Developing Research in Health & Social Care: Perspectives From Public Health

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Research context

• My background is in interventions to improve public health and reduce inequalities
  The core focus of the DECIPHer centre. Examples include
  • Improving mental health in schools
  • Working with homeless centres to support smoking cessation
  • Adaptation of dementia self-management programmes across contexts

• Good public health improvement research provides understandings of what works
  to enable populations to lead longer, happier, healthier lives, and reduce inequality

• Evidence gaps centre around developing, evaluating and implementing effective,
  sustainable changes outside of healthcare contexts, and across policy domains

• Research questions are shaped, and priorities identified, in a number of ways.
  • Funders will launch commissioned calls, signalling areas of;
  • Researchers will bring their own researcher-led ideas to these funders;
  • Collaborations with government representatives and organisations such as Public
    Health Wales and the public will shape priorities and questions
Key stakeholders

• A lot of work which came before me and laid the groundwork for DECIPHer was about building networks of stakeholders

• Key stakeholders in public health research may include
  • “The public”. This may be general population groups (e.g. DECIPHer’s ALPHA group). Or publics with specific lived experiences (e.g. RE-STAR project works with groups of neurodivergent young people)
  • Policymakers and practitioners across health and non-health domains. As the Wellbeing of Future Generations Act 2015 recognises, all policy domains can improve or to harm public health
  • Third sector organisations. E.g. groups who advocate to reduce poverty or prevent tobacco use
  • Other academics. Public health as an interdisciplinary team science

• The diversity of stakeholders in public health means we need to communicate effectively with groups with very different backgrounds and lived experiences

• Public health is perhaps also unique in the care we need to take not to engage with some stakeholders (e.g. commercial interests counter to public health)
Research skills & Development

- An important skill in public health intervention research is the ability to work across disciplinary boundaries, within academia and beyond
  - Respect for differing perspectives and willingness to reach shared understandings
  - A team science – values diversity of perspectives and all contributions
- Developing an understanding of, and respect for, diverse methods and methodologies
  - Trials in some cases, natural experiments in others, process evaluation, economic evaluation…
- Willingness to adapt and respond to change
  - Public health priorities can rise and fall rapidly – it can useful to be able to move with them
  - Increasing investment in responsive infrastructures such as NIHR PHIRST and Evidence Synthesis teams which apply methodological skills across any topic or population
- These skills can be learned formally. Also by learning by doing and being around other scientists and stakeholders who see the same issues from different perspectives
Success Stories

• Incubation of the School Health Research Network across Wales providing national data for policy evaluation work
  • Evaluations of EU Tobacco Products Directive regulations & Welsh Government Whole School Approach to Mental Health

• Shaping methodologies for how intervention science is done internationally
  • MRC guidance on process evaluation (Moore et al. 2015)
  • MRC funded guidance on adapting interventions to new contexts (Moore et al. 2021)

• Success also means building a team who can sustain and continue to evolve this work, building capacity within your team, across Wales and internationally
  • Growth in capacity for public health research in Wales – strong team of early and mid-career researchers moving into ever more senior roles
  • Success can mean discrete events (e.g. securing a grant, publishing a key paper, influencing a policy), but it is also a process
Challenges

- Interdisciplinarity – working across departments, universities and with non-academic groups
  - Everyone tells us we should be working in interdisciplinary ways. Lots of age-old structures within and across universities can make this very difficult

- To move around, or build in one place
  - Traditional view - move between employers to build experience. Not everyone can do this!

- Building and sustaining policy-practice networks in organisations with high staff turnover and regular reshuffling of staff roles can be a challenge
  - Developing partnerships at the organisational level rather than just with key individuals

- Securing a continuous flow of funding to build and maintain a team and sustain momentum
  - Contract insecurity and precarity in how universities employ research staff makes this a challenge
  - For permanent staff, managing competing demands of teaching and research can become a big challenge

- Learning to embrace and take on board constructive criticism, deal with rejection, and accept the more random elements in successes and failures…
  - We all like to pretend our successes are all down to our own hard work
  - Sometimes it’s about being in the right place at the right time! Particularly in public health where priorities change rapidly.
Reflections & Advice

• Research priorities in public health can change rapidly – be adaptable and willing to pursue new areas of research

• There is no single path. Some people pick a single topic and build a programme around that, others apply a broad methodological skillset across a diverse range of topics and populations.

• People progress and find success at different times and different rates – take time to learn the fundamentals by working with and learning from others

• Public health is a team science – start building your networks in Wales and beyond early. Start thinking about the next generation as soon as you start to experience success yourself

• It requires hard work, but also some luck for opportunities to come along at the right time.