Live Learning Partnership

Initial Findings

December 2020

MAKING WALES BETTER iwa GWNEUD CYMRU WELL

Wales Co-operative Centre Canolfan Cydweithredol Cymru

BUSINESS IN THE COMMUNITY The Prince's Responsible Business Network Cymru

CARDIFF UNIVERSITY PRIFYSGOL CAERDYDD

FFORWM GOFAL CYMRU CARE FORUM WALES

Cartrefi Cymunedol Cymru | Community Housing Cymru

cymorth cymru connect · strengthen · influence

Ethnic Minorities & Youth Support Team Wales | Tîm Cymorth Lleiafrifoedd Ethnig & Ieuenctid Cymru

WCVA CGGC

YLab

nesta

Introduction

What is the Live Learning Partnership?

We are a group of ten organisations, representing business, the third sector, policy and academia. We have come together in a learning-by-doing collaborative experiment to try to capture the voices and experiences of people across Wales in response to the Covid-19 pandemic. This is a deliberately cross-sector project.

The Institute of Welsh Affairs (IWA) and the Wales Co-operative Centre (WCC) are co-leaders of the partnership, along with Business In the Community (BITC), Cardiff Business School (Cardiff University), Care Forum Wales, Community Housing Cymru (CHC), Cymorth Cymru, The Ethnic Minorities and Youth Support Team (EYST), Wales Council for Voluntary Action (WCVA) and Y Lab (Cardiff University/Nesta).

What are we trying to do?

To understand the ongoing impact of the pandemic on individuals, work, the community and the world around us, we need to listen to people's experiences or 'stories'.

To gather these 'stories' we're using the online storytelling tool Sensemaker®. As the name suggests, Sensemaker® tries to make sense of the changing world around us by analysing people's experiences and stories, told from their perspective.

Unlike other surveys, SenseMaker® combines stories and numbers - human wisdom and data analytics, to ensure that the quantitative data always has the meaning and context of qualitative narratives.

Our aim is to collect experiences and stories from as many people as possible - and from as wide and diverse a population as possible. We will then use Sensemaker® to identify patterns across various narratives. We will also have the ability to gain intimate local insight because of these individual experiences. We will share our findings with others in the partnership and beyond - because that's how we can improve services, or change things for the better for individuals and communities.

Stories will be gathered on a continuous basis for a year from July 2020, so we'll also be able to track the impact and effectiveness of decisions and interventions on a regular basis.

What we have learned so far

We have examined the 65 responses between July and October 2020 from a wide range of sectors from across almost all parts of Wales. Over half of responses were from the housing sector but there were contributions from Welsh Government representatives, the third sector as well as social enterprises and cooperatives. The results were fascinating and provide an invaluable insight into people's lives during the pandemic but also have important implications for how people live and work in the future.

Each of the Live Learning Partnership partners is responsible for redacting all personal identifying data from the stories that come in through their own URL. Once redacted, this information will be shared publicly for others to view and use.

The majority of responses so far related to people and society with a particular emphasis on individuals' experiences of the pandemic and its impact on their working practices and health and well-being.

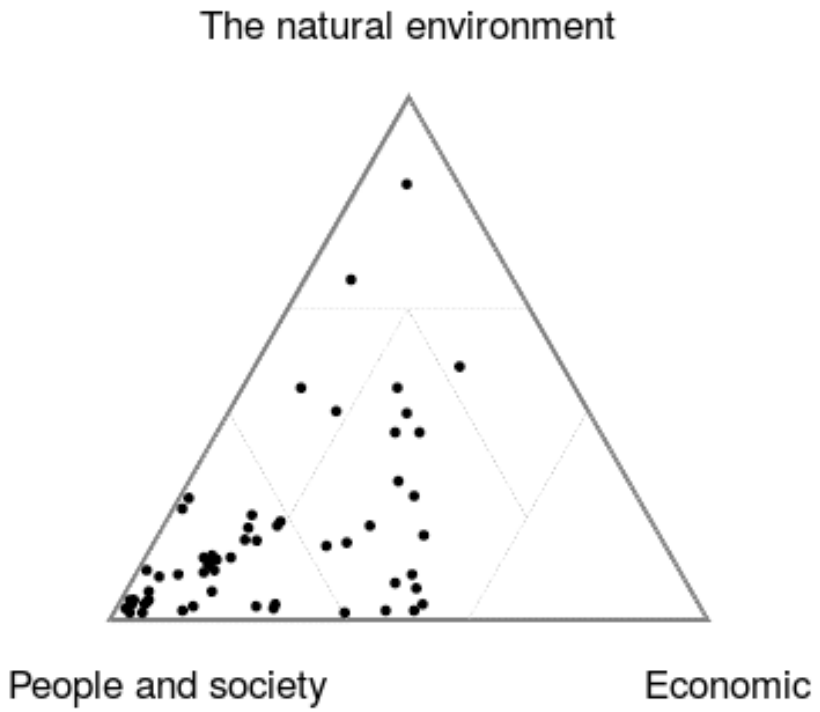

Figure 1 - What is the focus of what you have described?

Perhaps unsurprisingly, given the scale and nature of the pandemic, the majority of respondents felt their stories had a significant impact on their lives and had long term implications for the way that they lived and worked. People also felt that things would operate very differently after 'crisis' mode was over and wanted there to be a significant change with over 80% of respondents wanting to ensure things did not revert back to business as 'usual'.

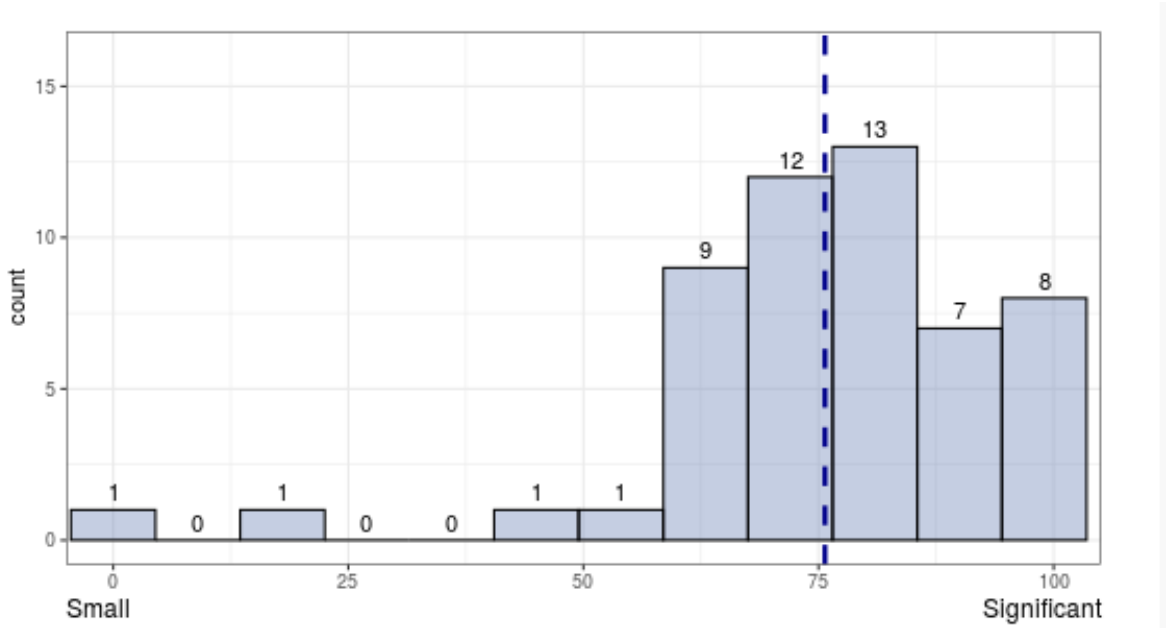

Figure 2 - What difference has this already made?

Many of the themes that emerged from the stories were similar but people's experiences and views varied considerably and the variety of stories demonstrates how differently people have reacted to similar experiences during this difficult time. This reflects the difference in people's living situations but also the different ways that people work, learn and interact with others. For this reason there are some very mixed messages emerging from the data and we have attempted to summarise these, as well as some of their implications for working practices moving forward, in the sections below.

Working from home: A blessing or a curse?

A large number of the stories related to the change in workplaces from people who had previously worked solely in an office environment and now moved to virtual working from home. Some respondents saw this as a very positive experience where they had achieved a much better work life balance that was previously unimaginable with long commutes to and from the office. Many had adapted well to the virtual environment and felt that they were now more productive:

> 'I have held many zoom, skype and teams meetings, but do not feel that the quality of my work has been impacted. In fact although there have been ups and downs I feel more productive.'

People also felt that they had built effective working relationships with colleagues and partners as they were all working together effectively towards a broad goal:

> 'We all worked together at the start of a lockdown we thought would only last a few weeks, to being months in and still working together to keep our tenants, families, friends and community safe.'

However, many respondents found the change to a purely virtual working environment much more difficult, felt isolated and were struggling at not having face to face contact with colleagues or service users. This lack of face to face interaction was a common theme for

many people who recognised the benefits of virtual meetings but really struggled with a lack of 'real' human interaction:

> 'People need contact with other people - preferably face-to-face. Whilst virtual meetings and working from home are great in so many ways, it is really important for lots of people's mental health to meet other human beings.'

This had resulted in a lack of spontaneity and creativity as respondents the usual informal interactions and conversations that often happen in the workplace were no longer possible:

> 'Since the lockdown started there has been a complete difference [in] how we connect to people, no longer do we meet and greet by the shaking of hands and a quick chat, it's now a Zoom or Teams meeting which don't just happen so there [are] no spontaneous conversations or ideas. This has left a hole, an emptiness which I crave, sometimes it almost feels robotic'

The work / life balancing act

A large number of responses also commented on people's work life balance. These were very closely related to the new working from home environment and again there was a mixture of responses. Some respondents found that their work life balance had dramatically improved. The lack of commuting time and a greater flexibility of working hours meant that many respondents felt they had a much more time to do the things they enjoyed rather than their lives simply revolving around work which had improved their well being:

> 'Work life balance is so much better I will never return to the hours I used to work in the office with the commute'

People also found that they were able to do things they would never have been able to under 'normal' working conditions. They broke up their day by walking, visiting family and neighbours or taking exercise which would never have been possible in their previous working life.

In contrast to this a similar number of respondents felt that their work life balance had deteriorated significantly. Many struggled with their area of work being where they lived and so had difficulty in being able to switch off and separate work and home life:

> 'The biggest impact it has had has been on my wellbeing and ability to switch off from work and enjoy being at home with my partner. It is hard now to establish when the work day starts and finishes. My work space is also where I eat, sleep and enjoy my downtime - so this lack of boundaries has started to take its toll.'

Some respondents also had to balance additional pressures from the pandemic such as having children at home and/ or caring responsibilities. This meant that time management and just trying to keep to a normal working day was impossible and the additional stresses meant that both their work and home life was dramatically affected.

Mental health and wellbeing

Perhaps unsurprisingly people's mental health and well being was one of the most significant issues raised by respondents. There were some people who felt their mental health had improved as the pandemic had given them time to re-evaluate what was important in their

life and had started to appreciate the 'little things' like nature and spending more time with their family.

> 'I feel I understand better about what makes me happy, and it's the really simple things, coffee and cake with friends, swimming in the sea, walks in nature, having peace and quiet!'

The majority of respondents had experienced more negative effects on their mental health and well being and Covid had added additional stresses to their already difficult lives. People struggled with the uncertainty that the pandemic had brought and often felt isolated and struggling to cope with what might come next:

> 'The strain that Covid brings is like building problems on top of problems. I'm usually a cool headed person - great under pressure but not sure why, this week feels like I'm coming to the end of my ability'

People also mentioned difficulties in concentrating for any length of time and a feeling of timelessness or 'groundhog day' as the days and weeks seemed to merge as the lack of variety of life became overwhelming:

> 'There is a sense of timelessness because every day is spent uniformly - same rooms, same people, same routine - and one loses a sense of which day of the week it is. Even weekends become almost indistinguishable. Home and work tasks become blurred and there is a sense of trying to achieve too much.'

Respondents were not always positive or negative and one respondent summed up a number of views reflecting their moods as like being on a 'coronacoaster':

> 'I feel that everything is getting better and almost like back to normal feeling and then as soon as I check the news or social media that terrifying feeling of the unknown comes back.'

Changing working practices

Whilst the majority of reflections centred around individuals' feelings and experiences there were also positive observations relating to changes in the way organisations worked and adapted. One respondent noted that their organisation had adopted a much more person-centred approach with services now being considered in more detail and greater consideration given to more tailored support with additional communication. Another noted that their organisation was now much more focussed on values rather than processes and had adopted a trust-based approach recognising staff will 'do the right thing' instead of focussing on timesheets and presenteeism.

One of the questions also related to how individuals / organisations had responded to failure and it is interesting to note that the majority of respondents felt that there was a readiness to learn quickly and move on. This is not the stereotypical response to how organisations react and so could indicate a changing culture of learning and adapting brought about by the crisis.

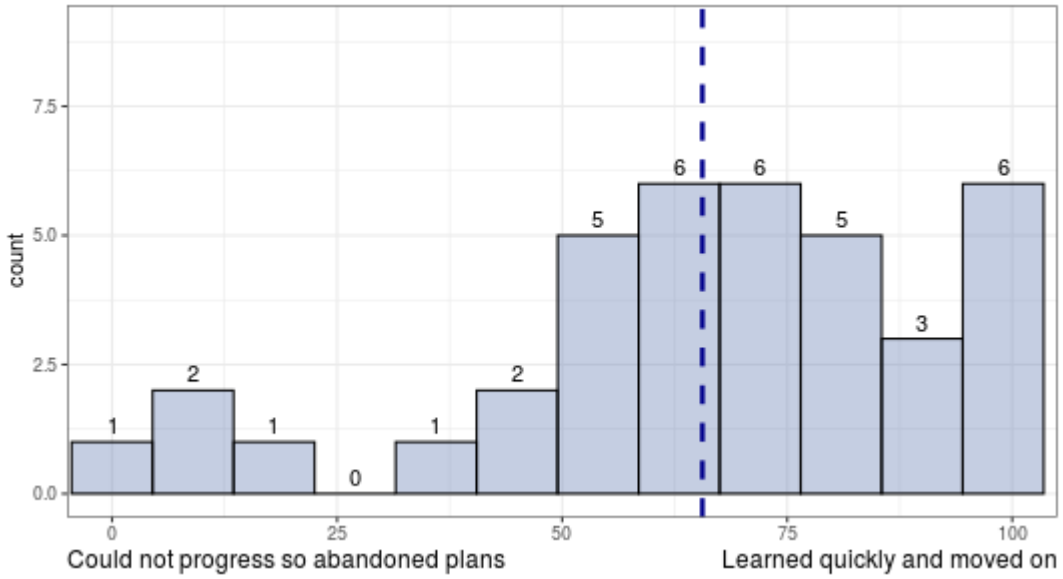

Figure 3 - If things did fail / go wrong, what was the response?

We will be undertaking a deeper analysis of these responses across different sectors and locations and this is certainly something which would be interesting to examine in further exploration of this data.

Implications for working practices in the future

Consideration of employees' wellbeing

Building on their own experiences some respondents reflected on the implications for working practices in the future. A number of people felt that organisations now needed to give much greater consideration to employees well being and how they can provide support in these difficult times. One organisation was attempting to do this through non compulsory daily team meetings which gave people the opportunity to just talk and have some form of social interaction without discussing work to help improve staff wellbeing:

> 'I have seen a lot of people on twitter say that a weekly opportunity to meet up is useful..... I also know of some teams who don't even meet up weekly but for me and my small team we could not imagine not meeting at least every other day.... once a week is just not frequent enough. I can imagine people think it is far too onerous or a waste of time but we have such positive outcomes for our work and wellbeing that we see it as essential to how we work together.'

Evaluating people's working styles and home situations

Probably the greatest lesson that emerges from people's stories is the very positive and negative experiences people have had from working from home. Some people have thrived under these new conditions and couldn't imagine going back to their old style of office based work. Others really struggled with the lack of human interaction and craved social and human contact to be able to function effectively. This has serious implications for organisations who are thinking of making home working 'the new normal'. Whilst this might be suitable for some employees it is clear that others still need an office style environment in

order to function effectively. It might therefore be helpful for employers to assess the learning and working styles of their employees and consider individual situations before making decisions on working arrangements that could benefit some but also be very detrimental to others. People are all different and function more effectively in different environments. Whilst some people benefitted from a home working environment, others have struggled, and it is important to recognise this when planning for the future.

Companies may need to establish a much more sophisticated way of understanding their employees and instead of adopting blanket procedures for all, be far more flexible in how they operate. Whilst this may be difficult to imagine at some organisations these stories surely demonstrate the variety of personalities and reactions to different working environments and it will fall on employers to consider how they can operate more effectively with a flexible approach which matches the needs of individuals instead of expecting individuals to conform to what works best for the organisation. One respondent summed up this situation when reflecting on their own experience and future working needs:

> 'The office is an important environment for some people, in some cases essential. It's pretty obvious at this stage that some people loved lockdown while others didn't and while industries all over the world are discussing whether we go back to the office or not for someone like me and other extroverts like me it is almost vital. I cannot foresee someone like me staying in my current job role forever if it means I have to work from home forever. While there are obvious advantages to working from home, some of which I too have enjoyed such as the lack of a commute we cannot forget how vital a space where people can connect in a physical environment is. It breeds creativity and friendship and genuine human connection that I just don't feel we get from video calling.'

What happens next?

As the collection of stories grows, we will be using them to illustrate issues to do with policy and practice in our discussions with Welsh Government, local authorities and other stakeholders.

We will also be sharing the stories and data publicly so that everyone can access them.

This is a learning-by-doing collaborative experiment. We do not have a dedicated member of staff working on this and so we are currently seeking funding for a data analyst/project coordinator.

The Live Learning Partnership will initially last until June 2021.

The IWA is grateful to the National Lottery Community Fund for their contribution to this project.

To join the mailing list to receive further updates please email: livelearning@iwa.org.uk

On behalf of the Live Learning Partnership, 8 December 2020