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Equality and Social Justice Committee

Inquiry: Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015

Evidence from: Dr Anwen Elias, Aberystwyth University



'INVOLVEMENT' AS A WAY OF WORKING WITHIN THE WELLBEING OF FUTURE GENERATIONS ACT: OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES OF IMPLEMENTATION

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1. Introduction

- 1.1 The Wellbeing of Future Generations Act (2015) (referred to as 'the Act' from now on) aims to improve the social, economic, environmental and cultural well-being of Wales.¹ In order to do so, the Act defines seven wellbeing goals that public bodies listed in the Act are required to work towards. The Act also identifies five "ways of working" that will support public bodies to meet these wellbeing goals.² These are: long-term, integrated, involvement, collaborative, and prevention.
- 1.2 This submission focuses on the implementation of one of these ways of working, namely 'involvement'. This refers to "the importance of involving people with an interest in achieving the well-being goals, and ensuring that those people reflect the diversity of the area which the body serves".³
- 1.3 Recent evaluations of the implementation of the Act have noted that "the Well-being of Future Generations Act is not being implemented at the pace and scale needed".⁴ In particular, "the sustainable development principle and the five ways of working are not consistently applied" and there is a need to focus on closing the gap between aspiration and delivery so that "this legislation fully lives up to its potential".⁵ The implementation of 'involvement' has been identified as being especially weak: there is evidence that "planning, decision-making and evaluation has failed to involve the communities affected", and that public bodies have made 'no change' or only 'simple changes' to their involvement processes" as a result of the Act.⁶ There have been calls for public bodies to go further in "involving the diversity of their communities"⁷ and

¹ [Welsh Government \(2015\) 'Well-being of Future Generations \(Wales\) Act 2015: the essentials'](#).

² Taken together, these ways of working form part of the "sustainable development principle", according to which a public body "must act in a manner which seeks to ensure that the needs of the present are met without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs". [Welsh Government \(2015\) 'Well-being of Future Generations \(Wales\) Act 2015: the essentials'](#).

³ [Welsh Government \(2015\) 'Well-being of Future Generations \(Wales\) Act 2015: the essentials'](#).

⁴ [Future Generations Commissioner for Wales \(2023\) Cymru Can – The Strategy of the Future Generations Commissioner for Wales 2023-2030](#), p. 14.

⁵ [Future Generations Commissioner for Wales \(2023\) Cymru Can – The Strategy of the Future Generations Commissioner for Wales 2023-2030](#), p. 13.

⁶ [Future Generations Commissioner for Wales \(2025\) Future Generations Report 2025](#), p16.

⁷ [Audit Wales \(2025\) No Time to Lose: Lessons from our Work under the Wellbeing of Future Generations Act](#), p. 14.

engaging “the public to build trust, strengthen consensus, and bridge the gap between policy-making and citizens”.⁸

1.4 This submission presents preliminary evidence of the opportunities and challenges that public bodies in Wales – and Public Service Boards (PSBs) in particular - face in involving citizens as part of their efforts to implement the Act. Drawing on case studies of four PSBs - Ceredigion, Flintshire and Wrexham, Neath Port Talbot and Gwent, the evidence gathered thus far indicates that:

- Whilst the public has been involved in the development of PSBs’ wellbeing assessments, the methods used have mostly consisted of standard approaches to gathering views and consultation. It is not always clear how these views have informed PSBs’ wellbeing objectives, or how the public is involved in delivering these objectives.
- In spite of a general commitment to deeper and more meaningful citizen involvement, interviewees identified several barriers to achieving this in practice. These include insufficient funding, time and skills. Broader challenges include the nature of PSB dynamics, the conflicting demands and priorities of different legislative and institutional frameworks, and limited external support for implementing the Act. [summarise]

1.5 The next section briefly describes the nature and scope of the data on which this evidence draws on; the remaining sections summarise key research findings to date.

2. Research design and methodology

2.1 This research focuses on PSBs, bodies which are established by the Act for each local authority area in Wales. PSBs “must improve the economic, social, environmental and cultural well-being of its area by contributing to the achievement of the well-being goals.”⁹ They are required to do so by undertaking assessments well-being in their local area, set wellbeing objectives and plan for how to meet these. In undertaking this work, PSBs must act “in accordance with the sustainable development principle”.¹⁰

2.2 The research focuses specifically on how selected Public Service Boards (PSBs) – Ceredigion, Flintshire and Wrexham, Neath Port Talbot and Gwent – have understood ‘involvement’ as a way of working and have sought to involve citizens in their wellbeing activities under the Act. These case-studies provide variation in terms of geographical areas in Wales, population size, and whether they represent a single or multiple local authorities.¹¹

⁸ [Future Generations Commissioner for Wales \(2025\) Future Generations Report 2025](#), p. 26.

⁹ <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/anaw/2015/2/section/36>

¹⁰ <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/anaw/2015/2/section/36>

¹¹ Whilst Ceredigion and Neath Port Talbot PSBs align with a single local authority, Flintshire and Wrexham joined to form a single PSB for their 2023-2028 wellbeing plan; Gwent PSB was formed at a similar time and brings together the local authorities of Newport, Torfaen, Blaenau Gwent, Caerphilly and Monmouthshire.

- 2.3 The evidence presented here draws on semi-structured interviews with 15 individuals conducted to date, involved with the PSBs in different roles (as members, PSB coordinators or supporting officers). This work forms part of an on-going research project (January-December 2025) being undertaken by the author, and which is funded by Aberystwyth University. The interviews have been anonymised, transcribed and coded thematically, to identify key themes in terms of how involvement is understood and has been implemented, and opportunities and barriers faced in involving the public in the work of PSBs. These findings are discussed in the remaining sections of this submission.

3. How do PSBs understand ‘involvement’?

- 3.1 Whilst the Act sets out “the importance of involving other persons with an interest in achieving the well-being goals”,¹² it does not define what form this involvement should take. The Future Generations Commissioner has recently set out his own understanding of what such involvement should look like:

“Meaningful involvement means going beyond consultation...It means: engaging with people at the earliest opportunity; ensuring transparency and access to information; clearly demonstrating how their involvement makes a difference; informing people about the impact of their contribution.”¹³

- 3.2 Amongst interviewees, there is a general understanding of ‘involvement’ as being different from ‘engagement’, and as requiring more than consultation where you “take a finished product to [the public] for discussion”.¹⁴ Respondents characterised ‘involvement’ as aiming to include people in the whole policy process and having influence on policy decisions; they agreed that doing so enables deeper engagement with and understanding of citizens’ perspectives and lived experiences.
- 3.3 However, interviewees also acknowledged that these terms are vague and can be – and often are - used differently by different people. For example, some respondents noted that activity referred to as ‘involvement’ often takes the form of standard practices such as consultation. Referring to the terms ‘involvement’ and ‘co-production’, one interviewee also noted that “all the terminology is perhaps thrown about a bit and not always in the right context”.¹⁵ The lack of a clear definition, or expectation, in the Act as to the form of public involvement allows for multiple practices to be branded as such, but which vary significantly in terms of the nature, scope and influence of the public’s input.

4. What kind of activities have PSBs undertaken in order to involve the public in their work?

- 4.1 Public involvement in the work of PSBs has mostly focused on the development of wellbeing assessments. In undertaking these assessments, interviewees reported

¹² [Welsh Government \(2015\) ‘Well-being of Future Generations \(Wales\) Act 2015: the essentials’.](#)

¹³ [Future Generations Commissioner for Wales \(2025\) Future Generations Report 2025, p15.](#)

¹⁴ Interview #4

¹⁵ Interview #1

having employed a range of engagement methods: paper and online surveys, conversations with the community by having a presence at events (e.g. markets, festivals), focus groups with already-existing groups (e.g. youth, 50+ or patient forums) or via civil society partners. Questions asked in these engagements most often focused around themes such as “what does well-being mean to you?” and “what would you like to see in the future?”. There are very few examples in the selected case studies of more innovative methods being used to involve the public, e.g. using co-production, participatory or deliberative methods that would enable the kind of deeper and more meaningful engagement identified above as characteristics of ‘good’ involvement practices. One exception is the Citizens’ Jury of North Wales, whose deliberations “help the PSB co-produce their wellbeing plans”.¹⁶

- 4.2 In undertaking these engagements, many interviewees identified the challenge of gathering public views on questions that are so abstract and removed from people’s daily lives. People often struggle to understand “wellbeing” as a concept, and are more focused on immediate policy challenges rather than their aspirations for the “future”. Concern was also expressed around explaining the role of the PSB to the public, and the limited ability of the PSB to deliver on the priorities identified by the public. In the words of one interviewee, the things that matter to people “is not within the gift of the PSB to impact...we can’t actually do anything about that”.¹⁷ This creates a tension identified by several interviewees about the purpose of involving the public in wellbeing assessments: it is hard to explain to people why contributing matters, and how their input will make a difference.
- 4.3 It is not clear how the data gathered through public engagement activity is used to inform the objectives developed by PSBs in their well-being plans. A few interviewees referred to these wellbeing assessments as technical exercises that draw on a large range of data assessing economic, social, environmental and cultural wellbeing for the area, of which public views is one data source. However, there is little clarity (from interviewees, or wellbeing assessments produced by the PSBs) about the exact process for balancing these different sources of data. In particular, the extent to which public involvement in the wellbeing assessment has influence on the PSB’s wellbeing objectives is unclear.
- 4.4 The Act requires PSBs to undertake broad consultation on its draft wellbeing assessment.¹⁸ PSBs have provided an opportunity for the public to feedback on their drafts through a mix of online or paper surveys. However, across the cases, the public response has consistently been very limited (to hundreds, or low thousands, of responses). Some interviewees consider this to be typical of the challenges public bodies face in getting people to engage with consultations in general; one interviewee noted, for example, that “everyone has a statutory duty to consult and you get this almost survey fatigue or consultation fatigue”.¹⁹ Others noted that responses were almost always from those already engaged, or who had specific issues that preoccupied them;

¹⁶ Flintshire and Wrexham PSB (2022) [Consultation on Flintshire and Wrexham’s draft wellbeing plan](#), p. 3.

¹⁷ Interview #1

¹⁸ <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/anaw/2015/2/section/38>

¹⁹ Interview #2.

getting a wider range of responses and perspectives was extremely challenging. Others pointed to the specific challenges of consulting on the wellbeing assessment given the nebulous and future-focused nature of the issues being discussed.

- 4.5 As noted above, it is also expected that the public is involved in the delivery of a PSB's wellbeing objectives. However, it is often unclear how exactly PSBs plan to achieve this. References to involvement in wellbeing plans, for example, are often very generic. There is typically little detail as to how exactly the public will be involved, thus making it difficult to evaluate the nature, scope and influence of citizens' input into the development and implementation of these plans. Neither is this an aspect that is generally reported on in any detail in PSBs' annual reports on their wellbeing plans.
- 4.6 A few examples of innovative approaches to citizen engagement were identified by interviewees, which linked into PSBs in different ways. One is the use of participatory budgeting (PB) within Gwent PSB.²⁰ This was initiated by Newport Council in 2021, through external funding through the Police and Crime Commissioner for a pilot-project focused on resilient communities. Experience of this approach was shared with PSB partners, leading to other local councils trialling PB in their own areas and using the PSB as a forum to share learning. However, interviewees noted that these pilots had in some cases been challenging, and this risked undermining the on-going use of this approach across the PSB as a whole.
- 4.7 A second example was provided by Flintshire and Wrexham PSB. Through funding provided by the North Wales Regional Support Grant, the PSB has participated in various projects including community narratives (using creative methods to record lived experiences in diverse communities), a Future Leaders programme for young people, and a Citizens' Jury for North Wales to assess evidence and deliberate on specific issues.²¹ This funding and collaboration has provided an opportunity to pilot innovative and "riskier" methods of citizens' involvement, ones that typically a local authority might not be willing to try.²² At the same time, however, "they're probably still not at that stage of actually changing and challenging the system, they're just at that stage of adding value and sprinkling a bit of stardust on and papering over the cracks a little bit."²³

5. Opportunities and challenges in involving the public in the work of PSBs

- 5.1 Several interviewees noted their strong commitment to the broad aims of the Act, and the future-focused approach it encourages to policy-making. Similarly, there was unanimous agreement that more meaningful involvement of the public in policy-making is important in terms of the relevance and legitimacy of those policies.
- 5.2 However, the emerging findings of this research points to several significant barriers to achieving this kind of involvement. Most frequently cited in this respect is **PSBs' lack of**

²⁰ Interviews #5 and #6.

²¹ <https://www.northwalesfire.gov.wales/media/fmjpbmlx/10c-flintshire-and-wrexham-psb-draft-well-being-plan-november-2022.pdf>

²² Interview #9.

²³ Interview #10.

funding. The limited funding provided is to support administration of the PSB; there is no funding for undertaking any activities linked to the PSBs' wellbeing plans. This was considered to fundamentally limit the capacity to undertake any innovative involvement activities, since doing so requires securing funding either from the PSB partners or from external sources. The increasing financial constraints experienced by many of the former in recent years has made it very difficult to provide such funding; some interviewees also suggested that, where such funding is available, it is prioritised for the partner's own activity rather than made available for collective activities through the PSB. It is striking that the examples of innovative public engagement referred to above – in Gwent, and Flintshire and Wrexham – secured their initial funding from sources external to the PSB.

- 5.3 Several interviewees also noted that there has **been little, or no, discussion at PSB level of involvement strategies and how to deliver more meaningful public input into the work of the PSB.** For some interviewees, this reflected the broader challenges of collaborative working within the PSB: of getting partners to attend and engage, and to develop a partnership approach beyond simply reporting on partners' respective activities. This has been made even more difficult as some partners have experienced internal challenges (e.g. restructuring) which have further impacted their ability to engage fully with the work of the PSB.
- 5.4 Rather, discussions and implementation of involvement strategies seem mostly to have occurred at the level of PSB officers or engagement officers within PSB partners. However, there was a strong sense that these **officers also have very limited capacity** to undertake this work since they are usually doing this work in addition to others within their own organisations. A desire to involve the public differently is thus in practice severely constrained by limited time and (as noted above) resources to do such work. Some interviewees also noted that they **lack the skills** to try different involvement methods, ones that would enable more meaningful and deeper public input into the PSB's wellbeing assessments and plans.
- 5.5 Several interviewees also pointed to the challenges of **aligning PSBs' long-term wellbeing objectives with competing expectations and priorities on PSB partners.** On the one hand, there are different legislative frameworks that PSB partners are working within; these were often felt to pull PSB partners in different and competing directions. Regional Partnership Boards (RPBs) were often mentioned in this context: set-up by the Social Services and Wellbeing Act (2014),²⁴ having a similar focus on wellbeing and involving some of the same public bodies as PSBs,²⁵ it was often noted that RPBs have much more funding than PSBs and therefore can do much more. On the other hand, some interviewees pointed to the tension between the PSB's future-focused objectives and the shorter-term priorities of local authorities in particular. The focus of the latter on service delivery informed by annual funding cycles was felt to make it difficult to get wider institutional buy-in to the longer-term priorities of the PSB. This was experienced

²⁴ <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/anaw/2014/4/contents>

²⁵ <https://www.gov.wales/regional-partnership-boards-rpbs>

as a fundamental tension of priorities, which in turn constrains PSB officers in their ability to build support for pursuing a different ways of working.

- 5.6 In terms of **external support for PSBs to implement ‘involvement’ as a way of working, there have been different experiences**. Two organisations were most cited in this respect: the Office of the Future Generations Commissioner, and Co-Production Network Wales. In terms of the former, a general theme was that this support had changed over time: whilst in the early years of the Act specific individuals were often assigned to work with PSBs in the development of their wellbeing assessments and plans, more recently this has been less available. Whilst there is some high-level contact with the current Future Generations Commissioner, there is little specific support for implementation of the Act and public involvement in particular. Co-Production Network Wales has provided more sustained support over recent years, through Project Dewi (a 5-year project funded by the National Lottery Community Fund).²⁶ Several interviewees noted contact with this project, either in the form of workshops sharing good practice, or support for specific PSB activities. These were found to be valuable, not least in terms of giving examples of different approaches to public involvement; however, some still found it difficult to translate these examples and learning into their own contexts given the constraints of time, capacity and skills noted above.

6. Conclusion

- 6.1 The findings presented in this evidence are preliminary, based on on-going research which will include undertaking additional interviews and analysis of the resultant data.
- 6.2 The findings of the data collected so far point to patterns of involvement that have not been fundamentally transformed by the creation of PSBs. The public has mostly fed into the work of PSBs through ‘gathering of views’ conversations and consultations.
- 6.3 Whilst individuals involved with the case study PSBs are committed to meaningful and deeper involvement of the public in their work, they face significant constraints in doing so. These include limitations of funding, capacity and skills; these are set in a context of broader challenges to partnership working within the PSB, and getting wider institutional buy-in to the ways of working promoted by the Act.

²⁶ <https://copronet.wales/what-we-do/project-dewi/?cn-reloaded=1>