

Green Opportunities

Supporting Wales' COVID-19 Green Recovery by identifying opportunities
to support population health through sustainable means

Winter 2020



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The pandemic is a wake up call for humanity. It has brought incredible challenges and exposed deep structural inequalities in our economy and society, including health inequalities, food poverty and racial disparity. We have captured learning and identified best practice to support the delivery and implementation of the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act (WFG Act), which could be used as a framework to help us achieve a green recovery, to ensure that we are all working to create a healthy, fair and sustainable future for Wales.

Guest Foreword

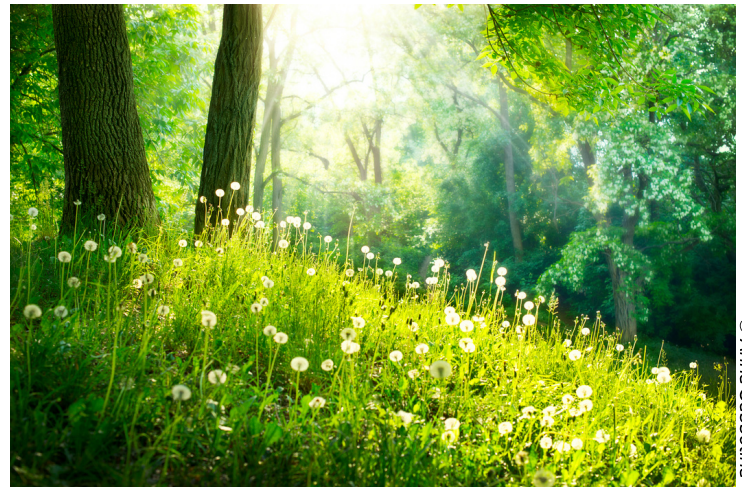
Since March 2020 our world has fundamentally changed. The shock of the Covid-19 pandemic has opened our eyes to the reality that things we take for granted can change overnight. This is exactly what environmental scientists have been warning us about for thirty years. However, as we rebuild from the pandemic, we have an opportunity to make the changes needed to create a world in which people can thrive without harming the environment that supports them. In Wales, the Well-being of Future Generations Act and Environment Act provide the public sector with a legal and moral duty to build back better and greener.

Everyone has been affected by the pandemic, just as the environmental crisis threatens every household. The environment is not something separate from us, it is what we eat, drink and breathe. We can do something about climate change and halt the destruction of nature. As with Covid-19, we have to turn and face our threats. In the words of the International Panel on Climate Change "no action is too small".

Rhodri Thomas, Cynnal Cymru



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Green Recovery

In 2019, Welsh Government declared a Climate Emergency for Wales and published its first Low Carbon Plan, Prosperity for All: A Low Carbon Wales, which reinforces the ambition for the public sector in Wales to be carbon neutral by 2050.

Earlier this year the World Health Organization (WHO) declared Covid-19 a global health emergency, stating that the pandemic is a reminder of the delicate relationship between people and planet. The WHO Manifesto for a healthy recovery from Covid-19 prescribes six actionable areas, focusing on biodiversity, climate change (covering energy, water,

travel, food, waste and consumption), green space and fossil fuel divestment.

Given the integral connection between the environment, health and the economy, the WHO Manifesto identifies the importance of working together to rethink how we use natural resources, promote healthy sustainable food systems, integrate health into all aspects of urban planning and invest in essential services to ensure everyone has access to clean water and sanitation. It is also essential to stop funding pollution through fossil fuel subsidies and transition to clean energy to improve air quality and save lives.

The WHO Manifesto provides a structure for all policy decision makers to guide recovery to promote a healthier, fairer and greener world, while investing to restore the economy. At a local level, the WFG Act, which mirrors the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals for Wales, provides a framework to implement the WHO Manifesto, while responding to and learning from the pandemic.



Wildlife Garden from Keep Wales Tidy

To begin the process of decarbonisation, NHS Wales Shared Services Partnership (NWSSP) undertook an assessment with the Carbon Trust covering all carbon emissions, to produce the NHS Wales Carbon Footprint Report 2018-19. The results of this are being used to develop the NHS Wales Decarbonisation Strategic Delivery Plan, which will act as the core response to support the climate emergency in Wales.

Over the border, NHS England recently committed to becoming 'Carbon net zero' by 2040, following growing evidence of the health impacts of climate change and air pollution. The NHS Net Zero Report sets out how the health service has already cut its carbon footprint and examines a number of key areas critical to carbon reduction across NHS England.



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Supporting biodiversity

The pandemic has had a major impact on the ability of the public sector to respond to the S6 biodiversity duty, (Environment (Wales) Act 2016), with practical nature projects and monitoring efforts delayed. In addition, pressure on public spaces, such as parks and beaches, has led to antisocial behaviour and an increase in littering, including discarded PPE, triggering a negative impact on biodiversity.

Positively, people have embraced nature, seeking out wildlife in their gardens, parks and the wider countryside and participating in outdoor exercise with improved physical and mental health benefits. All of this highlights the importance of the relationship between people and planet. Organisations have realised that nature rich space is an asset to public health, and continued to implement biodiversity projects, while adhering to national Covid-19 guidelines.

Biodiversity and zoonotic disease

The World Wildlife Fund (WWF) Living Planet Report 2020 highlights how the loss of biodiversity, due to humanity's destruction of nature, is directly linked to the increased likelihood of pandemics, with the potential to wreak havoc on health, economies and global security.

About 60% of infectious diseases are zoonotic - transmitted from animal to human - and slightly over 70% of the zoonotic infections are caused by pathogens that originate in wildlife. Nature-depleting human activities, including intensive farming and deforestation, displace species and bring more people into contact with wild animals creating the perfect opportunity for zoonotic disease. A recent WWF report is calling for urgent action to protect biodiversity and reduce the risk of future pandemics like Covid-19.

Did you know?

Seventy-five per cent of all emerging diseases are zoonotic

What can we do?

Preventing deforestation and maintaining healthy biodiversity can reduce the conditions that cause the spread of zoonoses.

Organisations can support biodiversity and prevent the decline of nature both directly, through sustainable land management to safeguard species and habitats, and indirectly, by embedding biodiversity throughout the decision making process at all levels - for example, through procurement, such as procuring Fairtrade cotton uniforms in place of unsustainably sourced cotton, and through infrastructure, such as sustainable drainage.

The campaign 'Deforestation Free Nation', from climate change charity Size of Wales, calls on public bodies to eliminate imported deforestation from their supply chains by avoiding unsustainably produced commodities, such as beef, soya, palm, coffee and cacao, and choosing certified alternatives instead, such as Fairtrade coffee and products containing RSPO certified palm oil.



Example of a sustainable drainage system (SuDS), from Keep Wales Tidy

Nature for health and well-being

The coronavirus pandemic impacts on all our daily lives, including our physical and mental health. Findings from a WHO Survey show that the pandemic has disrupted critical mental health services in 93% of countries, while demand for mental health support is increasing. Bereavement, isolation, fear and loss of income are causing mental health problems or intensifying existing ones. Those with pre-existing mental health conditions are more vulnerable to the measures put in place to curb the pandemic, while the disease itself can lead to neurological and mental health complications. In Wales, one survey found that around 50% of the population was experiencing clinically significant psychological distress, with around 20% showing 'severe' effects.

A recent study by the Mental Health Foundation identifies how the pandemic has affected mental health unequally, depending on people's social and/or economic status, with certain groups at a higher risk of experiencing poorer mental health and well-being. Evidence demonstrates that greater access to green and blue space is linked to improved physical and mental health across all socioeconomic levels. However, as measures to tackle the pandemic have highlighted, access to nature is not equitable across society. Certain groups and communities often have limited access to green space, such as gardens or local parks - a disparity that was made evident as lockdown restrictions were eased and people encouraged to spend time outdoors.

In order to improve access to green space and help tackle the loss of biodiversity, Welsh Government recently allocated £7.2m in funding to support a variety of projects throughout Wales, including community orchards and allotments to support community growing.

Green and fair economy

The pandemic has had a massive economic impact, affecting both employment and working practices, with the number of unemployed estimated to be between 5.3 and 24.7 million globally and 41,000 across Wales. The impact on youth employment is likely to be severe given that young people are already three times more likely to be unemployed and are more likely to be in casual employment with fewer contractual protections. Although policy measures have been introduced, unemployment levels continue to rise, with women, young people and people from Black and Pakistani backgrounds most likely to be affected.

However, despite the challenges, the pandemic has created the opportunity to pilot new approaches to achieve a green, healthy and fair recovery. A Health Impact Assessment from Public Health Wales on home and agile working found that the positive impacts of home and agile working policies include, reducing commuting time (and costs), facilitating physical activity and promoting active travel, alongside the opportunity to support local economies and investment. By embedding new ways of working and adopting a more equal and inclusive circular economy, we can tackle climate change and improve our

resilience to future pandemics. Additionally, economic measures, such as 'green bonds', could help fund local sustainable developments, empowering communities, developing 'low-carbon' skills and creating green jobs.



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Support for a green recovery is reflected across society with only 6% of people wanting to return to a pre-pandemic economy. In a report from Climate Assembly UK, the people's assembly on climate action, 93% agreed that steps should be taken across society to encourage lifestyles compatible with net zero.

Supporting vulnerable groups

A recent report highlights that certain groups such as the elderly, lower-income groups or groups with certain diseases are affected more by the direct and indirect consequences of Covid-19 than others. Factors that affect these outcomes are reflected in limited access to preventative measures, such as the availability of handwashing facilities, the ability to socially distance, healthcare accessibility, transport restrictions, food security and access to outdoor space for health and well-being.

At the start of the pandemic, local authorities redeployed staff to provide essential support to isolated vulnerable people and worked with partners in the voluntary sector to support community food banks, while mental health community and well-being services embraced new ways of working to support the most vulnerable. Community projects and social prescribing partnerships, such as the Grow Well project in Cardiff, have supported hundreds of people to feel healthier, happier and more connected to their community through gardening projects. On a national level, Public Health Wales' 'How Are You Doing?' campaign is providing support to people in Wales to address the negative impact of Covid-19 on mental, social and physical well-being, based on concerns highlighted in the public engagement survey results.

Developments from the Future

Generations Commissioner

In May 2020, the Commissioner's office published a five point plan on the areas Welsh Government should consider investing in and prioritising as part of its green recovery post Covid. Additionally, the Manifesto for the Future, launched in the autumn, contains 48 key recommendations to remind politicians of their duty to respond to climate change, social justice, keeping people well and the inequalities exposed by the pandemic.

Remember... nature is good for us!

Research from the University of Illinois found that spending time in nature provides protection against a range of diseases, including diabetes, cancer, cardiovascular disease and depression. Whether your garden or local green space, aim to spend time in nature every day to help improve your health and well-being.



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Be the Change

Be the Change is a campaign to encourage and support staff to take sustainable steps in the workplace to individually contribute towards Wales' well-being goals. The Be the Change Toolkit has been designed to help organisations adopt 'Be the Change' in their places of work, providing information and knowledge to support small sustainable changes on an individual or team level.

Social media

WHO Collaborating Centre on Investment for Health and Well-being Directorate:



Wales Health Impact Assessment Support Unit:



Contact: publichealth.sustainability@wales.nhs.uk

Produced by the Health and Sustainability Hub, World Health Organization Collaborating Centre on Investment for Health and Well-being Directorate, Public Health Wales