

Welsh Government | Covid-19 Research | Wave 2

Findings Note | 13.05.2020

Background

The Welsh Government has commissioned BritainThinks to conduct a programme of qualitative research to provide insight into the views and experiences of people in Wales during the Covid-19 pandemic.

This note sets out findings from a second wave of focus groups, each comprising 6-8 participants and lasting 90 minutes. Fieldwork was conducted on 11th May 2020. Focus groups were conducted online with the following participants:

- A group with participants aged 45 and over living in Llangollen and the surrounding areas.
- A group with participants aged between 18 and 44 living in Swansea and the surrounding areas.

All participants were BC1C2 socio-economic grade and there was a mix of gender across the sample.

These groups followed a first wave of focus groups in late April 2020, which delivered initial insight into views toward the Covid-19 pandemic. This second wave of research was designed to track opinion and to gain insight into responses to the recent Welsh Government and UK Government lockdown reviews (on Friday 8th May and Sunday 10th May respectively). Specific objectives for this second wave of research were to understand:

- Experiences of and views towards the Covid-19 pandemic amongst people in Wales, including levels of concern.
- Perceptions of the responses of both the UK and the Welsh Governments to the pandemic to date.
- Responses to recent announcements to ease the lockdown measures in Wales, including different approaches being taken in England and Wales.
- Responses to potential messaging.

This note outlines the key findings from the research, followed by a more detailed summary of responses as we heard them develop in the focus groups.

Summary of key findings

- 1. There continue to be very high levels of concern about the pandemic.**
 - In line with the previous wave of research, participants described the virus as having had a massive impact on their lives. These impacts are expected to continue for some time to come.
- 2. Levels of criticism about the UK Government's response to the crisis have remained high. Recent announcements about beginning to ease the lockdown appear to have added to this.**
 - As with the previous wave of research, participants were quick to criticise the UK Government for being slow to respond to the crisis and introduce the lockdown.
 - Participants also criticised the recent announcements about easing the lockdown. This was felt to have been put in motion too soon with a lack of clarity in communications.
- 3. By contrast, perceptions of the Welsh Government's response compare favourably with the previous wave of research. This appears to be driven by the decision to extend the lockdown in Wales.**
 - This decision was felt to be the best option for Wales in the current circumstances. Because this announcement came ahead of the UK Government statement, it was felt to be a symbol of the Welsh Government 'taking control'.
- 4. Despite some initial confusion, participants felt the distinction between the UK and Welsh Government announcements is relatively clear.**
 - Awareness of the announcements made over the weekend was high, with many participants tuning in directly to both Drakeford's and Johnson's addresses.
 - For many participants, the key distinction was that restrictions will be lifted in England to allow people to travel to exercise and to see others outside their households. This tapped directly into a key concern about the prevalence of people travelling to visit beauty spots across Wales.
- 5. On balance, the 'Keep Wales Safe' adverts were well received.**
 - All of the adverts tested were felt to be clear and concise, containing useful information. In addition, the 'Keep Wales Safe' strapline was praised for its simplicity.
 - The current tagline of 'Stay home. Protect the NHS. Save lives' was felt to be appropriate for the next three weeks as Wales remains in lockdown.

Background views and experiences of the pandemic

- **In line with the initial wave of research, the majority of participants described themselves as very concerned about Covid-19. The impact of the virus on their lives has remained high.**
 - Participants described their lives as being impacted by the virus in several ways. For many, loss of income and future uncertainty was a main concern, as well as continuing fears for their own health and that of (at-risk) loved ones.

- Most described themselves as having now adapted to the lockdown and said they were resolved to continue to observe these rules. There was a sense that by doing so they are able to keep some level of control in a challenging situation, to keep themselves and their families safe from the risk of contracting the virus.
- As in the initial wave of research, a number of participants said that a small ‘silver lining’ has been a sense of greater community cohesion emerging from the pandemic, with neighbours and local groups looking out for each other.

“The main effect for us has been the complete removal of income. It’s removed all incomes for us apart from my partner’s pension which isn’t enough to run the household. We’ve fallen between all of the government support measures.”

(Llangollen, 45+)

- **Compared to the last wave of research, participants described higher levels of concern about others breaking the lockdown rules.**

- There was considerable concern amongst participants about the perceived increase in other people breaking the rules, putting vulnerable people in danger, and undermining collective efforts to make lockdown a success.
- A number of participants pointed to media stories of VE Day celebrations in which social distancing rules were not observed. This contributed to a sense that other people are getting tired of the lockdown and starting to give up.

“My dad has health issues so I’m worried about him. And then you see everyone out partying on VE Day! So I’m really worried about it.”

(Swansea, 18-45)

Views on UK and Welsh Government responses to the pandemic

- **Perceptions of the UK Government’s response to the pandemic continue to be negative.**

- As in the previous wave of research, the UK Government was felt to have been slow to respond to the virus and to implement the lockdown measures. As previously, participants pointed to the perceived failure to provide adequate PPE for healthcare workers as a key symbol of this.
- In addition, the decision to begin easing the lockdown and confusion surrounding the way this has been communicated was highlighted by participants. This decision was felt by most to have come too soon, which, combined with the lack of clarity, contributed to a sense that the UK Government does not ‘have a grip’ on the pandemic.

“I think it’s been appalling. I think the [UK] Government are an absolute mess. The messaging has been mixed. We should have locked down a lot, lot sooner.”

(Llangollen, 45+)

- **Perceptions of the Welsh Government’s response continue to compare favourably with the UK Government. Positivity appears to have increased since the initial wave of research, driven by the decision to extend the lockdown in Wales.**

- In the previous wave of research, participants criticised the Welsh Government for a perception that it had taken a ‘back seat’ in managing the crisis and waited for the UK Government to dictate what would happen.
- By contrast, participants consulted in these focus groups had more positive perceptions of the Welsh Government. This was driven by the recent decision to extend lockdown, which was felt to be the best option for Wales at the current time.
- In addition, there was a sense that holding Mark Drakeford’s announcement prior to Boris Johnson’s had enabled the Welsh Government to have greater control over the narrative, and to influence the UK Government’s actions.
 - Participants felt this aligned Drakeford with Nicola Sturgeon, who continues to be viewed positively for showing leadership in the crisis and prioritising a health-first approach.
- More widely, name recognition for Drakeford as the First Minister appeared to be higher amongst participants compared to the previous wave of research (noting, however, that this is a relatively small qualitative sample). Many participants had seen all or parts of the statement on 8th May, including a younger participant who said they had not heard of Drakeford until this announcement.

“We had Italy to learn from, and instead we had a Prime Minister going around shaking hands with everyone. Thank God for Mark Drakeford! I feel really grateful. He came out ahead of the Prime Minister’s speech and Nicola Sturgeon did the same in Scotland, and I think that impacted what [the UK Government] then did.”

(Llangollen, 45+)

- **Continued support for the Welsh Government’s response to the pandemic will depend on how effectively it is perceived to use the three-week lockdown extension.**

- Participants described the decision to extend the lockdown in Wales as having ‘bought time’ to develop a strategy for gradually easing the lockdown that is sensible, clear and easy to understand.
 - Ultimately, it was felt that the Welsh Government (along with the other devolved governments) now has the opportunity to learn from the UK Government’s mistakes.

“We aren’t going to know exactly what we’re doing until 3 weeks’ time, and I hope that by then there will be a clear plan.”

(Swansea, 18-45)

- **Despite support for the lockdown extension, participants were clear that the ideal would be a UK-wide response to the pandemic.**

- Although participants were supportive of the decision to extend the lockdown in Wales, they voiced a strong preference for a joined-up, UK-wide response. As in the initial research, participants felt that a virus which does not respect borders requires a unified response.

- However, in these focus groups, the lack of a UK-wide response was blamed on the UK Government.

"I just think that we need a coherent approach because otherwise we lose sight of the clear message. I would like to see a clear, unified plan of how we're going to move out of lockdown. I would like them to say that they are going to look to open schools until September, and they're all going to do that together."

(Swansea, 18-45)

Responses to recent announcements

- **Awareness of the announcements made over the weekend was high, with many participants tuning in directly to both Drakeford's and Johnson's addresses.**

- Most participants had watched the announcements directly, either by tuning in or seeing the videos shared on social media.
- Those that had not watched them had still heard about the announcements and the changes that would impact them directly, usually through word of mouth.

"I watched Mark Drakeford's speech on Facebook, that came up on my feed. I liked it. I thought it was clearer than Boris Johnson's. One bit that did confuse me was that he said nothing has changed in Wales but that we would be able to go out more. To be honest with you, it's all a bit confusing, but Boris Johnson, he just waffles on and points at the camera."

(Swansea, 18-44)

- **Despite some initial confusion, participants felt the distinction between the UK and Welsh Government announcements was relatively clear.**

- As far as most participants were concerned, the Welsh Government announcement was clear in the short-term: the lockdown has been extended for three more weeks.
 - However, there was some confusion around the rules on leaving the house for exercise. There was some awareness that the rules have changed to permit this more often, but a feeling that this contradicts the meaning of a lockdown.
- For many participants, the key distinction between the UK and the Welsh Government announcements was that in England, restrictions will be lifted to allow people to travel to exercise and to see others outside their households (while observing social distancing requirements).
 - This was one the main criticisms of the UK Government's plan and tapped into concerns highlighted in the first wave of the research surrounding people travelling to beauty spots and putting local populations at risk as a result.

"I think the big mistake that Boris Johnson has made is saying that people can travel to different places for exercise and to see one other person at a time, and not putting a distance limit on that is madness, because everyone is going to flock to beauty spots."

(Swansea, 18-45)

- **There was a strong view amongst participants consulted in this wave of research that 1st June is too soon to re-open schools.**
 - Participants felt strongly that opening schools is high-risk, due to a perception that it will be almost impossible to enforce social distancing in them. If schools are opened in the coming weeks, participants raised concerns about the virus spreading and effectively 'undoing' the progress made in the lockdown.
 - There was some awareness that the UK Government has suggested primary schools returning first, which was seen as particularly worrying due to a perception that younger children will be less able to observe social distancing rules.
 - Participants felt that schools should not re-open until there is clear evidence that the prevalence of the virus in the population has been significantly reduced; this was felt to be very unlikely by early June. A small number of participants said that they would not be comfortable with schools re-opening any earlier than September.
 - Some participants felt reassured by the Welsh Government on this subject, thinking that their approach so far indicates they are less likely to re-open schools in June.

"Nothing would make me feel confident that schools and childcare facilities could open [at the beginning of June]. They all have families who go to the shops, it would go on and on and on."

(Llangollen, 45+)

- **Public transport was a low-salience issue for participants consulted.**
 - Only a minority of participants consulted in this wave of research normally rely on public transport for essential travel. Even among these participants, returning to public transport was felt to be a less urgent priority than other lockdown-easing measures.
 - Travelling on public transport was seen to be very high-risk, due to a perception that it would be impossible to social distance. As a result, participants felt it would be unsafe to encourage people to use public transport until the virus appears to be more 'under control'.

"I think [encouraging people back onto public transport] is not a very good idea at all. I have a bus pass and I quite regularly used it to go into town on the bus. I haven't been on the bus now for 6 weeks. I don't think it's a good idea at all because people going on the bus can't properly social distance."

(Llangollen, 45+)

- **Returning to work was acknowledged as a thorny issue, though participants had less strong views on what measures should be taken compared with the other issues discussed.**
 - Lack of change on workplace guidance in Wales contributed to returning to work being less front-of-mind than other policy areas.

- Participants said they were aware that returning to work safely will be difficult but felt that it will be easier for smaller businesses (which are common in their areas) to adapt, than it will be for larger ones.
 - In Llangollen in particular, there was a feeling that small staff numbers and a prevalence of manual jobs would make it easier to cope with new guidance, e.g. by implementing split-shifts and protective screens.
 - In Swansea, participants were more likely to mention difficulties opening offices, e.g. it being difficult to work in shift patterns, or problems sharing desks and communal areas.

“My last workplace was a charity and I’m actually really wondering what they’re going to be doing in the shops and a lot of people working in them being in high risk categories as well. There doesn’t seem to be an easy answer.”

(Llangollen, 45+)

- **There was little appetite for easing rules restricting socialising in Wales.**

- Participants felt that even a slight change to the rules on socialising would be too high-risk, with concern about vulnerable family members contributing to this view.
- In addition, the existing perception that people are breaking the lockdown rules led to the view that any easing of restrictions will be taken advantage of.
- As a result, participants were pleased that Wales appears to have taken a more cautious approach than the UK Government.

“Boris has announced now that we can meet up with 1 person from another household. However, is that a test to see if the numbers go up, I wonder? Are they trying to see if it will spread that way? If one person’s meeting, that will get stretched to 10 – if you give people an inch, they take a mile. I think it’s too soon to change anything.”

(Llangollen, 45+)

Overarching responses to potential messaging tested

- **On balance, the ‘Keep Wales Safe’ adverts tested well.**

- All of the adverts tested were felt to be clear and concise, containing useful information.
 - In particular, it was felt to be useful to reiterate what people *cannot* do – especially taking trips to beauty spots; a key concern raised.
 - It was also felt to be useful to reiterate advice on social distancing, to make it clear that this advice has not changed.
- Some elements that might be confusing were felt to be easily fixed, by taking a more directive tone. For example, it was felt to be confusing to talk about the ‘R’ rating in this context. Participants felt it would be better to focus on actions – especially those that people cannot do.

“A lot of people may not realise exactly what the R is, so wasting 2 slides on it is silly. And there’s the big 1 and 0.7, and those aren’t going to change people’s behaviours. Instead it should focus on the things that people are doing that they shouldn’t be, because people are driving to beauty spots and they are having picnics. Focusing on what you can’t do and can do with more clarity will have the biggest impact on the greatest number of people.”

(Swansea, 18-44)

- **Participants were also positive about the ‘Keep Wales Safe’ strapline tested.**

- This was felt to be a strong and clear message that was specific to Wales.
- When presented with alternatives, some participants liked the sentiment of ‘Looking after each other’, or ‘Protecting each other’. However, while these were felt to be very motivating messages, they were seen to be less appropriate as potential straplines, being less pithy than ‘Keep Wales Safe’.

“I prefer the original [Keep Wales Safe], maybe because it’s a bit of Welsh pride but especially when England is taking different approaches, it’s important to keep our people safe and I think the others are a bit more general – I like that it’s specific to Wales.”

(Swansea, 18-44)

- **The current tagline of ‘Stay home. Protect the NHS. Save lives’ was felt to be appropriate for the next three weeks as Wales remains in lockdown.**

- When the lockdown is eased however, participants said they will expect a new tagline that reflects the new guidance that will be in place.
- While this was not probed on specifically, a few participants spontaneously raised the new ‘Stay alert’ messaging which they felt is unclear. There was a sense Wales’ further three weeks in lockdown will give the Welsh Government time to come up with something that is more effective.

“I think keep it the same for the next 3 weeks and then, as we move out of the lockdown, have a new, snappy slogan ready to replace it.”

(Swansea, 18-44)

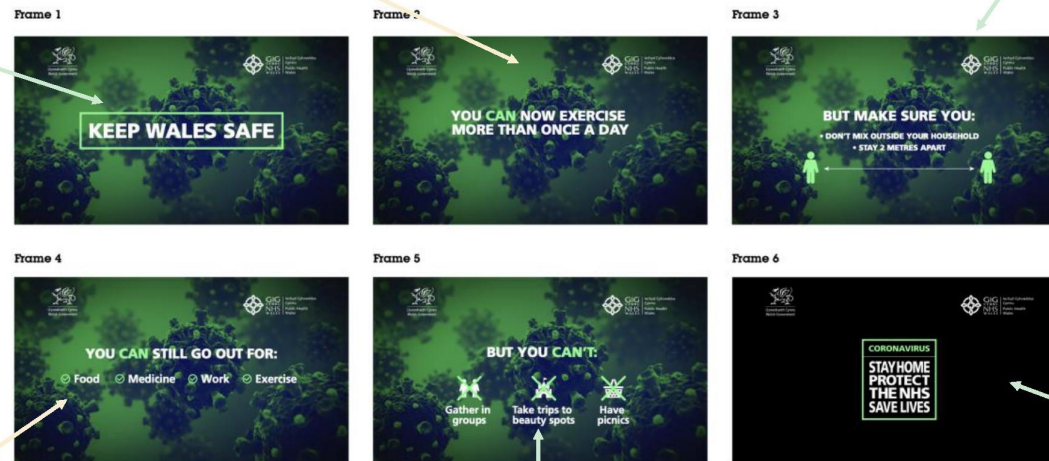
Detailed responses to potential messaging tested

Responses to exercise message:

- This frame was felt to be clear and present important new information about the restrictions in place in Wales.
- However, some participants felt that it would be better to specify 'twice a day' rather than 'more than once' due to fears that it could encourage people to go out several times a day.

- Reiterating social distancing requirements was felt to be a useful reminder of guidelines.
- Some participants felt that this message would be more effective if it was positioned after Frames 4 and 5, which also require social distancing measures to be observed.

- 'Keep Wales Safe' was felt to be a clear and motivating strapline overall.



- The content in this frame was felt to be clear.
- However, participants were unsure as to how useful it is since this is not something that has changed or that they were concerned about (compared to observation of social distancing rules as in Frame 3).

- Frame 5 was felt to convey the most important information overall. Participants felt that the information presented was clear and easy to understand.
- However, due to the perceived importance of this information, several participants suggested that it should come sooner in the sequence in order to make the content more prominent.

- Continued use of the 'Stay Home' messaging was broadly felt to be appropriate while the lockdown remains in place in Wales over the next 3 weeks.
- A small number of participants expressed a preference for the plain background on this frame, finding it easier to read the content compared to Frames 1-5.

Responses to everyone message:

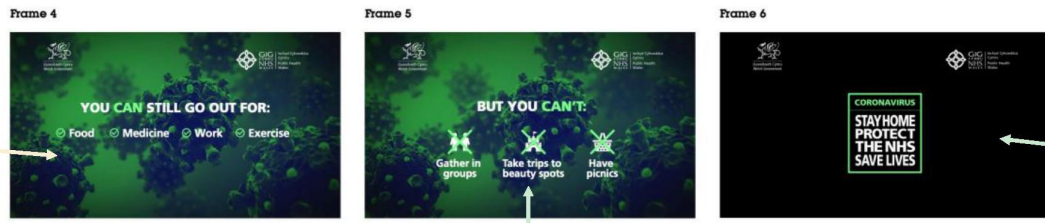
- The message in this frame was felt to be very motivating and a useful reminder about the importance of following the guidelines set.

- Reiterating social distancing requirements was felt to be a useful reminder of guidelines.
- However, some participants felt that this could be more informative, especially if moved to later in the sequence.

- As in the previous iterations, 'Keep Wales Safe' was felt to be a clear and motivating strapline overall.



- As previous, the content in this frame was felt to be clear.
- However, participants were unsure as to how useful the information is, given this has not changed.



- As previous, continued use of the 'Stay Home' messaging was broadly felt to be appropriate while the lockdown remains in place in Wales.

- As previous, Frame 5 was felt to convey the most important information overall.
- As a result, several participants suggested that it should come sooner in the sequence in order to make the content more prominent.

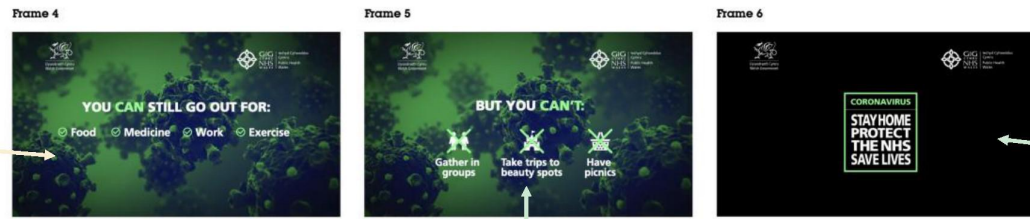
Responses to 'R' rating message:

- While most participants were familiar with the terminology 'R' rating, this was not something that all understood. As a result, without further explanation, Frames 2 and 3 were felt to be confusing.
- This was therefore felt to be a less powerful message than others tested. Some participants suggested that a more straightforward reference to keeping the number of new infections/deaths as low as possible would be more effective.

- As in the previous iteration, 'Keep Wales Safe' was felt to be a clear and motivating strapline overall.



- As previous, the content in this frame was felt to be clear.
- However, participants were unsure as to how useful the information is, given this has not changed.



- As previous, continued use of the 'Stay Home' messaging was broadly felt to be appropriate while the lockdown remains in place in Wales.

- As previous, Frame 5 was felt to convey the most important information overall.
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