Our Future Wales consultation:
Analysis of responses

Introduction

In May 2020, the Welsh Government invited the public to send their thoughts on the actions needed to support post-COVID-19 recovery and reconstruction. This **report focuses on 685 of the 2,021 submissions to the consultation process received by the Welsh Government** which we have analysed in detail**.** It does not include the more than 900 responses which were part of a coordinated campaign and all made essentially the same points, which are already covered in other responses. Nor does it include responses that were very narrowly focussed on easing short-term lockdown measures since these no longer apply and are not relevant to the process of long-term recovery and reconstruction.

The responses are arranged under the **six thematic areas** which emerged from the analysis: Society; Economy; Environment; Health, Social Care, and Well-being; Political engagement; and Digital technology. The report also highlights two cross-cutting issues – inequalities and the future of work – which emerged strongly from the analysis.

Society

The main topics raised by responses in this area include education, housing, employment, and community building.

Education. A significant number of responses mentioned the need to **improve education and training in Wales** to 'build back better'. A particular concern was **the ability to retain young people in Wales** once they have completed their education and training. Potential ways to do this suggested by respondents included focussed interventions that **identify talented pupils and provide training opportunities which develop into sustained, well-paid employment**. Examples included a Future Leaders Academy or 'Real-Life Civil Service Fast Track' programme. There was support for **re-focusing education on play-based initiatives** to improve the development and well-being of younger children. In addition, some responses advocated a **greater emphasis on the environment and the natural world in the curriculum**. More broadly, questions were raised about how to introduce **practical, interactive, creative learning which could take place outdoors**, as well as allowing more 1:1 time in the school day. **Emotional and social well-being support for children in foster**

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care and the continuation of funding initiatives in this area were also areas which some respondents thought should be prioritised. Finally, respondents argued for **enhanced training of the education workforce.**

<u>Housing</u> - The primary concern here was **the provision of affordable, suitable housing,** including the supply and quality of **housing for vulnerable people**. There was support for **investment in private sector housing renewal**, especially to limit the risk of COVID-19 infection. Other submissions proposed the use of **sustainable energy sources** for homes in Wales and a move to a 'Net Zero' status. There was frustration expressed over **second home ownership** and the impact this has on pricing-out the local population. Finally, to address homelessness, it was suggested **turning vacant houses and retail or office units that are vacated as a result of the pandemic into housing**.

<u>Employment</u> - **Working from home** was the main topic with respondents emphasising the positive impact on reducing stress levels, the ability to balance work with home/social commitments and having more time to take part in physical exercise. However, some respondents highlighted the downsides of home working such as **loneliness and social isolation**. On balance, responses suggested that in the future, a **mixture of home-based working and office-based activity would be preferable**.

<u>Community-building</u> - This term covers several strategies to improve community cohesion across Wales. The period of lockdown saw **communities supporting each other without the need for government intervention**. Respondents believed that there is a need to **build on these positive community initiatives.** Actions could include **increasing the provision of community spaces** and **providing training programmes and funding to help people establish new community groups**, and some respondents were opposed to funding initiatives that allocated funding through competition. By addressing these needs, it was said that communities will be able to build stronger, more cohesive community bonds.

Economy

The two main proposals in this area concerned providing improved support for Welsh-owned businesses and the circular economy.

<u>Welsh-owned businesses</u> - Submissions argued for **better business development in the shape of government schemes, initiatives, and funding streams** that encourage the growth of businesses in Wales. They suggested that there is an opportunity to support Wales' capacity

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as a **hub for creative industries as well as the 'brand' of Welsh produce**, particularly food and drink, drawing comparisons to a similar initiative in Cornwall.

Circular economy - Many responses advocated the development of a circular economy and Kate Raworth's 'Doughnut' economic model (which sets out a vision for an equitable and sustainable economy by bringing social and environmental concerns together in one single approach). It was argued that Wales is well-placed to develop a similar model, and there is now a greater need to make a 'bold economic move' such as this.

Environment

In addition to focusing on the climate crisis in 'rebuilding' after the COVID-19 pandemic, the main issues raised by respondents in relation to the environment were the 'green economy', rewilding, agriculture, green spaces, food production and green transport.

The 'green economy' - There were calls for the economy in Wales to be based on **sustainable energy supplies** from wind, water, and solar power. Wales is seen by most respondents as a country that is well-placed to develop sustainable energy, notwithstanding some opposition to the development of wind farms.

Rewilding, agriculture, and green spaces - Submissions highlighted how Wales's greatest asset is its natural environment and this needed better protection. Initiatives could include "re-wilding, forest for harvesting, short rotation forestry and short rotation coppice" and limiting the number of grass cuts of verges and hedges. This will also require "reducing the number of animals we graze, and the area of land used to grow food for animals" and better management of uplands. It was suggested that every local area could also receive support for a 'back to nature' green space open to all.

Food production - Respondents wanted the Welsh Government to encourage shopping locally and growing your own food. A "Welsh National Food Service that aims to eliminate food insecurity and tackle the interconnected issues of social isolation and food waste" was proposed. It was suggested that food labelling should be strengthened across the retail, food service and hospitality sectors to allow the consumer to be able to make informed purchasing decisions.

Green transport - Many proposals regarding green transport wanted more cycle paths to decrease reliance on cars and public transport by making it safer to cycle to and from work. There was support for additional investment in Electric Vehicle charging infrastructure. Some

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proposals went further and suggested that sales of petrol and diesel vehicles were banned to improve air quality, especially in cities such as Cardiff.

Health, social care, and wellbeing

Responses about health and social care focused on improving the quality of care provision in Wales, well-being, and health inequalities.

<u>Quality of care</u> - It was suggested that there is a need to **better train and pay those that care for the sick and vulnerable**. There were calls to integrate health and social care - "Wales should lead on creating a National Care Service (NCS), that is locally delivered and extends the NHS's free-to-all principle to social care". Respondents also advocated further training and support to enable sensitive discussions between clinicians and patients about **end of life care**.

<u>Well-being</u> - Respondents argued in favour of initiatives promoting well-being including **spending more time outdoors and interacting with the natural world**, a **better work-life balance**, and **support for access to healthy, affordable food and physical exercise**. Ideas included more training across NHS and social care to enable staff to broach "a conversation of 'how are you really'"; making mental health stress management techniques part of the curriculum; better provision in the workplace (physically or virtually) to avoid burnout; and a need to **deal with the backlog of poor mental health linked to various forms of abuse and isolation during lockdown**.

<u>Health inequalities</u> - Concerns were expressed about **unequal healthcare provision in rural Wales** as opposed to urban areas. This includes primary care, mental health services, and community care, as well as the **accessibility of services** such as outpatient appointments and GP services.

Political engagement

There are three key elements to this theme: increasing opportunities for citizens to be involved in decision-making; a desire for Wales to distinguish itself from Westminster; and delivery of the Well-being of Future Generations Act.

<u>Increased democratic participation of citizens</u> - There were multiple responses advocating the introduction of Citizens' Assemblies, as well as calls for other citizen-led democratic methods to put citizens at the heart of decision-making.

<u>Future of devolution and independence</u> - There was support for an **independent Wales**. Respondents who stopped short of this advocated **more devolved powers for Wales** and

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argued that the Welsh Government should **distinguish itself from the UK Government** more clearly. A **clearer communication strategy and stronger messaging from the Welsh Government** about policies and initiatives, especially regarding COVID-19, was also recommended.

The Well-being of Future Generations Act - Many proposals stressed **the need to deliver on the duties of the Well-being of Future Generations Act**. For example, one respondent argued that "Wales can again be a shining example, by putting environment sustainability and fairness at the heart of our economy and COVID-19 recovery plan".

Digital technology

Responses were focused on digital inequalities, as well as the potential of digital to improve productivity.

Digital access and literacy - Concerns were expressed about digital inequalities in Wales, mostly in terms of **broadband speed**, but also in terms of **access to technology and the ability to use it**. The provision in rural areas is poorer than in urban areas and this **impedes the ability to conduct business** and/or stay in touch with family and friends. For example, one business explained that they are unable to move to digital because current broadband provision does not allow them to conduct online meetings effectively. It was felt that now was the ideal time to support digital skills training to upskill the Welsh workforce.

Economic productivity - The increased use of digital technology was seen by some as a way for Wales to address its productivity problems; improve **industrial digitalisation** as piloted in the Made Smarter North West initiative; and increase **fiscal incentives for Research and Development (R&D).**

Inequalities

One of the cross-cutting themes to emerge strongly from the responses was perceived age, race and gender inequalities within Welsh society. Respondents argued that the **Welsh Government needs to do more to facilitate a fairer and more equal society by narrowing the gap between the affluent and those in need**.

Digital inequality - As mentioned above, respondents argued that we need better broadband in rural areas, and measures to overcome digital exclusion because of a lack of training or access to equipment, and poor connectivity.

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Wage injustice - In-work poverty, the perceived lack of pay rises in line with inflation, and the view that 'key workers' (particularly, care workers and retail staff) are not paid enough for the work that they do were common themes. There was also some support for the introduction of a Universal Basic Income in Wales.

Health inequality - In addition to geographical inequality, there is also a small but strong collection of submissions that mention the Welsh Government's commitment to the social definition of disability and argue that more needs to be done to allow disabled people access to public spaces.

Minority groups - Several submissions highlight how the COVID-19 pandemic is having a differential impact on certain groups. It was suggested that the elderly are being discriminated against because of lockdown measures, and there needs to be a specific plan to manage health risks in the workplace for BAME communities. Other responses mentioned access to healthcare and information (e.g. on abuse and domestic violence) for women and girls during the pandemic. For those people living with disabilities, there was a concern about the risk of current measures having a negative impact on them and how safe access to services could be improved.

Future of Work

The second cross-cutting theme was the 'future of work' in post-lockdown Wales. A common thread in the responses are questions about **how the way we work will be affected by COVID-19 and the lockdown period**. Many respondents felt that working from home had improved both their productivity and their ability to balance their work and home lives, and some raised issues about returning to a safe working environment. There were queries, however, about the **ability of people to cope with using different forms of digital technology**, particularly older people, and those from lower socio-economic groups. It was felt that these new working arrangements could provide **employment opportunities** (for instance, in the culture, digital and wider knowledge economy) **and locally-focused regeneration schemes**, either by private enterprise or government-funded schemes. More generally, a common theme is that **the infrastructure of Wales will need to be adjusted in response to the pandemic**, and that the Welsh Government needs to take this opportunity to **provide training and apprenticeship programmes for young people who are not in education, employment or training**. Furthermore, some respondents expressed fears about the potential 'drain' of talent as people move away from Wales for employment. Areas that are suggested for particular focus include

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the digital and creative economy, the knowledge economy, construction, and green energy. Although job retention and creation were mentioned in submissions, there were no substantive proposals put forward to help people stay in their jobs. Some submissions argue for the need to **rethink employment as part of a broader economic strategy** including home building, decarbonisation, and digital infrastructure.

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