



Simon Thomas AM,
Chair, National Assembly for Wales Finance Committee

Thursday 14th December 2017

Annwyl Simon,

Thank you for inviting me to provide evidence to the Finance Committee in relation to the Welsh Government 2018-19 draft budget process. I was pleased to note that three of your nine recommendations to the Welsh Government explicitly referenced the Well-being of Future Generations Act.

During the evidence session, you asked for further detail about the feedback that my office has provided to the Welsh Government in relation to their sessions piloting participatory budgeting.

We acknowledged that the scale of the challenge of how to seek people's views on the budgeting process in a meaningful way is not to be under-estimated. Welsh Government are viewing this as a longer-term piece of work, and it is helpful that their starting point is to use pilot sessions to work out the best approaches to take. However, if Welsh Government does not provide communities and individuals with the same information (or at least the headlines) being used by decision-makers, they risk people feeling that they are being "done to" and not "done with". People will not feel that they are being taken on a journey as policy develops, one that provides them with the understanding and rationale for decisions and new approaches and the opportunity to meaningfully contribute. Welsh Government risks asking them to divide a pot of money without the wider context – in one of the pilot sessions it was evident that there were frustrations that some services within the local community were being cut whilst for example, the majority of money goes into the health budget; yet people did not fully understand what was behind this or how to change it. Comments indicated that people wanted long-term thinking and preventative spend but needed more information on this.

We also provided a number of comments on how the sessions were run and suggestions for taking the work forward, particularly in relation to the five ways of working set out as the sustainable development principle in the legislation. In a single session it is a challenge to explain the financial and political process involved in budget setting as well as moving to seek people's views. We suggested that Welsh Government should give further thought to the best balance to strike between facilitating a conversation that is useful to people in developing their understanding of the context of the budget setting process but also generating something that is useful in informing the budgeting process and the next steps for engagement.

Welsh Government should see this work as an opportunity to see this work as not just a short series of engagements but to develop ongoing conversations. It is also an opportunity to consider the legacy both for Welsh Government to build their expertise in 'involvement techniques' amongst officials; and, as a result of this, to develop knowledge and skills within communities themselves around active participation and engagement, building knowledge and understanding of budgeting and other political processes. This means people, who are the experts in their own lives, will be better placed to offer up solutions and suggestions rather than frustrations. Welsh Government could explore taking further engagement to where people already are, and working in collaboration with partners to factor engagement into existing initiatives. In terms of improving the involvement/facilitation capability of officials, we suggested perhaps they could work with one or two trusted individuals who are used to working within their communities, building their knowledge and skills and work to support them to effectively facilitate the discussions.

I welcome Welsh Government's commitment to trialling new approaches to involvement, and my team are providing support and challenge to officials to take stock of the learning from the pilot sessions and plan next steps.

Yn gywir / Yours sincerely



Sophie Howe
Comisiynydd Cenedlaethau'r Dyfodol
Future Generations Commissioner for Wales