Alex Swift

Croeso welcome, this is the Exchange podcast. The official podcast of Audit Wales. The past 18 months have required us to change our behaviours in ways that were sudden and unforeseen. This has been unsettling occasionally, but has also resulted in positive outcomes, and today we're going to talk about both. I'm here with Chris Bolton from Audit Wales and Diana Reynolds from Welsh Government. Today's podcast is going to be discussing the science behind a lot of what we've been seeing and as well as the issues, controversies and politics which surround behaviour change. Can you start by introducing yourselves and then explaining why this issue of behaviour change is relevant and means a lot to you?

Diana Reynolds

I'm Diana Reynolds. I'm a civil servant for the Welsh Government. I run their long-term internal behaviour change program. So, I need to be interested in behaviour change to do that. It's one of the very first what we would call 'post nudge' programs, so it uses the science to try and help just over 5000 people to change their own behaviour from whatever it might be to something that will help us to be closer aligned to the Wellbeing of Future Generations Act.

Chris Bolton

Hi, I'm Chris Bolton and I work for Audit Wales. I'm interested around what happens on behaviour change science in that I come from audit. Lots of the public sector is spending money on trying to get people to do different things, and some of that is very cleverly constructed around what's the best thinking around behaviour change science. Some of it's not so cleverly constructed and part of that is understanding what works and what doesn't. What's the latest thinking in this field and how do we get it right? I mean, there's an interesting quote from a famous American that says 'half the money I spend on advertising doesn't work, I just don't know which half'. I think there's a bit of that around behaviour change science. if it works great, but did it work for the reasons we thought?

Alex Swift

Can you go into more detail about what's meant specifically by behaviour change in this context and its context in the pandemic?

Diana Reynolds

I think it's a contentious concept. Usually when we talk about behaviour change, there's a behaviour that we have that we don't want to have. So, maybe I'm a smoker and I don't want to be a smoker anymore. And then there's a behaviour that we want to get to. Which, in my case would be that I didn't want to smoke anymore and that's clearly defined. Maybe the real problem for most people is we're not used to looking at ourselves. We look at somebody else and say to them, "we want you to change your behaviour". So, for my program we start the other way around. We start with what the individual wants to change in their own situation. That helps because we're going to stand on a more ethical basis. We're going to stand based on being frank and honest with people and not mincing our words or changing the environment to suit someone. But to say, look we would like you now to stand two meters or more distant from each other. How can we help you to do that? You know, and one of the things that helps is to be able to jovially mention that there isn't a space for a cow between the two of you and that helps people to step back in a polite way. So, there are lots of techniques that can be applied.

Before the pandemic hit, there was a curve or direction of travel of Welsh Government, becoming more accessible, becoming more friendly. Then suddenly COVID hits and it gives you a push in. The trouble is it gives you a push into inconvenient directions. One of them is the right direction of travel, so we for a long time wanted to work more virtually because we know that we're causing air pollution if we all travel about too much - brilliant, we've suddenly found that we have learned how to work virtually. And that's a great result. On the other hand, you used the word unsettling. I would probably use a bigger word than unsettling. I think it's been quite traumatic to be in a situation where I'm having to decide, 'do I hug Granny or not?' It's a traumatic decision to have to make so I think it all those things are going on at the same time and the difficulty is to acknowledge all of that.

Chris Bolton

On a bit of what I learned when I was up in Bangor University with the Wales Centre for Behaviour Change was some stuff around 'is it better to understand what's the disposition in a community or group of people anyway?' And before you look at any sort of behaviour changes, what are they likely to move to and where are they now? In the sort of background, I'm from, there's very close living and a tradition of families coming together, but the notion of social distancing was a hard one to get around and that bit of blanket advice and pushing us all down one path needs to be moderated around "what is the current status in that society?" I learnt some things around social practice theory - the notion that we all subconsciously do things that the social grouping around us do, and that influences a lot of behaviour. But yeah, what's going on there already? What's ethical to move people to? and it's nudging rather than shoving.

Diana Reynolds

I think the other thing that's important there is the distinction between individual behaviours and collective behaviours. One of the risks is that we push people down an individual line, so we're saying it's your responsibility to make these decisions and you're stood on your own trying to make a difficult decision in difficult circumstances. Or you go down the line, which is more the way that Wales has taken which is to think about collaborative, caring behaviour, to think about practices which are collective and caring. So, a great example would be some of these young people who do go out, they are close together but they're all lateral flow testing all the time because an interesting thing about science is that in standing in a room 3 meters away from somebody, you are getting almost as high a hit in terms of your chemicals in your body, especially if you look at the person. If you look at the person while you're standing there, you're getting as good a hit as if you give the person a hug. There are things you can do which are just as beneficial and collectively you can be careful in a way that individually, you're in a sea of all the social norms and the sort of herd instinct, which is not what you want. You want to be making a collective, cohesive and caring decision.

Alex Swift

I'm interested in this point you made Diana about telling people to do things versus people wanting to do things. Would you argue that part of the coronavirus response was

getting people to see that "if you do this, you're going to be keeping your friends and family members safe" and "if you do this, you're going to be able to go back to having your freedoms sooner rather than later". Sort of, giving people an incentive.

Diana Reynolds

It's a wonderful question for government because so much of what government does is about telling people what to do and there is a genuine agreement about government in Wales that the way that it functions will be power with not power over. So, we have this idea that we're moving from being very bossy and counting stuff to being the part that helps all of us to pull together and works with people. And you know that takes time to learn the skills to do those things. On my programme, I'm not allowed to use command and control, so the whole programme works as an on-demand program. People come when they're ready to do the thing they want to do. The problem occurs when you get an emergency. A famous saying of Co-production is about when is coproduction is not appropriate. The only time it's not appropriate is in a fire or another emergency of that sort where you have to say, "get out the door now". So, in the same way, when government hits a situation where people are dying and there are still over 100 people dying in the UK every day.

Then it becomes trickier because you do want to maximize bringing people with you, but there is a line that you've got to be helping people across, and so it becomes about not one or other of those two things but how do you fit the two together? And if you look back across the way the Welsh Government has spoken about this, they will always be very respectful about people having died, people going through difficulty, the challenges involved, the fact that it's distressing for people, the fact that we're all having to work out ways of being which are not quite what we want them to be. They acknowledge or that, but they're also clear about the need to look after each other and to care for each other. Those are important messages to help people to come along the journey. I would say maybe it's a false dichotomy to say it's one thing or the other. It's about how do you weave those two together in a way that is consenting democracy, in a way in which we've agreed. We're going to try and work together in a democratic way. It is going to involve some people having to decide at some point.

Chris Bolton

To follow that, two observations from seeing things on the ground, and it's interesting that bit about waiting for that decision to be made. I mean, there's group of people I know, and it might be well be a small sample, but they've come to accept that this is the right way to do it. My other observation is around going to a rugby match with Cardiff Blues playing Bath. So, there was huge, crowded travel over from Bath and you could spot amongst the crowd the Welsh people, and English people because the Welsh people had masks on. So, I don't know what that translates to in social practice and the behaviours of the of the Welsh crowd. It was interesting that social collective responsibility was happening. You know, 'cause rugby crowds aren't the most well behaved. You know, for conformity, and that. But certainly, there was this very clear bit in a row of us all sat there with our masks on, and I think we were grinning underneath that we were demonstrating something that was a socially more responsible behaviour.

Diana Reynolds

It's interesting. It's terrifically subtle and that instinct to be part of the group…It tips from one thing to another, so we've seen in Wales, sometimes we're all wearing masks and we're great and we run with it. And then it can just tip slightly. The numbers go the other way, and suddenly we've all given up for a minute just there, and we must go out and remind everybody and have another conversation and start it all rolling again. The thing about waiting for the decision being made - What we're using there is a standard piece of change management which is meeting momentum. So, and this is easy if you're doing anything, if I'm managing anything at all, even if it's not a change, meeting momentum is so important, so we know that we're going to hear from our Minister every three weeks. And even if I haven't realised it's every three weeks, the fact that momentum is there is helping the communication. So, that's a top tip for anybody is to is to have that momentum and keep that rolling. And even though you might think, well, I don't know if I got anything to say this week, but get in the meeting and just check in. Maybe the other guys got something to say so it's just worth creating that momentum of consistency 'because it really helps to keep things moving.

Alex Swift

On that note about taking people with you, how important is it that the public see that's the that the government and civil service are changing their behaviour in accordance with COVID restrictions?

Diana Reynolds

It absolutely is important because it's about embodying what your instructions are. If I give you an instruction or suggest or invite you to something and I'm not embodying the thing that I'm inviting or instructing you about immediately, whether you consciously know it or not, your subconscious is going 'Yeah, that's not real'. But, if I'm embodying it and I'm taking that advice myself, then it's more convincing, my congruence is high, I'm more convincing. You're more likely to take it on board.

Chris Bolton

I absolutely agree and the only thing I'd add to that is in a world of misinformation and people spreading counter information and rumour and misquoting things, anything that sort of undermines doesn't help. It's not just about having a level playing field, there are forces dragging things in another direction anyway, so that anything that avoids it being dragged down the slope is important.

Alex Swift

I absolutely agree that it is very important to set that example and set that example early on. Moving forward, we've talked about the public changing their behaviour and officials changing their behaviour. I want to talk about behaviour change in terms of the legislation itself that was introduced because that I think that's an interesting side of it. It doesn't often get talked about as an example of behaviour change when of course it is because the pandemic has forced governments to behave in ways that they wouldn't normally want to or be allowed to. From your perspective, what are the basic factors that go into influencing the government's decisions to introduce or relax restrictions?

Diana Reynolds

So I'm not directly involved in the chain of information gathering to do with that, but it's a

large chain and it's a lot of information and it starts basically with the group called Sage who are the scientific advisors for the whole of the UK in terms of what's happening with COVID and that includes scientists of all sorts of different interests, so there's a big mixture of people. In fact, we quickly had to cobble together some extra people 'cause we hadn't quite got the mix we needed when we first started out. But that group brings together lots of information. The Welsh officials digest that and a huge range of information coming from Wales. So, for example when we are doing PCR tests in Wales, we are sequencing all those PCR tests so that we know exactly what we're dealing with. So, we've been able to very quickly say when we've seen these first few Omicron examples.

They are tough calls and risk-based decisions. We're not in a situation now where we can go "Oh, what's the one really good thing we can do here?" We're in a situation where everything is harmful in some way. I feel more comfortable now because we're now in a situation where we're acknowledging that. Before COVID hit, we were already struggling with situations where there was no non harmful way forward, but we weren't conscious of that, and I think it's an awful thing, but it is a blessing that now we are conscious that we're having to make a tough decision. Which is the least harmful way we can take this forward as we recover? There are ways in which we can recover from the pandemic, which are positive and not harmful, but good for lots of things. So, if we recover in the way that the World Health Organization and others suggests we do, which is by looking to climate change, combining recovery from covid with recovery in nature and all those sorts of elements, then we can do some positive stuff there which is also going on in parallel to these very difficult decisions that are to remove as much harm as we can from the system.

Chris Bolton

I wonder, not just on the law making, but generally about how the decisions that are made, have we become more collaborative and involving in what we do? I don't know the answer. I'd hope we have, and I think I can see examples. I think about some the collaboration between local government and third sector as one specific example. They are very tight now when they previously hadn't been and now there's a connection between them and this is the way it way forward, and I think that's an unintended positive

consequence of COVID. I'm not sure if there are many, but in terms of that area of Wales, it was a great way of working.

Alex Swift

Rather than 'consequences', I think I prefer to talk about what was already there, that the pandemic has highlighted, because you already had things like mutual aid groups, but the pandemic has highlighted the need for them.

Diana Reynolds

I think there's two things. People have been able to move into very active use of those networks and connections. And it's strengthened relationships, so the thing that Chris was talking about. Local authorities and 3rd sector, there's been some good strengthening of relationship going on. I do have to say there is of course the negative as well, so there are still many people feeling cut off and disconnected and not part of this great attempt to try and get us in a better state. I think that is where the misinformation comes in. Because people who are feeling unheard and distressed will latch on to information that seems to be perfectly reasonable and start to disseminate that potentially, even though it that's possibly not the thing that's bothering them at root. You know, it may well be other more fundamental things that we need to be sorting out and helping people and supporting people with, so there's still a big responsibility to try and bring people to have the conversation and to find out what it is that they need. What is their story? What is causing them to feel disconnected and distressed?

Alex Swift

I agree with that for sure. I think that if you're feeling vulnerable during that pandemic it becomes very easy when something like more restrictions is introduced to have a side of you which thinks, "oh, for goodness' sake". Because no matter how much the logical, rational side wants to support their restrictions, things like your mental health and the emotional distress that you went through owing to things like restrictions can almost lead you down those rabbit holes and a cynical way of thinking, which is completely understandable.

Going forward in in this podcast, I want to talk about an example of good practice that you've worked on Diana. About five years ago, both of you had a discussion on a different podcast about behaviour change regarding fostering respectful and collaborative behaviours in Welsh government, using methods like cup of tea meetings where somebody with whatever problem, whether logistical or emotional, can request a cup of tea meeting just to talk it through with someone and express what they're struggling with. At a time when there is lots of disagreement, particularly around issues like further restrictions both in the public at large and in officials, what's the relevance of that five or so years on?

Diana Reynolds

It's really relevant. And in fact, for me it dates back further than COVID. It dates to the Brexit vote because we had the referendum and for two weeks following the referendum, I ran emergency workshops. If you can imagine, there were some people in Welsh government whose entire job is taking European funding and enabling it to be spent in constructive ways across Wales and 100% of their work time was spent doing that. And suddenly, they woke up on a Friday morning and discovered that was going to have to stop, and so we had some very distressed people at that point. As part of that, we developed something about reconciliation. Basically, the question was "you've got people who voted for, you've got people who voted against. How do you get those people to work together when they disagree about something so fundamental?"

And so, regarding how you bring people together to have a conversation when you don't agree with each other, several colleagues have used an empathy walk which is a method from theory where you come to find someone who really disagrees with you about a topic - and this could be to do with Brexit or to do with COVID or to do with something entirely different - and take a walk or have a cup of tea with that person and just hear what the person is saying without commentary. It's very tough thing to do 'cause you're going to sit and you're going to notice what the person is saying and you're going to notice how you're feeling, but you're not actually going to comment back. While the person has the floor, they have the floor and then you have the floor. And then you have a bit of a pause, and then you can start to have some sort of dialogue following that. But it's very, very powerful. This idea of sitting and just listening, and what's fascinating is if you listen for long enough to anybody, you will find points of contact. You may need to listen for a long time, but there will be because you're both human beings. There will be something where

you go "Oh yeah, I'm interested in that too"

A big question in life is "why we spend all our time arguing about the bit we disagree about, instead of getting on with solving the bit we do agree about?" And of course, this is where coproduction comes back in because in coproduction you do exactly that. 'Oh, we agree about this bit. So, what can we do to solve this bit?' And then we'll carry on talking about the tough stuff. And as you as you work together, that influences your psychology and your attitude to each other, and so your conversation gets easier. And sometimes you can solve difficult problems, but only if you start with a small problem that you want to solve together and that you both want to solve.

Chris Bolton

Diana and I talk about this a lot. That specific bit about having the cup of tea conversations or going for the walk, there's a bit in that which I found very useful. You may well come out of this changed yourself. You need to go into these conversations with the expectation that I'm going to find out something that may well change me and that gives a different perspective, and it's another version of listening without judgment.

Diana Reynolds

It's a really important point actually, because there's a very big difference between me trying to be helpful or to heal somebody or put somebody else right or fix somebody else all that stuff and the idea of engaging in a conversation which is about mutual healing. And then it's the mutual healing that unlocks it. I know that it takes a while to learn it, but eventually you get to know that I'm going to change to. It's because it's a dynamic system. Everything is connected to everything else in this dynamic system. And so, when a bit moves, another bit moves. If you're going to stand completely still and not change, you're not going to see much change around you.

Chris Bolton

Yeah, absolutely. And I think that that's an interesting thing. I see so many things around "I stand by my principles". Well, okay, but be prepared to change some things, because everything has got to change.

Diana Reynolds

Yeah, I think dancing on your principles is much better. It's going to be more accurate for a start because you're in this moving system. Dancing with your principles is perfect, isn't it? Because you're in response all the time, but if you're going to stand static on them something awkward is going to happen. I mean you are going to move eventually but it could be a more painful movement.

Chris Bolton

Shatter rather than bend.

Alex Swift

I think that's particularly pertinent with all the stuff we were discussing around lockdown scepticism or even to a degree vaccine scepticism. I did some research on vaccine scepticism. It turns out a lot of them are just afraid of needles which is just something I could certainly relate to.

Diana Reynolds

I think all of the behavioural science is with you there that the best way is in through enquiry and invitation. That is the best way to engage people and to get an idea and you get the chance of learning from them. So yeah, you might discover that they're really scared of the needle or some other aspect of it. Well, maybe we can find a way. I think the important thing here is about the creativity in finding a solution. So, for example, we had a lot of people working at home alone. We had a lot of people under a lot of pressure working in the house, and they've got children and pets, and goodness knows what else going on around them. We had something about reinventing informal meetings so not just having the formal meetings that we have but reinventing informal meetings in the virtual environment. So, instead of having to go into the office and see somebody, which might be a dangerous thing to do, be able to recreate the sort of thing that we need to get make us feel socially part of the group.

But do that virtually and use an idea called 'the new professionalism' where we are much more accepting of the fact that there will be pets and small children intervening in the

meeting, and that when that happens that's the world reminding us that small child and the future generations are important, and whatever we're talking about in the meeting, we should be thinking about it through the lens of future generations. So, it's a great reminder. You can really benefit from some of these things that we previously might have thought was an annoying thing. It becomes something that's useful, so I think creativity and finding solutions is important as well.

Alex Swift

That that point about professionalism is a good one. What do you think will be the long-term changes to the behaviour of people inside or outside of the Welsh Government?

Diana Reynolds

Well, if I look inside 'cause that's where I know best, I think there's been a change in our relationship with risk. I feel our ability to manage and comprehend risk is probably somewhat improved, and I think we've always been very good in Wales at rapid response so that's not been such a surprise, but I think the act of rapidly responding in these occasions has given us a bit of an insight into how broken some of our systems were before COVID hit. I think this is quite an important thing for us to understand moving forward is a lot of the problems we're now facing are not just COVID problems, but pre-COVID problems that we hadn't identified. It was the Chinese year of opening our eyes last year. So, it was an interesting thing to happen during that year. So, our comprehension of what it means to be managing risk and our comprehension of where the system has got disconnected from itself and needs reconnecting is much better. Therefore, I would anticipate, I would hope that would mean that we will be better in terms of developing and delivering policy, because those things are fundamental to developing and delivering policy.

I think I think for people outside that's much harder because you're in the face of it. I think there's this real danger of polarization. This business of reconciliation is crucial. Reconciliation across any divide. So, we keep bringing these polarizations back together again and go "Where is there overlap?" Because they're what I would call false dichotomies. We're setting ourselves up as not agreeing with somebody, and what that's doing is it's not doing justice to my opinion or your opinion, it's sort of characterizing the issue in a very cartoony way rather than looking at the depth of those significant

understandings and going "Where's the overlap?" Never mind where the edges are that are different. Let's look at where is there an overlap. Because that's the place where we can start to do some work and I am heartened by more people volunteering. I'm heartened by just the caringness that I'm seeing around me, but I think we've got to build on that to make sure it's including everyone. Everybody can feel part of that. The classic thing - can we stand shoulder to shoulder against all oppressions at once, not just some of them? All of them at once? What does that even mean? We're still working that out but that's what we must do.

Chris Bolton

On some of the long-term changes, I think that understanding of risk I agree with. That the other bit about relationships, I think there are being some very strong relationships and networks built, and I think that's fantastic. The other side of that is, how does that connect with other networks. So, whatever comes next, are there old relationships that need to be re-established? So, it's that stuff around behaviour. Because - if you're familiar with the proximity principle - you'll end up kind of sticking with those things you you've established over the last two years. The other bit I'm thinking about as well, I'm of that age group where several my friends are retiring from interesting jobs they've had and things, and there's a loss of corporate memory and I'm not sure how that's going to play out.

It might be great because they've gone away with all the old ideas and then people are coming in full of all the new stuff we want around wellbeing of future generations. But I think there's always a risk around mass retirements and of groups of people that you lose things from the system. And I that work that intrigues me from a public services perspective. The points you make about in wider society, and within work as well, there's this sort of false dichotomy, and polarization across society. I think that behaviour has deepened over the last two years. Well, probably the last four years since 2018. From a behavioural perspective we need to be thinking about how we get into that space and think about how we move away from this polarized space because I don't think polarization is any for society or the shape of the world. We need to get into that space where we find our overlaps and common ground.