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Update on Developing a Vision for Academic Public Health Research and role for Public Health Wales as a system convener

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Approval/Scrutiny route:	Business Executive Team (21 February 2024)
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Purpose

The purpose of this paper is to outline progress on the “Developing a Vision for Academic Public Health Research in Wales” project, which will lead to a co-produced future vision for academic public health research in Wales. This paper outlines the current status of the work, high-level findings and implications for Public Health Wales, and plan for dissemination of the published report.

Business Executive Team has been sent this paper for information.

Recommendation:				
APPROVE <input type="checkbox"/>	CONSIDER <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	RECOMMEND <input type="checkbox"/>	ADOPT <input type="checkbox"/>	ASSURANCE <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
<p>The Committee is asked to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Receive assurance that the work on developing a vision for academic public health research is progressing with milestones and a plan for publication of the forthcoming report. • Consider implications for Public Health Wales and role as a system convener. 				



Link to Public Health Wales [Strategic Plan](#)

Public Health Wales has an agreed strategic plan, which has identified seven strategic priorities and well-being objectives.

This report contributes to the following:

Strategic Priority/Well-being Objective	All Strategic Priorities/Well-being Objectives
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Summary impact analysis

Equality and Health Impact Assessment	No Equality and Health Impact Assessment has been undertaken as a decision is not required by the Committee.
Risk and Assurance	Not identified as a risk on the Corporate Risk Register or Board Assurance Framework.
Health and Social Care (Wales) Act	This report supports and/or takes into account the Quality Themes
Financial implications	None
People implications	The process applies to all staff undertaking research.



1. Purpose / situation

Public Health Wales (Public Health Wales) wishes to work with key stakeholders to create a joint vision for academic public health research in Wales. There are two main elements to developing the vision. The first is **analytical work**, which takes Public Health Wales's six strategic priorities as a starting point from which to explore the breadth and scope of the academic public health research landscape in Wales and will result in a published report. The analytical work is the focus of this paper.

This paper outlines:

- high-level findings and recommendations from the analytical work
- timescales for publication of the report
- next steps and plan for dissemination

Following this analytical phase and publication of the report, the second element of the work is to collaboratively co-develop a vision and strategy that harnesses Wales' unique strengths and capacity in academic public health research.

2. Background

A Co-Produced Vision for Academic Public Health Research in Wales

Developing a co-produced vision for academic public health research in Wales presents an opportunity to explore the strengths and weaknesses of the public health research offer, understand current or forthcoming opportunities and threats, and identify areas for development and investment as a public health research system.

A co-produced vision aligns with the refreshed Public Health Wales Research and Evaluation Strategy, which asserts Public Health Wales's aspiration to be a system facilitator and leader for population health research to support the delivery of Public Health Wales's long-term strategy.

Public Health Wales, alongside The Chief Medical Officer for Wales and Health and Care Research Wales, have endorsed this work and the outputs will help the research community alongside partners to respond optimally to the pressing health needs facing our population, with high-quality, high-impact research which shapes public health policy and practice.

Better alignment between research and national priorities generally, has been called for by the Reid Review¹, which had also pointed specifically to the need to

¹ Reid G (2018) Review of Government Funded Research and Innovation in Wales

align research funding to the legislative framework with a strong focus on prevention and population health.

3. Description/Assessment

Public Health Wales has commissioned an external consultant in public health, Eugenia Cronin, to work with us on the analytical element of this project.

3.1 Analytical Phase 1: Methods, Findings and Recommendations

Data collection has been completed for Phase 1 of the work and a report is currently being written which:

- explores the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats of the academic public health research offer,
- identifies key areas for development and where Wales can strengthen its routes to influence research investment,
- identifies the joint endeavours between universities and non-academic organisations that foster strengthened academic public health research in Wales.

Methods

To establish a comprehensive overview of the academic public health research offer in Wales we have:

1. Mapped the **academic public health research landscape** through an analysis of the Research Excellence Framework (REF) Impact case studies, 2021 and the UK Health Research Analysis (HRA) 2018 and 2022 data. These have been mapped against Public Health Wales's strategic six priorities and the three domains of public health.
2. Undertaken an **Open Call for Evidence** – All Welsh Higher Education Institutes (HEIs) were invited to submit evidence to Public Health Wales through an online survey, about the public health research they were involved in, future plans, aspirations and constraints. We received 20 responses across the HEIs to this call.
3. Conducted 18 semi-structured **1:1 Interviews** between August and October 2023 with key senior stakeholders including representatives from each HEI in Wales, a DPH, Welsh Government, Public Health Wales researchers, and Wales/UK research funders. The interviewees were each asked about their views on academic public health research in Wales including key strengths, weaknesses, challenges, and opportunities for the future.

A Summary of the Key Findings

The above data has been analysed with high-level findings outlined below. The data is also in the process of being triangulated to corroborate findings, giving a more comprehensive overview of the current academic public health research landscape.

UK Health Research Analysis (HRA) 2018 and 2022 data

Wales received 2.6% of funding awarded for projects with a public health element in the UK in 2018. In 2022, Wales' funding had reduced to 1.58%. (**NB** UK HRA shows funding awarded by lead partner, funding to co-applicants is not shown).

Research Excellence Framework (REF) Impact case studies, 2021

Out of 368 case studies, 33 were officially submitted by Welsh HEIs to REF 2021 under the Public Health, Primary Care and Health Services Research (HSR) category. Manual checking of REF 2021 showed 62 of the 368 case studies as having a public health element. These case studies were distributed across a number of disciplines including; Allied Health Professionals, Psychology, Social work, Geography and Law.

Analysis of Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats (SWOT)

This section draws on the perspectives of all 18 interviewees and includes narrative from the call for evidence survey about strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats facing academic public health research in Wales.

Strengths	Weaknesses
The size of Wales	'We don't talk enough' – lack of connectivity and alignment across NHS, Public Health Wales, HEIs to build PH research capacity
SAIL	PH research not strong overall (lack of focus), lack of critical mass
DECIPHer Research Centre	Access to SAIL as a publicly funded resource
The policy environment	Financial challenges facing HEIs
NHS and Public Health structures	Difficulty at UK level getting funding - this is reflected in HRA analysis
Supportive and stable context	Not easy to retain good people
Good individual researchers	Lack of senior PH researchers
Strong academic culture	Disconnect between HEIs and training of PH registrars
Research infrastructure	No one has the overall picture of PH research
Epidemiological research, and breadth and depth of population data	Small HEIs forgotten/ South Wales NHS focus

Diversity and lots of public health research – this is also reflected in REF case studies	
Opportunities	Threats
Develop LA, NHS, Public Health Wales, HEI collaborations	Funding for research and posts is a problem
Tap into international resources and networks	Lack of succession/career planning
Build and strengthen relationships with funders	Porosity of border
Establish PH research forum, focus for overview of research	Stretched resources causing more insular attitudes
Be more strategic about joint posts	Lack of profile increases vulnerability in tough times
Make more of SAIL	Devolved nations miss out on some UK funding
Think more strategically about NIHR PH opportunities	
Train PH registrars in research	
Greater focus on teaching, research and supervision	

Recommendations

This section describes the preliminary themes that have been drawn from the findings above.

1. Need for a **vision/strategy** for public health research
2. **Identification of priorities / strength of public health research in Wales** to improve routes to influence research investment
3. Greater **coordination of activity** to bring more research investment into Wales
4. Clearer **public health research career structures**
5. **Greater alignment** between public health delivery, training and research
6. **Stronger relationships** between HEIs and Public Health Wales
7. **Greater overview of public health research activity in Wales**

Implications for Public Health Wales

Interviewees were asked to name the biggest single factor which would strengthen or sustain public health research in Wales. Public Health Wales was identified as a clear systems leader and facilitator to support the strengthening of public health research.

Areas identified for Public Health Wales include:



- Providing **leadership and collaboration** - Public Health Wales has the opportunity to provide both for public health research.
- Acting as a **systems facilitator and convener** – Public Health Wales could help to make links / build networks and relationships systematically rather than personally.
- Enabling **stronger partnerships/ facilitating a hub with a focus on research careers** – there were recommendations for a HEI ‘Faculty’ linked to Public Health Wales, supported by Welsh Government, with a focus on public health research careers.

3.2 Next steps for analytical phase

Key Milestones

2024	Feb	Mar	April	May	June	July	Aug	Sept
Writing of report	Dark Blue	Dark Blue	Light Blue	Light Blue	Light Blue	Light Blue	Light Blue	Light Blue
Review of report (By Steering Group and Expert Panel)	Light Blue	Dark Blue	Dark Blue	Light Blue	Light Blue	Light Blue	Light Blue	Light Blue
Report publication and dissemination	Light Blue	Light Blue	Light Blue	Dark Blue	Dark Blue	Light Blue	Light Blue	Light Blue
Phase 2: Co-produced vision phase commences	Light Blue	Light Blue	Light Blue	Light Blue	Dark Blue	Dark Blue	Dark Blue	Dark Blue

Report publication and dissemination

A short version (executive summary) of the report will be produced which will be published on the Public Health Wales website and shared widely with partners. A longer version of the report will be available on request.

Phase 2

Following the conclusion of the analytical work, Public Health Wales will work on the second phase with stakeholders and all HEIs to share the findings from the analytical work. Public Health Wales will then facilitate the development of a co-produced vision/ strategy with stakeholders, bringing together key leaders across the HEIs. Different models of working will be scoped to take this work forward.

3.3 Governance and External Oversight

To oversee the analytical work, a **Steering Group** meets quarterly and is chaired by Iain Bell. Membership includes the Chief Medical Officer for Wales, the Director of Health and Care Research Wales and senior UK academics.



The data collected during phase one will be peer reviewed in April by an external **Expert Panel** of UK-based academic public health experts to sense check the findings and provide independent oversight.

4. Recommendation

The Committee is asked to:

- Receive **assurance** that the work on developing a vision for academic public health research is progressing with milestones and a plan for publication of the forthcoming report.
- **Consider** implications for Public Health Wales and role as a system convener.