



# FOUNDATION FOR DEMOCRACY AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

## **A response to the current consultations of the Future Generations Commissioner for Wales on the Commissioner's Priorities and the Draft Strategic Plan – 6 April 2017**

FDSD is delighted to see that the Commissioner is taking an active approach to continuing the Wales We Want conversation. We are pleased to see that the priorities include not only climate change, economic change and population change, but also citizen disengagement. Deepening our democratic practices is critical to achieving social, economic and environmental sustainability.

Given our expertise, our comments focus in particular on issues relating to public engagement and collaboration. We also comment briefly on the need for an evidence base and the current consultation process.

### **Public engagement**

It is important that the Commissioner sees part of its role as improving practices of citizen engagement. The Developing Priorities document recognises that this is against the background of communities feeling “frustrated after repeated experiences of being consulted ineffectively or too late, or in a way that could not influence the decisions taken”. This is particularly relevant post-Brexit.

The public sector lacks champions for well-crafted public engagement that is sensitive to the conditions and experiences of different communities and social groups. The Commissioner is well placed to become an advocate for imaginatively designed and meaningful forms of participation amongst Welsh public bodies and relevant stakeholders.

It is suggested in the Draft Strategic Plan that it is critical for the Commissioner to “Walk the Talk” as part of promoting new ways of working. It follows then that the Commissioner must prioritise its own strategy for meaningful public engagement. This would move beyond the Wales We Want process to engagement in ongoing strategic decision making and seeding public engagement around the well-being goals. In this way, the Commissioner would become a model of participatory decision making for the rest of the Welsh public sector and beyond.

*FDSD would be delighted to work with the Commissioner in considering how public engagement could be mainstreamed into its ongoing work and developing broader guidance on good practice in public engagement for other public and non-public bodies.*

## **Collaboration**

Collaboration is one of the five key “ways of working” set out in the Well-being of Future Generations Act. In a similar way to public engagement, the Commissioner has an important role in creating “a better understanding of what true partnership looks and feels like, along with breaking down barriers and building understanding of the benefits”. Collaboration between stakeholders across public, private and civil society boundaries is critical if we are to realise the ambitious aims set out by the Commissioner. It is even more necessary in times of austerity, although this is also a context in which many public bodies and other actors tend to retrench and focus only on their core activities. Against this context, the Commissioner again has a vital role in catalysing collaborations.

The current Strategic Plan gives little detail of the role that the Commissioner might play in developing a more collaborative culture in Wales. It is noticeable that much of the discussion relates primarily to public bodies. The challenge here is not simply collaboration between public bodies, but rather for those public bodies to animate collaborations across public, private and civil society boundaries. Currently the role of the private sector and civil society is underdeveloped in the documentation. Their role will be vital in responding to the challenges laid out by the Commissioner.

The emergent public service boards ought to become an important actor in convening and animating local democratic engagement and more collaborative action to tackle issues that stretch beyond public sector remits. An example is affordable childcare.

*Again, FDSO would be delighted to work with the Commissioner in developing strategic priorities and good practice for the promotion of collaborative working arrangements in realizing long-term goals.*

## **Building the evidence base**

The development of an evidence base across all four priority areas identified by the Commissioner is critical, perhaps most importantly in identifying areas of poverty and deprivation. There is a need to ensure that data is disaggregated so that it is useful at local levels to enable informed choice, decision making, scrutiny and also innovation.

## **The current consultation process**

With regards to the current consultation process itself, we wish to raise three issues which relate to our broader comments on public engagement. First, while the Priorities and Draft Strategy documents are informative, they are presented in ways that are not likely to engage people who are not already involved in the public debate. The information is presented in a linear and dense fashion – more visualisation and graphics would improve its appeal and increase motivation to engage.

Second, while the Sensemaker survey is a great improvement on typical official survey instruments, a more nuanced instrument would sequence information in a way that makes trade-offs more explicit. There are hard choices to be made and it would be useful for the

Commissioner to understand how members of the public and interested parties make these judgements.

Third, it is not clear from the documentation how the Commissioner is ensuring that the consultation is made relevant to the varying communities and social groups across Wales. This is the first major public engagement process led by the Commissioner and it is important that it is seen to “walk the talk”.

**FDSO hopes that this response is helpful to the Commissioner and we look forward to working with you in the future. Please do not hesitate to contact us, via our Chair, Professor Graham Smith [graham.smith@fdsd.org](mailto:graham.smith@fdsd.org)**