

Welsh Parliament, Public Accounts committee Inquiry: Barriers to the successful Implementation of the Well-Being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015

Reponses from Monmouthshire Public Services Board

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

The legislation and guidance provides a useful and helpful understanding of the Act. Support and advice from the Future Generations Commissioners Office and Welsh Government have helped increase awareness of the Act and its understanding.

The fact that many public body partners are subject to the legislation means that we now have shared well-being goals and ways of working that support partnership working at a local, regional and national level.

The Act provides a helpful framework and increased profile which enables the PSB to think longer term and be increasingly ambitious in developing solutions to improve well-being in our communities.

However in a complex organisations like a council or health board the progress and impact is only as good as the extent to which services and departments own and embrace the process in their planning and service design, and we need to continue to learn and adapt our approach to maximise the pace of change required. There needs to be a shift in emphasis away from compliance and towards truly embedding sustainable development in everything we do.

In particular there needs to be more of an emphasis on the seven areas for change identified by the Act: procurement, finance, workforce planning, risk management, corporate planning, performance and assets. Raising awareness and understanding in these fields is fundamental to achieving the transformational change intended by the Act. There is probably less understanding of the Act and its implications in some of these fields and/or limited flexibility in procedures and processes in some of these areas to be able to really implement and embrace the Act in its purest sense.

2. The resources available to public bodies to implement the Act and how effectively they have been deployed.

The implementation of the Act has largely been embedded within responsibilities of existing resource. In order to deliver sustainable development, integrating the responsibility within and adjusting existing processes is important rather than creating new.

Resources for PSBs are very limited. The resourcing of the PSB can fall disproportionately on local authorities by default as the authority has responsibility for the support role. The PSB has received an amount of annual funding from Welsh Government to utilise on a regional footprint. This has strengthened collaboration in the region, however the terms and short-term nature of the funding can inhibit the ability to truly plan for the long-term and make well-considered decisions.

Officer capacity, particularly at leadership and management level, is incredibly tight. There can be limited bandwidth to lead and drive some of the more transformational changes required in order to truly implement the sustainable development principles for the long term, whilst also ensuring current delivery against ever increasing demand on public sector resource. To assist with this we feel there is a need to ensure the balance is right between accountability for delivering against the act and allowing space to deliver the changes required to truly implement it.

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

We welcome the support we have received from the Future Generation Commissioner. The Commissioners Office have been approachable and helpful in providing support and advice to us to implement the Act. They have also provided lots of information, tools and resources to strengthen our understanding and implementation of a range of aspects of the Act.

The Commissioner has also provided an important connection with wider bodies in a variety of sectors that has been helpful to facilitate the progression of work in line with the Act.

The tools and resources (for example Art of the Possible journey checkers and the Future Generations Report) provided by the commissioner's office are detailed and extensive. We don't always have the time capacity to make full use of these resources, and we feel we would benefit from further support from the commissioner on synthesising these important resources and identifying the key issues for how we apply them within our local context to improve well-being. We would also benefit from further support being tailored to take account of the local context and evidence on well-being along with regional and national support provided.

We recognise the continuing importance of embedding the requirements of the act and demonstrating that we have done so in our work. As the awareness of the Act increases and becomes more embedded in our practice, how we deliver the Act is ultimately about how we adapt and transform, and how we plan and deliver services to ensure sustainable development. To support this a greater focus on systems and behavioural change, would be hugely beneficial, along with the techniques and support required to deliver in this way would also be welcome.

4. The leadership role of the Welsh Government.

We welcome the support we have received from the Welsh Government which has been helpful in supporting and advising us on the implementation of the Act. In particular we found the individual workshops with WG, as we were developing our Wellbeing Assessment and Plan, were very useful and helped us by providing informal feedback to understand if we were using the right approaches.

The Act is widely applied and acknowledged in Welsh Governments approaches, guidance and support provided to the PSB. However, we recognise that WG themselves have an even bigger challenge, than public bodies do, in embedding the principles of the Act across such a large organisation. The lack of integration of processes and legislation from Welsh Government can sometimes impact on our ability to fully implement all aspects of the Act. Welsh Government often recognise this and try to work with the PSB and public bodies to overcome this where possible.

Short-term notice of funding streams and restrictive conditions on grants offered to public bodies and the PSB from Welsh Government can sometimes inhibit our ability to truly plan for the long-term. The short-term funding cycles work in opposition to the legislation of the Act and this then can further derail the ability of public bodies and the PSB to make well-considered decisions on use of the funding in line with the legislation. It is hard to plan for long-term projects when funding is available at the 'last minute' or on short-term cycles which have to be spent within a very restrictive timescale.

5. Any other barriers to successful implementation of the Act (e.g. Brexit, COVID, etc.).

Fluidity and our ability to continually adapt/develop the PSB well-being plan based on the latest evidence of well-being will be needed as we move forward. The current uncertainty around Covid, and the potential impacts of Brexit, increases the likelihood that any adaptation/developments to the wellbeing plan will need to happen at a greater pace and frequency than ever before to ensure we remain reactive and responsive to changing well-being needs within our county. The legislation will need to be flexible to accommodate this.

There is broad recognition across the PSB that the Act and sustainable development principles are crucial in determining how we should and need to deliver public services. However, immediate financial pressures and short term budget setting can pose a huge challenge to this, and it can make it harder to carry out long-term planning for future generations in line with the Act.

The integration of processes and legislation in the context of being a border County, can sometimes impact on the PSB ability to fully implement all aspects of the Act – for example around health services, procurement, education and Welsh language provision. The overlap of the Welsh/English border blurs the lines of responsibility and accountability of populations, particularly where residents who live on the English side of the border but use the Welsh side as their main service centre or vice-versa. Cooperation and collaboration with English Councils, not under the duties of the Act are crucial to work seamlessly to support citizens regardless of the border issues.

Short-term notice of some funding streams and restrictive conditions on funding offered to the PSB from Welsh Government can sometimes inhibit our ability to truly plan for the long-term and make well-considered decisions on use of the funding in line with the Act.

Other challenges to implementation of the Act occur where areas of policy or legislation are not fully devolved to Wales, for example energy infrastructure and crime and disorder. Welsh Government recognise these challenges and work hard to assist PSB's where possible.

6. How to ensure that the Act is implemented successfully in the future.

There can be limited capacity to lead and drive some of the more transformational changes required in order to truly implement the sustainable development principle for the long term. To assist with this we feel there is a need to ensure the balance is right between accountability for delivering the act and allowing space to deliver the changes required to truly implement it.

There needs to be a focus on taking account of differing local contexts on well-being, including below local authority level. Regionalisation and rationalisation of agendas may potentially dilute the ethos of the Act if localism is lost in its application. Local and place based approaches remain vitally important to implementing the Act effectively, alongside both regional and national approaches.

Longer term sustainable funding that is not time limited or short term is needed to enable long term planning for future generations in line with the Act.

Focus needs to be proportionately given to outcomes as a result of the Act rather than process or a mix of both where there is likely to be long term impact. This means the way we measure and evaluate our performance will need to continue to evolve to still allow us to evaluate the efficiency and effectiveness of current service delivery while also track progress against longer term community well-being objectives. To deliver this effectively may require extra resource and/or expertise.

There is a need to continue to take account of evidence generated locally, regionally, nationally and globally to inform work under the Act to ensure it reflects major challenges and also opportunities to well-being.

It is important that the PSB look to the long term and do not compromise the ability of future generations to meet short-term needs. To do this we must seek to understand long-term trends, including potential disruptions that could impact on those trends and how we address them. The Welsh Government and Future Generations Commissioner have an important role in facilitating this.

Consideration should be given to reviewing where gaps in the application of the Act in Wales are most evident, and specifically applicable to public services/PSB, to determine where the barriers lie that prevent public services from doing more or being more accountable. This may result in more targeted support that organisations can utilise to improve their application and implementation of the Act, as well as more widely across Wales.