveness of collective approaches during the crisis was raised in our survey. The majority thought that the crisis had brought people together. However, the extent to which there had been an appropriate level of collaboration between sectors was viewed differently according to which sector was responding.
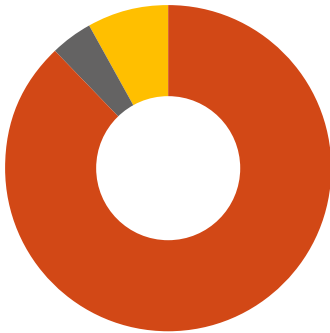
9 **Has the crisis brought**
     people together?

Yes	**88%**
No	**4%**
Not sure	**8%**
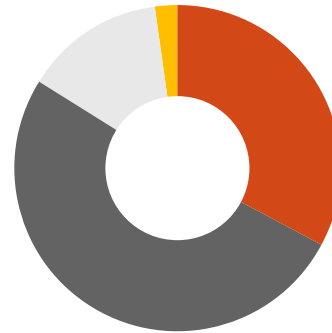
10 **To what extent has there been collaboration**
     between sectors during the crisis?

A great extent	**33%**
Some extent	**51%**
Not much	**14%**
None	**2%**

The second phase of our research focussed on how more and better collaboration might be achieved. In particular it dug deeper into three themes:

— **Community assets** - how did these perform and what lessons are there for the future?

— **Social capital** – what was noteworthy in the way that individuals responded, and what prevented or encouraged them to invest energy and expertise outside their usual sphere?

— **Communication** – with social distancing and lockdowns the pandemic has had an isolating effect. What was effective in mitigating this?

Theme 1:
How well have community assets performed during this crisis period?

Understanding Welsh Places brings together publicly available data about key community assets and their distribution across the towns of Wales - including schools, open spaces, charities, GPs, hospitals.

What happened in our schools and hospitals is fundamental to the analysis of how well our places have responded and our assessment of how resilient we are. They will doubtless be subject to rigorous review in post-Covid inquiries to come, but are not the focus of this work.

Our research asked the same questions of those other community assets that we often take for granted. When we are being told not to assemble in anything but the smallest groups, what are the implications for those places where we like to gather - both in and outdoors?

In those first fearful days of lockdown, with the news dominated by images of the deserted streets of Wuhan and the disaster unfolding in Italy it was perhaps inevitable that there would be over-reaction. There was a dearth of national guidance that could inform the management and use of community assets. Much was left to local actors to interpret and implement. Such an approach inevitably produced a wide variety of outcomes, as multiple decisions were made with little understanding of the overall levels of risk. Not all of these proved helpful or sustainable – and we outline examples below.

Understandably the initial response was to close and/or prevent access to any facility that would encourage congregation. Community halls were locked, urban parks were gated, access to coastal car parks taped off, fell walkers were targeted by drones. In some town centres emergency tape was wrapped around street furniture to stop people sitting. These initial reactions were progressively revised, but in nearly every setting the nation struggled to find the right balance between risk aversion, and offering the right degree of freedom to make life under lockdown tolerable. Even much later in the crisis the re-opening of the high street continued to be made more difficult by the closure of public conveniences.

When asked in our survey about community assets supporting the community through the crisis respondents raised several themes. We revisited these in more detail during our second phase of research:

- A renewed appetite for accessing open spaces;

- Growing appreciation for our Parks;

- Widespread closure of community venues; and

- Planning for a resumption of 'normality'.

Widespread closure of community venues

During our research we heard how parks and open spaces posed a series of quandaries for the authorities charged with their management. In comparison, at the outset, the position for those responsible for indoor spaces such as community halls and centres appeared to be more clear cut. Respondents commented that given the various restrictions and risk levels, closure was the most realistic option, and that reopening brought a host of considerations that asked a lot of questions, particularly of voluntary-run establishments. The WCVA's guidance on reopening ran to 11 pages[7] and has been updated on several occasions as Welsh Government advice has evolved. We heard that the length of the guidance was about right but the ability and, at times, confidence to implement advice varied.

A recurring theme of our research is that, throughout the pandemic, the decision to close a facility may be reasonably straightforward, but living with the implications of that decision and dealing with its reversal very much less so. The majority of respondents recognised that services that traditionally operate from halls and centres, such as food banks, became even more essential during the pandemic, and the closure of a hall would clearly have a detrimental effect on delivery of these services

Respondents with first-hand experience of these services observed that those more disadvantaged or vulnerable were disproportionately impacted as a result. This came out clearly in our discussions where all respondents recognised that the crisis had hit some much harder than others. Some respondents discussed how community ingenuity and proactive local authorities found ways around these problems, such as scope for innovation and the introduction of often sophisticated solutions of delivering services to those most in need. A number of examples emerged from our discussions.

In **Porthcawl**, **Griffin Park Wellbeing Centre** was required to close along with all the other centres. However, within 3-4 weeks, in order to reduce the number of people going into chemists, it was opened up as a pharmacy distribution centre. A Covid 19 Strategy Group had been set up by local volunteers who had first come together some time previously to combat problems caused by a heavy snowfall. This network contacted the four main pharmacies in the area and put forward an idea that they could enhance their delivery services and reduce queuing through use of the Centre. Prescriptions came into each chemist and would be set aside in a separate box for volunteers from the group to collect between 1–2 pm every day. Each box collected was taken to the Centre where the hall was set up into areas to reflect the five wards. Each ward had a register of clients which included food deliveries, pharmacy needs, social contact and welfare support. Deliveries to each ward went out from the Centre.

In **Rhyl**, the **Foryd Community Centre and Cafe** also had to close. However, they adapted and began to operate a meals on wheels service from the café. The Centre's food bank also started delivering food parcels and using staff and volunteers for shopping and getting prescriptions for isolated individuals. The Centre had an existing community transport provision for older people which operated as a taxi service. This was modified to become a meals on wheels and medication delivery service. Later it was used to take people to vaccination appointments who otherwise couldn't get there.

Rhyl has the two most deprived wards in Wales and some of the highest unemployment rates in Wales (*See Appendix C: UWP data*). With the suite that usually provides free access to IT closed, Job Seekers were unable to get support as they had no access to the internet. The community centres had allowed people to use their phone lines, but this too was suspended during the crisis. For some of those who were most in need this meant they had no means of being able to contact officials around benefit claims. Similar challenges faced by the unemployed and benefit claimants were reported in Merthyr Tydfil.

Initially, as with all places of worship, **Port Talbot mosque** was closed. Recognising the social as well as spiritual deficit this would leave, the mosque committee was proactive and adapted rules for the benefit of the local community. A food bank operated through the mosque which helped support the Muslim and wider community.

In addition, all eleven on the management committee had some expertise in a particular field - health, media or local government. They made themselves available for members of the community to contact them for help. Anyone that needed help was able to gain advice on topics such as tax credits to PPE. Through the actions of the management committee the mosque became a hub for information and advice. This proved important when the debate about the vaccination programme became vital. There was a weekly live radio session from the mosque including a Q&A session and online sermon. The mosque was able to produce infographics to dispel some of the misinformation around vaccinations circulating within the community.

Analysis & Conclusions

The experience of the pandemic has in many ways reaffirmed the **role of our community assets** and confirmed the reasons why they were first created. The importance of hospitals and the education establishments has been highlighted by others. The less obvious purposes and contribution provided by other community assets should also now be seen in a different light.

With limited national guidance, **Places** have responded differently across a range of issues related to the management of community assets. Some have fared better than others and have been used in novel and essential ways while others remained closed. There is learning that should be captured to better understand the positives and negatives. Looking ahead, we believe guidance should be prepared in advance to ensure faster and more consistent decision making across different areas and tiers of government, and this could help communities deal better with the next crises.

Community buildings have illustrated the role they play in our lives, especially for the more vulnerable in society. In times of crisis their potential contribution is heightened. But there are questions about whether we were as a society best placed to take advantage of them. The first response was to see them all closed. The reopening varied both in timescale and use with many remaining closed unless an essential voluntary service or public service could be delivered from them.

There was a sense that, from a strategic perspective, the range of public sector and voluntary partners did not fully understand the extent of facilities they collectively offer. While each will have a form of asset register there is a need collectively for a shared understanding / gap analysis which identifies a community meeting space for each and every community for use in crises. This could be produced by and shared amongst local authorities, town / community councils, health boards, voluntary sector and other partners such as the Welsh government and emergency services. There is also merit in considering what kind of equipment (grab bags) or capacity (broadband connectivity) they could all be supplied with.

A renewed appetite for accessing open spaces

Many respondents discussed the importance of open spaces, contrasting those areas with accessible spaces and those without. Our research highlighted their importance during significant periods of restrictions as one of the few places it was possible to spend time with friends and family. For those areas that did have access to open spaces the majority of respondents told us they believed this had a positive impact on people's wellbeing.

However the availability and acceptable use of these spaces varied across areas. Respondents discussed the different approaches adopted to enable or restrict access to these open spaces during lockdown. This varied from full access to some areas locking gates, taping up furniture and taking a stricter view on what was perceived to be acceptable rest / relaxation and travel. These are set out in more detail below.

The press regularly reported the phenomenal growth in the use of paths and trails[8] (in spring / summer 2020) as people were desperate to break the monotony of lockdown and be in different surroundings. There were tensions too as those living in rural and coastal locations became worried about virus transmission from visitors (during summer 2020). With congestion and overflowing car parks at the country's beauty spots, further restrictions were put in place with cars being stopped by the police (December 2020 to February 2021) on major roads and turned back if there weren't justifiable reasons for the journey. This featured in some of our research areas such as Merthyr Tydfil where issues around visitors to Pen y Fan made national news, and access to the coast in and around Porthcawl highlighted issues including, on one occasion, a mass brawl.

There are signs that there will be longer lasting effects from this. Our research has indicated that the buoyant activity in the housing market is evidence that many people are seeking a move. This has been reported in the press during late 2020 and early 2021 and corroborated by local estate agents that we have spoken with. **A third of those looking to move are seeking a different area and nearly 30% are doing so to access a garden or outdoor space more easily.**

2.78 million people (4.26%) across Great Britain do not have green space within a 10-minute walk from their homes. In Wales the figure is 241,478[9] (7.62%). The current demand is favouring homes with gardens over apartments and market and coastal towns over the large conurbations[10]. This was mentioned by a number of respondents. Estate Agents in places like Llandovery have seen a significant increase in demand during the pandemic (many from outside the area) compared to a relatively static market pre-COVID.

8   https://www.bbc.com/future/bespoke/made-on-earth/the-great-bicycle-boom-of-2020.html
      https://www.gov.uk/government/news/2-billion-package-to-create-new-era-for-cycling-and-walking

9   Green Space Index; http://fieldsintrust.org/green-space-index

10   Robert Gardener; Nationwide Chief Economist; Financial Times 1st June 2021

	Porthcawl	Bangor	Rhyl	Port Talbot	Merthyr
Population	15,672	17,988	25,149	37,276	43,820
Households near green space	82%	87%	85%	76%	89%

Fig 1: Understanding Welsh Places data

For those in the more populous towns and cities access to Parks became an issue. The UK Government's Communities Secretary said that closing them would be a 'last resort'[11], but when better weather filled city parks, then UK Health Secretary Matt Hancock warned sunbathing was against the UK Government's social distancing rules.

At the height of the restrictions people were being told only to leave their homes when absolutely necessary, and being required not to travel far for even informal recreation. Exercise was to start and end at home. All organised recreation and sport were suspended.

Analysis & Conclusions

The pandemic has emphasised the important role open spaces can play in terms of community resilience. This is evident in their contribution to improving wellbeing, mental health and reducing isolation particularly as a Covid-safe space to meet family and friends.

The different approach by authorities to the availability of open space as a Covid-safe area suggests a lack of consistency across Wales. This could be addressed in future by clearer guidance from the Welsh Government.

Growing appreciation for our parks

Other than for elite athletes the suspension of sports, training and recreational facilities persisted for a long period. Even outdoor individual sports such as tennis and golf were included in this ban. It is unclear whether the resumption of team sports came soon enough to prevent lasting damage being caused.

One example illustrates the complex and inter-related factors that can produce different outcomes. The re-opening of the tennis courts in Pontypool Park meant that a Pickleball group could move their group of 97 older members who regularly played indoors in Cwmbran to outdoors once parks were allowed to reopen (June – December 2020). This allowed a lot of people to exercise up to three times a week, to get out and to improve their physical and mental health. The new surroundings even meant that the group picked up new members. The council reports that the use of Pontypool Park has generally increased significantly in the last year.

An international study[12] of park usage in 98 countries, tracked primarily with data from Google's Community Mobility Reports, found that public policies that restricted people's social and physical contacts were associated with an increased number of park visits.

> *Park visits in the United Kingdom first decreased, at the same time as new confirmed cases were increasing, and then increased rapidly after April, finally reaching 150% more than the baseline.*

Formal and informal recreation is essential to the mental and physical well-being of the population. Lockdown and other Covid restrictions unavoidably entailed significant disruption particularly to organised recreation. But the pandemic has strengthened the case that parks, with their capacity for hosting spontaneous and informal recreation, are a crucial community asset. Their contribution to national life during the crisis provides an opportunity to rethink their role.

Cllr Joshua Beynon in Pembroke said:

> *The crisis has shown the need for place to be approached differently with the key foundations of public space needed to be highlighted and taken more care of. Place was approached through a very physical asset-based means before, whereas now we can see that it needs to have more focus on community assets and the things that people didn't use before. For example, park benches were rarely used or altogether ignored by the public as they had had places to go and cafes to sit in, but these benches became much more well used once those places were shut by restrictions. People are now going for walks in the local area to get out of the house and in the process, they're taking note of what is in their immediate community and learning more about it, connecting with it much more than they did before.*

12   Impacts of COVID-19 pandemic on urban park visitation: a global analysis; Dehui Geng, John Innes, Wanli Wu, Guangyu Wang; Journal of Forestry Research; November 2020

Analysis & Conclusions

Parks that in many cases have suffered neglect and under investment in the recent past have won new supporters. Paths and trails in every community have witnessed a significant increase in footfall, which we believe clearly evidences that the time and effort taken in documenting and maintaining them are such essential tasks.

With funding pressures faced by the public sector over the last decade, councils have faced challenges when justifying discretionary spending on parks compared to 'core services'. The pandemic should prompt a reconsideration of how parks and open spaces can contribute to well-being goals under the Future Generations Act, initiatives and associated funding.

Planning for a resumption of 'normality'

The temporary repurposing of community assets and their return to 'normal' use was raised in several areas. The example given in Merthyr Tydfil sums up the range of considerations, and illustrates the ideas borne out of necessity, experienced in many areas. In September 2020 Merthyr Tydfil was one of a handful of areas in Wales that were placed into a local lockdown due to significantly higher increases in Covid cases than other areas. It has continued to be amongst the worst affected in Wales. By November 2020 the military planners that devised the mass testing approach piloted in Liverpool were supporting Cwm Taf Morgannwg health board and Merthyr Tydfil County Borough Council to test all of the area's residents.

The logistics of such an approach required suitably sized, located and accessible premises. The council and health board were quick to identify these facilities such as the Merthyr Tydfil Leisure Centre. Many of these are operated by Wellbeing@Merthyr (formerly Merthyr Leisure Trust) who were supportive of their use at a time when restrictions had severely impacted their original purpose. A natural progression for the council and partners, once the national vaccine programme had been announced, was to use these same facilities for larger-scale vaccinations alongside GP surgeries and local smaller venues.

As restrictions ease and venues began to gradually reopen, a concern for the council and Wellbeing@ Merthyr was when and how to use these facilities for their original leisure purposes. Due to health risks around another wave of the pandemic these facilities are being leased for the vaccination programme until January 2022. This poses an economic and business planning burden on Wellbeing@Merthyr, who will not be in a position to reopen their facilities until next year while competing facilities will be doing so earlier.

Analysis & Conclusions

This illustrates how decisions to close or repurpose community assets, understandably taken in the urgency of the moment, will have consequences subsequently.

Finally, these assets need personnel – many of them voluntary – to operate them. They assist in providing an essential safety net. It is to these that we turn to in the next theme.

Theme 2:
Mobilising voluntary crisis support from the private, public, and third sectors

A society's response to adversity is a measure of its resilience. Welsh Government reported that in May 2020 over one third of people in Wales had supported family friends or neighbours.

> *10% of people have volunteered to help with the COVID-19 situation in the last four weeks with half of these spending more than 5 hours helping during that period.*

> *33% of people look after, or give help or support to family members, friends, neighbours or others. This has increased from 29% in the 2019-20 full-year survey[13].*

By that juncture across the UK the health service had received 750,000 offers to help out, 3,500 local mutual aid groups had registered on the Covis-19 Mutual Aid website and 2 million people had joined local Facebook support networks[14]. What was driving this according to Power to Change was the realisation that

> *Our immediate community is the front line of defence. Community isn't just "nice to have". It's a matter of life and death[15]*

Another factor that supported more active participation rates in community affairs was the increased amount of time people were spending within their locales. By June 2020 ONS was reporting that half of the UK workforce was working from home for at least part of the week[16].

When asked, as part of our research study, about what local initiatives have supported the community through the crisis several broader observations emerged around the importance of: Encouraging local voluntary effort; Making it easy to volunteer; Community leadership; and the important part that businesses played in testing circumstances. These and other acts were described as examples of a 'symbiotic' relationship growing between the community and businesses, with each supporting the other in turn when the needs arise. And were further explored in follow-up discussions, described below.

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13   National Survey for Wales (monthly survey) June 2020; 23rd; Welsh Government; July 2020

14   Local Heroes How to sustain community spirit beyond Covid-19; Power to Change; 5th May 2020

15   Local Heroes How to sustain community spirit beyond Covid-19; Power to Change; 5th May 2020

16   Coronavirus and homeworking in the UK; ONS; April 2020

Encouraging local voluntary effort

People evidently wanted to help their communities and found themselves in the position to do so. Welsh Government has acknowledged the ongoing potential this has and has sought to build on the momentum generated, and to maintain voluntary activity post pandemic. A tranche of new funding amounting to £2.5 million was awarded to 27 organisations to support their work in recruiting and training volunteers in the future[17] which was in recognition of the role they had played during Covid-19. And a committee in the fifth Senedd urged that a policy review be conducted to ensure that the lessons being learnt would inform the development of the sector.

> **Recommendation 3.** The Welsh Government should work with stakeholders to review the role of the voluntary sector in responding to future emergencies. This should include:
>
> — Clearly identifying and recognising the vital role of the voluntary sector in responding to emergencies.
>
> — Sharing of best practice from the response to both the pandemic and the flooding in 2020; and
>
> — Assessing the extent to which the voluntary sector is integrated into formal and informal emergency planning structures and how partnerships can be strengthened.[18]

Discussions during the course of this research with representatives of the voluntary sector identified some of the opportunities and the current hurdles. Participants brought up funding uncertainty for the voluntary sector from 2022 onwards and its effect on forward-planning as an issue. It was acknowledged that this delay was likely compounded by the pandemic. Given the role the sector has played, particularly in early mobilisation of support for the most vulnerable in society, respondents raised concerns about what the future might look like for them and about the capacity in which they might have to play a role in another crisis. Several representatives commented

> *by now [May 2021] we would have expected some form of broader announcement and initial guidelines to give us an idea of what the future might look like.*

Analysis & Conclusions

From each sector there are instances of **voluntary effort** which have had significant impact in their own contexts. Our discussions suggest that this response shows a latent appetite for people to do more in their communities. It would be worth implementing learning from elsewhere to harness and realise this interest possibly through the voluntary sector and town/community councils, local authorities and health boards with Welsh Government support.

17   Welsh Government boosts support for valued charities & third sector organisations; Press Release; 5 March 2021

18   Impact of Covid-19 on the voluntary sector; Senedd Equality, Local Government and Communities Committee February 2021

Community leadership

The extent and effectiveness of community leadership was questioned by respondents. There was a sense that individual acts of generosity and public spiritedness were inspirational and delivered key interventions. But in the face of a challenge of this scale, respondents commented that better co-ordination of actors and agencies, and improved awareness of and access to physical and human resources could have helped expand the scope and effectiveness of voluntary support. One respondent observed that

> *Throwing money at something is not always the answer – checking in with volunteers though has always been important.*

There was recognition that identifying and empowering 'community leaders' isn't easy in practice. However, during the course of the past months, it has been necessary for people in the community to come forward to overcome impediments to service delivery.

For example, in rural Carmarthenshire respondents noted it was those in the community who were already well connected socially through groups and societies who were able to identify need, and then link that with the support that was being offered (at times by a number of organisations). A number of our discussions reflected on the need to consider what more might be done to establish such a network in advance of the next event/crisis, what expectations would be reasonable for it, and how might it be organised to best effect. This clearly also raises questions around how to ensure those with less social capital and access to established networks are not excluded from decision making and planning, or overlooked in the provision of support.

In Llandovery and Llandeilo it was elected members that played that pivotal role. Elsewhere some community council clerks interviewed thought that the perception of the role of councillors has altered in this respect during the course of the crisis. Local councillors who usually were '*only consulted when there's a planning issue*' were seen as points of contact. And some took on a very active role, for example in the organisation of the Bangor Foodshare Initiative.

Analysis & Conclusions

Those able and prepared to take on more of a **leadership role in crisis** response need to be supported and empowered. Many examples from the current crisis have illustrated that **local councillors** are a ready and willing resource who have the connections and the broader understanding of community processes to assist response and recovery. They represent a community based resource that is relatively easy to contact and mobilise during a time of crises. Their contact details are publicly available, and they are known within their communities and well placed to act as a first point of call. What more might be done to train and support them for when the need arises. A starting point could be knowledge exchange cascaded from the experience from the current crisis.

Many others **community members** have come forward too. We heard of the critical contribution they made. They spoke of working in a vacuum especially in the early days. What more could have been achieved with more preparedness and planning? At its simplest this could be in the form of a digital network or an annual half day conference to disseminate good practice and refresh the database of 'community leaders'.

Make it easy to volunteer

Scaling volunteer programmes is complex, and the Welsh Government support in investing in future capacity to do so is welcome (see above). During our study we heard how frustrated volunteers can become ex-volunteers and there was plenty of press coverage of those who had put their names forward to help in some way but had not been asked to do anything.

Compounding this, as raised in a number of our discussions, was the issue around individual volunteers not being considered or treated as key workers and being unable to access childcare facilities in the same manner in order to volunteer. And for people new to volunteering there were the procedural frustrations of registration. A number of respondents commented that

> *DBS checks are important to prevent volunteers taking advantage of the vulnerable, but the process needs to be speeded up.*

With volunteers bringing energy and innovation to bear on issues which are unprecedented and developing in a dynamic manner, it is not surprising that they confront regulations that demand a more bureaucratic response. As raised a number of times during our follow-up discussions managing the provision of a range of services, to a dispersed and often vulnerable set of users, through a volunteer workforce, raises a number of logistical issues. It inevitably involves the creation of databases. Many of those people interviewed were concerned about the data protection implications. Their questions included:

— How best information could be securely maintained;

— Whether it should then be destroyed at a certain point;

— Whether databases developed for this purpose could be retained in case something like it happens again;

— How those databases could then be kept secure and updated and by whom?

For example, a volunteer in Porthcawl who had developed a contact database of vulnerable people during heavy snow a few years ago and destroyed it stated

> '*I was kicking myself this time as I had destroyed that list.*'

Analysis & Conclusions

For the population at large, who during the pandemic has responded in large numbers whenever a call has been made, the **process of accessing volunteering opportunities** has to be straightforward. Their expectation would be that they would utilise the same digital methods as they would in other parts of their life. The experience itself needs to be rewarding and must avoid the frustrations that some of those who came forward during the current crises experienced. Straightforward guidance on the collection, storage and use of data for this purpose would give volunteers reassurance about what they can and cannot do.

Businesses playing an important part in difficult circumstances

The pandemic has been a public health emergency which has prompted social and economic crises globally. In the UK it was difficult to envisage the fate of those businesses required to close for the duration of lockdown and for the countless others whose normal running would be severely disrupted. And our study areas were no different.

The avoidance of a surge in unemployment despite the historically large fall in economic activity is generally attributed to the introduction and the subsequent extensions of the furlough scheme. HMRC's easing of payment on VAT, corporation and income taxes has temporarily assisted cash-flows. And measures to reduce the burden of business rates have undoubtedly kept many businesses as going concerns, particularly where this support has been more prevalent, such as for the hospitality and retail sectors. Contrary to expectations given the depth of the downturn and the £6 billion of UK corporate debt, corporate insolvencies are at a 32-year low. Businesses on one account are '*defying gravity*'[19].

What became apparent during the course of our study was that local government has been quick to deliver more formal support measures. The distribution of grant aid to those on the National Non-Domestic Rates list was widely praised for its ease and rapidity by respondents. Councils have also been working with their high streets to support safe re-opening. Though in this respect there was less consistent approval in the responses from business, and more criticism of authorities around failure to consult and transparency.

The picture that emerges though is one in which the sectors have combined to achieve noteworthy results on an individual and community level. Examples unearthed through our discussions include:

— The photographer studio forced to close who then provided a door-to-door service undertaken for free, and with the proportion of the profit from the prints donated to a woman's charity.

— The clothing shop who shifted to the manufacture and distribution of thousands of 'wash bags' for NHS personnel. Drawing on contacts in the fabric industry and the volunteer efforts of 16 volunteer sewing machinists (aged 14 to 84 years) these bags allowed workers to avoid contamination by placing clothes in the bags after their shifts and putting them straight into the washing machine.

— The café shut to paying customers who continued to prepare and deliver cooked meals to their regulars. These regulars were predominantly elderly and would have had difficulty otherwise in securing a supply of cooked food.

— Singular acts of human kindness towards isolated and vulnerable people e.g., continuing the supply of Sunday lunch for free to a man who had cancelled his regular order having been made redundant.

— A business in Pontypool using its own vehicle to move 1000 Easter Eggs for a local church to Social Services.

— A butcher's in Llantrisant provided meat free of charge to a community centre scheme providing means for the vulnerable and homeless.

— In Porthcawl a local woman started making cakes for key workers, this snowballed to a team of 40 bakers delivering to surgeries etc. With sponsorship from local businesses, she published a recipe book. And all funds went back into the health board.

— Another volunteer in Porthcawl was able to persuade the local Co-op to take orders over the phone and allow people to pay by card this way for the first time. Co-op now permanently take orders over the phone and now have 4-5 drivers as opposed to 2. Many people will continue to shop this way. Nottage Stores, a small local shop bought a system where people could pay over the phone so the owner could assist the community.

— The role that some business clubs, Chambers of Commerce and Business Improvement Districts played in communicating up-to-date and accurate news and advice as well as collective purchasing of safety measures / equipment for their memberships

Analysis & Conclusions

The pandemic has had an unprecedented impact on businesses many of which have been forced to close for at least part of the past year. Whilst maintaining themselves as 'going concerns' businesses have also exhibited **an appetite to be grounded in their communities** and reflect people's desire to help and support in times of need. This may indicate a return to the more traditional view of the role of the local employer in the Welsh community. Or it could be an illustration of the growing impetus of Corporate Responsibility.

The establishment of more Business Improvement Districts in Wales provides the organisational mechanism for more businesses to engage with their host communities and opportunities for BIDs to become involved in programmes with social as well as commercial ends should be encouraged.

Theme 3:
Effectiveness of communication

The existence and availability of reliable and trustworthy sources
of information is a concern with far broader application than to the
current pandemic.

What the Covid-19 crisis has exposed is the extent of the growing mistrust of official sources, and the
opportunity afforded for conspiracy theories. Most concerning has been the potential to influence not
only views and opinions, but actions. Perhaps the best illustration has been the way that information
about vaccination has been manipulated with direct impacts on vaccine take up in some communities.
At a time when clear and consistent information has taken on a greater significance, so-called 'fake-
news' is ubiquitous. So much so that both the BBC[20] and Channel 4[21] have developed on-line resources
aimed to help users establish the veracity of information.

Outside the major television networks and in the world of social media, misinformation is a constant
hazard. HM Government promotes an approach, SHARE checklist[22], designed to help consumers
through the dangers. But it is hard to imagine how these essentially worthy resources can cope with
the immediacy of the medium.

Such considerations are beyond the scope of this study. The focus here is on the ways in which social
media and other means of communication were deployed to disseminate information of value to
different communities. This was against a background of a daily diet of conflicting news from around
the world on the course of the pandemic. Even within the UK there were significant differences
between the four-nations, for example on the rules that applied on social distancing, use of the
outdoors, numbers that could congregate, permissions to travel and to visit family and so forth.

20   https://www.bbc.co.uk/beyondfakenews/
21   https://www.channel4.com/news/factcheck
22   https://sharechecklist.gov.uk/

Community based responses

In Porthcawl we heard how volunteers were early to see the impact on the community and act upon it by setting up a **Covid 19 Strategy Group**. Members were recruited through social media – Facebook and a website[23] that was set up within 24 hours of the decision being taken to form it. Policies and procedures were established in less than a week and embedded in a constitution. The online platform was supplemented with the use of leaflets. WhatsApp groups were set up for each ward. These were linked into the local town council and some of the elected members there became *ward managers*.

Respondents commented that Porthcawl was fortunate to have had a *'brilliant tech manager'*. Membership on the Porthcawl First[24] Facebook page grew beyond 14,000. This was then linked to other on-line resources such as the veterans' hub, and the museum.

As the UWP data illustrates (*See Appendix C*) the Porthcawl demographic does not immediately present as the most obvious territory for social media usage.

	Porthcawl	Bangor	Rhyl	Port Talbot	Merthyr
Population	15,672	17,988	25,149	37,276	43,820
Schools	5	10	8	14	21
Premises without broadband	2%	6%	1%	0%	2%
Age: over 64 years	31.9%	11.7%	21.2%	20.1%	18.5%
Age: under 16 years	13.7%	14%	20.4%	17.5%	19.2%
Retired	23.6%	7.7%	17.3%	16.7%	15.4%

Fig 2: Understanding Welsh Places data

It has by far the oldest population of the five places analysed in our second phase of research, the lowest number of under sixteen-year-olds and the biggest proportion of retirees. However, we were told that the conclusion from the group was unequivocal:-

> *Without social media, our group would have been ineffective.*

Facebook, messenger and WhatsApp were deemed as the most effective channels. And later the group used Zoom for meetings.

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23   https://porthcawlc19s.weebly.com/

24   https://www.facebook.com/PorthcawlC19S/

Facebook also played a prominent role in Rhyl. Our discussions here focussed on how the Chair of the Residents Association on the Bruton Park Estate set up the Covid 19 Bruton Park & Surrounding Areas Community Information Group following advice from an ex-lecturer. Initially the purpose of the group was simply to provide information. As it quickly grew (320 members) others started to recognise the value of its reach. Local councillors began asking the group to disseminate information. And subsequently it has been used to arrange shopping and medicine pickup and delivery. Respondents commented that

> *There have been some good debates on the page. It's been great for engagement with new people.*

Respondents confirmed that the support it provided to people new to the area was one of the positives. As was the capacity to get information out quickly, to communicate with and mobilise volunteers. On the negative side, as can often be the case with such platforms, the monitoring and regulation of some contributions proved problematic.

In Port Talbot, WhatsApp groups were set up to help disseminate information within the BAME Community. A local councillor reflected that, partly because (in their view) of a language barrier there was confusion amongst some members of BAME communities and commented to us that

> *Because of the language barrier, this community found it harder to pick up information from the news channels and felt isolated. The pandemic had a disproportionate effect on the community because of this.*

Neath Port Talbot BAME Association had to adapt quickly and were able to use technology to do this. They set up WhatsApp groups and used social media. Their reflection on the use of this to us was that

> *Social media is a fantastic platform to get news out there.*

But others were promoting misinformation on Covid across social media. This was quite well structured and took hold. Several national surveys had indicated that the BAME communities were more hesitant to take up the vaccination[25] and the group took the view that this could become a significant problem.

There was a local stakeholders group meeting on the issue. As a result, they wrote to the health board and local leaders to suggest the message needed to be delivered locally through channels the community could identify with and relate to.

Analysis & Conclusions

Much of the **good practice has arisen spontaneously**. There is little evidence of the level of planning or preparedness for establishing these channels of communication. There was no guidance available for community members on how to source or disseminate information of value and what channels to use. Reliable alternatives to the Community Notice board could be investigated and communicated to community members.

25   The Guardian podcast; 26th January, 2021, Nazia Parveen

Partnership with public authorities

In Swansea and Neath Port Talbot the Local Health Board and NPT BAME Association began working on the 'Tell Me More' Campaign to address concerns around vaccine hesitancy in the Black Asian and Minority Ethnic Communities. One of the people who helped develop the campaign stated that it aims to help the BAME community access 'honest and accurate information' to make informed decisions about the vaccines. The concept was realised as late as December 2020, and implemented shortly after. The style and language used is clear and simple and is translated into a number of different languages. The content includes a Forum of local experts delivering information in a Q&A style. There is now a website[26] up and running. Those involved in the campaign told us that the challenge is to maintain the integrity and trust in the process, and to present information in the right way. Efforts are still continuing to get more people to engage and maintain momentum – and the group hope that it will be possible to have face to face meetings in the not-too-distant future and to mingle afterwards. The mechanism may have other uses after the pandemic has run its course.

There was a different story in Pwllheli where we spoke with a local doctor and a local councillor who had reacted quickly to news of potential effects of pandemic. They collaborated early in February 2020 with local stakeholders – Local Authority, Police, ambulance, surgeries which assisted in enforcing the eventual local lockdown. Again, they utilised social media to distribute information regarding the pandemic and created the website FreshAir.Wales to inform people about the importance of masks and outdoor spaces. Their initiative is credited by other respondents from that community with having helped achieve quick vaccination rates in the area.

Local Economies

The views of the pandemic from businesses, councils and voluntary organisations differed in some respects.

Whilst there is no single organisation responsible for restarting, reviving and renewing the economy, Welsh and UK Government has relied to a greater extent on local authorities alongside select key partners to engage with and administer support to the local business community. Councils have been involved in establishing and administering a number of new financial support and grant regimes. Council personnel are having to deal with unfamiliar working practices - a hybrid existence of working from home with occasional visits to council premises. In addition, they have borne the burden of establishing testing and vaccination programmes.

Given the pressures, government at the local level has emerged with its reputation enhanced amongst the businesses and voluntary organisations surveyed thanks to the role the played in administering the new financial support and grant regimes. Some investment around basic tech related skills and infrastructure would be of benefit such as that realised by Porthcawl First.

Analysis & Conclusions

This provides an opportunity to build, if the extent and effectiveness of **communication and coordination between partners** can be maintained or bettered. Local authorities' contacts databases have been significantly bolstered during the pandemic and can be used to best effect at a time when channels to reach target audiences have never been more varied or powerful.

Local authorities' best **databases in respect of the business community** are often those relating to taxes. Making contact with named individuals responsible for premises in the hearts of communities can be problematic in an emergency.

The task of **monitoring the well-being** of those isolated and vulnerable residents who do not enjoy supportive networks and are not on the radar of the caring agencies has also been a challenge. For this group, lockdown and social distancing will have been a trial.

In this age of communication, we are still yet to develop **a reliable system to inform and relate to the population**, while honouring the boundaries that respect for individual privacy and vulnerability demand.

Thanks and Acknowledgements

Appendices

Appendix A:
Methodology

Rationale

The pandemic has almost acted as a 'natural experiment', giving us insights on how resilient our places are, and what they need to be more resilient in future. Some of the problems being exposed by the pandemic have been deeply embedded in our communities for a long time, and some successful solutions were born out of the pandemic as well.

For this piece of work, the IWA defines resilience as the ability of a community to withstand shocks, stress and challenges. Resilience encompasses the ability to adapt and survive adverse circumstances such as environmental, societal, or economic shocks, or to cope and thrive given the challenges of everyday life.

Purpose

To understand how places across Wales have coped with the effects of the pandemic. Are there particular assets or characteristics some communities have, which can help them navigate successfully this new world we find ourselves in?

The pandemic presents an opportunity to re-think streets, spaces and buildings to support new models of social engagement and interaction focussed on making the best use of public and civic resources and connecting people. This can create a lasting impact, improving both the physical environment but also creating sustainable and vibrant town centres that are focused on improving people's wellbeing.

The pandemic can therefore be a catalyst to make change for a better future, but before we do that, we need to understand the building blocks that will help us along the way.

This research will be used to inform the development of a series of policy recommendations for the next Welsh Government and local authorities. We anticipate these recommendations will focus on which assets policymakers should prioritise for investment to build the resilience of Welsh places in the long term.

A two-phased approach

Given the disparity of place, the challenge was to achieve both a meaningful **coverage** and **spread** within the available resource and time scale. Hence, a two-phase approach was adopted to provide a breadth of coverage in phase 1 and a depth of enquiry in phase 2.

Phase 1

Initially an insight into the experience in twelve towns spread across Wales through:

— An initial desk based review of quantitative data from Understanding Welsh Places (UWP) and other published sources to inform the development of a brief attitudinal survey form.

— A phone/v-call survey based on a structured questionnaire with representatives of the private, public sector, and the voluntary sector (Town and Community Councils; Local decision makers; Local authorities; Local businesses; Third sector organisations; Community groups).

The survey was designed to capture respondents' perceptions of how well their towns have fared thus far in the course of the pandemic, and also record specific examples of the practice and experience that informed their assessment. Consistency was achieved across the interviewing team through utilising a topic guide. A beta version was field-tested and reviewed with one location.

A sample of towns across Wales were selected using the Understanding Welsh Places categorisations of place. The UWP website has classified 193 places into seven groups (1 – 7) based on K-means analysis of the variables.

The survey used both multiple choice and open-response questions:-

Multiple choice to 'measure' perceptions for inter-place and intra-place comparisons e.g., have sectors' experiences been different. Caution was exercised in drawing too many conclusions from the sample size however it did enable us to explore patterns that emerged.

Open-response questions were used to collect anecdotal evidence of how individual businesses, public sector workers, and community members responded spontaneously and independently to the stresses that Covid-19 had placed on their communities. We sought to capture how the places' characteristics helped or hindered the response.

Current evidence from the quantitative data was constrained by statistical time lag and data collection horizons. A useful collateral output in UWP terms was to identify the areas that would benefit from better data capture/dissemination.

The intended outputs were:

— An overview of the impact of and resilience of places to Covid from those who experienced it at first hand.

— To capture the anecdotal evidence on community responses illustrating the above and set it out thematically.

— To examine the ordering of the perception analysis and establish any correlation which might exist with the desk top research into place characteristics from the selected data sets against each of the towns.

— Produce an **issues paper** to both examine the soundness and reliability of conclusions drawn to date and enrich the approach to the second phase of research.

Phase 2

Following review of the first-phase outputs we undertook in the form of case studies more detailed analysis of 5 places selected from the initial 12. These were Bangor, Merthyr Tydfil, Porthcawl, Port Talbot and Rhyl.

Appendix B:
Topic guide, introduction and interview form

What is COVID-19 teaching us about the resilience of Welsh places?

Topic Guide, Boilerplate and Interview Form

Topic Guide - We are living in an era of volatility. Social, financial, and environmental challenges are not exceptional events but are constants. It has been argued that after the experience of structural change in the 1980s Welsh places had found a way to cope with economic adversity. However environmental and public health crises pose different threats.

Resilience suggests something beyond coping, not only the capacity to survive, but also to adapt and thrive. Are some communities doing better than others in this respect, and if so, what distinguishes them? Is it around organisational capacity, or the opportunity to exhibit individual and institutional initiative and innovation, or the extent to which community assets contribute to community life?

COVID-19 has presented a test like no other, both in its severity and ubiquity. No community has been left untouched as its impact has waxed and waned across the land. It has heightened our awareness of the need for strategies that can be relied on when called to respond. As yet we do not have a full understanding of its impact on the physical, mental, and economic health of the nation. This research aims to contribute to that by analysing the experience of people from different sectors right across Wales. What is their perception of Covid's impact on their organisations and the places in which they operate? What are the likely longer-term effects? To what extent have their communities been able to adapt and flex? And what attributes helped or hindered that process? This first stage will gather response across the breadth[27] (12/15 places) of the country. It aims to:

— Review the impact of COVID-19 from those who experienced it at first hand.

— Collect anecdotal evidence on community responses.

— Establish any correlation which might exist between the place characteristics of each of the 12 towns and the perceptions that arise from the surveys.

From the client's brief:

— To understand why particular places across Wales may have coped differently with the effects of the pandemic, viz the response to the pandemic itself, the economic resilience of a place, the wellbeing of people in their communities. Can we identify particular assets or characteristics some communities have, which can help them successfully navigate this new world?

— The pandemic presents an opportunity to re-think streets, spaces, and buildings to support new models of social engagement and interaction focussed on making the best use of public and civic resources and connecting people. This can create a lasting impact, improving both the physical environment but also creating sustainable and vibrant town centres that are focused on improving people's wellbeing.

Boilerplate introduction

Thank you for agreeing to take part in our exploration of what is COVID-19 teaching us about the resilience of Welsh places.

The Means has been appointed by the Institute of Welsh Affairs, Wales' leading think tank. The IWA is independent of government and political parties. It brings together experience and expertise from all backgrounds to come up with ideas to improve the economy, education, governance, health and social care and the media.

We will be interviewing representatives of public, private and voluntary sectors in a dozen or so places right across Wales.

For the purposes of this research, we are defining resilience as more than the capacity to cope with periodic crises. We're interested in how well different places can adapt and continue to thrive in the face of the diverse challenges that confront them – social, economic, environmental, and public health.

In particular, we'd like to gain a better understanding of how different places have fared and what factors have made a difference – for better and for worse. And we'd welcome your insight from the perspective of your **community**, your **sector** and your **organisation**.

The output of the research will be used to inform the debate on future policy.

1.   Interview Data: Undertaken by

Date of Interview:

Interviewee:

Organisation:

Town

Sector:

Voluntary -

Public   UA   /   Community

Private – *choose from list below*

Industries of employment (defined by UWP)

a.   Agriculture, forestry, fishing

b.   Health and Social Work

c.   Education

d.   Public Administration

e.   Support Services

f.   Professional, scientific, technical

g.   Real Estate

h.   Financial

i.   Communication

j.   Accommodation and food services

k.   Transport and storage

l.   Wholesale and retail

m.   Construction

n.   Manufacturing

o.   Mining, quarrying

2.   What challenges was your community facing as Covid19 arrived?

3.   What has been the impact of Covid 19 on your community?

Very serious impact, highlighting important concerns that need addressing in order to be prepared for further challenges of this scale

Significant impact, but it has proved manageable

Overall a relatively minor impact, but some significant stress points

No longer lasting impact, optimistic that it will recover gradually over time

4.   What are the local initiatives or community assets that have supported the community through the crisis?

5.   What has hampered or hindered or been unhelpful?

If no response prompt (and tick)

Lack of reliable information at a local / national level

Lack of collaboration between major stakeholders / agencies

Unpreparedness in contingency planning

Weakness in agencies – explore

Deficiencies in community assets – meeting places / community-based service delivery / parks and open spaces / schools

6. **So, overall how resilient has your community been**

very / adequately / barely resilient

7. **Next a question about partnership. To what extent has there been collaboration between sectors during the crisis?**

To a great extent

To some extent

Not much

None

Please give me the best example you can think of:

Lastly some questions on how your organisation has fared during the crisis

8. **To what degree has its resilience been tested?**

Severely

Substantially

To some extent

9. **Has your organisation made lasting changes in the way it delivers products or services?**

Yes

No

Can you give examples

10.   Finally, how do you assess the overall impact. Has the crisis:

Brought people together   y / n / not sure

Exposed gaps in planning and service provision   y / n / not sure

Hit some much harder than others   y / n / not sure

Highlighted the need for new approaches to place   y / n / not sure

11.   Is there anything else you would like to add?

Thank you again for taking part. If you would like to be kept informed about the outcomes of this research please respond to the e-mail we will send you if you would like to share your e-mail address.

Appendix C:
Understanding Welsh Places

http://www.understandingwelshplaces.wales/en/map/#alphabet

	Porthcawl	Bangor	Rhyl	Port Talbot	Merthyr
Population	15,672	17,988	25,149	37,276	43,820
Schools	5	10	8	14	21
Shops	101	175	185	184	273
Charities	47	51	46	64	88
Trustees	277	314	308	397	433
Number of people per hospital	0 *(0 hospitals)*	18,063	12,754	38,009	44,807
Number of people per GP and dentist	611	582	221	475	350
GP recorded mental health condition	25%	21%	34%	25%	26%
Households near green space	82%	87%	85%	76%	89%
Travel (public) time to sports facility	51	27	36	39	43
Travel (public) time to Library	32	30	34	28	35
Premises without broadband	2%	6%	1%	0%	2%
Jobs	3,655	13,560	7,300	14,080	19,130
Age: over 64 years	31.9%	11.7%	21.2%	20.1%	18.5%
Age: under 16 years	13.7%	14%	20.4%	17.5%	19.2%
Employed	55.3%	33.5%	52.7%	54.3%	56%
Unemployed	3.6%	3.3%	6.5%	4.9%	5.8%
Economically inactive	38.8%	49.2%	38.2%	38.6%	35.8%
Student	6.1%	47.7%	7.7%	6.4%	7.3%
Retired	23.6%	7.7%	17.3%	16.7%	15.4%
Qualifications Level 1	11.5%	7.7%	16.1%	15%	14.1%
Qualifications Level 2	14.6%	11.9%	16.8%	15.8%	14.9%
Qualifications Level 3	10.5%	33.2%	11%	10.7%	9.9%
Qualifications Level 4	31.3%	23.9%	15.3%	16.3%	18.1%
UWP Category	4	7	3	2	2