

Submission to the Senedd's Public Accounts Committee consultation on 'Barriers to the successful implementation of the Well-Being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015'

From: Meeting of Friends in Wales (Quakers), Wales Focus Group

1. About us

1. We are the Meeting of Friends in Wales (MFW), Wales Focus Group. The Society of Friends (Quakers) is a national church. It is also a charity, working for positive change in areas such as climate justice, peace and disarmament, migration, equality and peace. Friends in Wales groups together the four Area Meetings of Wales and the Southern Marches.
2. The Wales Focus Group is made up of representatives of each of the Area Meetings who work together to advise MFW with regard to matters specifically of Welsh interest. The Focus Group has worked to make Quakers in Wales aware of how progressive Welsh legislation is. Welsh Quakers are justifiably proud of the acts that our devolved government has produced.

2. The Well Being of Future Generations Act

1. The Well Being of Future Generations is the outstanding act that has, more than any other, reflected the different and innovative nature of Welsh Government (WG). It is intended that the act should affect the way that all political decision making is made within the Principality, being the primary consideration in any legislation.
2. While it has affected the decision making in many instances, for example, and notably, in decisions related to the M4, there are still many areas of Welsh life where thinking about the well being of future generations, or of present ones, does not appear to be paramount.
3. There are two major factors holding back the progress of the Act. Throughout the history of devolution in Wales the nation has been the subject of the powers reserved to the UK Government, and to the distribution of funding controlled by that body. In more recent times the funding available for the progression of the Act has been syphoned off to the management of the Covid-19 pandemic.
4. Future funding will also be curtailed if the UK Government direct their efforts to reverse the economic crisis caused by the pandemic to misdirected, short sighted, funding of fossil fuel and other polluting industries.

3. Awareness and understanding of the Act and its implications.

1. Awareness of the Act is still limited amongst the population of Wales, the Act is a matter of pride for some but still with many who have no knowledge of it. It is therefore unsurprising that awareness of its implications has not fully impregnated the Civil Service and local Authority employees.
2. Most, if not all, County Councils have now declared that there is a climate crisis, however the implication of that declaration is something else which has yet to permeate those councils completely. There is a resistance for Councils to produce the strategies

necessary to combat that crisis and therefore to ensure the well being of future generations. Where are the strategies for increasing equality amongst populations?

3. The Act calls for Public Service Boards inspired by local “stakeholder” assemblies but, where these have been inaugurated, they have been uninspiring talking shops with virtually no public involvement.
 4. People only participate in the national conversation if they feel that their voice matters. They need systems that allow them to hear from administrations, and – critically – communicate back to them what they are thinking and feeling.
 5. Councils are showing a conservative mind set, keeping to old ways of working, and addressing old concerns. There is no doubt that this is due in part to the lack of finance and overbearing presence of the Covid-19 virus, but the innovation of the Welsh Government is not mirrored by the next layer of administration. Related powers are not being used, and too much mere box ticking is taking place. The WG is clearly aware of this and the Local Democracy and Elections Bill currently going through the Senedd gives authorities a “general power of competence” which will reduce any stranglehold of compliance officers who currently need a specific legal basis for any action by the council.
 6. Planning Departments can provide some example of this. Religious buildings created to serve large congregations of worshippers are nowadays often the subject of innovative thinking about how they can be re-used to serve existing communities. This may well involve rethinking the heating, heat conservation, insulation, it may require some redesign, remembering the building's past but making whatever changes make the building more suitable for 21st century usage; all well in line with the well being of future generations. When there is then to pressure to fossilise the building to fit the planning regulations of earlier years, this problem which probably rests with the Historic Environment (Wales) Act and Cadw rather than local government, but it can be very counterproductive.
- 4. The resources available to public bodies to implement the Act and how effectively they have been deployed.**

1. Income levels are insufficient for public bodies to fully implement the Act, see introductory paragraphs, above. The Powys Challenge reports that:

“The actions we have planned over the next year were reliant on us receiving funding from WG; however, this has now been withdrawn as a result of WG needing to re-prioritise funding towards supporting the COVID-19 response. Successful progression of the actions will now rely on available capacity across PSB partner organisations.”

Partner organisations are, of course, fully stretched and had been looking to public monies to kick start the process. Stakeholders have been largely sought amongst the major charitable and pressure groups, while groups such as Extinction Rebellion (XR) and Transition Towns appear to have been largely excluded.

2. If the Act itself is not as fully appreciated by the public as it should be, the Public Service Boards (PSB) that should be an inspiration to the public, are close to being fully invisible. PSB meeting can attract a handful of members of the public. This must be addressed urgently. Citizen's Assemblies chosen by sortition and providing adequate support (loss of earnings compensation, support with caring costs) can ensure - and be shown to ensure - that with a true cross-section of the population forming the Citizens Assembly people can arrive at wise proposals that will be widely-

supported.

3. The Commissioner's Office has more of a presence, with well designed blogs and web pages, and strong, enthusiastic, presence at meetings and conferences. The Commissioner appears effective, particularly in recent years however, the early abolition of the Climate Change Commission for Wales and not addressing the climate crisis in her first three years appears mistaken. The effectiveness of the Office, measured against the points made above, has to be questioned. Greater funding may lead to greater effectiveness, but can that be still be achieved in a situation of tightening budgets?

5. Support provided to public bodies by the Future Generations Commissioner.

We are not able to comment.

6. The leadership role of WG

1. Currently the UK Government's Internal Market legislation is going through the Parliamentary process. In part that Act, which is largely to replace the arrangements previously within European Union agreements, appears to be designed, almost in passing, to weaken the powers of the devolved nations; it is also intended to place competition rules which make localism illegal. Both these aspects weaken the potential well being of future generations of people in Wales.
2. The WG is very aware of the shortcomings of the transport network in Wales. The WG has been developing a unified strategy for transport and this has been set back dramatically by the effects of the pandemic. People have been frightened away from public transport and income levels have fallen dramatically. This is a debilitating set back that will damage the Government's intentions well after the pandemic is brought under control.
3. The Well Being of Future Generations Act defines "a prosperous Wales" and refers explicitly to sustainability and resource use but manufacturing and production appear to be the area least understood. The Commissioner's Report 2020 tries to tackle these issues but a lack of expertise shows through.
4. It could be that the economic damage that has been caused by lockdowns and restrictions will further set back this aspect of future development. While Governments talk about building back better and green recoveries, which are, without doubt the correct principles to operate, there is a pressure to try the mistaken and damaging, but heavily lobbied, route of further investment and support for fossil fuel based industries.
5. Despite the good intentions of the WG, good quality internet and telephone connections are far from universal in Wales. Where fibre and improved bandwidth has been introduced in the proximity of exchanges usage has increased hugely; as a result bandwidth at the extremities of the system, in villages and farms, has decreased! The WG recognises the importance to future well being and the economy, of good quality WiFi connections, considerable work is still needed to achieve those good intentions.

7. Any other barriers to successful implementation of the Act?

1. In common with very many other nations the Welsh economy is at threat of collapse. Many small businesses are on the brink of failure, or have already disappeared. Unemployment levels are set to become overbearing. Failure to repay the huge amounts of debt that have been considered to be the measure of our economic

strength, but are in fact, the symptom of the desperate economic malaise that has been foisted on recent generations, could repeat the conditions that caused the banking collapse.

2. The economic structure of the “western” countries that are known as “developed” has to be completely rethought. We need imaginative re-appraisal of our financial support structures. We see a pressing need to tax wealth more effectively – in particular wealth held in land and property. Income from wealth should be taxed at the same rate as income from work.
 3. Second homes and self catering accommodation should be taxed at least in the same way as domestic property. These properties, mainly empty through the winter months deeply affect the local economy and provision of services. This impacts on opportunities for young people to buy their first house or indeed to rent at affordable prices; young people with skills which we need are unable to remain in their home areas. These changes to the population balance also affect the nature and character of places, especially when English replaces Welsh in changed place-names, business branding, etc.
 4. Most important is the need to re calibrate our economic system to the limits of the planet. Continuing to use up three planets worth of resources is an impossibility. Money is a confidence trick that is being seen through. Resource use, tied to planetary limits is the only way that future generations can exist, let alone find well being.
 5. Military use of land in Wales has benefits for the wildlife and plants where they operate, but provides little benefit for the native population. Huge tracts of land in Pembrokeshire and Breconshire remain in the ownership and use of the Ministry of Defence. While wind power is overtaking fossil fuels as the method of generation, Carmarthen Bay is unusual in having very little sea based wind turbine use. This is because of military use. What will provide the greatest benefit for future generations – fighter planes and killer drones, or clean, sustainable electrical energy?
 6. The present discussion about the Museum of Military Medicine being sited on Cardiff Bay underlines the importance given to the Military. Local people have lost resources, their own museum and now possibly the last bit of green space on the front. This could be a museum celebrating the Bay and its history, its cosmopolitan people and their achievements.
- 8. How to ensure that the Act is implemented successfully in the future?**
1. The understanding and conversation about the dangers of our present way of life and the possible improvements that could be brought about through the use of Citizen's Assemblies, working with the support of Government and Local Authorities, needs to be brought to the public consciousness. We encourage the Office of the Future Generations Commissioner to investigate, with the providers of entertainment in Wales, both digital and physical, what a sustainable economy might look like, and how it can be understood through drama, art, magazines.
 2. The basic premise of the Act is right: that every piece of legislation by the WG or Local Authorities in Wales should have as a first priority the well being of future generations. That principle has to imbue every aspect of public life. It depends on the UK Government reducing its reserved powers and doing nothing to reduce the powers already exercised by the WG. It depends on the WG being provided with a fair share of the United Kingdom's resource. It depends on the ability of the WG to explore innovative paths in taxation and reward. It depends on the WG building back better

and greener.