

# Ymlaen: The research, innovation and improvement strategy for social care 2024 to 2029

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We're currently asking for your [feedback](#) on this draft strategy.

People working in social care go above and beyond to deliver services that improve outcomes for the people of Wales.

Supporting individuals and families in every community, the social care sector protects children, adults and older adults and helps them to do what matters to them.

This happens against a backdrop of growing inequality, increasing demand, rising costs and recruitment pressures, which means we need to continue developing services to respond to the needs of individuals and communities.

We know that research, innovation and improvement can support social care services to make a positive difference, now and into the future.

There's been a limited system of support in these areas compared to what we see in other public services like education and health. Progress has been made in social care over the last few years thanks to the work of a range of organisations, and there'll be more opportunities in the future through the commitment of partners and policy developments including the National Office for Social Care.

So it's timely for us to have a shared strategic approach to support the social care sector to achieve the ambitions set out in the Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act 2014.

We want to create a culture where evidence is central to delivery and used to inform decisions at all levels of social care, and where people feel inspired and supported to try new things.

Ymlaen – meaning 'forward' in Welsh – is the strategy we've developed together to deliver on those aims.

## Our vision

*People leading, developing and delivering social care feel confident, supported and inspired to use evidence and innovation to make a positive difference to care and support in Wales.*

To achieve this vision, Social Care Wales will work with partners to:

- **Set direction:** identify shared priorities for research, innovation and improvement so we can direct attention, resource and action to where it's needed most.
- **Connect:** 'join the dots' between different types of support for research, innovation and improvement in social care.
- **Enable:** create conditions that enable positive and lasting change in social care.
- **Support:** provide direct support to people working in social care to encourage research, innovation and improvement.
- **Disrupt:** inspire new ways of working.

## Context

In 2018, Social Care Wales published the [\*Social care research and development strategy 2018 to 2023\*](#) in partnership with Health and Care Research Wales.

It was the first time we'd set out clear goals and actions to support better social care research and develop evidence-enriched practice on a national level.

We've achieved a lot with our partners over the life of the first strategy:

- new research has been funded
- we've worked with practitioners and people who use care and support to set research priorities
- we've made social care data easier to access by bringing it together in one place
- we've supported people to make sense of research and get it into practice.

Across Wales, a wide range of organisations, as well as supporting research and evidence-enriched practice, have also been supporting service improvement and innovation in social care.

But we know there's still a lot to do to help meet the aspirations for care and support set out in the Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act 2014.

The Act set out a collective vision where social services work with citizens and other agencies to support individual and collective well-being, helping to make sure support is person-centred.

The evaluation of the Act (2023) revealed that it still has strong support among citizens and people working in social care in Wales. But there's frustration that implementation has not been as successful as envisaged.

In developing this strategy, we heard that people want us to address the gap between policy, legislation and strategy and what happens in practice. They want the Act to be delivered for everyone, and for our new strategy to contribute to that goal. Improving people's lives needs to be at the centre.

Subsequent policies like *A Healthier Wales* and *Decarbonising Social Care* have reinforced our ambitions for well-being, environmental sustainability, prevention, and supporting people in their own communities. This means growing our capabilities in reablement, rehabilitation and intermediate care, better integration between our health and social care systems, and supporting the sector to achieve net zero by 2030.

Developing and implementing this strategy is also an opportunity to help realise our aspirations for Wales to be a fairer country for all. This strategy supports work by a wide range of partners to contribute to the Anti-Racist Wales Action Plan, LGBTQ+ Action plan and More than Just Words Welsh language plan to make a measurable change to current and future generations.

There's great work going on across social care in Wales. We want to support this by establishing an approach to research, innovation and improvement that's centred on working in collaboration. Agreeing priorities together helps us decide where we should focus our collective efforts.

We also want to strengthen the social care 'voice'. People working in social care told us they don't feel their interests are well represented in the public sector. We can be an authoritative voice backed by engagement and evidence to help get those interests heard and taken into account. This is critical to supporting well-being in communities.

By promoting the contribution, importance and values of social care, we can influence change.

## **What we mean by research, innovation and improvement**

We've combined research, innovation and improvement in our new strategy as we don't necessarily think about them as different things. We're more likely to think about new ways of doing things, making something more person-centred, or understanding what works.

**Research** means trying to gather new knowledge by addressing defined questions with systematic and rigorous methods. We use a broad definition of research that includes but also goes beyond academic research to cover practice-based research and evaluation. We want people to feel confident to do their own research, to evaluate their ways of working, and to use evidence to inform their practice. We also want to support our academic research partners to do high-quality research, and we'll promote this across social care.

**Innovation** is about using fresh knowledge to improve how things are done in a way that's new to a particular setting, or to social care. Innovation happens in different ways, and on different scales. It can be about making the system easier to work in, changing the way a service is delivered, creating new digital technologies, or introducing new ways to approach practice. Social care practitioners often innovate in their daily work, by sharing learning about what is and isn't working and generating new practices.

**Improvement** is more difficult to define and means many things to different people. It involves incremental and positive change, and looking for different ways to plan, manage and deliver care and support. It's different from innovation because it includes continuity - the new ways of doing things are based on existing models.

Our goal is to embed evidence-enriched decision-making across all levels of social care. We value evidence from different sources, including:

- research, from both practitioners and specialised researchers

- experience and wisdom of people who use care and support and carers
- data and intelligence
- knowledge and wisdom of practitioners.

People said they want a culture where research, innovation and improvement are valued and central to delivery.

## **Working with partners**

Delivering the vision of this strategy for people leading, developing and delivering social care will need strong collaboration across a wide range of partner organisations. Social Care Wales will lead this new strategy and work with partners to deliver it.

The first strategy was developed by Social Care Wales and Health and Care Research Wales. For the new strategy, [a wider set of partners](#) across research, innovation and improvement have collaborated. Together, we're working on an implementation plan that'll outline the activities we'll each commit to. We want a strong collective sense of ownership for the strategy and its delivery.

Social Care Wales will keep track of the implementation, and will bring partners and stakeholders together regularly to share progress and agree our future work. We want this to be a 'living' strategy, with the flexibility to respond to what social care needs. The implementation needs to be an ongoing conversation, not something we report on from time to time.

To do this, we'll create two groups from our partner organisations and include the people in social care we're aiming to support. The groups will be:

- an oversight group of senior leaders to provide advice and help unblock barriers to progress across our partner organisations
- a community of ‘implementers’ from across partners, to create an environment of active sharing, learning and doing.

We’re well-placed to drive this work because we lead research, workforce development, improvement, innovation and workforce regulation in social care for Wales.

We’re [already doing a lot to help people working in social care to connect, develop skills and knowledge, and to access research and data in ways that work for them.](#)

Our new strategy aims to make each partner’s contribution to research, innovation and improvement support clearer. This is an opportunity for all of us to ‘join the dots’ for people in social care and do the hard work of finding the right support on their behalf.

## **How we’ll work**

We’ll **listen** to and promote the full, rich and diverse range of voices involved in social care, especially those of people who access care and support and aren’t often listened to or prioritised. We’ll champion equality, diversity and inclusion and advocate for anti-racist systems, structures and practices.

We’ll **co-design** our support with people involved in social care. Our primary focus is on the people leading, developing and delivering services because that’s how we believe we can achieve our collective vision. This will help us use the knowledge and experience of practitioners to focus on what matters and bring about change that works in practice for people accessing care and



support.

We'll work with partner organisations to **take collective action**, where it's most needed, to make the biggest impact. We'll avoid duplication and try to 'join the dots'.

We'll always **learn** through our work in developing and delivering this strategy. We'll learn with and from our partners to create a support system that works well and can adjust to changes. We'll also learn from people working in and using care and support, and from research and data.

We'll work with partners to **make the most of technology and digital developments** to support strengths-based social care. This will include exploring the ethics and appropriateness of using digital technologies, including artificial intelligence, to develop and deliver social care services.

We'll **adapt and respond** to changing circumstances, needs and new knowledge. We'll be aware of and respond to changing priorities and pressures experienced by those delivering services. We'll evaluate the strategy as it's developed and put into practice, and be curious and open about new and sustainable ways of doing things.

## What we'll do with our partners

### Set direction

Show

Identify shared priorities for research, innovation and improvement so we can direct attention, resource and action to where it's needed most.

## **Why?**

This isn't about dictating to people working in social care. It's to make sure our focus is positive, helpful, productive and aware of what matters most to people.

## **Actions for Social Care Wales and our partners**

### 1. Horizon scanning. We will:

- bring partners and others together to reflect, set future direction for our work and learn from each other and from elsewhere
- identify and share possibilities for change to support our ambitions for the well-being of future generations
- connect new opportunities, learning and inspiration with our enabling and supporting activity
- use research and data to identify potential future opportunities and challenges and explore possible solutions.

### 2. Setting priorities for our joint work. We will:

- work with partners to run structured and robust priority-setting processes on a regular basis. These will help us to understand what's important for people working in social care in Wales, people who use care and support, and for families and carers – especially people whose views aren't often listened to or prioritised
- encourage and support research that aligns with our joint priorities, with a particular focus on research that addresses inequalities
- consider where our joint work can have the most impact
- take into account the implications of policy direction, legislation and strategies in our priority-setting work

- use our shared priorities to decide how we focus and adapt our joint activity
- bring partners together to identify challenges where digital innovation could play a helpful role.

3. Use evidence to champion the 'voice' of social care. We will:

- celebrate the distinctive culture of social care in Wales
- promote equality, diversity and inclusion and advocate for anti-racist systems, structures and practices
- highlight the difficult issues that affect people working in and accessing social care
- build the strong and compelling reasons to convince others of the need for change.

## **Connect**

Show

'Join the dots' between different types of support for research, innovation and improvement in social care.

### **Why?**

We need to create a system of support for those co-designing, delivering and leading services that nurtures a culture of working together. It needs to bring about action, be flexible to meet different needs, and be easy to access.

### **Actions for Social Care Wales and our partners**

1. Build an understanding of who does what to support research, innovation and improvement and how they work together. We will:
- nurture meaningful relationships with each other to make change possible

- work together to define our roles and understand each other's contributions
- find ways of connecting the different areas so they continuously communicate and inform each other, maximising impact and avoiding duplication
- connect people to research and evidence happening in Wales, about Wales, and relevant to Wales
- make sure people know about our system of support and make sure it's easy to access and navigate.

2. Develop opportunities for joint projects and funding arrangements. We will:

- invest in and find opportunities to improve support for the system as a whole – for example, mapping the sources of support and establishing forums for working together
- find opportunities for joint working and combined funding, including joint posts and secondments
- develop formal partnerships between researchers and practitioners
- find opportunities to develop partnerships between technology and digital support and people working in social care.

## **Enable**

Show

Create conditions that enable positive and lasting change in social care.

### **Why?**

We need to make it possible for people to learn and grow, and respond to the challenges in social care.

A lot of solutions are already being put into practice. We need to invest resources in supporting people to recognise these and learn from each other.

## **Actions for Social Care Wales and our partners**

1. Develop funding approaches for research, innovation and improvement that promote creativity and sustainable change. We will:

- advocate for new funding streams at the local, regional, national and international levels, for projects of different sizes and with different ambitions
- explore, research and recommend approaches to funding that enable long-term sustainable development, with people and relationship-centred care and support at the centre.

2. Share evidence and ideas for managing and delivering services. We will:

- support research projects on social care about Wales, or relevant to Wales, conducted here or further afield
- gather and make sense of the best available research and data
- share information and insight in ways that meet different learning preferences, skills, experiences and needs
- help people to combine what they learn from research and data with their own wisdom and the lived experience of people accessing care and support and their families and carers.

3. Help to measure what matters in social care. We will:

- create better ways to measure and understand different perspectives and experiences, and recognise how inequalities intersect to shape these
- help people working in and on social care to measure what matters and stop counting what doesn't, so they can demonstrate impact and focus on improvement and delivery.

## **Support**

Show

Provide direct support to people working in social care to encourage research, innovation and improvement.

## **Why?**

We need to support research, innovation and improvement in ways that respond to the ambitions and complexities of social care.

## **Actions for Social Care Wales and our partners**

1. Build the confidence, skills and capabilities of practitioners in research, innovation and improvement. We will:

- build capabilities and support to access, use, understand and produce good quality, ethical research
- build capabilities to adapt and learn from practice and develop new ways of working, including the use of technology.

2. Build and grow social care research capacity. We will

- work together to support the development and retention of early- and mid-career social care researchers in universities and research centres in Wales.

3. Create safe spaces for learning and problem solving. We'll bring people together to:

- understand and address challenges and inequalities in service delivery and provision
- identify, break down and overcome barriers
- think about what could be possible
- consider the potential contribution of digital technology.

4. Support people to test new approaches and understand their impact. We will:

- provide evaluation support, learning and information
- provide coaching and mentoring for people to explore different ways of working.

5. Provide leadership support and development. We will:

- help leaders in social care to develop compassionate learning cultures that go beyond mandatory training
- support leaders to nurture inclusive and respectful cultures using the principles of compassionate leadership
- develop leadership skills in producing and using research and data to inform planning, practice and service design, including workforce modelling
- support safe spaces for leaders to learn from each other and examine and build their professional development.

## **Disrupt**

Show

Inspire new ways of working.

### **Why?**

We need to be bolder and braver in tackling the challenges and inequalities faced in social care.

We need to challenge the way things are done now, which will deliver more of the same, while appreciating work already being done to improve outcomes. This will help us respond to what matters, now and in the future.

### **Actions for Social Care Wales and our partners**

1. Promote the conditions for 'good disruption' and balancing rights and responsibilities. We will:

- present and promote the evidence to do things differently
- encourage and support 'good disruption', which means challenging the way things are currently done with the aim of improving outcomes
- promote the potential role of digital innovation in supporting social care
- increase understanding that innovation can mean testing ideas that may not be perfect at first
- create spaces for open and honest reflection about what works and what doesn't
- help people to learn from what happens when things don't go to plan and move forward.

2. Encourage people working in social care at all levels to have confidence in their ability to bring about positive change. We will:

- promote the impact of 'small wins'
- target support to include 'everyday innovators' and emerging leaders of change and innovation, rather than only people in formal management roles
- support people working in social care to understand what positive change is, looks like and feels like.

## **Capturing and telling the story of our impact**

Our strategy is designed to be delivered together with our partners. We'll know this is the case if:

- partners understand their contribution to the strategy and take collective ownership for delivering the shared vision



- new and improved partnerships emerge from the strategy through shared knowledge, learning and resources
- people working in social care access the support available through partners.

The strategy needs to contribute to positive change for people working in, and on, social care in Wales. We want to promote a culture of evidence-enriched decision-making, as well as the space, encouragement, value and funding to enable continued growth and improvement that ultimately will make a positive difference to care and support in Wales. We'll know this has happened if, on a local, regional and national level:

- people working in social care have more opportunities to share, reflect and learn together
- innovations are shared and pockets of promising practice spread
- people working in and leading social care have the confidence and skills to:
  - use evidence in practice and decision making
  - lead and contribute to both improvement and innovation in everyday practice, service development and transformational change
  - evaluate their contribution and demonstrate the difference their work has made
  - lead cultures that make considered, positive risk-taking possible.
- people in social care have the digital skills needed for their work
- we have accessible and effective processes to support digital innovation
- people working in social care know where to access research evidence
- gaps in data and research are identified and addressed
- evidence from evaluation is gathered and shared
- there's improved availability and use of social care data.

We need to develop a better understanding of the impact of our work. We also need to continuously learn and adapt what we do to maximise the positive difference we can make to people delivering care and support.

We'll use a method called contribution analysis to capture our impact and tell the story of what we achieve together through this strategy. That means looking at how what we've done contributes towards our goal.

We'll evaluate our impact as we go and be open and transparent about what is and isn't working. We'll be flexible, using what we learn to adapt our approach where needed.

Tell us what you think

We're currently asking for your feedback on this draft strategy.

Please complete our [online form](#) to tell us what you think, or visit our [consultation page](#) for more ways to respond.