



Shaping the future of Academic Public Health Research in Wales

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Executive Summary

A strong Academic Public Health Research (APHR) environment is essential to improve population health, inform policy, drive innovation, and support economic growth in Wales. While Wales has a strong research history and supportive policy context for public health, the APHR environment and capacity is currently constrained by limited funding, fragmented activity, and the absence of a coherent, system-wide vision, strategy, and influence across Wales and UK funders. This threatens growth and sustainability and highlights significant untapped potential to address current and emerging public health challenges through high-quality, impactful research and development.

The Chief Medical Officer (CMO) for Wales (2023), Health and Care Research Wales (HCRW) and Public Health Wales (PHW) identified APHR as an area facing challenging times in Wales, but with the potential to be strengthened for the benefit of the population.

To help inform a future approach, Public Health Wales conducted a comprehensive review of the APHR landscape in Wales, supported by an UK wide steering group. Published in May 2025, the "[*Optimising Academic Public Health Research in Wales*](#)" report evidenced the downward funding trend, workforce challenges, and the strategic risks for Wales. The review set out four key recommendations:

1. Develop a national vision for APHR
2. Focus on Wales's strategic and innovative research strengths
3. Enhance funding and partnerships through cooperation and collaboration
4. Support the next generation of public health researchers

The report concluded that a *unified vision for Wales* was needed to improve coherence, strengthen collaboration, and maximise research impact on policy, health outcomes, and inequalities. The report recommended by thinking differently, working collectively, and investing in strategic coordination, capacity building, and career development, Wales can create a thriving APHR environment that delivers measurable benefits for population health, policy, and the economy. While Public Health Wales was considered well placed to support coordination, leadership must be shared and facilitated with partners - across Welsh Government, Health and Care Research Wales, the Chief Medical Officer, higher education institutions, the NHS, social care, local authorities and the third sector.

What happened next

In 2025, Public Health Wales convened a series of five system-wide workshops to co-develop a shared vision for APHR. This included engagement with all Welsh higher education institutions, the Wales Innovation Network, NHS Health Boards, local government, Public Health Wales and third sector partners. These insights shaped a collective vision, strategic aims, principles and actions focused on moving from aspiration to delivery.

Developing a collective vision for Academic Public Health Research in Wales

The following vision and strategic aims describe a coordinated, outward-facing national public health research system that strengthens areas of methodological excellence and future research capability (essential components to underpin high-quality APHR), delivers robust evidence for policy and practice, and responds to emerging challenges. Together, they aim to enhance Wales's ability to grow and sustain APH, and Wales's contribution to UK and global public health research improving health and equity.

Strategic Vision

"A dynamic, innovative and strengths-based academic public health research system that builds future research excellence and capability, and delivers visible, measurable impact on health and equity in Wales and globally."

Strategic Aims

- Strengthen APHR infrastructure as an enabler of research excellence and impact
- Build methodological and technical capability, APHR careers and workforce resilience
- Co-produce a coherent national identity and collective voice for APHR in Wales
- Embed open, collaborative and co-produced research across the system
- Focus on real world public health challenges: responsive and forward-looking APHR.

Together, these aims provide the foundations for a future-ready capable and collaborative APHR system that delivers impact and positions Wales as a high-performing, competitive research environment.

Next steps

This document sets out a clear, shared ambition for Academic Public Health in Wales, shaped by stakeholders across Wales. This will be shared with partners across Wales and the UK, recognising that achieving this vision is not the responsibility of any single organisation but collective leadership across the public health system. Progress will require alignment with Welsh Government priorities and wider UK Life science research strategies, funders, research infrastructure initiatives and academic career pathways.

This vision is intended to provide a common reference point to support dialogue, partnership working and future development of an APHR system in Wales focused on real world public health challenges and measurement benefit to Wales. As part of this work, Public Health Wales will continue to provide national leadership and advocacy, working collaboratively with Welsh Government, Health and Care Research Wales, academia and other partners; and act as a central point of contact and facilitation for APHR in Wales through its Research and Development Office.

Authorship, Acknowledgements and Contact Information

This publication represents the outcome of a collaborative effort. Public Health Wales would like to acknowledge the work undertaken by the Research and Development Office and the Research Partnerships Team.

Public Health Wales is grateful for the expert advice, contributions and assistance provided by many people throughout this project. Most notably, this includes the stakeholders from across Wales who gave up their time and took part in the development of the Vision and Strategy.

Shaping the future of Academic Public Health Research in Wales

Introduction

A strong Academic Public Health Research (APHR) environment is essential to improving population health, driving innovation and supporting economic growth. Wales has a rich public health research heritage and a supportive policy context, but structural challenges currently limit the system's full potential. These include constrained funding, fragmented activity, and the absence of a coherent, system-wide vision and strategy with influence across Wales and UK funders. Without action, this risks undermining future growth and sustainability, despite significant untapped potential to address current and emerging public health challenges through high-quality, impactful research and development.

The Chief Medical Officer (CMO) for Wales (2023), Health and Care Research Wales (HCRW) and Public Health Wales (PHW) identified APHR as an area facing challenging times in Wales, but with the potential to be strengthened for the benefit of the population. To help inform a future approach, Public Health Wales undertook a comprehensive review of the APHR landscape in Wales, including desk-based analysis, stakeholder interviews, and input from a Wales Steering Group and UK-wide expert panel. Published in May 2025, the '[*Optimising Academic Public Health Research in Wales report*](#)' highlighted both significant strengths and system-wide challenges for APHR.

Wales benefits from rich linked data assets, strong links between academia, policy and practice, and a committed research community. However, APHR in Wales is facing a period of significant challenge with a declining workforce, erosion of public health academic posts, unclear career pathways, and risks of researchers drawn to centres elsewhere. This is compounded by a sustained decline in public health research funding into Wales, fragmented infrastructure, and limited national and international visibility.

In the context of worsening health outcomes and widening inequalities, these trends represent more than a developmental challenge – but signal a potential strategic risk to Wales's health, economic growth and national resilience. Stakeholders identified the lack of coordinated priority-setting and system-wide leadership as a key barrier to maximising impact.

The review concluded that a unified national vision was required to strengthen coordination, collaboration and focused development of public health research capacity in Wales aligning with the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 and Public Health Wales's long-term strategy to prevention, equity and evidence-informed policy.

Vision and Aims

Strategic Vision

“A dynamic, innovative and strengths-based academic public health research system that builds future research excellence and capability, and delivers visible, measurable impact on health and equity in Wales and globally.”

Strategic Aims

1. Strengthen APHR infrastructure as an enabler of research excellence and impact

Wales is recognised as a place where high-quality, policy-relevant public health research can be delivered efficiently and at scale and research infrastructure actively supports translation into policy and practice. Data, digital, governance and organisational infrastructure reduce fragmentation, enables rapid collaboration, and supports engagement with UK and international partners.

Success: Faster consortium-building, efficient access to data and funding, and stronger translation of research into policy and practice.

2. Build methodological and technical capability, APHR careers and workforce resilience

Wales has a resilient, interdisciplinary public health research workforce with broad and deep expertise. There is a clear opportunity to better connect methodological and technical skills with public health domain expertise to build sustainable, interdisciplinary APHR careers. A more integrated research ecosystem - linking strengths in social and behavioural sciences, health economics, data science and AI, advanced analytics, geospatial methods, evidence synthesis, and participatory and systems approaches with expertise across microbiology, genomics, epidemiology, prevention, mental health, social determinants, health services, and climate and planetary health - would enable a robust, responsive APHR capable of addressing complex and emerging public health challenges.

Success: A future focused APHR career pathway, and ecosystem that supports resilient, skilled workforce, with the ability to respond rapidly to complex and emerging public health challenges. There are clear academic pathways (MSc, PhD, Postdocs, Fellows etc), joint positions supporting interdisciplinary research that informs policy and practice.

3. Co-produce a coherent national identity and collective voice for APHR in Wales

Establish a visible, recognisable APHR identity for Wales to strengthen collaboration - locally, nationally and internationally connect with and collaborate with the right expertise quickly and confidently. This will amplify impact, strengthens advocacy, attract talent, and position Wales as a credible partner and leader in UK and international public health research.

Success: Stronger cross-disciplinary collaboration and expanded access to Research Council funding, sustainable APHR career pathways, and greater national and global recognition of Wales's research strengths.

4. Embed open, collaborative and co-produced research across the system

Embed meaningful partnerships and co-production with communities, services and third-sector organisations as a core way of working across the research lifecycle ensuring that public voice, lived experience and service insight shape research priorities, design, delivery and translation into practice.

Success: Research priorities reflect lived experience and system need, with evidence more readily adopted into policy and practice.

5. Focus on real world public health challenges: responsive and forward-looking APHR

To maximise the impact of APHR in Wales and its contribution to improving health, strengthening economic growth and national resilience, a collective and prioritised approach is needed. Rather than dispersed efforts across multiple agendas, the vision is for APHR in Wales to focus on a small number of clearly defined, real world public health challenges where Wales has existing or emerging strengths, sustainable funding routes are feasible, and coordinated action has the greatest potential to deliver measurable impact to public health in Wales over the next 2–5 years.

The public health critical challenge areas emerging from the collaborative workshops are provided in Box 1. These are indicative areas which would be explored further with system wide partners to reach a consensus on the public health challenges for Wales.

Success: Coordinated system effort focused on areas of greatest potential impact, enabling rapid mobilisation of expertise in response to emerging threats and pressures, and driving innovation, new methods and cross-sector solutions to improve health and reduce inequalities.

Box 1. Real world public health challenge focus

Indicative areas of strength and focus (to be further developed):

1. Climate change, One Health & environmental public health
2. Genomics and infectious diseases
3. Healthy places / built & natural environments (urban and rural)
4. Mental health & community wellbeing
5. The future of public health: digital, data and AI and surveillance

All thematic priorities must:

- Be developed through an equality lens and the Wellbeing of Future Generations Act
- Align with Public Health Wales, Welsh Government and university priorities
- Incorporate community voice
- Complement and inform existing and future national strategies for health

The vision and strategic aims set out a coordinated, outward-facing national public health research system that strengthens methodological excellence and future capability, delivers robust evidence for policy and practice, and responds to emerging challenges. Together, they enhance Wales's ability to grow and sustain APHR and to contribute meaningfully to UK and global public health research that improves health and equity.

Next Steps

This document provides a clear statement of ambition that has been jointly shaped by stakeholders and provides a common reference point to guide future development, collaboration and dialogue across the public health research system.

Achieving this vision is not the responsibility of any single organisation - progress will require alignment with many factors including funders, academia, Welsh Government and wider UK health and life science strategies, research infrastructure initiatives, and academic career pathways.

To continue momentum towards this vision, Public Health Wales will:

- Provide system leadership and advocacy for the APHR Vision for Wales at national, UK and international levels.
- Identify areas of technical strength and real-world public health priorities for APHR, building on those initially identified (Box 1).
- Identify, maintain and publish public health research priorities aligned to Public Health Wales.
- Identify strategic objectives, to inform discussions with strategic academic partners, and Welsh Government, Health and Care Research Wales and other UK funders.
- Host the annual Public Health Wales Research & Evaluation Conference as a national platform for visibility, collaboration and impact.
- Maintain a central point of contact for public health research through the Public Health Wales Research & Development Office, supporting engagement, navigation and partnership across the system.

Public Health Wales will also work with Welsh Government and Health and Care Research Wales to inform and develop national public health research, innovation and life sciences strategies in relation to health and public health; and to strengthen Wales's positioning with UK-wide funders and strategic research initiatives. This will include consideration of sustainable funding models, academic career pathways, and mechanisms to enhance Wales's competitiveness for major research programmes.

Building on the strong collaboration that shaped this collective vision, Public Health Wales will work with Welsh Government and wider system partners to translate ambition into coordinated action and measurable impact.

Together, we will explore coordination and shared mechanisms for oversight that can both inspire, support implementation, and sustain progress over time. Areas for further work identified through development of this vision are:

1. National Leadership and Strategic Advocacy

Provide visible national and international leadership for APHR in Wales, aligning and publishing research priorities with strategic policy objectives, and acting as the central coordination and access point through the Research & Development Office.

2. Real World Public Health Challenge Focus

Identify priority real world public health challenge areas where APHR has the greatest potential benefit to Wales, and to develop and mobilise Wales-wide academic collaboration around these areas to secure strategic funding opportunities, aligning system strengths with policy priorities and sustainable funding routes.

3. Governance and Shared Oversight

Establish a cross-sector National Academic Public Health Steering Group to provide strategic oversight, priority-setting and clear governance, supported by system-level reporting and prioritised action plans with defined ownership and review cycles.

4. Coordination Infrastructure (Hub Model)

Establish a light-touch Coordination Hub to connect expertise, support co-production, mobilise collaborative funding and enhance national visibility, alongside mapping existing infrastructure, identifying gaps and developing a sustainable, non-duplicative resourcing model.

5. Phased and Proportionate Implementation

Phase delivery by prioritising actions within existing capacity, identifying areas requiring additional investment, focusing on high-impact activity, and ensuring dedicated coordination resource to avoid fragmentation.

Conclusion

The intent of this vision is to provide a shared point of reference for the future development of APHR in Wales. It is intended to stimulate dialogue, strengthen relationships and support collective learning across the system, while creating the conditions for greater coherence, collaboration and impact over time.

While not a formal commitment, this vision provides a shared platform to guide future thinking, strategic direction and investment and partnership working, enabling the development of a more connected, interdisciplinary, sustainable and impactful APHR system for Wales.

References

[Optimising Academic Public Health Research in Wales](#) (Published May 2025)

Cite this publication

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i greu Cymru iachach

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for a healthier Wales