Evaluation of the Working Wales Service: Report 1

The Theory of Change, the Impact of COVID-19, and the Evaluation Framework

Summary

1. Introduction

1.1 Working Wales is a Welsh Government-funded service designed to provide streamlined and efficient employability support that is responsive to an individual's needs. Introduced in 2019, it is a new approach to providing free and impartial employability and careers advice across Wales, which is delivered for the Welsh Government by Careers Wales.

1.2 The evaluation of the Working Wales service will cover the period from April 2019 to April 2022. The main role of this first report is to set out the theory of change for the service and, building on that theory, the framework that will be used in the next phases of the evaluation. Moreover, it reports on the findings of the scoping phase of the evaluation, a review of the management information for the service, and a review of the impact that the COVID-19 pandemic had on the delivery of the service in 2020. Case studies of 10 users of the Working Wales service, which explore the support that they have received and its benefit to them, are also presented.

The service

1.3 Working Wales provides an all-Wales entry point to employability support. It enables individuals to talk to trained advisers about employment and skills, their aims and aspirations, and any challenges that they face in obtaining and maintaining work, education or training. Advice and guidance are provided on a face-to-face basis at Careers Wales offices (although the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted on this, as discussed in this report), local Job Centres, and other community outreach locations, over the telephone and online.
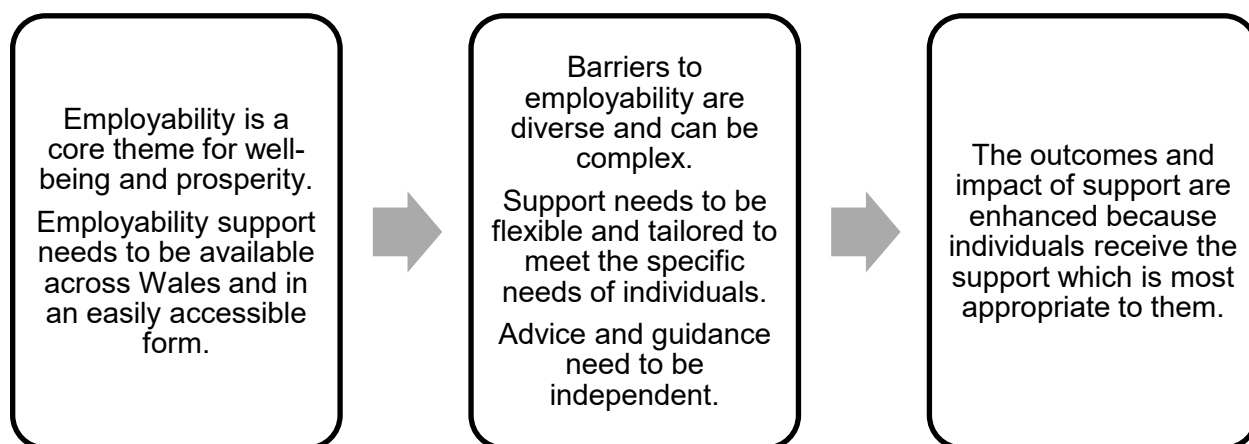
Purpose of the evaluation and methodology

1.4 The evaluation is exploring the effectiveness, efficiency and impact of Working Wales for the period April 2019 to April 2022. The focus will be on the performance and impact of the service, with a review of the service design and delivery processes.

1.5 The research undertaken for this report included 30 scoping interviews with key members of the Working Wales team, Welsh Government officials, and a range of partner organisations working in the employability field in Wales (including the National Training Federation for Wales (NTFW), several local authorities, the Wales Council for Voluntary Action (WCVA), the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), and the Trades Union Congress (TUC)).

1.6 Two workshops with Welsh Government officials were undertaken to inform the development of a theory of change for Working Wales, with eight participating in the first workshop and 12 in the second. The workshops were undertaken online due to the restrictions in place as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

1.7 The review of the impact of COVID-19 on the Working Wales service included telephone interviews with 18 members of the Working Wales management team and an online survey of frontline Working Wales staff, to which 96 responses were received (constituting a response rate of just below 50%). These were undertaken during October 2020 (before the 'firebreak' lockdown).

1.8 A substantial change to the method as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic was that no substantial consultation with customers in the Working Wales service was undertaken during this phase of the evaluation. This had been planned to explore the service from a customer perspective. Undertaking substantial fieldwork with customers was not considered appropriate during the pandemic, as the restrictions in place were likely to have a significant influence on the responses to questions. The delaying of consultation with customers (which will be a key part of the next phase of the evaluation) also released resources that allowed the review of the impact of COVID-19 on the Working Wales service, as introduced above, to be undertaken.

1.9 To address the lack of contact with customers, a set of case studies were introduced in late 2020, which were undertaken in early 2021. This involved the development of 10 in-depth case studies with individuals who have engaged with Working Wales at some point over the past 12 months.

2. Key findings of Report 1

Theory of change

2.1 A theory of change explains how an intervention is expected to work, starting with the inputs, followed by the outputs (the activities undertaken), the immediate outcomes (as a result of the activities), and, finally, the longer-term impact of the intervention. The development of a theory of change for Working Wales has found that while the overall rationale and logic for the service may be straightforward (see Figure 1), the complexity of barriers needed to be overcome by some individuals adds a layer of complexity to the evaluation process.

Figure 1: Central logic of the Working Wales theory of change

Employability is a core theme for well-being and prosperity. Employability support needs to be available across Wales and in an easily accessible form.	→	Barriers to employability are diverse and can be complex. Support needs to be flexible and tailored to meet the specific needs of individuals. Advice and guidance need to be independent.	→	The outcomes and impact of support are enhanced because individuals receive the support which is most appropriate to them.

2.2 The full theory of change model for the service can be seen in Appendix 1.

2.3 The principal output (i.e. activities) of the service is the number of customers engaged and then supported. We are also interested in the characteristics of those customers in order to understand the groups of people being supported, or not, by the service. Furthermore, there is an interest in the type of support being provided so as to be able to understand what type of support is most effective. However, of more importance to the evaluation, perhaps, are the outcomes, which represent what happens as a result of the activities being undertaken.

2.4 Two types of outcomes (i.e. results) are identified within the theory of change: service management outcomes, and outcomes for the individuals being supported. It will be important for the evaluation to explore both types, with both, therefore, a feature within the evaluation framework set out in the main report.

2.5 The service management outcomes are quantitative — (a) the amount of referrals/signposting to subsequent support, and (b) the number of individuals being referred (reflecting the fact that individuals can be referred more than once or to more than one service). The 'quality' of these outcomes is, however, also important from an evaluation perspective. Are individuals being referred to the most appropriate/effective support to address their particular/specific needs? This will be challenging to evaluate but very important because it is at the heart of the rationale for the Working Wales service.

2.6 The outcomes for individuals supported by Working Wales are generated as a result of the improved knowledge and understanding that they should have (following their engagement with Working Wales) of their personal potential/capabilities (strengths, weaknesses, etc.) and also the opportunities in respects of (a) the labour/job market, (b) training/personal development support that they can access, and (c) overcoming barriers that may be restricting their employment opportunities. Scoping interviews suggest that this should lead to positive outcomes in terms of the individual's personal motivation and/or their self-confidence, things that we have often referred to as 'soft outcomes'. The evaluation will engage with individuals supported by Working Wales in order to explore whether there is evidence of these outcomes being generated.

2.7   The final stage of the theory of change is the impact of the service. Working Wales should contribute to achieving key Welsh Government employability and economic development policies. It is clear that the service cannot achieve such impacts in isolation — there is a reliance on the training and development support to which Working Wales will refer its customers. The role of Working Wales is to identify the needs of individuals, but it does not deliver the support needed in order to address those needs. This is the key assumption within the theory of change for Working Wales — that the support to which individuals are referred is available and effective. This is an important point when considering how the success of Working Wales should be judged.

Service management information

2.8   The analysis of management information for this report covers the whole of Year 1 of the service (April 2019 to March 2020) and covers Year 2 up to the end of December 2020. The analysis finds that the demand for Working Wales support has been strong, with the service regularly engaged with more than 2,000 new adult customers per month and referring/signposting nearly 30,000 customers (both adult and youth) in its first year of operation. Furthermore, that first year included more than 37,000 face-to-face interviews and nearly 4,000 participating in group sessions with customers, as well as significant numbers interacting on the telephone and via the online service. The figures for Year 2, however, show the impact of the restrictions in place as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the delivery of the service

2.9   The COVID-19 pandemic had a massive impact on most things during 2020, including Working Wales. Primary research with the Working Wales team for this report found that the general view from within Careers Wales and the Welsh Government on how the service had coped with the restrictions put in place as a result of the pandemic was positive. Services, whilst being delivered differently, had continued and been effective. Moreover, several new services had been introduced, whereby enhancing the Working Wales service during the pandemic. Understandably, there had been some impact on the quality of the services due to, in particular, the lack of in-person support as a result of the closure of the careers centres and no outreach activities being undertaken. As the analysis of the management information shows, these were key features of the service in its first year of operation.

2.10   Importantly, positive impacts were identified by the Working Wales team. Most notably, the provision of support via telephone/video was considered to have improved access to the service in some instances; the view was that this approach should be maintained, alongside the reintroduction of the in-person support offered, going forward. This is an example of how challenging circumstances can lead to innovation and a positive change in how a service is delivered.

2.11   It is, however, important not to ignore the impact of the pandemic on the provision of services to which Working Wales would usually refer/signpost individuals and from which referrals to Working Wales are made. Those services have, for example, moved to an online delivery model and/or reduced the level of support that they can provide as a result of the restrictions in place. This has obvious implications for

Working Wales regarding its ability to effectively receive and later make referrals, and, thus, for the ultimate impact that the service is designed to contribute towards (as identified in the theory of change) to be achieved. The 'ecosystem' in which Working Wales is working also changed dramatically during 2020 with the introduction of new support in response to the impact of COVID-19 by both the UK and Welsh Governments. These changes will also have an impact on how Working Wales operates.

2.12   There is an awareness amongst the Working Wales team that there is likely to be an increase in the demand for support at a later time when interventions such as the furlough schemes come to an end and when those who have, for now, 'paused' thinking about their career decide to re-engage. Indeed, plans are in place to deal with such a situation, and additional resource has been provided by the Welsh Government. In addition, the likely substantial increase in demand for support as a result of the economic impact of the pandemic (specifically an increase in redundancies) and the pressure that there is likely to be on the service for support during the coming months are clear, leading some staff to express concern surrounding the service's ability to effectively meet such an increase in demand. Steps have been taken to prepare for this, including an additional budget being provided by the Welsh Government. This is something that will be reviewed as the evaluation proceeds to its next phase.

Customer case studies

2.13   The 10 case studies of individuals supported by Working Wales are a positive reflection of how the service is being delivered and the positive outcomes that it can generate for the individuals involved. The case studies demonstrate the wide range of issues with which the Working Wales service helps individuals. Importantly, they also show that those issues are often broader than what may traditionally be considered 'employment' issues. A key finding is that Working Wales is much more than merely a 'needs analysis and referral' service, and is supporting individuals who are sometimes in very difficult periods of their lives.

2.14   The 'positivity' and 'reassurance' that individuals have received from the Working Wales team were identified as being very important, as was the 'personalised approach'. How the service/support is delivered is therefore equally important to the actual service being provided. These are issues that the evaluation will continue to explore with a wider range of customers as the evaluation progresses.

3.   What is next for the evaluation?

3.1   The framework set out in the main report provides the foundation for the following stages of the evaluation. Research that will be undertaken as part of the next phase will include consultation with:

- Individuals being supported by the service
- The management and delivery teams
- Stakeholders and partner organisations

Appendix 1: A linear theory of change for Working Wales

	Within the control of Working Wales		Outside the control of Working Wales	
Inputs →	**Outputs (activities) →**	**Outcomes A →**	**Outcomes B →**	**Impacts**

• The budget provided to Careers Wales to deliver the Working Wales service + allocation to the service from the Careers Wales core budget
• Welsh Government officials' input in a policy and management capacity
• External stakeholders' and partners' referrals to the service (e.g. DWP)
	• The number of individuals supported
	• A wide range of individuals engage with the support — illustrating that barriers have been removed
	• The number and source of referrals/signposting
	• The range of activities undertaken/support provided
	• Outreach activities
	• Stakeholder and partner engagement activities
	• Marketing and promotional activities?
		For the service:
		
		• The amount of referrals/signposting made
		• The range of individuals being referred/signposted
		• Improvement in the 'quality' of referrals/signposting (subjective)
		
		For the individual:
		
		Improved knowledge and understanding of:
		
		a) Personal potential/capabilities
		b) Training and personal development opportunities
		c) Local employment opportunities
		d) Means of overcoming barriers to employment
		
		Leading to positive change in respect of:
		
		(a) Self-motivation
		(b) Self-confidence
			• Increase in the benefit that individuals gain from the further support/training undertaken (due to it being the right support for them, better motivation on the part of the individual, etc.)
			• Possible indicators include an increase in the number/proportion completing training courses, etc.
				Contributing to:
				
				• A positive economic impact:
				  ○ Increased labour market churn
				  ○ Reduced unemployment
				  ○ Reduced underemployment
				  ○ Reduced economic inactivity
				  ○ Increased productivity
				• A positive impact on levels of well-being
				• Employability support is delivered more effectively and efficiently, improving the cost-benefit

	Within the control of Working Wales		Outside the control of Working Wales	
Inputs →	**Outputs (activities) →**	**Outcomes A →**	**Outcomes B →**	**Impacts**
Assumptions, barriers and enablers →	• Ability to deliver the service as designed • Demand for the services/support being provided • Awareness of the service • Ability to access	• Ability to deliver the service as designed • The availability of the training/support required (to refer/signpost to) • The willingness of individuals to be referred/signposted • Limitations in the ability of individuals to be referred/signposted	• The quality of the training/support provided (to which Working Wales has referred/signposted)	• The availability of appropriate jobs/opportunities
External influences →	Prevailing economic conditions | General population health conditions (e.g. the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic) | Prevailing welfare and unemployment support structures (e.g. benefits regime, other employability schemes, etc.)			

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Views expressed in this report are those of the researchers and not necessarily those of the Welsh Government

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