



Submission to the Public Accounts Committee's Enquiry on the Barriers to the Implementation of the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015

The Wales Centre for Public Policy and the Study

1. **The Wales Centre for Public Policy (WCPP)** seeks to improve policy making and outcomes by enabling public services, the Welsh Government and other decision makers to access authoritative independent evidence about what works. We collaborate with leading policy experts to bring together and summarise the existing evidence to develop fresh thinking about how to address the key economic, social, and environmental challenges facing Wales.
2. This briefing draws on an independent study of the implementation of the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015, which was funded by Cardiff University. The research was based on case studies of four Public Service Boards (PSBs), interviews with PSB members and support officers in local authorities, the Office of the Future Generations Commissioner for Wales, and Welsh Government officials and Ministers, and analysis of PSB documents. It was conducted in 2018-2019 and is published as Nesom and MacKillop (2020).

Key findings

Barriers to the implementation of the Well-being of Future Generations Act

3. **Perceived lack of clarity of the Act:** Most interviewees from PSBs welcomed the intention behind the Act and the flexibility to determine how best to implement it within their area. They reported that it was, "help[ing] policy-makers [...] think about good decision-making" (interview). However, many found the concepts and language within the Act confusing, aspirational and vague and most believed that the space within the Act for local interpretation was a challenge and often caused confusion. This was especially true of central concepts such as sustainable development and well-being, which were said to have different interpretations across PSB member organisations, institutions, and legislation. For instance, many interviewees believed that well-being was defined in different ways in the Well-being of Future Generations Act and the Social Services and Well-being Act.
4. **Institutional complexity:**
 - a. **PSBs add an additional layer of governance:** Most PSBs are coterminous with local authority areas, but they create an additional layer of governance which adds to what researchers have called the already-congested institutional landscape in Wales (Entwistle et al. 2014). Interviewees suggested there was confusion surrounding how the Act sits

within the wider local governance structure in Wales, which, in turn, affects their ability to tackle wicked issues and doing cross-cutting work. Interviewees said they were unclear about how PSBs and Regional Partnership Boards and Community Safety Partnerships should work together, how the PSB replaced Local Services Boards, how to integrate different funding streams (between UK-Welsh Government; between Welsh Government departments) and the role of national bodies in the Act's implementation at local level. Interviewees also noted that PSBs had very little funding. Some partnerships (e.g., Regional Partnership Boards) have "access to millions of pounds of money", whilst PSBs have access to nothing" (Interview).

- b. **It takes time to build trust amongst partners:** Interviewees recognised that implementation required "a bedrock of trust", but that this "takes time and collaboration" and could not be legislated for (Interview) (see point 7, below). Where there was a lack of trust between PSB members, it was difficult to have the healthy challenge which interviewees said was needed to implement the Act effectively.

5. Centre-local relations:

- a. **Subsidiarity:** As noted above, most local interviewees were grateful that the Act created space for "local flexibility to do what you want" (Interview). This was echoed by actors at the national level, who stressed that implementation was a local matter and that the PSBs were in charge of this aspect. Paradoxically though, some local interviewees wanted more central support (guidance and funding). One interviewee said that it felt like the Welsh Government did not "have a clue on what they were after" (interview) and so more guidance would be useful. Conversely, others

questioned whether having the Future Generations Commissioner for Wales assess their plans meant that they were not free to implement the Act as they saw fit. This is not an issue which is unique to Wales. The importance of getting the right balance between local autonomy and central guidance has been highlighted by studies of sustainable development policy implementation elsewhere (e.g., Berger, 2003; Parto, 2004; see also Audit Wales, 2020).

- b. **Participation/Communication:** Local interviewees suggested that there was insufficient communication with and participation of local partners during the development of the Act and in discussions about how it should be implemented nationally. Good communication and participation - between different levels of governance and across different policy communities - are known to be important success factors in the implementation of sustainable development (e.g., Voß et al. 2009) because key stakeholders must be able to define collective goals and visions of the future in order to transform deeply embedded, yet unsustainable, practices.
- c. **Departmental structures and silos:** Departmental silos, particularly at the national level, were seen as impeding the cross-cutting working that is required by the Act and it was felt that "the legislation put[ting] a lot of onus on local authorities" (interview) to join things up locally. These silos meant partners were "given their instructions separately, by different departments, as to what they ought to do", which leaves organisations with "very limited capacity for [...] thinking together" (interview).
- d. **Funding:** Linked to silos, different funding streams were seen as preventing public services from making decisions

together and “hold[ing] each other to account” (interview). For example, one interviewee explained that there had been multiple times when two separate funds had been awarded to different PSB partners for the same issue. Without pooling resources, it is difficult to work in a cross-cutting and collaborative way at the local level. The short-term nature of funding allocations was also seen as problematic. An interviewee observed that “Welsh Government and Westminster Government [...] will only give you funding for a year [...which] is alien to the way that the Future Generations Act want people to work” (interview).

6. **Local partnership working:**

- a. **Importance of local context and history:** It was widely recognised that collaboration couldn’t be “legislate[d]” for because of “multi-level governance here, with different voices and different powers involved” (interview). Local context, history and the approaches of local actors determined the time and effort spent to organise and build trust, and collaborate. Some PSBs were relatively well placed to implement the Act because there were existing trusted relationships between local partners, whilst others were not at that stage yet (see point 7).
- b. **The role of national public bodies and regional agencies:** Relationships were further complicated by the presence of national partner organisations within PSBs (e.g., National Resources Wales and the Health Boards). These partners were, in some cases, sending “exactly the same representatives on both public services boards [meaning that] [t]he same fire representative, the same police representative, the same public health, Natural Resources Wales... Virtually ever partner, apart from the local authority” (interview). Some interviewees, from national

organisations as well as other PSB members, questioned whether this allowed for implementation to be truly local, or whether PSBs needed to be as local as they are.

7. **Time and resources:** Successful policy implementation requires culture change, trust and negotiation, and this, takes time (Guarneros-Meza et al., 2018). In sustainable development, the process is often slow as the changes required are wide-ranging, integrated and long-term. Local interviewees believed that the Act’s timescale was too ambitious and left some partner organisations “feeling time-pressurised” (interview). This meant “fall[ing] back on their single organisational interest and [...] saying, “This is the priority for my organisation, this is what I want the PSB to contribute to”” (interview). Some asked whether “nine months a year to change the assessment into the plan” was feasible. It “is alright if you’re one organisation but when you’re seven...” (interview).

Conclusion

8. Our research into the local implementation of the Act identifies a number of barriers. To address these requires time, participation, collaboration and trust between levels of governance and across different sectors, as well as support – guidance, financial and other – from the centre. It should be noted that our interviews were conducted in 2019 and pre-dated Welsh Government establishing new implementation strategies which could help address the issues that interviewees identified to us.

Methodology

9. Our research was conducted as part of the Wales Centre for Public Policy’s research programme on evidence use and effective policy making. This is funded by Cardiff University and is distinct from the WCPP’s work on behalf of Welsh Government

Ministers and public services. We selected four PSBs – two rural and two urban ones – as case studies to examine the implementation of the Act at the local level. The data were collected between December 2018 and October 2019 and consisted of 16 semi-structured interviews with 18 interviewees spanning PSB members, support officers in local authorities, the Office of the Future Generations Commissioner for Wales, and Welsh Government officials and Ministers, plus analysis of 89 publicly available documents pertaining to the formulation and implementation of the Act, including (draft) Well-being plans. We also held conversations with academics in the field and a seminar with civil servants which was organised by Welsh Government.

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