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- Works with public services to access, generate, evaluate and apply evidence about what works in addressing key economic and societal challenges; and
- Draws on its work with Ministers and public services, to advance understanding of how evidence can inform and improve policy making and public services and contribute to theories of policy making and implementation.

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Summary

- » The Wales Centre for Public Policy (WCPP) was commissioned by the Welsh Government to conduct a review of international poverty and social exclusion strategies, programmes, and interventions.
- » A significant set of evidence-based reports has been produced for this project, to inform the Welsh Government's approach to the alleviation of poverty and social exclusion in Wales.
- » Taken together, the evidence shows that poverty and social exclusion are complex, multifaceted, and dynamic 'problems' to address, spanning multiple policy areas, actors, and delivery structures. The lived experience of poverty and social exclusion in Wales reflects this.
- » A good anti-poverty strategy makes a big difference. If a strategy is to be more than a list of relevant policy initiatives, there needs to be a focus on the means through which the Welsh Government can ensure that those who can act, do so.
- » An anti-poverty strategy can maximise its effectiveness through ensuring an appropriate mix of policies and interventions; planning and careful consideration of delivery agents; monitoring; and the ongoing participation of those with lived experience.
- » We offer one potential 'prioritising framework', based on our work. This would include four cross-policy areas of focus, or priorities, for action: (1) reducing household costs and maximising income (2) supporting pathways out of poverty (3) developing an enabling environment and (4) addressing the mental load and mental burden of living in poverty and social exclusion in Wales.
- » Simply grouping policy interventions on this basis will not be sufficient. There needs to be alignment in the processes for oversight and accountability for delivery; and where appropriate, coordination in the delivery itself.
- » The Welsh Government needs to define its role in persuading, supporting, enabling, and challenging the partners involved, and ensure that adequate capacity is dedicated to this.
- » Attention also needs to be given to the approach to monitoring progress, and measuring 'success', to ensure that the strategy can respond and adapt to changing circumstances, and to enable understanding of the impact of the Government's efforts to support people living in poverty in Wales.

Introduction

Poverty and social exclusion are major issues in Wales. Prior to the current cost of living crisis, poverty rates had remained relatively stagnant for 20 years and, for much of that period, higher than in England, Scotland, and Northern Ireland (Stats Wales, 2020); with almost a quarter of people in Wales living in poverty.

The Welsh Government commissioned the Wales Centre for Public Policy (WCPP) to conduct a review of international poverty and social exclusion strategies, programmes, and interventions to inform the alleviation of poverty and social exclusion in Wales. This work, which concluded at the end of 2021, was underpinned by a multi-dimensional definition of poverty, including social as well as economic dimensions, drawing from the Bristol Social Exclusion Matrix (B-SEM)¹ (Levitas et al., 2007) and reflecting the Welsh Government's broad, holistic view.²

The suite of reports produced for the review, set out in Table 1, brings together a significant bank of quantitative, qualitative, and lived experience evidence. It includes a report on what makes a 'good' anti-poverty strategy (Kenway et al., 2022) and a multi-part evaluation of the effectiveness of interventions addressing specific policy-related dimensions of poverty and social exclusion (Bucelli and McKnight, 2022b-m). Twelve such dimensions were selected by the Welsh Government for focus in the review, most mapping across to the B-SEM. A summary of the strength of the evidence for these twelve policy areas is shown in the overview report (Bucelli and McKnight, 2022a). Both these parts of the review draw on international evidence.

The commissioned review also includes a situation analysis or 'snapshot' of poverty and social exclusion in Wales (Carter, 2022a). Since this was conducted, the situation in Wales and across the UK has dramatically changed, with rising food and energy prices, driven in part by the outbreak of war in Ukraine, and a series of government decisions in response to this, both at the UK and Wales levels. The trajectory is still uncertain, but it is clear the situation has worsened since we conducted our review, and that poverty and social exclusion in Wales will continue to be a major issue for some time.

This final report does not aim to summarise all project outputs and findings. Instead, we draw deliberately and selectively from the research in efforts to inform future action. Such an approach enables us to highlight the relationships *between* the different evidence bases to make some suggestions on how the Welsh Government might address poverty and social exclusion in Wales.

- ¹ The Welsh Government's definition of poverty remains that set out in its Child Poverty Strategy for Wales (2011): "By poverty, we mean a long-term state of not having sufficient resources to afford food, reasonable living conditions or amenities or to participate in activities (such as access to attractive neighbourhoods and open spaces) which are taken for granted by others in their society."
- ² The B-SEM was developed in 2007 as a means of better understanding the causes of social exclusion. The matrix is intended to be used to examine causes across the lifespan – in childhood, youth, working-age adulthood and later life. It is structured around three key domains (the resources available to individuals; their ability to participate in a wide range of spheres; and their overall quality of life), with ten different aspects ('sub-domains') of social exclusion falling under these (Bucelli and McKnight 2022a-m).

To support this approach, we outline **five important considerations** that need to be accounted for as the Welsh Government develops its poverty alleviation strategy. These are set out in **section 3** and relate to:

1. **The focus or priority of the strategy,**
2. **Given that focus, the relevant combination of policies or 'policy mix' identified,**
3. **How national, regional, and local bodies will be mobilised and accountable,**
4. **How progress and 'success' will be measured and monitored, and**
5. **How to ensure meaningful participation of those the strategy seeks to support.**

One illustration of how such prioritisation and identification of a policy mix might be achieved – a 'prioritising framework' – is outlined in **section 4**.



The framework rests on **four areas of focus** around which poverty alleviation efforts might be coordinated:



1. **Reducing costs and maximising income** – reducing demands on household budget and maximising income so that basic needs are met



2. **'Pathways' out of poverty** – access to (higher quality/better paid) work, flexible and affordable childcare, and wider socio-economic participation



3. **An enabling environment** – tackling barriers related to people's immediate environment or neighbourhood



4. **Mental load and mental health** – addressing the emotional and psychological burden carried by people living in poverty and social exclusion.

These focus areas are deliberately selected to demonstrate how multiple aspects and drivers of poverty and social exclusion interconnect, both within and between these four areas. More detailed coverage of these four areas in this report (and in the contributing twelve policy reports) provides indications of how, for example, considerations around effective delivery, accountability, monitoring progress, and meaningful participation might be operationalised or achieved.

Table 1. Summary of reports produced for WCPP's project on poverty and social exclusion

Author	Focus of report(s)	Type of evidence reviewed	Number of outputs	Reference
New Policy Institute (NPI)	A review of international poverty and social exclusion strategies, concluding with a checklist of what makes an effective anti-poverty strategy	International case studies	1 report	Kenway et al. (2022)
Centre for Analysis of Social Exclusion, LSE	Reviews of international evidence on the effectiveness of policies and programmes that aim to tackle poverty and social exclusion	International 'what works' evidence	12 reports on specific policy areas and 1 overview report	Bucelli and McKnight (2022a-m)
WCPP	An overview of past, current, and possible future trends in poverty and social exclusion in Wales A review of the evidence on lived experience of poverty and social exclusion in Wales	Quantitative data/evidence Secondary, qualitative evidence	2 reports	Carter (2022a; 2022b)
WCPP	The results of four workshops conducted by WCPP in different areas of Wales involving people with lived experience of poverty and social exclusion	Primary, lived experience evidence	1 report	Roberts (2022)

Delivering a response

The situation analysis conducted as part of the review (Carter 2022a; 2022b) demonstrates that poverty and social exclusion in Wales are significant, complex, and dynamic. This makes the approach that the Welsh Government takes – *how* it works to address poverty and social exclusion – as important as the individual measures it adopts. Evidence suggests that a good strategy can make a big difference (Kenway et al., 2022).

The report on what makes an anti-poverty strategy impactful, undertaken as part of this review, states that an effective poverty alleviation strategy often involves the:

“...delivery of multiple initiatives across diverse policy areas, with differing delivery partners, and variable degrees of control or agency over [...] implementation”

(Kenway et al., 2022, p.5)

An effective strategy, therefore, needs to be more than a list of relevant initiatives; it requires significant effort through a joined-up network of implementable policies and structures that can *deliver*. The specific added value of a good strategy is that it acts as a means through which those who *want action* can enable or oblige those who can *take action* to do so (Kenway et al., 2022).

The report on effective anti-poverty strategies highlights the need for:

- **Prioritisation:** choices must be made. The strategy should be clear about what it aims to achieve and only include actions that serve that end.

- **Realism:** given the limited resources and powers that a devolved government can deploy, there will inevitably be a gap between what a government would ideally want to do and what it is able to do; and with such a complex issue, meaningful change will take longer than is politically expedient. Spending time in the early stages, on good design, planning and implementation will be what matters most. Without this, governments can fall into the trap of developing a strategy, policy, or intervention that, on paper should be effective, but in practice fails because it is under-resourced, poorly designed, or lacks an implementation plan.
- **Coordination:** delivery across multiple policy areas, with multiple partners, requires an investment in the governance of the strategy. For example, it must be the responsibility of a Minister with enough seniority and cross-policy influence to ensure that it is put into effect. There also need to be mechanisms in place for coordination at different levels; and a means for ensuring that there is good and detailed understanding of progress.
- **Adaptability:** the strategy should ‘be capable of learning as it proceeds, with outcome measures playing a growing role’ (Kenway et al., 2022, p.4). It should be able to – over time – demonstrate what works.

The summary report on the effectiveness of policies and programmes (Bucelli and McKnight, 2022a-m), and the workshops conducted by WCPP with those with direct lived experience of poverty and social exclusion in Wales (Roberts, 2022) as part of the review, both echo these points.

For example, that:

- Effective policies or programmes require coordination across related interventions, i.e., a **'policy mix'** that responds to the interconnectedness of the problem and how it is experienced across different policy areas. This interconnectedness is self-evident when individual stories of lived experience highlight, for example, how household income is dependent on the interaction between the availability of affordable childcare, viable job opportunities and suitable transport infrastructure.
- Despite a 'strong' or 'good' evidence base for a range of programmes and interventions (Bucelli and McKnight, 2022a), in other policy areas, the evidence of 'what works' can be patchy. Any strategy will therefore need to have a means of determining the value or impact of interventions and adapting over time.

What, then, could this mean for any Welsh Government response? Informed by the combined messages across the work conducted for the review, we suggest that the Welsh Government needs to account for **five important considerations** as it develops any new anti-poverty strategy. These are articulated and discussed in turn below.

1) Prioritisation

What is the focus or priority of the strategy? How will it add to and build on existing efforts?

The Welsh Government already has a multitude of initiatives that are seeking, directly or indirectly, to address poverty and mitigate its impacts. One consideration, therefore, is what would be the purpose of any *new* strategy (Kenway et al., 2022)?

As noted in the Introduction, the Welsh Government takes a broad and holistic view of poverty. This means that its initiatives will cover a similarly broad range of policy areas. In this context, the aim of any 'prioritisation' effort should be to develop a strategy that provides coherence:

“actions must be linked to clearly defined objectives, and different objectives must have some unity between them”

(Kenway et al., 2022, p.38)³

Prioritisation would therefore be an effort to provide a framework that can bring coherence to the multiple initiatives that sit beneath the overarching strategy; and as such would enable the Welsh Government to use this framework as the basis for coordinating delivery of activities across partners.

Which priorities to set or include in an anti-poverty 'strategy' for Wales is, of course, a political choice. It can (and should) be informed by evidence, but evidence alone cannot dictate the priorities. Any prioritisation, of course, invites debate and counter-prioritisation. It therefore needs to be able to be defended, and for tensions – which will naturally arise due to the gap between the ideal and what is possible and fundable – to be able to be constructively managed and accommodated. The views of those with lived experience of poverty and social exclusion to determine what is most important should play a critical role.

³ The Toronto Poverty Reduction Strategy (2015–2035) provides an example of deliberately addressing poverty and social exclusion across a prioritised set of policy areas and aspects of people's lives as well as an attempt to tackle the structural drivers of poverty. The Strategy, with rolling four-year action plans, contained five thematic areas as priorities – namely housing stability, service access, transit (public transport) equity, food access, and quality jobs and liveable incomes. It also aimed at systemic change, for example, leveraging the city's economic power to drive inclusive economic growth and engaging city staff and residents on poverty reduction efforts. The Strategy also provided guidance on shaping how agencies and divisions understood poverty and their responsibility for it.

2) A 'policy mix'

In light of these priorities, what will be the relevant combination of policy interventions (or 'policy mix')?

Efforts to support those experiencing poverty, or at risk of experiencing poverty, need to try to reflect the complex interaction between various factors:

“There are multiple drivers of poverty and social exclusion and therefore no single policy is sufficient to reduce them. What is required is a strategy which includes a range of policies designed to address the multidimensional nature of poverty and social exclusion.”

(Bucelli and McKnight, 2022a, p.5)

In our work, we've considered a range of 'factors' that can interact to create the conditions in which people can find themselves experiencing poverty and social exclusion (**Figure 1**). While this is based on a consideration of only *some* elements of the B-SEM domains of social exclusion, what is already clear is the degree of complexity as well as constant interaction *between* these (and other) factors; with some acting as both 'causes' and 'effects'.

In developing its response, therefore, the Welsh Government will need to consider the interplay between the different dimensions of poverty and social exclusion and develop appropriate 'policy mixes' in relation to the priorities identified.

The recent Child Poverty Income Maximisation Action Plan (IMAP) (Welsh Government, 2020) provides an example of this. The IMAP was a set of practical actions *across* policy areas (e.g., education, transport, social security) to help maximise the incomes of families living in poverty in Wales and support them to build their financial resilience.

3) Delivery agents and structures

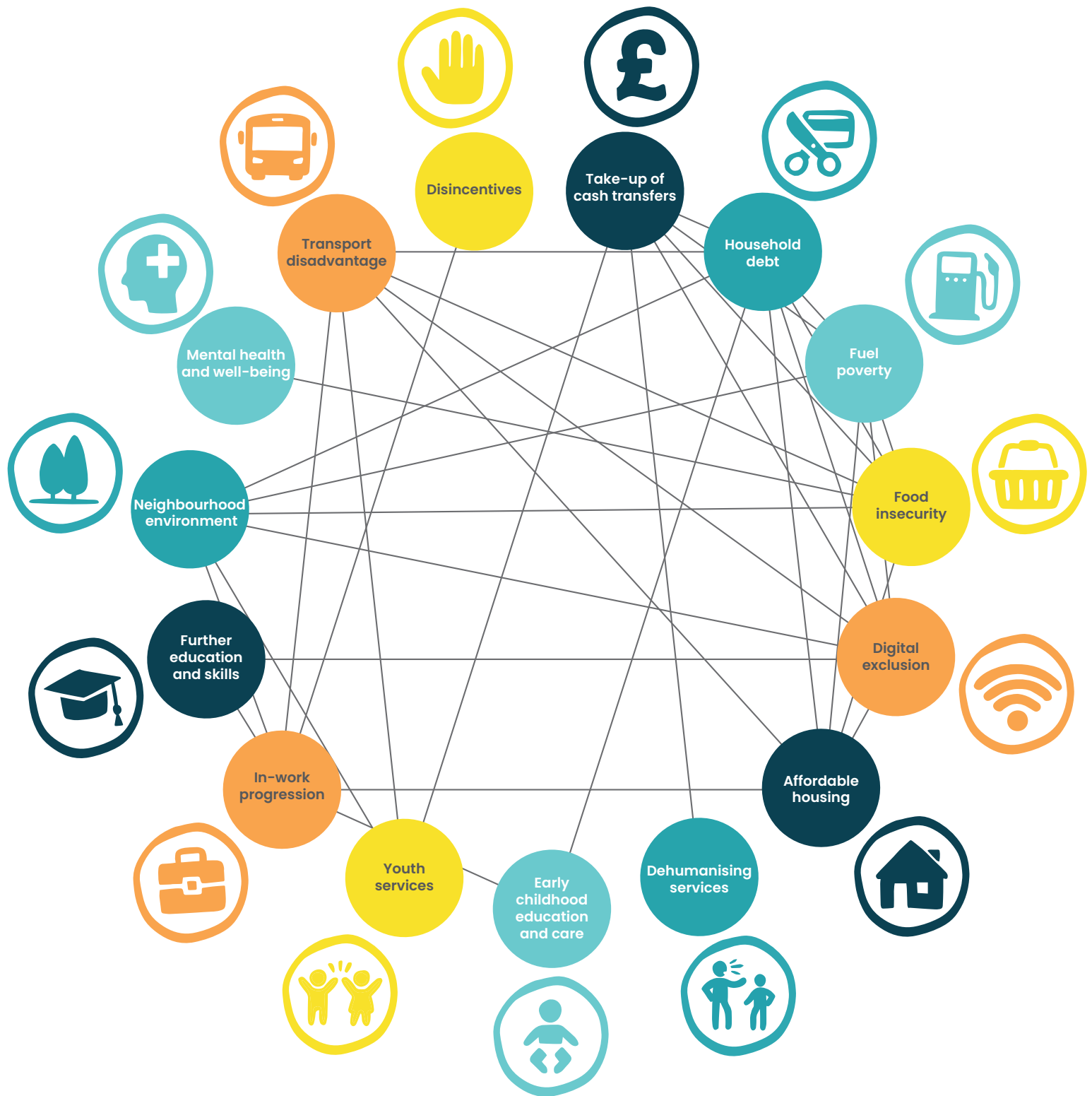
Which national, regional and local bodies will need to be mobilised? Do they have capacity? Is delivery aligned with their incentives? What resources and support might they need?

Our review of effective anti-poverty strategies emphasises the need for effective coordination of actors at multiple levels: from Ministerial through to 'front line' service delivery (Kenway et al., 2022) and across different government departments and policy areas. This requires engaging both the formal and informal 'machinery of government'.

The Welsh Government may want to see coordinated action from a long list of partners including Government departments as well as across local government, health boards, housing associations, schools, and colleges, the Third Sector, job centres, the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), supermarkets, childcare providers, and more. Careful thought, then, needs to be given to defining the actions that need to be taken, by whom, and the role(s) the Welsh Government will play in persuading, supporting, enabling, and challenging the partners involved, maintaining the momentum over the longer-term, as well as the capacity it will need to do so.

The overlapping responsibilities and accountabilities of regional bodies will need to be a particular focus: Corporate Joint Committees (CJCs), Public Services Boards (PSBs), Regional Partnership Boards, City Deals, and Regional Skills Partnerships are (among others) all likely to have a role to play in delivering on the Welsh Government's anti-poverty agenda.

Figure 1: Interconnections between poverty and social exclusion-related policy areas



If delivery against the defined priorities requires effective collaboration and cooperation across these and those mentioned above, this will require the Welsh Government to dedicate resource and capacity to supporting and challenging these bodies to act accordingly.

4) Monitoring

How will progress across various cross-cutting issues be monitored? How will the 'success' of any strategy be measured? How will the efficacy of different interventions be determined? Is there the necessary capacity and clarity of responsibility at national level to monitor progress and hold partners to account?

Addressing complex and dynamic issues like poverty and social exclusion takes time. As the review of anti-poverty strategies (Kenway et al., 2022) highlights, many countries therefore use a combination of outcome *and* output measures to monitor progress. There is an important political imperative for early action in tackling poverty: so, outputs 'matter' along the 'journey' to achieving outcomes and demonstrating real change for those living in poverty.

The reviews of anti-poverty policies and programmes highlight, however, that in several policy areas there is poor quality evidence of 'what works' (Bucelli and McKnight, 2022a-m). There are evidence gaps and a tendency for producing weak evaluations of programmes, especially in relation to localised interventions. In such cases, it is particularly important that evaluations do *go beyond* assessing outputs (e.g., number of referrals, caseload etc.) and effectively focus on the impact on poverty and social exclusion.

This would need to include analysis of how different disadvantaged groups have been affected (e.g., people with disabilities, people from Black, Asian and Ethnic Minority backgrounds, single parents, care leavers). The cost implications (time, funding, opportunity) of including such analysis in all evaluations, versus focusing in on evaluations of programmes specifically targeted at different disadvantaged groups, would need to be considered.

In considering the impact, a mixture of data sources will be needed. Research on youth services in particular stresses that qualitative evidence has a significant role to play in monitoring impact. Quantitative measures in this context can overlook positive outcomes and lead to damaging reform if services are compelled to demonstrate impact in this way (Bucelli and McKnight, 2022m). The Welsh Government's strategy should consider how existing data collection and data linkage could support the evaluation of specific interventions.

For Wales, another consideration in monitoring the effects of any strategy will be the limitations of the current devolution settlement – and with this, the associated risk that the impact of any Welsh Government action is engulfed by decisions at a UK Government level, or by other forces beyond either Government's control and therefore impossible to discern. As the review of anti-poverty strategies highlights, other countries have sought to overcome this challenge by modelling what would have happened if no action were taken – providing a baseline 'counterfactual' against which the effects of their strategy can be monitored (Kenway et al., 2022).

5) Participation

How will the strategy incorporate the ongoing and meaningful participation of the people that it is seeking to support?

The review of strategies highlights the importance of any strategy being 'person-centred' and ensuring the meaningful inclusion of those with lived experience, and those who provide services to them, in its development and delivery.

Similarly, the reviews of programmes and interventions across multiple policy areas highlight the importance of designing and coordinating services around *people*. 'One-stop', multi-agency services in the community that provide diversified support are useful in the face of the range of interconnected needs and vulnerabilities people can experience (Bucelli and McKnight, 2022a). Evidence shows that these are most effective when they are non-stigmatising and leverage trusted relationships in the community that help with expanding their reach. They also create the possibility of gathering insights into the lived experiences of claimants and users to understand barriers to access faced by different groups (and hence the range of options and alternatives needed to ensure inclusion). They are an important ongoing source of local intelligence.

In certain policy areas, such as digital exclusion, youth services and neighbourhood environment, participatory approaches to designing services are emerging as an important means to enhance the success of interventions; while also acting as an intervention in themselves, through the impacts on those participating (Bucelli and McKnight, 2022c; 2022j).

Participation must be ethical, authentic, and meaningful for the benefits to be properly harnessed and to mitigate against risk of any harm for participants. This would include fully and appropriately informing and gaining consent of those involved, a respectful and inclusive participatory process, thinking through participants' expectations and the benefits of such participation for them, as well as giving feedback and being clear about any parameters for change.

Given the uncertainty over future trends due to the ongoing impacts of the Coronavirus pandemic and other external events, thought should be given to how to incorporate insights from lived experience (i.e., how people living in poverty and social exclusion in Wales experience and articulate the current situation as lived out by them and people they know) in the processes for further informing and monitoring the delivery of the Welsh Government's strategy.



A 'prioritising framework'

The preceding section made the case for 'prioritisation', providing a coherent framework to support the organisation, management and oversight of a strategy seeking action across multiple domains. In this section we outline one possible 'prioritising' approach, illustrating how this can support the development of a strategy that is more than a policy intervention list. However, as already noted, the articulation of priorities is, ultimately, a political decision.

Based on the Welsh Government's existing commitments (Welsh Government, 2021a; 2021b), and the evidence reviewed through our work, we suggest that the Government could coordinate its efforts around the following four priorities or areas of focus:

- 1. Reducing costs and maximising income** – Effective ways of maximising an individual or household's available income so that basic needs⁴ are consistently met, and adults and children do not have to repeatedly battle to 'make ends meet'.
- 2. 'Pathways' out of poverty** – Evidence-based support to help people address the drivers of poverty in the long term, for example through access to (higher quality / better paid) work, flexible and affordable childcare, and wider socio-economic participation.
- 3. An enabling environment** – Tackling barriers related to people's immediate environment or neighbourhood (e.g., lack of quality housing, adequate infrastructure, appropriate services, and green space), that affect their quality of life and socio-economic and civic participation.

4. Mental load and mental health

– Addressing the emotional and psychological burden carried by people living in poverty and social exclusion through tackling stigma and (re)humanising 'the system'. Treating people with the respect and dignity they deserve.

These four areas of focus have a strong foundation in the experiences of those living in poverty and social exclusion in Wales (Carter, 2022b; Roberts, 2022). Analysis of this evidence shows that those with lived experience of poverty often emphasise the structural drivers of poverty and social exclusion (such as low income, poor quality and insecure work, increases in the cost of living and changing or insufficient social security), leading to broader financial and non-financial forms of social exclusion. The emotional and psychological dimensions of poverty and social exclusion are also emphasised by those with lived experience – for example, shame, stigma, and pride – presenting barriers to accessing much-needed services and support (Carter, 2022b). Mental load and mental health was not an area of focus for the review of interventions, but as it came through strongly and unprompted as an important issue in the lived experience workshops it became our fourth 'area of focus' for this report.


⁴ The [Bevan Foundation](#) refers to 'basic needs' as adequate shelter, food and warmth, and things and activities that many of us take for granted. The JRF refers to '[minimum needs](#)' in their definition of poverty, which includes basic goods and services alongside social participation.


In the tables below, we set out in brief the rationale and ‘policy mix’ associated with each area of focus and, where possible, list the ‘promising actions’ that emerge from the analysis of the international literature. We then reflect across all four areas of focus on the ‘important considerations’ of mobilising actors and structures, monitoring, and participation of people with lived experience in relation to this particular ‘prioritising framework’.

Reducing costs and maximising income




When household income is limited, food, fuel, housing, servicing debt and indeed anything with a ‘price tag’ attached, all ‘compete’ with each other and put significant strain on financial resources, negatively impacting on ‘mental load’ and mental health. It is essential to both reduce household costs and maximise and stabilise available household income.

Policy areas (‘policy mix’)	Intersecting issues	‘Promising actions’ from international evidence
<p>Fuel poverty</p> 	<p>Fuel poverty and food insecurity often co-exist. Households face the dilemma of ‘eating or heating’ (Bucelli and McKnight, 2022f; Carter, 2022b; Roberts, 2022).</p>	<p>Home energy efficiency improvements, particularly in the existing rental housing stock where fuel poverty rates are highest, are important for tackling long-term risks of fuel poverty. Options are available to overcome the split incentive problem (e.g. through grants and pay-as-you-save financing models).</p> <p>Energy efficiency improvements funded through general taxation are less likely to lead to higher energy costs which negatively impact low-income households. However, pay-as-you-save financing schemes, such as those provided by Energy Service Companies (ESCOs), offer a promising approach which can bring in important financing alongside delivering energy saving improvements (including retrofit).</p> <p>Energy audits can help elicit positive behavioural changes in relation to energy use. Helping households use energy and energy savings devices efficiently can help to reduce energy bills.</p> <p>One of the key drivers of fuel poverty is low income and any strategy to reduce fuel poverty needs to tackle this driver. Targeted financial assistance can take the form of ‘labelled’ social security payments or help with energy bills. More evaluation evidence is required to assess which is the most effective at reducing fuel poverty.</p>


Policy areas ('policy mix')	Intersecting issues	'Promising actions' from international evidence
<p>Food insecurity</p> 	<p>Fuel poverty and food insecurity often co-exist. Households face the dilemma of 'eating or heating' (Bucelli and McKnight, 2022f; Carter, 2022b; Roberts, 2022).</p>	<p>Support for food banks and community-based interventions (e.g. community pantries, community cafes etc.) should acknowledge their limitations in terms of reach, wide-scale impact and ability to address drivers of food insecurity. Upstream interventions are necessary to ensure that households have the financial means to meet their basic needs.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Localised solutions should promote service coordination and provide diversified support (e.g., in relation to housing, mental health, debt relief). • Key challenges to tackle are uneven provision, lack of sustainability, limited operating times, stigma, restrictive eligibility criteria and limited food choice and availability. <p>The expansion of free school meals should be considered in light of evidence that universal provision reduces stigma and increases uptake. Restrictive eligibility criteria undermine their role in improving households' overall resources and work incentives. A range of actions can be evaluated in terms of feasibility, including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Revising eligibility criteria that currently exclude a large number of vulnerable households (e.g., maintaining extensions adopted during the Coronavirus crisis). • Adopting universal free school meals, for a limited age group as in England and Scotland, or for all school-aged children. Complementary area-based solutions could also be assessed.

Policy areas ('policy mix')	Intersecting issues	'Promising actions' from international evidence
<p>Affordable housing</p> 	<p>The housing system shapes affordability (Bucelli and McKnight, 2022b). Council tax arrears play a key role as a cause of household debt. Credit deductions for unpaid rent put further strain on struggling households.</p>	<p>Priority should be given to boosting a social housing provision which is genuinely affordable, secure and high-quality.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Scarcity of social housing leads to forms of rationing, increases competition for homes and increases costs in the private sector. • Short-term solutions focusing on increasing the supply of social housing may lead to long-term systemic change – creating the conditions necessary for the system to increase 'wider affordability'. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ There is evidence that systems that promote wider affordability across the housing system reduce costs and volatility, increase quality standards and reduce segregation. <p>Promoting regulation, quality standards and tenant protection in the private rented sector can both promote greater affordability in the private rented sector and contribute to a wider affordability system.</p>

“You have got to choose which one, you know, what do I pay you? Do I pay the gas and electric? Do I make myself more in debt so that we can eat?”
(Roberts, 2022, p.9)

Policy areas ('policy mix')	Intersecting issues	'Promising actions' from international evidence
<p>Household debt</p> 	<p>Living costs outside a household's financial capacity can lead to a mutually reinforcing relationship between poverty and debt (Bucelli and McKnight, 2022h; Carter, 2022b).</p>	<p>An approach that tackles the causes of household debt should be based on an understanding of the mutually reinforcing relationship between poverty and debt.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strategies to increase disposable income and reduce expenditure (e.g. cost of childcare, food, fuel, transport, housing) should be considered to increase households' resources. • Council tax reform is particularly important in light of the regressive characteristics of the current system and the key role played by this type of arrears as a cause of indebtedness. • While beyond the remit of the Welsh Government's devolved powers, there is a strong case to call for changes to the design of Universal Credit and its system of payment in arrears and repayment of advances. <p>Alleviating and rehabilitating measures are important to provide a fresh start and mitigate the negative effects of debt on health and well-being.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Greater coordination between debt advice services and other agencies and services can help identify households at risk of indebtedness and facilitate early intervention. Debt advice services can also serve as a point of contact and trigger a range of referrals to appropriate services. Data-sharing opportunities should be evaluated. • Improved links between debt advice and debt relief services can tackle lack of awareness of debt solutions. This can strengthen consumer protection and prevent debtors making unsuitable arrangements.




Policy areas ('policy mix')	Intersecting issues	'Promising actions' from international evidence
<p>Take-up of cash transfers</p> 	<p>Social security payments can fluctuate. Lived experiences of poverty trace issues back to past changes in benefits (Beck, 2018, cited in Carter 2022b; Roberts, 2022).</p>	<p>Automation is effective at improving take-up and can decrease fragmentation, ensuring that best practices are shared. Facilitating the process of claiming can address important barriers to take-up, such as inertia, lack of awareness and knowledge and, potentially, stigma. Priorities should include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Auditing existing data sharing arrangements and evaluating potential synergies in order to identify opportunities for automation. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Useful lessons can be drawn from the Scottish initiative to link a number of devolved grants to Housing Benefit or Council Tax Reduction records. • Alternative claiming routes must be offered to fix potential administrative errors and reduce exclusion. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ There should be an assessment of whether automated systems increase 'simplicity', as this cannot just be assumed. There is evidence that often administrative simplicity does not translate to simplicity for claimants. Evidence of the lived experience of claimants and administrators can offer insights. <p>Local initiatives can integrate a range of interventions, from the provision of information to advice and assistance in claiming. Partnerships with civil society actors leverage established relationships of trust, which can be crucial to reach and support the most vulnerable claimants and account for attitudes and norms related to stigma (see Case Study 2). However, these types of programmes often lack robust evaluation.</p>






'Pathways' out of poverty


Any anti-poverty strategy must aspire to taking people out of poverty and social exclusion long-term. This means tackling key drivers of poverty through supporting good quality education and skills development; helping adults into work; improving in-work progression; and addressing the 'costs' of work through the provision of affordable, flexible transport and childcare.



Policy areas ('policy mix')	Intersecting issues	'Promising actions' from international evidence
<p>Further Education and Skills</p> 	<p>Poverty and social exclusion present significant barriers to educational access and attainment. Skills and qualifications are key determinants of people's employability and income (Carter 2022a; Bucelli and McKnight, 2022g.)</p>	<p>Achieving greater parity of esteem between academic and vocational education can support FE's role in improving the life chances of disadvantaged groups. However, systemic changes are required, including:</p> <p>Rebalancing resources between FE and HE and between full- and part-time study.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Funding mechanisms need to support the acquisition of higher levels of qualifications (e.g. Levels 4 and 5), while maintaining flexibility and options that can better support disadvantaged learners. <p>Links within FE (e.g. between formal and non-formal activities), and between HE and FE, can bridge the divide between sectors.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> An integrated system can introduce the openness and permeability necessary for greater inclusion of disadvantaged groups. Simple processes and adequate advice and support services can further aid learners navigating the system. <p>Qualification pathways that enable the development of broad occupational competencies improve the transferability of skills, and can make vocational education relevant to a range of occupational fields.</p> <p>Inclusivity of post-16 programmes and apprenticeships can be improved by revising entry requirements (e.g. linked to specific grades at key stage 4), as the current system risks excluding those more likely to benefit.</p> <p>Quality assurance mechanisms are essential to respond to employers' and learners' concerns about the relevance, quality and transferability of vocational qualifications, which shapes users' participation and employers' engagement.</p>

Policy areas ('policy mix')	Intersecting issues	'Promising actions' from international evidence
<p>In-work progression</p> 	<p>Lack of progression can sustain in-work poverty. Increasing household-level hours of paid work and/or the generosity of in-work benefits however can be as or more important than in-work progression.</p>	<p>Enabling forms of activation for the unemployed, such as training, have greater potential to lead to progression than 'demanding' forms of activation (i.e. that focus on the use of activation demands on participants), such as monitoring and sanctions.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Evaluation evidence which takes a longer-term perspective shows how training programmes for the unemployed tend to outperform demanding forms of activation. However, good quality training is more costly in the short term and policy makers need to identify which courses to offer or support. <p>Sector-specific workforce development initiatives which use a dual-customer approach (working with employers as well as workers) show positive long-term impacts on earnings and net benefits to participants, governments and wider society.</p> <p>The current evidence base relies on small scale US studies. More needs to be understood about which programmes work and why. These initiatives are also reliant on experienced employment intermediaries and their transferability to Wales needs to be given due consideration.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In-work conditionality for low earning Universal Credit claimants is set to increase UK-wide policy focus on in-work progression.

“You have not had it [living in poverty] every day, every year, and then get to your mid-thirties and you are no better off than when you were watching your parents do the same thing.”

(Roberts, 2022, p.19)

Policy areas ('policy mix')	Intersecting issues	'Promising actions' from international evidence
<p>Early childhood education and care (ECEC)</p> 	<p>Lack of access to high-quality, affordable childcare affects ability to work (or work more hours) and acts as a barrier to in-work progression (Bucelli and McKnight, 2022d). Lived experience evidence suggests a lack of alignment between childcare provision and childcare needs (Roberts, 2022).</p>	<p>As those who are better off disproportionately use and benefit from ECEC services – limiting the effect of ECEC on poverty and social exclusion – priorities should focus on:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Revising the current 30 hours a week offer in light of elements identified in the international evidence as more likely to increase ECEC participation among disadvantaged families. Expansion and including guaranteed places, support for working and non-working parents, and fees scaled on income and number of children should also be considered • The distributional impact of recent reforms should be assessed, and possible deadweight identified. • Quality of provision and extended entitlement put pressure on providers, who rely on additional hours and fees from younger children to cover costs. This can exacerbate disparities in access. Further expanding Flying Start outreach or revising its geographical focus could be considered. <p>The Welsh Government has taken important steps to create a holistic approach to ECEC, recognising the importance of greater integration of education and care, and of a unified quality framework. Plans to raise skills and standards across the ECEC workforce are underway. These efforts can be supported by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unified qualification standards and pathways to recognise work experience and previously acquired competences. • Unified treatment of the maintained and non-maintained sectors. • Coinciding raised standards with improved status – in terms of pay, working conditions and professional recognition. • Including adapted pathways for assistants who represent a large share of the workforce but have fewer possibilities for gaining qualifications and progression than core practitioners. • The collection and analysis of workforce data (e.g. socio-economic background), including assistants, to facilitate identification of professional development barriers and to provide a basis for devising solutions.


Policy areas ('policy mix')	Intersecting issues	'Promising actions' from international evidence
<p>Transport disadvantage</p> 	<p>Poor or lack of access to transport increases the risk of poverty and social exclusion through limiting access to job opportunities, in-work progression and access to further education and skills, training, and childcare provision</p>	<p>Increasing demand-responsive transport provision offers greater flexibility than fixed routes/timetables. However, digital exclusion can mean that not everyone has access to this type of provision.</p> <p>Use of green vehicles, whether for community transport, shared transport or more generally for public transport, can help reduce carbon emissions.</p> <p>Whole transport systems can help address fragmentation and improve integration of community, shared and demand-responsive transport services.</p> <p>Focusing on estimating the social value of community transport rather than more narrow quantitative assessments (e.g. number of journeys) has the potential to increase investment in line with impact</p>
<p>Disincentives in the system</p> 	<p>Lived experience demonstrates how the factors above interact to disincentivise people from working and make it difficult to forge a pathway out of poverty (Roberts, 2022). It is crucial that these in-built disincentives are removed from the system.</p>	





An enabling environment


People living in poverty and social exclusion also often face barriers related to their immediate environment – for example, lack of quality housing, adequate infrastructure (transport, digital), appropriate services (e.g., youth) and green space as well as crime and anti-social behaviour including substance misuse. Anti-poverty interventions therefore also need to consider how to foster enabling environments.

Policy areas ('policy mix')	Intersecting issues	'Promising actions' from international evidence
Affordable housing	See "Reducing costs and maximising income" table above	
Transport disadvantage	See "'Pathways' out of poverty" table above	
Digital exclusion 	Digital exclusion can limit education, skills and job opportunities and access to related services (Carter, 2022a).	Access to devices and connectivity <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • While affordability is a key element relating to access, and digital adoption is sensitive to price, successful programmes require a holistic approach and must tackle other aspects related to motivation, skills and training. • Differences in use are also driven by perceived relevance to users' needs, which digital accessibility alone cannot change. <p>Digital literacy programmes can reduce digital exclusion. However, there is a lack of high-quality evaluation evidence to help guide 'what works'. There is a need to address motivational barriers and literacy programmes are likely to be more successful when linked to a clear need.</p>

Policy areas ('policy mix')	Intersecting issues	'Promising actions' from international evidence
<p>Youth services</p> 	<p>Youth services can be critical for early intervention for young people who are struggling, including those at risk of offending or anti-social behaviour (Bucelli and McKnight, 2022m).</p>	<p>Open access provision promotes inclusivity and avoids the stigmatisation that often arises from targeting services to the most disadvantaged.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Experts have expressed concern about the increasing pressure to measure and demonstrate the quantitative impact of open access youth work provision which can lead to misinterpretation and damaging reform. <p>Meaningful youth participation which harnesses the lived experience of young people through their involvement in the design, provision and evaluation of youth services can lead to service improvements and benefits to young people. Meaningful participation requires active engagement and real influence, as opposed to passive presence or token roles.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There is good quality evidence that participation in youth service decision-making leads to better social skills (efficacy and empathy) and that leadership or decision-making opportunities lead to greater feelings of ownership and empowerment and higher levels of attendance. • The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child has been a positive vehicle for change, leading to greater active involvement of young people in matters that affect them.

“a journey that took half an hour in the car was more like two hours on the bus and the earliest option arrived into the city nearly half an hour later than many employers expect you to be in work – not helpful for an area of high unemployment”

(Boston, 2017, cited in Carter, 2022b, p.42)



Policy areas ('policy mix')	Intersecting issues	'Promising actions' from international evidence
<p>Neighbourhood environment</p> 	<p>Limitations of neighbourhood environment interventions (resulting from job creation, local economy boosts, improved community participation and physical environments) and benefits for those living in poverty (Bucelli and McKnight, 2022j).</p>	<p>Clear objectives in relation to poverty and social exclusion reduction are needed for benefits from neighbourhood environment interventions (resulting from job creation, local economy boosts, improved community participation and physical environments) to reach the most disadvantaged.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • These objectives should avoid regeneration efforts further exacerbating social exclusion, displacement of the most disadvantaged citizens and households and gentrification. • 'Activity-based' approaches attempting to regenerate town centres by creating mixed environments are promising but currently not robustly evaluated. • Evaluation should be planned alongside interventions, which should include realistic timeframes (e.g. distinguishing between short- and long-term outcomes) and focus not solely on processes and outputs, but on assessing distributional outcomes and effects on poverty, and estimating 'social value'. <p>Community-led approaches can mitigate the risks of gentrification by placing local community needs and experiences at the centre of development, provided they succeed at generating effective, inclusive engagement.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Proactive engagement of the most disadvantaged in the community and a focus on understanding and tackling engagement barriers are needed to achieve real inclusion.





Mental burden and mental load

Living in poverty and social exclusion has significant repercussions for people's mental health and well-being, generating or exacerbating a whole spectrum of emotional and psychological needs. A substantial 'mental load' of stress and anxiety is created by having to manage the cost of living daily (Roberts, 2022), exacerbated by the stigma associated with living in poverty and dehumanising treatment through the system/services there to help.

Policy areas ('policy mix')	Intersecting issues
<p>Dehumanising services</p> 	<p>Lived experience strongly shows that the broad challenges, stress and strain involved in dealing with the complexities of the social security system – and the way benefits are communicated, applied for, and administered – impact on claimants' mental health and can make them feel 'dehumanised' (Carter, 2022b; Roberts, 2022).</p>
<p>Stigma</p> 	<p>Stigma is a critical dimension of poverty which can often be overlooked and is particularly prevalent in relation to social security payments and food insecurity, acting as a key barrier to service access and take-up (Carter, 2022b; Roberts, 2022).</p> <p>Poverty has been shown to reduce children's enjoyment of education and engagement with their peers (ap Gruffudd et al., 2017, cited in Carter, 2022b).</p>

This area was not included in the review of interventions, and further work could be done to find effective ways to address the stress and stigma that the current system creates, especially given the lack of data on stigma and social exclusion in Wales (Carter, 2022a). Through their review on interventions to support increase **take-up of cash transfers**, Bucelli and McKnight (2022k) did find evidence that efforts to automate benefits helped to tackle both service-related and individual access barriers, including stigma.

“It’s a vicious circle because no matter what you’re always going to worry about one thing or another. My son is worried to death – ‘how am I gonna’ manage mum?’”

(Roberts, 2022, p.16)

Governance and delivery

Given the interconnections between the different factors and policy areas associated with these four areas of focus, any effective strategy should group together and coordinate existing and new efforts to tackle the multiple economic and social drivers of poverty and social exclusion impacting upon individuals and families in Wales.

For example, in relation to reducing household costs and maximising income, the Welsh Government could build on recent coordination efforts to streamline access to support, strengthen advice services and raise awareness of available benefits, through:

- Embedding or even requiring the best practice identified in the toolkit developed for streamlining processes for applying for Local Authority benefits (Welsh Government, 2021k), including addressing the identified next steps.
- Exploring the potential to build on this process by connecting it with other 'needs assessments', like the goal to proactively identify those at risk of fuel poverty (Goal 1, Welsh Government, 2021l), and examine whether this can be linked to support for food insecurity (given the evidence on the links between these).
- Complementing the above with a coordinated communications campaign and investment in advice services, reflecting on and learning from interventions such as the IMAP (Welsh Government, 2020a). And exploring the potential for a 'single point of access' for claimants to ensure the system reaches people and makes a difference (Bevan Foundation, 2020c).

Similarly, for enabling 'pathways out of poverty', the Welsh Government has introduced a series of policy interventions that, in different ways, are seeking to address the dominance of low-paid, low-skilled jobs in the labour market in Wales; from the commitment to lifelong learning, to investment in infrastructure, the fair work agenda, and the focus on educational attainment of children from lower-income households. What is unclear is the extent to which the delivery and oversight of such initiatives is linked and coordinated; or the degree to which they are geared towards supporting people living in poverty and social exclusion in Wales.

And this is key – grouping policy interventions will not be sufficient. There needs to be alignment in the processes for oversight and accountability for delivery; and where appropriate, in the delivery itself.⁵ And the Welsh Government needs to define its role in persuading, supporting, enabling, and challenging the partners involved, and ensure that adequate capacity is dedicated to this.



⁵ Greater coordination between agencies and local programmes that integrate multiple services (e.g., energy management, debt advice services or assistance with benefit claims) can better reflect the interconnected reality of lived experience of poverty and social exclusion and provide more joined-up support at community or neighbourhood level.

Monitoring and research

To support the delivery of coordinated efforts, an effective monitoring framework would be needed. Existing initiatives will have associated monitoring in place. These could be mapped and rationalised and/or improved to enable decision makers to have a good understanding of the implementation of the various interventions. Such data should be used as the basis for ongoing conversations with partners about delivery. Understanding the 'success' of the strategy, and the relative efficacy of different interventions would likely require research. Similarly, further research could be conducted on how areas of priority, and proposed ways to improve the situations of those living in poverty and social exclusion, differ across geographic and demographic variables and living situations. Little to no data are collected on stigma and social exclusion in Wales, which could also be an important area for further research.

Participation

The Welsh Government could also consider whether and how insight from those with direct lived experience of poverty and social exclusion can inform how activities evolve and adapt over time such that the package of interventions is centred on the needs of the individuals and households it is seeking to support. It may be that this data on lived experience can be provided more deliberately and systematically, for example through collaboration with frontline agencies involved in the Anti-Poverty Coalition for Wales.

The benefits of such ongoing participation would include targeting relevant services in a way which makes support accessible to them and avoids stigmatising labels (labels which many do not identify with), and designing policies which support social and community relationships (Bucelli and McKnight, 2022f).



Conclusion

Poverty and social exclusion are major issues in Wales that have been exacerbated by the Coronavirus and multiple other external events. Evidence points to a more challenging trajectory ahead. Together, poverty and social exclusion represent persistent and complex problems with multiple impacts on people's day-to-day lives and well-being.

There are limitations and constraints associated with the evidence base compiled through this work. The scope was (by necessity) not exhaustive, focusing on twelve policy areas related to social exclusion, which showed varying quality across their evidence bases. Nonetheless, the bank of evidence provided by this project provides a basis for determining what an effective anti-poverty strategy – and its delivery – might look like for Wales and the considerations that may provide any such strategy with the best chance of success.

The broad, multi-dimensional definition of poverty and social exclusion endorsed by the Welsh Government, and its wider ambition to tackle this persistent problem, provide a foundation for coordinated strategic and operational efforts across multiple governance levels and policy areas.

If a strategy is to be more than a list of relevant policy initiatives, there needs to be a focus the means through which the Welsh Government will ensure that those who can take action, do so. Five key questions must be considered to aid the strategy's development.

Evidence has an important role to play in informing which priorities to set or include in any anti-poverty 'strategy' for Wales, but this will ultimately be a political choice. One illustration of how such a prioritisation and identification of a policy mix might be achieved – a 'prioritising framework' – has been outlined in [section 4](#). Rather than being instructive or definitive, this framework outlines a proposed approach or 'lens' that is supported by the evidence base.

An exhaustive strategy and action plan operating in policy 'silos' is not, the evidence suggests, 'what works' for the alleviation of poverty and social exclusion. Based on the evidence reviewed here, a more targeted, cross-policy approach to deliver effective action has a greater chance of success. The approach should allow multiple stakeholders to mobilise around it, with a network of governance and accountability mechanisms to support and reinforce this.

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