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

DECIPHer
Centre for Development, Evaluation, Complexity and Implementation in Public Health Improvement
A Public Health Research Centre of Excellence

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)
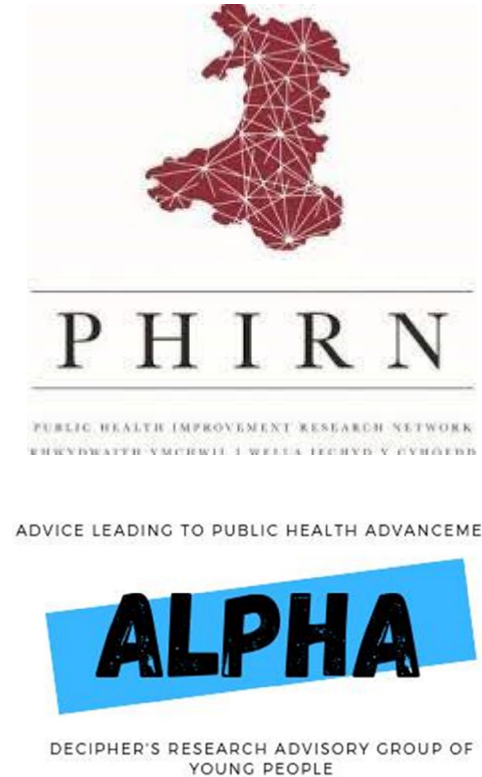
Research skills & Development

- 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.