



Is the Wellbeing of Future Generations Act standing up to the test of time and delivering for future generations?

Provocation

Peter Davies

December 2021

[Peter Davies](#) is a [Trustee](#) in the *Foundation for Democracy and Sustainable Development*

Introduction

The **Wellbeing for Future Generations (Wales) Act** became law in 2015. A **previous FSDS blog** reflected on development of the Act from my perspective as Sustainable Futures Commissioner for Wales from 2011-16, setting out its genesis in the devolution process. This is now well documented by **Jane Davidson**, the then Minister, in her book *Lessons from a Small Country*. It is now 6 years since the Act became law and we are entering a critical period with transition from key leaders, local authority elections and with enough time passed to judge whether the Act has actually made any difference to how Wales is governed – although not enough to see whether it has made a difference for future generations. So, has the Act achieved what we hoped for Wales?

What were we trying to achieve?

The Act set out to embed sustainable development as the central organising principle of public services in Wales, aligning to the **UN Sustainable Development Goals**. It was designed to empower and drive positive change and deliver a practical impact beyond high level principles. Some were concerned that at best it was “motherhood and apple pie”, and that it would make little practical difference becoming simply a “cut and paste” reference in policy documents, or at worst a tick box exercise adding layers of bureaucracy and cost.

Practical mechanisms were included in the architecture of the Act such as extending the sustainable development duty to the devolved public sector in Wales, establishing a strong independent voice

for future generations under legislation, setting up local Public Service Boards to enable delivery through collaboration at local level, and requiring public bodies to set wellbeing objectives against the national goals.

But much more significant, beyond the mechanics, it was about building a movement with a common sense of purpose, namely **achieving our seven national goals and realising a common way of doing things through the five ways of working**. A movement that would extend beyond the public sector bodies under the legislation to involve our communities and businesses.

This thinking was reflected in the name change from Sustainable Development Bill to Wellbeing of Future Generations. We also recognised that this involved a mindset and culture change which was going to take time. Success was not simply going to be measured in the effective bureaucratic implementation of the mechanics of the Act.

What have we achieved?

“What Wales does today the world will be doing tomorrow” were the words of the United Nations spokesperson at the launch of the legislation. To some extent, this has been proven to be the case with equivalent legislation being proposed in **Scotland** and **Westminster** and the UN itself establishing a **Special Envoy for Future Generations**

The creation of an independent voice for future generations has had a great impact and attracted global interest, positioning a small nation as an agent of change. Huge credit needs to go to Sophie Howe, as the first **Future Generations Commissioner**, and her team for establishing this new role and driving forward the legislation as a model that has put Wales firmly on the world stage.

All this global interest means there is always the danger that we get carried away with our own rhetoric, so what does it look like on the ground.

It is definitely not the case that we have seen transformation in outcomes in the last 6 years as is well documented in reviews by **Wales Audit Office, the Commissioner** and importantly the report of **Public Accounts Committee**. This latter report, which was recently the subject of a **scrutiny of implementation debate in the Senedd**, concluded that inconsistent leadership and slow culture change were failing the aspirations of the Act. The recommendations, which have now have a **Welsh Government response**, focused on long term planning, the operation of Public Service Boards, the setting of milestones and associated indicators and extending the reach of the Act in the public sector.

The various reports and the Senedd debate highlight the gaps between aspiration and implementation. The Commissioner’s review of how public money is spent through **procurement practice**, often recognised as the acid test of effectiveness, gives a sense of the scale of the implementation gap. Nevertheless, it is wrong to put every failure of policy or decision making at the door of the Act. As an example used in the Senedd debate made clear, it was never intended to be the means by which **decisions on school closures were to be made**.

The Act was designed as a legislative framework, requiring public bodies to apply its principles in coming to decisions. Increasingly we are seeing more specific pieces of legislation using the framework of the Act, such as the **Tertiary Education and Research Bill** which sets the civic mission of Universities.

I definitely believe we have seen the start of transformation in how the public sector operates in applying the principles of the legislation, which is way beyond the “cut and paste” of previous experience. As Tim Peppin, Director of Regeneration and Sustainable Development at the Welsh Local Government Association – a key partner in the development of the Act – states:

It has been incredibly rewarding to see how the WFG Act has become embedded, with high levels of awareness across local authorities and the wider public sector. Council reports now routinely reflect on how proposals, policies and spending plans relate to the goals and ways of working in the Act. Inevitably, there is still some “lip service” paid to the legislation with occasional bland impact statements being made but, generally, there is a more robust assessment of projects which is undertaken “upstream to influence” and not, as used to happen, “downstream to justify”.

This progress has very much been aided by strong leadership from the current First Minister and the challenges offered by the Commissioner. The nature of the conversation has changed, with ways of working reshaping approaches to policy challenges, representing the start of a journey to reorientate government systems.

Where should we be focusing?

A number of areas are pressing if we wish to see more embedded transformation:

- The response to the climate and nature crises and applying lessons from Covid pandemic will no doubt add urgency to the actions required. The basic objective of the legislation, looking after the needs of future generations, requires real world, contentious and difficult decisions that need to be built on involvement.
- Enabling people-powered change was central to the concept of the “Wales we Want”, the public conversation that informed the Act. Our wellbeing indicators continue to show that a decreasing number of people feel they have influence on decisions. It is encouraging that Co-Production Wales now has lottery funding to work with Public Service Boards on public engagement, but we also need greater adoption of **deliberative democratic models such as citizen assemblies**.
- The indicators and associated milestones that underpin the national wellbeing goals are our measures of genuine progress beyond GDP. If we are serious about change, they need to

shape budget decisions and reporting on our progress as a nation. They should form a golden thread through all the organisational wellbeing plans. The problem is that we have 350 + wellbeing objectives in organisational plans but little sense of their contribution to national wellbeing indicators. These indicators should be rebranded as Measures of National Progress.

- Ensuring public money is being spent in line with principles of the Act. I still have no idea why a separate “economic contract” for supporting the business sector was needed when legally all funds for support needed to be aligned with the Act. **The Social Partnerships and Procurement Bill** should strengthen actions by aligning procurement practice, with tools such as **the social measurement framework** supporting decision making. Similarly, Government can be much more specific in remit letters and should embed the principles in requirements for public appointments and other leadership roles.
- Leadership needs to come from all parts of Welsh society, with the business sector having a key role. **Dwr Cymru** provide an excellent example of using the framework of the Act to build in long term planning cycles and reporting against their contribution to our national goals
- We have seen how leadership of young people can accelerate action on the climate crisis. The **Future Generations Leadership Academy** is building a cohort of young leaders across Wales, while the proposals for a National Nature Service can provide another route to building skills for the future. However, there is still a need to ensure that schools use the introduction of the new curriculum to enable young people to have the skills, attitudes and knowledge to contribute to our national wellbeing goals. I am sure most head teachers are unaware of the legislation.

The Wellbeing of Future Generations Act after 6 years is still only in its infancy. It is making an important difference on the democracy and sustainable development journey. It is not the end of the story though and we need to keep learning, improving practice and where necessary strengthen the legislation. The Senedd debate this month and the commitment to cross committee scrutiny is an encouraging sign. The next month will see the publication of the (much delayed) milestones and revised national indicators, along with the Future Trends report. These are important parts of the architecture of the Act that should drive further action in 2022.

The coming 2 years will see an important transition to the next leadership phase with a new First Minister, the end of the 7-year term of the current Future Generations Commissioner and local leadership renewal post local authority elections. It will be in the hands of these successors to keep the vision of the Act at the centre of our national purpose.