GIG CYMRU NHS WALES | Iechyd Cyhoeddus Cymru / Public Health Wales

Iechyd Rhyngwladol / International Health

International Horizon Scanning and Learning to Inform Wales' COVID-19 Public Health Response and Recovery

Summary Calendar UPDATE
April 2021 – March 2022

Canolfan Gydweithredol Sefydliad Iechyd y Byd ar Fuddsoddi ar gyfer Iechyd a Llesiant

World Health Organization Collaborating Centre on Investment for Health and Well-being

Background Information

The rapidly evolving nature and uncertainties of the COVID-19 pandemic have led to unprecedented challenges for health systems, as well as to long-lasting well-being, social and economic impacts for societies. To understand, mitigate and address these, a joined-up, collaborative, timely, and evidence-informed public health action has been essential across all governance levels, sectors and stakeholders, nationally and internationally. Continuous and timely learning from the experience of other countries and the emerging evidence and guidance, provided by key international organisations, is critical to inform such actions, approaches and decision-making processes in Wales.

International Horizon Scanning and Learning

The International Horizon Scanning and Learning work stream was initiated by the World Health Organization Collaborating Centre on Investment for Health and Well-being (hereafter referred to as WHO CC), Public Health Wales, to inform the COVID-19 public health response and recovery plans in Wales. It focuses primarily on COVID-19 international evidence, experience, measures as well as transition and recovery approaches and explores solutions and measures to mitigate the emerging health, wellbeing, social and economic impacts (potential harms and benefits). The work stream contributes to a healthier, more equal, resilient, prosperous and globally responsible Wales. The focus of the reports primarily lies on COVID-19 international evidence, experience, measures as well as transition and recovery approaches, to understand and explore solutions for addressing the on-going and emerging health, wellbeing, social and economic impacts (potential harms and benefits).

Relevant international evidence is extracted, synthesised and formulated into high level timely reports. The reports include a variety of data sources including scientific literature, government communications and non-governmental organisations' reports and analysis. The methodological approach involves a three step process consisting of a scoping review, evidence synthesis and final edit. This systematic approach aims to provide dynamic, up-to-date, actionable intelligence and communicate key findings, allowing for the report to be concise and easily understandable.

All International Horizon Scanning and Learning reports from April 2020 to date can be found [here](#).

The International Horizon Scanning Reports: Methodology

The International Horizon Scanning reports have been published regularly since April 2020, synthesising data, evidence and empirical learning from key organisations, research and relevant countries. To gain an understanding and overview of the current available national and international evidence in regards to COVID-19, the reports include a variety of data sources including scientific literature, government communications and non-governmental organisations' reports and analysis. The methodological approach involves a three step process consisting of a scoping review, evidence synthesis and final edit. This systematic approach aims to provide dynamic up-to-date actionable intelligence and communicate key findings, allowing for the report to be concise and easily understandable.

International Horizon Scanning and Learning: Summary Calendar

This International Horizon Scanning and Learning Summary Calendar is an update from the previous Summary Calendar which can be found [here](#) and covered the period of April 2020 through to March 2021. This Summary Calendar has collated, synthesised and presented a clear and concise summary of the COVID-19 International Horizon Scanning Reports over the past year, since April 2021 through to March 2022. The International Horizon Scanning and Learning work stream has proved to showcase informative and impactful research whilst collating data from other countries and has provided guidance, recommendations and useful insights regarding the evolving nature and uncertainties of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has sought to improve and inform such actions and approaches in Wales. The summary aims to inform a succinct overview of comprehensive, coherent, inclusive and evidence-informed policy action, which has supported and continues to support the national strategies towards a healthier, more equal, resilient, prosperous and globally responsible Wales. This calendar includes key messages and key recommendations from the high level synthesis page of each International Horizon Scanning report.

This document is best viewed on a desktop or laptop computer using Adobe Acrobat Reader (available [here](#) as a free download).

Contents

# International Horizon Scanning, 22nd April 2021

Key Findings

Global COVID-19 vaccination rollout:

- Vaccination rates vary significantly across the globe, with poorer countries reporting lower rates than seen in high-income countries - lower rates may be attributed, in part, to delays in supplies, vaccine hesitancy and mixed messaging
- Vaccine nationalism has emerged with the richest nations pushing to get first access to supply and potentially stock piling key elements for their production
  - The economic cost of this is predicted to be high potentially costing $1.2 trillion per year of the world's economy and $119 billion per year to high-income countries
- Equitable access to vaccination is essential and is being made possible through schemes such as the COVAX fund, which aims to accelerate the development and manufacturing of vaccines to guarantee fair and equitable access across for all countries
- The higher the proportion of the population that is vaccinated, the fewer opportunities COVID-19 will have to spread and mutate
- There are emerging concerns regarding the efficacy of vaccines against new variants of concern (VOCs), however there are plans to make modifications to existing vaccinations is order to address VOC

- Vaccine trials among children are expanding and the vaccination age is lowering

International travel measures:

- Decisions to implement travel measures, adjustments and discontinuation of risk mitigation measures should be based on thorough risk assessments that are conducted systematically and regularly
- Current evidence supports a combined approach to quarantine and testing of travellers. A pre-departure test (or test directly upon arrival) combined with quarantine and a further test five to seven days after arrival to confirm the possibility of being released from quarantine if the test is negative
- Countries across the world are considering the possibility of introducing COVID-19 vaccine passports or certificates, aiming to confirm vaccination status and demonstrate protection / lack of infectiousness to allow individuals to travel or attend large gatherings
  - However, concerns have been raised due to the unknown efficacy of vaccination on transmission rates and the possible risk that vaccine passports could increase inequality in access and opportunity

Country Insight
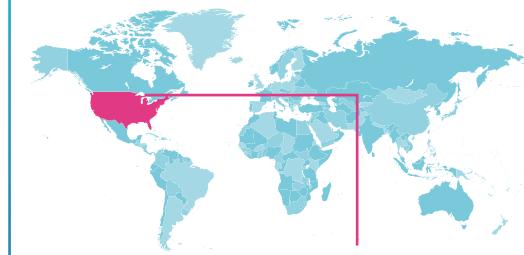
Timeline and epidemiological update in Wales

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International Horizon Scanning, 13th May 2021

Key Findings

Long COVID:

- 'Long COVID' / 'Post-COVID Syndrome' or 'Post-acute COVID' is an emerging condition, which can cause persisting ill health and a wide range of lasting symptoms

- It is not yet well understood, however growing evidence suggests it is common and debilitating. The most prevalent symptoms, associated with Long COVID include chronic fatigue, difficulty breathing, chest pain, joint/muscle pain, persistent cough, difficulty concentrating / cognitive dysfunction, headache, loss of smell/taste, and others

- Prevalence hard to determine as surveillance is not yet consistent across Europe, and studies across different countries vary significantly

- Evidence suggests that Long COVID is associated with age, female sex, number of symptoms in the acute phase, hospitalisation, certain co-morbidities and risk factors

- There are currently no specific tests or treatments; monitoring, surveillance and research; and patient involvement are instrumental to addressing Long COVID

Telework due to COVID-19:

- Social distancing measures to contain COVID-19 have increased the prevalence of 'telework', including working from home (remote) and flexible working

- The prevalence of telework varies substantially between countries, sectors, and occupations before and after the COVID-19 pandemic
  - Findings suggest that telework appears to be more prevalent among those who are better qualified and skilled, and higher paid

- Advantages of teleworking include increased productivity, reduced commute and cost of living & reduced air pollution

- Disadvantages of teleworking include lack of skills/training resources, lack of health and safety guidelines, security issues, work/home interference, and loneliness & isolation

- National and local government policies are instrumental in successfully implementing telework in the long-term

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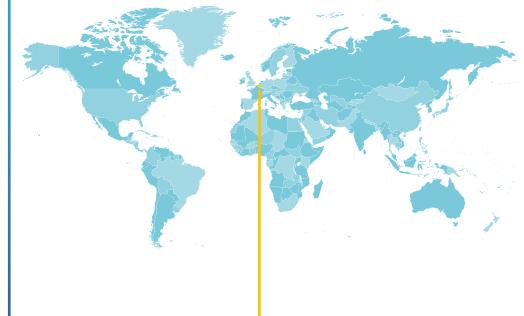
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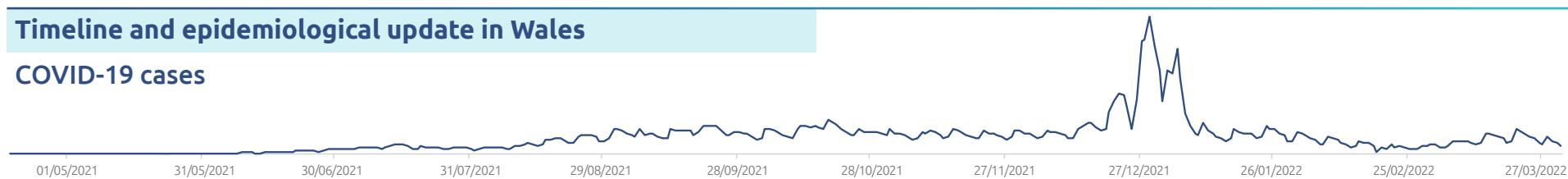
Key Findings

COVID-19 vaccine uptake across the world

- There are a number of factors that are consistently reported to have an impact on vaccine uptake globally, including age, sex, education, ethnicity and income
  - Globally, over 70% of people are likely to accept a COVID-19 vaccine, ranging from 29% in Kazakhstan to 95% in Extremadura, Spain
- Long-term, the underlying structural factors that generate health inequity should be addressed, combined with actions to address inequity of COVID-19 vaccine uptake to protect the most vulnerable in society
- Levels of confidence in the COVID-19 vaccine vary over time and influence uptake, this impacts upon vaccine hesitancy, which may be a problem in the global effort to control COVID-19 and has the potential to derail the current successes if not managed effectively

Re-opening policies

- Most countries have produced a staged plan to lift infection prevention control measures, with social distancing and compulsory mask use lifted last
  - Most countries include the percentage of population vaccinated in the suite of factors to consider, prior to lifting restrictions
- Decisions on removal of infection prevention control measures must be made based on the best available data for that country at the time
- Re-opening policies should not increase inequity: an assessment of the differential impact on different groups should be considered prior to re-opening to avoid unintended consequences

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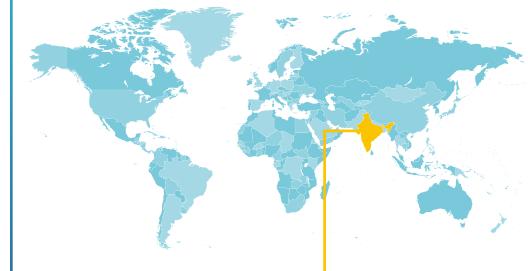
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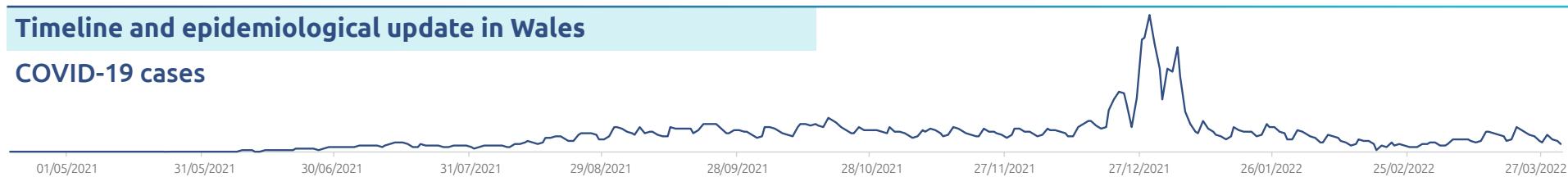
International Horizon Scanning, 1st July 2021

Key Findings

COVID-19 impact on education and schooling practices:

- School closures have caused disruption to learners across the globe, with a total of 167 country wide closures being recorded at the peak of school disruptions
- Early analysis predict that children from disadvantaged background are most likely to be affected by school closures
  - Plans should take account of the needs of vulnerable groups and existing disadvantage so as not to widen the educational attainment gap further
- The impact of COVID-19 on children's physical and mental health should be mitigated by applying appropriate interventions which balance the needs of children to play and learn
- Initiatives, such as increased public health messages in schools, parental engagement in children's education and increased use of technology, can be utilised to improve future educational programmes

Environmental impact of COVID-19:

- Non-pharmaceutical interventions have been related to lower levels of air pollutants and particulate matter across cities worldwide, however this may not be sustained
- The use of personal protective equipment (PPE) has increased over the course of the pandemic, this creates an environmental issue
- Further research is necessary to find sustainable solutions and mitigation measures to reduce the environmental impact of PPE waste
  - More environmentally friendly alternatives to PPE use have been proposed including hand sanitisers, social distancing and reusable masks

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# International Horizon Scanning, 22nd July 2021

Key Findings

COVID-19 impact on employment security:

- The workforce has experienced unprecedented disruption due to COVID-19; 93 per cent of the world's workers were within countries with some form of workplace closure measure in place at the start of 2021
  - The hardest hit sectors include manufacturing, accommodation and food services, wholesale and retail trade and real estate and business activity
- However, this has not been felt equally by all workers, employment losses among temporary and part-time workers, including agency workers, have been greater than among employees with regular contracts
  - Those in vulnerable and disadvantaged groups are more likely to find themselves in precarious employment. This causes significant health inequalities
- Precarious employment circumstances can propel the onward transmission of COVID-19 as there is less access to sick pay which is necessary for cases and contacts who are asked to stay away from the workplace

- There are clear links between employment insecurity and mental health in crisis situations and there is mounting international evidence that precarious employment has independently had an impact on mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic

Recognition of Long COVID

- 'Long COVID' (also called 'Post-COVID Syndrome' or 'Post-acute COVID') is a long lasting condition following an infection with SARS-Cov-2.33
- The condition is not yet well understood, but 'Long COVID' causes persistent ill-health with a wide range of long lasting symptoms including but not limited to fatigue, chest pain, shortness of breath and forgetfulness
- There is no one officially recognised definition for Long COVID and the condition is still not officially recognised as an occupational illness in a number of countries. This complicates diagnostic and support measures for affected individuals
- A number of grass roots support groups have been established throughout Europe in order to advocate on behalf of those experiencing Long COVID
- Further research into Long COVID is needed to understand the impact and support people

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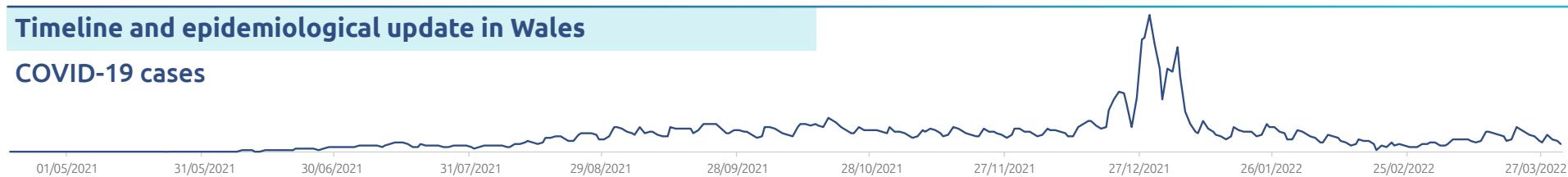
# International Horizon Scanning, 12th August 2021

Key Findings

Mental health service recovery from COVID-19:

- The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has had detrimental effects on mental health services worldwide
- Throughout the pandemic there has been a call for investment in mental health and some countries have included mental health services explicitly in their COVID-19 recovery plans
  - A global survey of 130 countries found that 89% of countries have mental health and psychosocial support as part of their COVID-19 response plan, however, only 17% of these countries have allocated additional funding to support this
- The pandemic has accelerated the development of alternative ways of working, including the growth of digital mental health support. This will need to be sustained, where appropriate, to meet increasing demand, however, a more fundamental change to rectify inequity in society is essential to address population level mental well-being
- Data collection and management is key to understanding unmet and emerging needs, and planning comprehensive mental health services, but enough trained staff are also essential to meet this need
- Moving into recovery, additional resourcing of mental health services is essential, and whole-of-society and evidence based mental health interventions are needed with sustainable funding to support their implementation

The impact of COVID-19 on vulnerable groups

- Many vulnerable groups experienced worse mental health outcomes due to the pandemic than the general population, and now need mental health support to recover
  - Older people are identified as a group that has experienced a disproportionate impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, and this was made worse by digital exclusion
- A number of groups with specific health conditions, such as the immunocompromised, continue to be affected by the pandemic. Efforts should be made to keep vulnerable groups safe, without further exacerbating health inequity
- Some screening programmes were suspended and there are backlogs to work through, work is also needed to help people feel safe to attend for subsequent diagnostic tests in order to prevent further health harm
- The ongoing and wider impact on the whole household of having a person in the house that is clinically vulnerable should be recognised and support offered to households, for example by

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educational and workplaces recognising the challenges this brings

- Where reported, there was largely patient satisfaction with switching to telemedicine for vulnerable groups, where this is appropriate, this should be maintained

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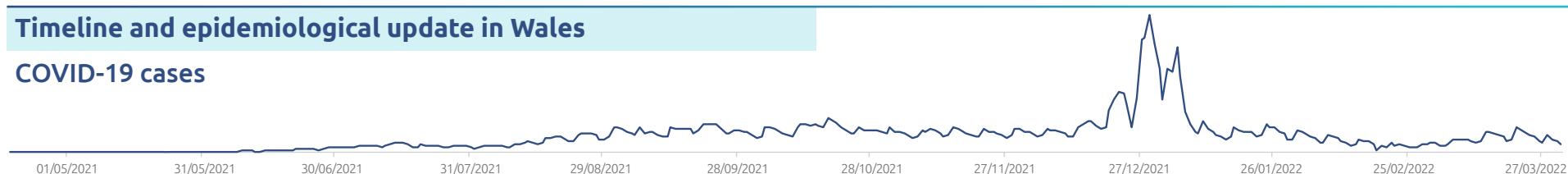
International Horizon Scanning, 10th September 2021

Key Findings

Re-opening of educational settings

- Recommendations and protective measures are still in place in many countries mainly related to hand hygiene and respiratory etiquette, physical distancing, use of masks in schools, environmental cleaning and ventilation and respecting procedures for isolation of all people with symptoms
- Testing forms a crucial element of re-opening, with speed of delivery of the COVID-19 test results being an important factor, also many countries have started encouraging educational settings to promote vaccination amongst all eligible individuals
  - All of the advice for tertiary students includes Universities helping international students understand the local restrictions and requirements of their destination country to aid successful integration and minimise risk

The impact of COVID-19 on people with a disability

- People with a disability may face greater risk of contracting COVID-19 and are also disproportionately impacted by service disruptions: this is a health equity issue
- International recommendations suggest a disability inclusive and human rights based COVID-19 response
- People with a variety of disabilities should be involved in developing COVID-19 recovery solutions that meet their diverse needs
- All public health messaging should be fully accessible, and communicated regularly

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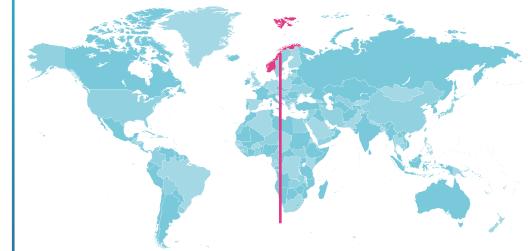
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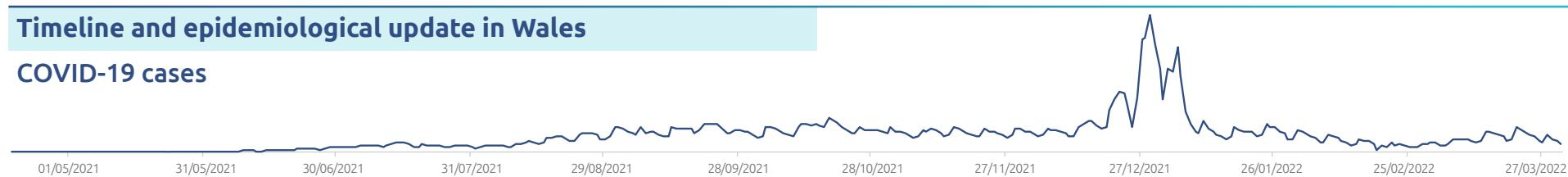
Key Findings

COVID-19 vaccine update:

- The COVID-19 vaccines have proven to be effective in reducing the number of people being hospitalised and needing intensive care treatment for COVID-19
- Key factors that determine vaccine efficacy include:
  - Protection against infection
  - Protections against disease
  - Prevention against transmission
  - Protection against severe disease and death
- The existing vaccine certificate/passport programmes internationally take two shapes – certificates designed for easier international travel and those designed for domestic purposes to gain access to facilities and services

The impact of COVD-19 on people from the LGBTQ+ community:

- Discrimination against people from the LGBTQ+ community still exists and is reported to have increased during the pandemic, this must be rectified
- People from the LGBTQ+ community still experience problems both accessing health care and utilising healthcare services, this must be remedied, or health inequities will continue to increase
- Structural issues such as housing, poverty and employment play an important role, and any recovery plan should explicitly outline how these structural issues will be addressed

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International Horizon Scanning, 25th November 2021

Key Findings

Winter 2021/22 COVID-19 planning:

- Much of Europe is struggling with a further wave of COVID-19 and as such winter plans in Europe are focussed around the re-introduction of restrictions, including mandatory mask use together with limitations on people mixing (particularly indoors)

- Most countries have clear 'step-up' and 'step-down' plans based on prior experience ready to implement swiftly should circumstances change. The metrics used to make decisions to step up and down are similar and most often feature pressure on the health services and intensive care units

- From the international literature, there appear to be two main drivers of differences in COVID-19 infection rates that are amenable to change (seen both within countries and between countries). These are the levels of vaccine uptake and the use of non-pharmaceutical interventions in addition to vaccines, e.g. working from home, mask use etc

The impact of COVID-19 on older people

- COVID-19 is having a differential impact on older people with increased age appearing to be a risk factor for poorer health outcomes especially hospitalisation and mortality

- Many countries reported difficulty in keeping COVID-19 out of long-term care facilities

- Factors that are important in the management of COVID-19 in a long-term care facility include careful adherence to infection control measures, adequate staffing levels, access to personal protective equipment and good leadership

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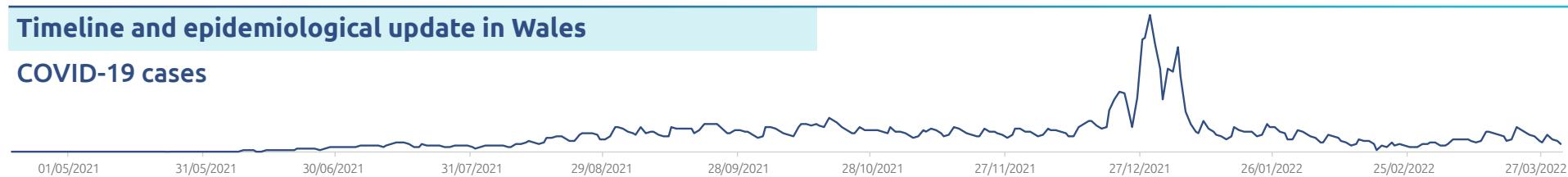
International Horizon Scanning, 17th December 2021

Key Findings

The impact of COVID-19 in ethnic minority groups

- The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated existing inequalities both within and between countries
- The structural inequalities in society that generate differential health outcomes need to be addressed for COVID-19 and beyond
- Differences in vaccine uptake by ethnic group have been explored as part of the pandemic response but there is more to do to address these differences and increase uptake
- Language as a barrier to access health services has long been identified as an issue: all public health messages must be accessible to the population
- Access to online health services may increase health inequalities if not managed carefully

COVD-19 scientific advice to governments

From the survey we conducted we found:

- In all countries that responded COVID-19 responsibilities still lie with the government
- All countries that responded had established scientific advisory groups to help governments make evidence based decisions
- The frequency of meetings was the primary method of flexing the support needed with more or less frequent meetings depending on the stage of the pandemic

countries which responded to the survey: Belgium Burkina Faso, Canada, Germany, Israel, Italy, Netherlands, South Africa, Spain

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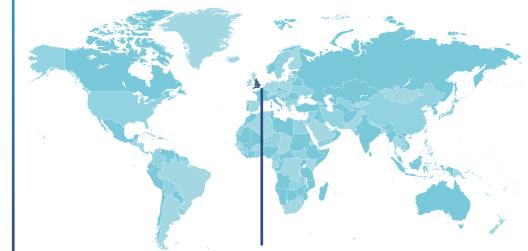
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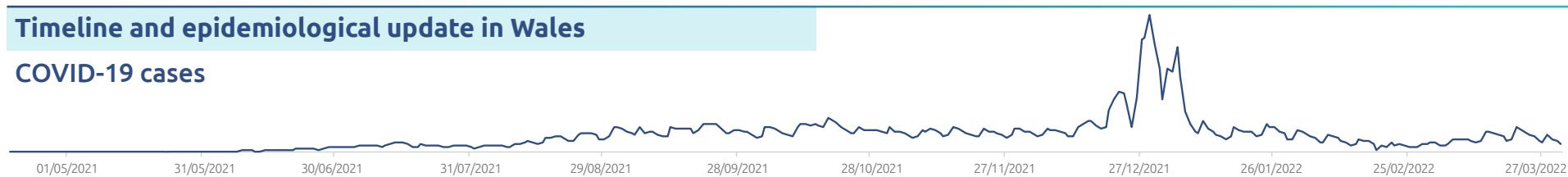
# International Horizon Scanning, 27th January 2022

Key Findings

The impact of COVID-19 on children

- The COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on children, particularly with regard to mental well-being and child development

- The economic impact of COVID-19 on household income has an impact on families, and therefore on children. Living in poverty directly impacts upon children's experience of education, health, housing, nutrition and sanitation

- Food insecurity for children is a serious public health issue, and the provision of nutritious, school meals for vulnerable children is an important measure to tackle this

- There have been considerable shifts in play activities in children, with active outdoor play being replaced by indoor activities: opportunities to play outdoors need to be re-introduced and bolstered to support child development and mental well-being. The decrease in physical activity and increase in sedentary behaviour in children should not become the new norm, urgent and sustained effort is needed to redress this or serious health issues will be stored up for the future

- The confidence that women have in their maternity services being provided in a 'COVID secure' environment is key to boosting attendance at these important appointments and essential to helping children have the best start in life

- Countries such as USA, Canada and Brazil are all vaccinating children from 5 years up, and research is underway on COVID-19 vaccination for children under 5 years. Policy makers will need to consider the broad risk-benefit balance when considering the vaccination of children

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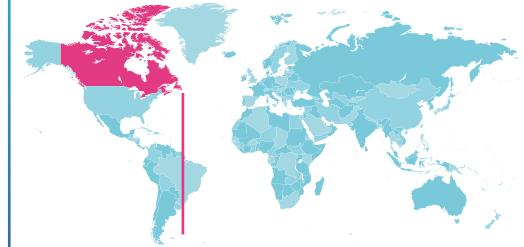
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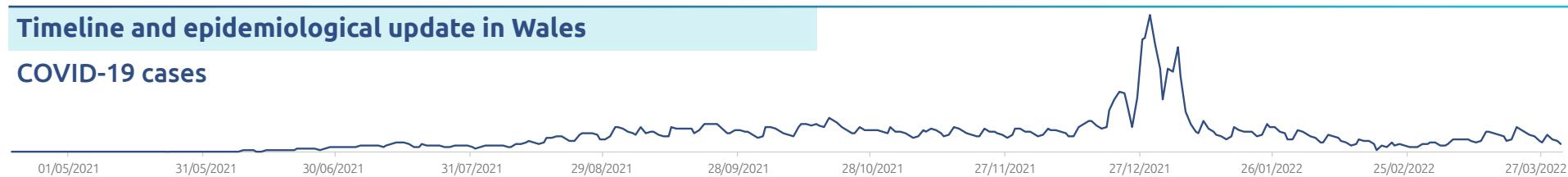
International Horizon Scanning, 10th March 2022

## Key Findings

COVID-19 vaccine equity

- Stark differences in COVID-19 vaccine supply have been observed between countries

- Access to essential medicines, including vaccines, is a prerequisite for the fundamental human right to health for all, and this must be addressed as a key public health issue

- Many more vaccines are being tested and this market should continue to expand offering new opportunities to improve vaccine equity

- COVID-19 vaccine strategies should continue to prioritise prevention of severe disease

- Supporting the transfer of technology, together with training staff and improving access to ingredients and equipment, so that countries can produce their own vaccine supplies, appears to be a successful solution

COVID-19 excess mortality

- Monitoring excess mortality provides an understanding of the impact of COVID-19 during the pandemic

- Excess deaths are based on an assumption of an 'average' year given the trends in death rates and demographic change, they are predictions, we cannot know what would have happened if the pandemic had not occurred

- The patterns in excess mortality reflect the waves of virus circulating in different countries at different times

- Public health interventions, such as vaccination, have had an impact on excess deaths

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The International Horizon Scanning and Learning reports are developed by the International Health Team at the WHO Collaborating Centre on Investment for Health and Well-being (WHO CC), Public Health Wales.

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