

# YLab

## Delivering Public Services Innovation: Evidence from Wales

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# About Y Lab

Y Lab was established in 2015 and is the first Public Services Innovation Lab for Wales. A partnership between Cardiff University and Nesta, it supports innovation across public services in Wales and beyond.

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[Public service innovation](#) involves creating, developing and implementing ideas that produce public value and societal benefit. Its importance is rising, particularly in the light of escalating challenges around funding, technology adaptation and political and social change. There is a growing need to provide both value for money and meet increasing demand. Y Lab is providing new thinking around this agenda, including introducing [new funds](#) to help innovators in Wales.

## What we did

Last year Y Lab conducted a survey across public services in Wales asking leaders and employees for their examples of innovation since devolution. As a team we looked at the examples submitted, based on a few things that we know are often present in successful innovations:

- **Some level of novelty** Successful ideas don't need to be new-to-the world. Some of the ideas we looked at are brand new but most are new to Wales or to a sector.
- **Relative advantage** We explored the notion of relative advantage; it may not be the best solution but is the idea better than what went before?
- **Level of (or potential for) scale** Do the ideas have the potential to be or have they been taken up elsewhere? Innovations that spread between organisations or groups or even globally should indicate something about their usefulness.
- **Level of impact** This can be a thorny issue as innovation often remains contested. We looked at innovations at various stages from nascent to established and tried to understand the impact within the context of the organisation, rather than 'outside in'.

## What people told us

Speaking to the originators and implementers of innovation in Wales a few things have struck us.

**Partnerships** are reported as central as one would expect. But why and in what particular way does partnering deliver successful innovation? Complex public services appear to require cross disciplinary knowledge and cooperation, but some people found the reality of managing partnerships to be very challenging in practice. Those that succeed work out different strategies depending on the type of organisational mix and type and complexity of idea. Dealing with difficult questions upfront appears essential, as does **setting expectations** and ensuring that the balance of risk and **reward is shared and understood**. Diversity of working background also seems important; people involved in developing the innovations often had a myriad of different working experiences and were able to bring in adjacent domain knowledge to great effect. In one example, an innovator was able to draw on previous knowledge and skills in computer science by introducing new technology into the education sector. In a further case, a manager's own personal interest in technology led to the introduction of a new digital approach to managing inventories, with great effect.

Strategies for **public and user engagement**, particularly when large organisations are trying to implement change was seen as essential. Buy-in from individuals across the organisation can influence others and improve the idea. Technology can be a useful tool in connecting organisations to users, but face to face communication still plays a significant role, especially where there may be a wider impact on the public environment.

Replacing services appears hard for many reasons, not least where professional groups have strong ethical and professional responsibility for the wellbeing of potential users. Where services evolve or are introduced successfully, a lot of time and effort seems to be required and exerted over a longer period of time to persuade the relevant professionals and employees of trying something new (reluctance to change is classic 'late adopter' behaviour). Identifying credible

champions both to drive and be early adopters of the idea was vital to the success of one national programme in particular.

The time needed by people who implement innovations in public service is often longer than you might think, particularly for those responsible for large-scale change. **People need to build technical skills, network knowledge and understand and learn from what has failed before.** This has implications for areas of the public sector that are losing staff at a high rate. 'This could never happen now' was heard more than once.

The '**small world**' context in Wales was seen as a double-edged sword. When it works, politicians and leaders can connect easily and pool resources, link to policy initiatives and new legislation (which was often seen as driving change) and make quicker decisions to great effect. However, it was also suggested that the small world may also mean that developing external links and **building and retaining skills may be a greater challenge.** One example highlighted that remaining connected to central UK government whilst also linking to Welsh government has mutual benefits. They suggested working locally enabled the flexibility and ability to try new things in Wales via additional funding, initiatives and networks from Welsh government while continuing to benefit from the wider experience distilled through UK government.

The **third sector** seems to hold an interesting place in the innovation landscape: Sitting between public bodies and users, it can provide novel insights for services and their connectivity to users can help large organisations to innovate internally. The relationships between third sector and government was viewed by participants as an important area especially for managing risk through devolved leadership. Managing and distilling the crowd of ideas that non-governmental actors create, presents a challenge for both sides.

**Research institutions** are reported as playing a central role in the innovation infrastructure in Wales; tenure can be longer and they represent a more stable part of the public service fabric; they are often well-funded (or at least may be able to access funding), have global connectivity (linked to wide evidence base), play a vital role in building whole participatory networks through which new ideas can have a real impact.

**Users and public bodies can coalesce around big research themes.**

Together, their work can link many aspects under an umbrella theme, share ideas and build at scale. One national education programme engaged with 97% of middle and high schools in Wales by bringing together government bodies, university researchers and charities. Academics bring a degree of independence and credibility when building high-level networks and strong centres, which in turn can attract further staff and funding. **A number of research centres in Wales have become self-sustaining engines of innovative activity**, building a sustainable mechanism for public involvement and providing real social benefit. They can also build into their work a high level understanding of how change works in complex systems and the challenges of introducing new interventions into these systems.

If **small firms and startups** are going to disrupt public service, they need **identifiable and effective ways to sell their ideas across the system**, to achieve scale and make the idea commercially viable. It was suggested there are opportunities for Wales in what could be a well-connected network of public services.

People reported that **large funders** had done incredible work in identifying and funding innovation projects, however those projects that succeed need strategies to make ideas sustainable following the reported, often 'cliff-like' but inevitable, tail-off in funding. **Austerity** is the background for some innovation, for example, where technology is replacing human labour, though this also may be rhetorical cover for projects that people want to implement regardless. However, it seems some larger **more complex innovations need time, space and significant funding to develop** the deep technical skill and public engagement that is required. Some ideas need nurturing, otherwise people in public services won't have the space or confidence to do the work.

**National schemes and large funded centres have been successful** in Wales in establishing further local innovation, **providing skilled people and strong brands** that people can use to promote their own initiatives. Strong identifiers (slogans, brands) appeared consistently and seemed to help when communicating across stakeholders.

Finally, new and better ideas are emerging all the time - some of the ideas we highlight here may already be on their way to being replaced. There remains a real challenge for government in exploring and scaling the right ideas and working out mechanisms for supporting what works and learning from ideas that don't.

*Y Lab is looking to use the information shared to help us understand how and why innovation happens in public services and inform research and teaching at Cardiff University. More information can be found at [ylab.wales](http://ylab.wales) or follow us on [Twitter](#).*

## Case study

### Invisible Walls Wales

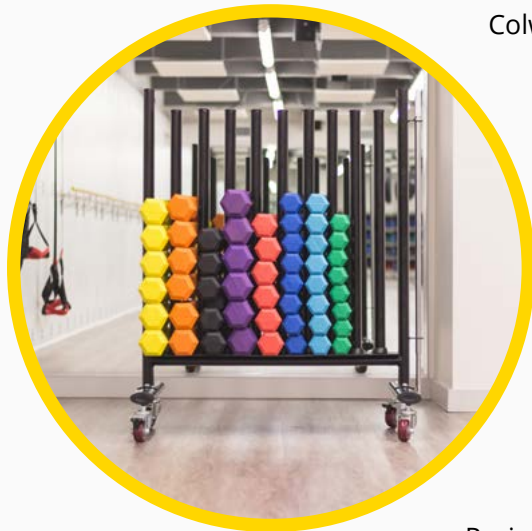
Invisible Walls Wales re-imagined and re-framed the experience of family visits to HMP & YOI Parc in Bridgend to reduce re-offending rates and the legacy of intergenerational transmission of crime. Recognising that 6 in 10 children with fathers in prison will also enter the criminal justice system, they created a unique model of interventions. The prison visits facility was reverse engineered to be warm and inviting with a 'food hall' feel, more conducive to positive family engagement, which has a proven impact on recidivism. Each year, 20 families identified as high risk were assigned a mentor who could assist with a range of challenges including substance misuse and debt. Services such as homework clubs and after-school activities were offered as part of the family visits service. Reoffending rates have been dramatically reduced. 69% of prisoners at HMP Parc have regular family contact, compared to 48% nationally, and substance misuse amongst the adult clients fell by a statistically significant 66%.



Project Leads: HMP Parc, G4S

## Case study

### Colwyn Bay Health Precinct



Colwyn Bay Health Precinct enables health, social care and leisure professionals to deliver an integrated care plan to local people in Conwy improving health, wellbeing and social participation.

Medical and fitness facilities are co-located in Conwy Leisure Centre so that physical activity can be used as a tool to help manage chronic conditions, aid rehabilitation and improve people's health. More than 20 projects are now based at the centre, including programmes for people with diabetes and Parkinson's Disease.

Project Partners: Betsi Cadwaladr University Health Board, Conwy County Borough Council and the Welsh Rugby Union.

## Case study

### Tenovus Cancer Care - "Sing with Us" choir

Tenovus Cancer Care established its first "Sing with Us" choir in 2010 for anyone affected by cancer. Professional musicians lead rehearsals that aim to be uplifting, fun and supportive. Subsequent studies with Cardiff University, Royal College of Music and Imperial College London have shown that an hour's choir rehearsal reduces members' anxiety and depression, and has a positive impact on biological markers related to stress, immune function and inflammatory response. This could put people affected by cancer in a better position to receive treatment and maintain remission.

Project Lead: Tenovus Cancer Care





## Case study

### Sand Dune Project, Swansea Bay – A Nature Based Solution



Wind-blown sand from Swansea Bay is often deposited on the cycle path and road, causing hazards for motorists, cyclists and pedestrians and expensive clean-up operations for Council departments. A partnership project with Natural Resources Wales and City and County of Swansea addressed this problem by managing and encouraging sand dune creation. Areas of the beach were fenced and volunteers were used to plant marram grass which stabilises the dunes and 'locks up' the mobile sand. The dunes have been establishing for a year now – dramatically reducing the amount of sand deposited on the road and cycle path. This means less maintenance, and cost savings to the council of more than £20,000 per year. Other benefits of the sand dune project include; improved aesthetics, habitat creation and coastal defences against extreme weather and sea level rise.

Project Partners: City and County of Swansea, Natural Resources Wales

## Case study

### Greener Grangetown

Greener Grangetown is retrofitting residential streets in an area of Cardiff to collect, clean and divert rain water directly to the nearby River Taff. New drainage and rain gardens are being installed to gather and clean rain water, preventing the need for transfer to a treatment works in another county. The rain gardens have been developed and placed with input and collaboration from the local community to improve the area's biodiversity and calm traffic on residential streets.

Project Partners: Natural Resources Wales, Welsh Government, Dwr Cymru, City of Cardiff Council





Cardiff University was founded by Royal Charter in 1883, today the University combines impressive modern facilities and a dynamic approach to teaching and research. The University's breadth of expertise encompasses: the College of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences; the College of Biomedical and Life Sciences; and the College of Physical Sciences and Engineering, along with a longstanding commitment to lifelong learning. Cardiff's flagship Research Institutes are offering radical new approaches to pressing global problems.



Nesta is a global innovation foundation that backs new ideas to tackle the big challenges of our time. Nesta uses its knowledge, networks, funding and skills - working in partnership with others, including governments, businesses and charities. It is a UK charity that works all over the world, supported by a financial endowment.

To find out more visit [www.nesta.org.uk](http://www.nesta.org.uk)

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