

A shift in governance,
policy, and delivery for
future generations?
Well-being Planning in
Wales.



Discussion Paper

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Abstract

Wales' Well Being of Future Generations Act 2015 is often held up as an exemplar of innovation on governance for sustainable development, with its emphasis on public sector planning and institutional reform. The paper concentrates on Public Service Board well-being planning across Wales as a litmus test of whether new duties under legislation signal a shift in public policy to focus on generations yet to come. It explores how future generations' needs have been represented and the extent to which Welsh public services have begun to institutionalize and adapt their work to focus on long-term outcomes. This paper also reflects on why the spatial dimension of well-being and approaches to growth and de-growth are fundamental to our understanding for future well-being in Welsh communities. The paper critically explores emerging practice, identifies the challenges that are emerging and explores ways of enhancing the voice of future generations in public policy in Wales.

Key Words: future generations; Wales; public sector; governance; sustainability

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Introduction

Over time, debates on sustainable development have matured and mutated from early discussion of definitions, to methods by which it might be institutionalised. Later efforts to provide meaning to sustainability resulted in policy around themes such as ‘sustainable production’, ‘sustainable consumption’, and sustainable ‘place’.¹² However, from the earliest thinking on sustainable development to more recent preoccupations with the challenges of climate change, a core thread of discourse has been the challenge of dealing with the needs of future generations³⁴⁵.

While long recognised, concern for future generations has itself become riven with competing perspectives. Amongst ethicists there is a concern to establish the rights of future generations⁶⁷, amongst legal scholars an interest in how such rights might be enshrined in public policy⁸⁹ and for political scientists an interest in why it is proving so problematic to meaningfully guide public policy, so that it recognises future generations¹⁰. Uniting these debates, is the acknowledgment that future generations should no longer be marginalised.

In Wales, since 2015, the Well-Being of Future Generations Act (WBFGA)¹¹¹²¹³ has placed a legal duty on the Welsh public sector and Welsh Government Ministers to deliver their work while considering the needs of future generations and planning for long-term well-being. As a result of the Act, Wales has also established a Commissioner for Future Generations and Office, innovations intended to support the public sector and hold it to account on its approach to sustainable development. On the Act’s launch, Nikhil Seth, from the United Nations said:

The Act captures the spirit and essence of two decades of United Nations work in the area of sustainable development and serves as a model for other regions and countries. We hope that what Wales is doing today the world will do tomorrow. Action, more than words, is the hope for our current and future generations.¹⁴

This paper reflects on the impact of the Act on governance in Wales in its first five years, concentrating on the response of the Welsh public sector and the way in which it has been supported to institutionalize and adapt its work to focus on long-term outcomes for future generations. Our

¹ Weiss, E.B., (1992). In fairness to future generations and sustainable development. *Am. UJ Int'l L. & Pol'y*, 8, p.19.

² Daly, H.E., (1995). On Wilfred Beckerman's critique of sustainable development. *Environmental Values*, 4(1), pp.49-55

³ Page, E.A., (2007). *Climate change, justice and future generations*. Edward Elgar Publishing.

⁴ Davidson, M.D., (2008). Wrongful harm to future generations: the case of climate change. *Environmental values*, pp.471-488.

⁵ Skillington, T., (2019). *Climate change and intergenerational justice*. Routledge

⁶ Norton, B.G., 1982. Environmental ethics and the rights of future generations. *Environmental Ethics*, 4(4), pp.319-337.

⁷ Nolt, J., 2017. Future generations in environmental ethics. *The Oxford handbook of environmental ethics*, pp.344-354.

⁸ Herstein, O.J., 2008. The identity and (legal) rights of future generations. *Geo. Wash. L. Rev.*, 77, p.1173.

⁹ Davies, H., 2017. The Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015—A Step Change in the Legal Protection of the Interests of Future Generations?. *Journal of Environmental Law*, 29(1), pp.165-175.

¹⁰ Smith, G., 2019. Enhancing the legitimacy of offices for future generations: the case for public participation. *Political Studies*, p.0032321719885100

¹¹ Welsh Government (2015) *Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015*(23)

¹² Gonzalez-Ricoy, I. and Rey, F., 2019. Enfranchising the future: Climate justice and the representation of future generations. *Wiley Interdisciplinary Reviews: Climate Change*, 10(5), p.e598.

¹³ Jones, N., O'Brien, M. and Ryan, T., 2018. Representation of future generations in United Kingdom policy-making. *Futures*, 102, pp.153-163

¹⁴ Seth, N ‘Speech to The Wales We Want, International Sustainable Development Event Cardiff, UK, (2015)

findings will be of interest to those who are keen to better understand the strengths and limitations of legislative efforts to institutionalise practice which focuses on future generations.

Duties on behalf of Future Generations

Analysis of efforts to focus on future generations in Wales needs to recognise that devolution and public policy commitments to sustainable development are inter-related. Since the Government of Wales Acts in 1998 and 2006, Welsh Government has been legally required to make a Scheme setting out how it proposed, in carrying out its work, to promote sustainable development. Over time, alongside further devolving of powers and responsibility, Wales has approached this duty through different lenses: firstly focusing on the promotion of sustainable lifestyles by ‘learning to live differently’; secondly through a resource-based One Wales; One Planet approach with Wales’ ecological footprint a central theme; and legally through a Sustainable Development Bill; which finally resulted in the Well-being of Future Generations Act¹⁵¹⁶. However, in Wales, in terms of making a difference to the lives of Welsh citizens, the Welsh Government must work with limited levers as it is severely restricted in its ability to pass primary legislation or shift fiscal rules. However, it does have a major influence on public services in Wales, so perhaps it is unsurprising that the focus of legislation for sustainable development has settled on where Welsh Government does have financial and strategic influence; local government; regional health authorities, the National Health Service; Public Services Boards (PSBs) and a raft of national environmental, historic and education bodies among organisations which are covered by the legislation.

The WBFGA provided Wales, for the first time, with a legal definition of sustainable development following 20 years of pre- and post-devolution attempts to integrate sustainable development duties into the work of Welsh Government, the Welsh public sector and civil society¹⁷. Public bodies and Welsh Ministers are now required to adopt and use a sustainable development principle¹⁸ in their governance and operations; reframe their work around seven national well-being goals, linked to the UN Sustainable Development Goals¹⁹; work together in 19 newly established local partnerships called Public Services Boards (PSBs) who produce Well-being Plans; and regularly report on progress to the Wales Audit Office, with support from a newly created Future Generations Commissioner and Office (OFGC). This provided Wales with a revised governance structure for public bodies to focus on well-being and future generations:

Firstly, there are a set of duties on Ministers and Public Bodies as set out in the Act²⁰. The latter includes organisations such as local government, the health service or any organisation sponsored or funded by Welsh Government. The Act states that Public Bodies must carry out sustainable development in exercising their functions and use the sustainable development principle to plan and deliver their work which includes duties to: ensure that the needs of the present are met without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs; act as a guardian of the ability of future generations to meet their needs; and finally to balance short-term and long term needs, especially where their work may have detrimental long-term effect.

¹⁵ Netherwood, A & Flynn, A (2020): *The making of sustainability: institutional layering and policy stretching in Wales. Intergenerational Justice in Sustainable Development Treaty Implementation*. Edited by Prof Dr Marcel Szabó & Prof Dr Marie-Claire Cordonier Segger. Cambridge University Press

¹⁶ Davidson, J (2020) #futuregen: *Lessons from a Small Country*. Chelsea Green Publishing Co.

¹⁷ Netherwood (n 15)

¹⁸ The sustainable development principle is described as five ways of working: 1) looking to the long term so that we do not compromise the ability of future generations to meet their own needs; 2) taking an integrated approach so that public bodies look at all the well-being goals in deciding on their well-being objectives; 3) involving a diversity of the population in the decisions that affect them; 4) working with others in a collaborative way to find shared sustainable solutions; and 5) understanding the root causes of issues to prevent them from occurring.

¹⁹ A prosperous Wales; A resilient Wales; A healthier Wales; A more equal Wales; A Wales of cohesive communities; A Wales of vibrant culture and Welsh language; A globally responsible Wales

²⁰ Welsh Government (n11) Articles 3(1), 5 (1), 5 (2a)

Secondly, there are several duties for newly established PSBs²¹. The Act states that they must: deliver activities in accordance with the sustainable development principle; assess the state of economic, social, environmental and cultural well-being in their area through a well-being assessment; and prepare a local Well-being Plan setting out local objectives and the steps it proposes to take to meet them.

Thirdly, the Future Generations Commissioner also has duties to promote the sustainable development principle, but also must act as a guardian of the ability of future generations to meet their needs; encourage public bodies to take greater account of the long-term impact of the things that they do; provide advice and assistance to public bodies, PSBs and the Auditor General Wales in relation to the sustainable development principle; and report on how public bodies can:

- (a) better safeguard the ability of future generations to meet their needs, and
- (b) take greater account of the long-term impact of the things that they do²².

The legal responsibilities of public bodies outlined above illustrate the ambitious requirements of the Act to address the needs of future generations. However, it is notable that the legislation itself does not define what the term ‘future generations’ means. Instead, in associated statutory guidance to individual public bodies²³:

a generation is considered to be about 25 years. It is therefore expected that public bodies and public services boards will look at least 10 years ahead, although best practice would be to look 25 years ahead. In some contexts, it will be longer.

This raises important questions about how public policy is developing and should evolve related to the ‘long-term’ and ‘future generations’. While public sector policy in Wales already focuses on the long-term through spatial planning, health planning, early years interventions and housing, would the legislation shift the attention of public bodies further into the future and consider future generations’ needs in their own right?

Our research, described in this paper, focuses on how public bodies: assess and describe the needs of future generations; address detrimental effects of current policy approaches and the changes required; and identify where compromise is needed in planning for well-being outcomes between generations. We have also sought evidence of new governance approaches to ensure the guardianship of future generations. In relation to all these duties we have anticipated that the PSBs engaged in Well-being Planning are committed to fulfilling their legal responsibilities.

Public Service Boards & Future Generations

Nineteen PSBs have been established since 2016, emerging and evolving from various previous partnership structures at a local level. PSBs are made up of local government, University Health Boards, Fire and Rescue Authorities, Natural Resources Wales, and a range of other organisations to collectively plan for and deliver local well-being. They are required to undertake a local well-being assessment; to develop local wellbeing objectives; and to produce and implement a Well-being Plan (WBP) for their communities.

A review of well-being assessments from the PSBs, commissioned by the OFGC²⁴ highlighted key gaps in the way future generations were represented in the evidence for well-being priorities at a local

²¹ Welsh Government (n11) Articles 36 (3), 37, 38, 38

²² Welsh Government (n11) Articles 23,28

²³ Welsh Government (2016) *Shared Purpose: Shared Future: Statutory guidance on the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015*

²⁴ Netherwood, A, Flynn, A, Lang, M (2017) *Well-Being Assessments in Wales: Overview Report: A report commissioned by the Office of the Future Generations Commissioner from: Netherwood Sustainable Futures, Cardiff University & Mark Lang Consulting*

level. The work showed that assessments lacked insight on the impact of future trends on the physical localities, ecosystems, communities, communities of interest and economy of their areas. Assessments were focused on current conditions and current services, with relatively little focus on the ‘place’ they were assessing. In the majority of PSBs the needs of future generations were absent from discourse and analysis. This work suggested that the public sector in Wales needed to invest much more in the skills to develop integrated and future orientated thinking, where policy makers could be more comfortable with uncertainty while using their expertise to make reasonable assumptions and make a ‘judgement call’ on behalf of future generations.

During 2018 and 2019 we built on this work to examine the extent to which well-being objectives and PSBs’ practice were recognising the specific interests of future generations through WBPs. Our approach utilised interpretative policy analysis²⁵ and framing²⁶. These methods recognise that different interpretations of policy by different actors can often lead to ambiguities of meaning, contended interpretations of problems, policies and actions, and for some groups, a lack of meaning that prevents them becoming active in implementing the policy. We were particularly interested to adopt these methods to gauge how the needs of future generations were being framed in WBP interventions and reporting.²⁷

Firstly, we focused on specific commitments in WBPs. For example, for a general objective such as poverty reduction, what specific actions were being undertaken to address this over the short, medium and long-term to address multi-generational poverty? For climate adaptation we sought to understand how impact, risk and action had been framed within a locality. This analysis gave us a deep, rich and nuanced picture of the intentions of the Plans in relation to the long-term delivery of well-being and the PSBs regard for the needs of future generations. We have termed these commitments *interventions* i.e. what the PSBs are committing to do to improve well-being. We found that the specific interventions in WBPs fell into four categories:

Shared policy agendas – this included unspecific shared commitments from partners to contribute to the following shared policy agendas: e.g. best start in life; healthy lifestyles; community safety; sustainable travel; housing; poverty; economic regeneration; biodiversity; skills; digital economy. These commitments are focused on improving the well-being of generations already born with very limited focus on generations beyond this.

Building an understanding of place – this included a range of commitments to build up evidence of well-being in the area through community mapping; research projects; information portals; risk assessments; community profiles; social evaluation and in one case through a future trends project. The major focus of this activity across most WBPs seemed to be on gathering evidence on the current conditions in the area, and not considering future conditions and liveability of a ‘place’ for future generations.

Integrating service delivery – this included a wide range of interventions to work more effectively together as a group of organisations through co-location; campaigns; recruitment; procurement; asset management; protocols and procedures; programme development; co-marketing; engagement toolkits; and new plans and strategies. There was no evidence of how the services that PSBs provide might need to change in a locality in decades time.

²⁵ Yannow, and Schwartz-Shea, P (2006) *Interpretation and Method: Empirical Research Methods and the Interpretative Turn*. ME Sharpe, Armonk, NY

²⁶ Gamsin and Modigliani (1987): The changing culture of affirmative action. *Research in Political Sociology* pp137-177

²⁷ Note on method: documentary review of PSB well-being plans and associated documents from March 2018-May 2020 including: a review of web-based material for all PSB sites on changes to governance, progress and specifics in delivery of plans this has included, where available, minutes, governance, progress reports and performance management frameworks associated with well-being plans; and a review of PSB Annual Reports.

Place-based service delivery - this included a wide range of projects, programmes in communities which would enhance current well-being such as: community hubs, volunteering programmes; community champions; social prescribing; business support; health pilots; skills training (food, business); community zones; centres of excellence; city/place wide initiatives (food, ageing well, loneliness, health, green infrastructure). The evidence suggests that many of these activities were already planned or underway by PSB partners with benefits and outcomes firmly focused on the well-being of current generations.

In most cases, the rationale for PSB activity varied widely in quality, but, in relation to the long-term typically provided vague, aspirational, poorly defined long-term benefits of proposed activities. We found that most plans provided no commentary on explicit outcomes for future generations. However, there were some exceptions:

- Cardiff PSB, representing the capital city of Wales had a strong future focus with *Cardiff Today; Cardiff Tomorrow* providing a narrative for change, pressures and challenges to future place-based liveability²⁸
- Powys PSB, a large inland rural county, has a 2040 strategic vision for the area designed to address the key aspects of future, especially its economic vulnerability and utilising its natural assets.²⁹
- Pembrokeshire PSB, a coastal area heavily reliant on tourism and agriculture, focuses on service based and strategic outcomes for its various interventions by 2030³⁰.

We also found that most WBPs:

- were unclear on the outcomes of interventions and their relative impact on the long-term policy problems they were seeking to tackle e.g. any long-term policy challenges seemed to be being tackled by relevant small initiatives or projects rather than a more ambitious transformation of strategy or delivery systems;
- did not have transition pathways, route-maps, targets and milestones to tackle policy challenges from short, to medium and long term. Actions between these time periods often seemed unrelated to each other with unconnected isolated interventions between short, medium and long-term. Proposed actions provided no insight into the accumulation of benefits from interventions over time;
- did not reflect on the efficacy of current delivery systems for tackling long-term policy challenges and delivering long-term change. The focus of many of the interventions in the plans seemed to be that partners would build on existing approaches and focus predominantly on more inclusive, integrated and collaborative ways of working;
- exhibited a dominant focus on the delivery of services in the 'here and now', through current systems, with limited acknowledgement of changes to service demand and the need for service reform over the long term;
- showed minimal focus on place-based future well-being. By this we mean that they were unfocused on place-based challenges such as the resilience of landscape, infrastructure ecosystems which future generations will rely on. There are some notable exceptions such as climate adaptation and green infrastructure work undertaken in the five Gwent PSBs (Blaenau

²⁸ Cardiff Public Services Board (2018) *Cardiff Well-being Plan 2018-23*

²⁹ One Powys: Powys Public Services Board (2018) *Towards 2040: Powys Well-being Plan*

³⁰ Pembrokeshire Public Services Board (2018) *Well-being Plan for Pembrokeshire*

Gwent, Caerphilly, Monmouthshire, Newport and Torfaen PSBs) who prioritised collaborative working on a place-based scale on these issues^{31 32}; and

- provided a strong indication that PSBs were interpreting future generations as current young people and children and focusing on interventions to prevent adverse long-term impacts on current citizens lives through support at an early age e.g. best start in life, early interventions, children first, ante-natal and adverse childhood experience initiatives.

Our analysis shows that the majority of PSBs have adopted a five-year focus on outcomes for the WBP (rather than adopting a 25-year timescale as suggested by the guidance to the Act) with only seven of the 19 PSBs focusing on time periods of more than 10 years. To aid our interpretation of the data we developed a typology to illustrate short term, medium term and long-term actions in the WBPs:

- most short- term interventions listed in the plans were often *service focused*, with specific actions aimed at improving conditions through projects/plans and initiatives in a place, or for a community of interest for the next 1 to 5 years.
- many medium-term actions were aimed at *systemic change* to help tackle a long-term policy problem between 3-10 years.
- most long- term actions were *aspirational and vague* with the outcome often being that the PSB had somehow tackled a long-term policy problem – with the outcome to be delivered sometime between 5 and 30 years.

Notably, many PSB progress reports published in 2019 provide no specific reference or indication that they were doing anything on behalf of future generations in the detail of their work. References to the long-term, where they did occur were often vague statements like “*the Board has always got an eye on the future*”³³ to “*we aim to use 2040 as a focal point*”³⁴ However, several PSBs listed specific work on climate change, green infrastructure, housing and poverty as multi-generational policy issues which they would be working on with a view to improving well-being. Other PSBs implied future benefits in developing community resilience through neighbourhood hubs and good citizenship, and intra-generational engagement between young and old. Nevertheless, in most of these cases, there was no indication of specific outcomes for future generations. We found evidence in only two annual reports which suggested a longer- term approach to the PSBs work: “*we will focus on building long-standing natural, cultural and social assets to secure these for future generations*”³⁵ and another intervention was focused on “*safeguarding land for future generations*”³⁶.

In summary, it is notable that any rigorous notion of the longer-term is absent in the narrative of most WBPs and Annual Reports; at best they only give a very limited indication of how an activity might impact on the well-being of citizens in the future.

Supporting change

As part of our research, we also sought to examine, through publicly available material, the tools and advice that the Future Generations Commissioner, Welsh Government and others have produced to support public bodies to look after the interests of future generations. A key question for us, following

³¹ Brown, J, Netherwood, A & Thomas D (2017) *Gwent well-being objectives: overview report*. A report commissioned by Gwent Strategic Needs Assessment Group

³² Netherwood A & Thomas D (2019) *Climate Ready Gwent: Lived Experience. Overview Report*. Commissioned by Gwent Strategic Well-being Assessment Group.

³³ Flintshire Public Services Board *A Well-being plan for Flintshire 2017-23* (2017)

³⁴ One Swansea: Swansea Public Services Board (2019) *Annual Report 2018 / 2019* pg.30

³⁵ Bridgend Public Services Board (2018) *Well-being Plan* pg.3

³⁶ Torfaen Public Services Board (2019) *Annual report for period April 2018 to March 2019* pg. 27

our work on well-being assessments and the well-being planning process, is how have public services been encouraged and supported to take future generations and long term thinking into account?

Public bodies in Wales have been provided with information, data and advice on techniques for long term planning, to support their response to the Act. Public Health Wales, in their report *Futures for Wales* provided a detailed and wide-ranging review of futures techniques; good practice and theory behind futures thinking, predominantly focused on trends data and scenario planning³⁷. Public Health Network Wales ran a national conference *Shaping Our Futures in Wales* focused on what futures thinking is; what added value these techniques provide; and information on future trends data³⁸. Five Gwent PSBs³⁹ developed a regional approach commissioning a *Gwent Futures Report*⁴⁰ during 2017/2018. The aim of this work was to establish a set of future scenarios for Gwent up to 2035; Welsh Government have also produced a Future Trends Report to support public bodies and Ministers to consider how long-term trends may impact on the economic, social, environmental and cultural well-being of Wales. This was produced in 2017 and supporting material updated in 2019^{41,42}.

Critically, for our analysis, having reviewed this material it is unclear how the documents provide explicit insight into the *needs* of future generations, because their focus is on trends and scenarios for the future welfare of current generations. Limited advice is offered on how PSBs could apply the trend data to places and specific communities that they serve, or the services that they provide may need to be revised.

We also reviewed the advice and tools given to all the PSBs from the Future Generations Commissioner. This focused predominantly on two things: how public bodies should plan their work using the five ways of working; and how public bodies should plan their work using the seven well-being goals. The material we reviewed included work:

- to support WBP objective setting, via letters from the Commissioner to PSBs which signposted future trends material
- to support business planning in the public sector^{43,44}
- the *Art of the Possible* initiative bringing together experts, academia, and stakeholders to develop a ‘portfolio of practice’ and resources that can be used by public bodies to respond to the legislation⁴⁵
- *Live Labs* providing advice and assistance to public bodies to explore complex problems and opportunities from the perspective of future generations; challenge the “business as usual” approach; test ways of delivering significant changes in policy design and service delivery⁴⁶.

Advice from the OFGC on the long-term ‘way of working’ consistently signposted the Welsh Government Future Trends, Report⁴⁷, Gwent Futures⁴⁸ and Oxford Martin Commission⁴⁹ as ways to

³⁷ Graham J, Azam S, Woodfine L, Dyakova M and Bellis MA (2018). *Futures for Wales*. Public Health Wales, Cardiff. ISBN 978-1-910768-95-2

³⁸ Public Health Network Wales (2019) *Shaping our Future Conference Proceedings*

³⁹ Gwent is made up of five PSBs from Blaenau Gwent; Caerphilly; Monmouthshire; Newport; and Torfaen from South East Wales.

⁴⁰ Ash Futures (2019) *Gwent Futures: Report* Commissioned by Gwent Strategic Well-being Assessment Group

⁴¹ Welsh Government, *Future Trends Report* (Welsh Government, 2017)

⁴² Welsh Government (2019) *Future Trends Website* <https://gov.wales/future-trends-2017> accessed March 2020

⁴³ Office of the Future Generations Commissioner (2019a) *Future Generations Framework for Projects*

⁴⁴ Office of the Future Generations Commissioner (2019b) *Future Generations Framework for Service Design*

⁴⁵ Office of the Future Generations Commissioner, *Art of the Possible*. <https://www.futuregenerations.wales/the-art-of-the-possible/> accessed March 2020

⁴⁶ Office of the Future Generations Commissioner, *Live Labs* <https://www.futuregenerations.wales/work/live-labs/> accessed March 2020:

⁴⁷ Welsh Government (n39)

⁴⁸ Ash Futures (n38)

⁴⁹ Oxford Martin Commission (for Future Generations) (2013) *Now for the Long-Term*.

inform public bodies thinking on this issue. We found very limited advice on how to operationalise this trend data or to use it in meaningful ways to inform interventions planned by public bodies or PSBs.

The Commissioner also produced, in collaboration with the Welsh Local Government Association and others, a *Future Generations Framework for Scrutiny*⁵⁰ to support local government scrutiny committees, who are required to oversee both PSB activity and local government functions. This framework encourages scrutiny committees to ask questions and expect a response related to:

- the long-term trends that the activity will impact on
- the impact of long-term trends on the activity
- a timescale of at least the next generation (5, 10, 15, 25 and 50 years ahead)
- known trends and those with a higher level of uncertainty using data up to the 2070s
- the likely impact of trends in a decade or across a generation.

Further research is required to judge how effective the tool might be for scrutiny committees to represent the needs of future generations.

The Commissioner also published a *Future Generations Report* in May 2020⁵¹. The document serves as an impressive compendium of the OFGCs practice between 2016 and 2020, and specific recommendations for improving public sector and Welsh Government's performance in relation to the Act. However, significantly, we were unable to find specific examples of where the needs or perspectives of future generations or long-term accountability were part of the rationale for specific recommendations. We suggest, on the evidence of this report, that the two unique characteristics of the legislation; long term planning and safeguarding future generations have been somewhat overshadowed by describing processes and practices.

Indeed, reviews of the public service response to the Act by Wales Audit Office⁵² and Commissioner⁵⁴ suggest that despite the support noted above, the public sector is struggling to adapt to the requirements of the WBFGA. WAO found limited evidence from the individual public bodies (the constituent bodies of PSBs) that they were changing their existing modus operandi to focus on the long-term. WAO have called for a more sophisticated approach from the public sector which focuses on future needs, risks, resources, and benefits to communities; being specific about the nature of long-term outcomes and milestone steps to achieve them and shifting timeframes to 50 and 60 years.

Welsh Government, as the key funder of public services, and therefore influential in creating the conditions for others to respond to the Act, is also finding difficulty in adapting its approach to fully recognise future generations. Work commissioned in 2018 by WWF Cymru⁵⁵ and by OFGC⁵⁶ highlighted institutional and political barriers to progress. In particular, there is little evidence as yet, that the WBFGA is driving decision making, policy development or delivery across Welsh Government, or that traditional modes of operation within the civil service are being altered as a result of the legislation.

Dialogue in 2019 and 2020 between Welsh Government and the third sector groups representing civil society, has sought to explore what civil society can expect from government in relation to the Act

⁵⁰ Office of the Future Generations Commissioner (2019e) *Future Generations Framework for Scrutiny*

⁵¹ Office for the Future Generations Commissioner (2020) *The Future Generations Report 2020*

⁵² Wales Audit Office (2019) *Review of Public Services Boards*.

⁵³ Wales Audit Office (2020) *So, what's different? Findings from the Auditor General's Sustainable Development Principle Examinations*. May 2020

⁵⁴ Future Generations Commissioner for Wales (2019) *Progress towards the Implementation of the Future Generations Act.: Overall Findings*: October 2019

⁵⁵ WWF Cymru & Netherwood, A A 'game-changer' for future generations?: *Welsh Government's response to the Well-being of Future Generations Act* (2017)..

⁵⁶ Office for Future Generations Commissioner (n40)

and what the third sector can contribute^{57 58}. Wales has yet to establish a national forum for civil society, government and the public to explore what the Act might mean for how they work together towards long term goals or focus their work on future generations.

PSBs across Wales do have local voluntary councils to represent the work of the third sector within well-being planning. Many PSBs also have children's and young person's groups providing them with a voice at a local level. Despite this, we found no evidence from the material we reviewed from PSBs of civil society bodies seeking to establish new ways of thinking from the perspective of future generations, for example through future citizen juries, or local climate change commissions⁵⁹.

After five years since the passage of the WBFGA, public bodies are still finding it difficult to refocus their work on the needs of future generations and to focus on the long-term. Overall, it is difficult to disagree with the sentiments of Anderson⁶⁰ who suggests that the response to the Act in Wales has been one of rebadging and repackaging of existing work.

The following sections review the key literature on governance for future generations to explore why it is so problematic to meaningfully engage with future generation, and how public bodies might address the gap between what the Act is seeking to achieve and the way the public sector is responding to the challenge.

Representation

Difficulties in developing governance approaches to consider future generations needs are not unique to Wales. A focus on short-term time horizons appears to be almost endemic in many Western democratic societies^{61 6263}. Commentators such as Jacobs⁶⁴ suggest that in order to be successful long-term policy-making and delivery needs to have the capacity to address the uncertainty that is 'hardwired' into thinking about long-term costs, benefits and interventions. Thompson⁶⁵ has sought to explain why we discount the needs of future generations and have difficulty in accounting for their well-being, through 'presentism'. His basic assumption is straightforward: that citizens discount the future, so their democratic processes (and institutions) follow suit. Jacobs⁶⁶ also addresses the challenges of short-termism by distinguishing between policy and interventions that focus on:

- a) long-term inter-generational investment between generations, and
- b) policy and interventions which focus on the future welfare of current generations.

⁵⁷ Third Sector Partnership Council (2019) *Update on voluntary sector involvement in implementing WBFG Act* Third Sector Partnership Council November 2019: A Civil Society Stakeholder Forum on the Well-being of Current and Future Generations?

⁵⁸ WWF Cymru (2019) *All Together! Pointers for action from the Wellbeing of Future Generations New Year Workshops* 2018

⁵⁹ Netherwood, A (2020) *North Wales Climate Mitigation: developing a regional response to the climate emergency*. Report for Natural Resources Wales and North Wales Regional Leadership Board

⁶⁰ Anderson, V 2018: *Protecting the Interests of Future Generations*. CUSP Working Paper No 14. Guildford: University of Surrey. Online at: www.cusp.ac.uk/publications.

⁶¹ Finnegan, J (2019) *Institutions, climate change, and the foundations of long-term policy-making*. Grantham Research Institute on Climate Change and the Environment. Working paper No. 321

⁶² Thompson, D.F., 2010. Representing future generations: political presentism and democratic trusteeship. *Critical Review Of International Social And Political Philosophy*, 13(1), pp.17-37.

⁶³ Boston, J (2017) *Governing for the Future: Designing Democratic Institutions for a Better Tomorrow Public Policy & Governance* Volume 25

⁶⁴ Jacobs, A.M. (2016). Policy making for the long term in advanced democracies. *Annual Review of Political Science*, 19, pp.433-454.

⁶⁵ Thompson (n 60)

⁶⁶ Jacobs (n 61)

As we have described above, much of the debate within PSBs is firmly focused on present generations and their future welfare, rather than generations to come.

Jacobs⁶⁷ also suggests that the interests of current generations are favoured over those of future generations. This is, firstly due to information biases which arise when there is limited information available on long-term policy consequences. Secondly, there is an unwillingness for policy elites to enter durable – longer-term – policy commitments. Thirdly a reluctance amongst groups to engage in inter-generational bargains, including consideration of policy choice and trade-offs. As we have seen in Wales, evidence feeding into well-being planning does not seem to be supporting public bodies to think about choices and bargains between generations.

Similarly, the Oxford Martin Commission⁶⁸ has explored the tension between short and medium-term measures and the need to plan for long-term trends. The Commission suggested that we are ‘locked into’ models of institutional governance, policy and behaviour which make it very difficult to plan for the long-term. This is because institutions struggle to adapt to current pressures: including short-term political and business cycles which encourage short-termism; a lack of political engagement and trust with the electorate; and a growing complexity to problems (e.g. climate change) that we face. The Commission points out that in many cases we have “institutions built for yesterday” which find it difficult to operate on longer-term time horizons. While the WBFGA recognises the need for institutional reform, in our research, we have found little evidence of changes within PSBs or their constituent organisations to accommodate or represent the views of future generations. This suggests that an institutional fix – a moving of administrative responsibilities or creation of new ones- is not sufficient for effective governance of future generations. Instead we need to recognise that institutions are working within settings that may enable or constrain opportunities for pursuing the needs of future generations. Key to these settings are the devolution of responsibilities to be able to make meaningful decisions on behalf of future generations.

Gonzalez-Ricoy and Rey⁶⁹ in their work on climate justice, focus on the impact of policy on those yet to be born and generations to come. They argue that, for democratic legitimacy, it is not enough to focus on young people of today and that representation of those to be born is a pre-requisite for effective long-term planning. They also suggest that future generations’ interests may not be aligned with those of current generations. Future generations will experience different conditions, challenges and opportunities for their well-being than current generations. To better promote the representation of future generations in policy making Gonzalez-Ricoy and Rey suggest that there needs to be three features. Firstly, that representation occurs when there is some authorisation, accountability and correspondence between policy makers and those affected. Second, that representation also occurs when there is reference to the objective interests of the future generations. Third, that representation, and democratic legitimacy occurs when the needs of future generations are represented in the audience or institutions affected.

Again, our research has found scant evidence of well-being planning recognising potential future conditions for future citizens, nor has it provided examples of correspondence or accountability on behalf of future generations. The challenge of representing yet to be born generations is particularly pertinent to our evidence gathering in Wales. We have found that the work of PSBs, the Commissioner and Welsh Government do not distinguish between future generations. Rather, the focus of their work is primarily on the future well-being of current generations. Long term planning that engages with outcomes for multiple generations into the future is marginalised.

⁶⁷ Jacobs 2016

⁶⁸ Oxford Martin Commission (n 47)

⁶⁹ Gonzalez et al. (n 12)

Institutional reform

Institutional reform is a key theme emerging in the literature, with innovations taking place in a variety of countries including Finland, Scotland, Israel and Hungary⁷⁰. These examples provide us with descriptions of innovative structures to help represent future generations in current decision making. They also provide insight into alternative executive, legislative and judicial governance structures which might be adopted. However, these descriptions do not give us much understanding of the *impact* of institutional reform on decisions, investment and services which will affect future citizens.

Gonzalez-Ricoy and Rey⁷¹ suggest key aspects of institutional reform which might help better represent future generations. Firstly, future generations should be represented independently from elected officials and representatives so that decision makers can be challenged on their behalf. Secondly, scrutiny needs to occur on behalf of future generations to ensure that they are considered as a distinct group with their own specific needs. Thirdly, techniques such as strategic foresighting⁷² can be used to inform policy choices and be ‘more respectful’ of future interests and the needs of those to be born. Similarly, Finnegan⁷³ focuses on the need for institutions to explore trade-offs and bargaining between current and future generations, and compromise between generations in developing public policy, where future generations needs are part of the process around which decisions are made and justified.

At present, while we see some evidence of emerging use of future trends in Wales, and development of various tools to support decision making we see no signs of a change in focus in PSBs. Their attention is on current generations rather than recognising that future generations are a distinct group whose views need to be represented in their own right. An indication of how change might take place is a report for the Welsh Local Government Association⁷⁴ that summarised some of the key mechanisms for organisational change to help build accountability for future generations into local government in Wales. Suggestions included: impact assessments focusing on utility for future generations; extended time horizons for scenarios to explore conditions which future generations will face; financial systems focusing on long-term budgeting and fiscal planning; sunset clauses reviewing policy direction and impact; and bespoke institutions, such as local future generations panels, and commissions or committees to examine policy and decisions from a multi-generational perspective.

Future needs

We suggest that if PSBs developed a more rigorous approach to distinguish between different groups of people living in different periods of time, it might enable them to explore trade-offs and compromises which are fundamental to long-term planning. The following categories describe one way in which policy makers might differentiate between the needs of different generations of people living in their area, where a generation is “a group of individuals born and living contemporaneously”⁷⁵. PSBs could focus on the following four categories in their work:

⁷⁰ Jones et al. (n13)

⁷¹ Gonzalez et al.(n12)

⁷² Strategic foresight is a structured and systematic way of using ideas about the future to anticipate and better prepare for change. see <https://www.oecd.org/unitedkingdom/>

⁷³ Finnegan (n59)

⁷⁴ Netherwood, A & Brown, J (2014) *Generation 2050 Better long-term decision making: A resource for Local Government* produced by Netherwood Sustainable Futures and PwC for Welsh Local Government Association July 2014

⁷⁵ Merriam Webster.com

- *inter-generational needs* – between current and future generations
- *trans-generational needs* – beyond current generations - for future generations
- *multi-generational needs* – focusing on outcomes for multiple generations
- *intra-generational needs* – focusing on outcomes within a current generation

We develop this typology using examples below.

- Addressing *inter-generational needs* might be exemplified by actions which deliberately maintain a soil resource upon which current agriculture and future agriculture might be reliant. This recognises that current levels of soil exploitation cannot continue. This specifically recognises that our approach to growth needs to tackle things now to benefit people today and in the future. Such action enables existing and future generations to access healthy soil to grow food. This activity is mutually beneficial to both groups of people.
- A stable climate is an example of *trans-generational need* where current generations need to reduce their emissions and adapt to climate change, incurring ‘costs’ and making challenging choices about growth and development to maintain well-being for future generations. This recognises that we need to make decisions which we may not benefit from, so that future generations can maintain their well-being.
- *Multi-generational needs* can be addressed through activity which supports several generations of people living in a locality, as a by-product of addressing the needs of current generations. For example, investing in green infrastructure can benefit current generations but longer-term benefits may be even more significant for generations to come.
- *Intra-generational needs* can be addressed through activity which focuses on the present, for example, developing a day care centre next to a school to encourage support within current generations. The centre may or may not be there for future generations.

As we have argued elsewhere⁷⁶, current notions of well-being arguably represent a safe, uncontentious and depoliticised view of sustainability at a local level for the current generation. We suggest that it is the types of trade-offs, bargains and relationships between generations that are described above which need to be explored by PSBs in order to be more representative of the needs of future generations.

Relationships between generations

To further explore how inter-generational and trans-generational needs might inform well-being planning, we have drawn on the work of Gough⁷⁷ and Büchs & Koch⁷⁸ to develop a framework for PSBs to think about resources, growth, generations and place. These commentators argue, that to better reflect future generations needs, current generations have a moral obligation to pursue a degrowth agenda to transition into a less carbon and resource intensive world. They acknowledge that this approach will clash with current generations expectations of ever improving health and well-being. It is precisely this type of tension, between generations which we believe, needs to be explored as part of the well-being planning process. What are the trade-offs between delivering current needs and future generations living in the locality, given current resource use and direction of development?

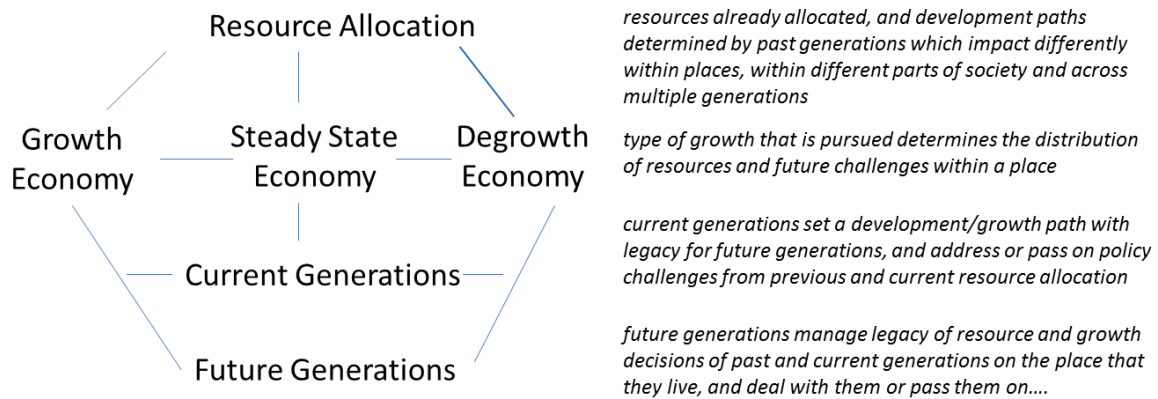
⁷⁶ Netherwood et al (n 22)

⁷⁷ Gough, I., 2017. Heat, greed and human need: Climate change, capitalism and sustainable wellbeing. Edward Elgar Publishing.

⁷⁸ Büchs, M. and Koch, M., 2019. Challenges for the degrowth transition: The debate about wellbeing. Futures, 105, pp.155-165.

As Figure 1 illustrates, our thinking on future generations can be encapsulated in a continuum that runs from growth, through a steady state economy to degrowth. Within each of these stages there is a notion of how resources may be allocated or re-allocated. Within the current neoliberal growth model, resource allocation takes place through trickle down and trickle on effects within current generations and between future generations. It tends to further accentuate the uneven distribution of resources. At the other end of the continuum, a degrowth perspective would seek a more equitable distribution of resources within and between generations. In between, these two would be a model of resource distribution that essentially conserves existing resource relations.

Figure 1 Framework for resources, growth, generations and place



Underlying Figure 1 are a set of political decisions about who gets access to resources and when. There are clearly tensions between well-being supporting growth or providing an alternative degrowth agenda. By differentiating between needs and time we can evaluate how the public sector in Wales is formulating and operationalising futures for Welsh citizens. Büchs & Koch's notion of degrowth is potentially important for well-being planning because it brings to the fore commitments to resource redistribution and how they can be both temporally and spatially variable.

An example of spatial distribution and inequity is how most economies focus on material consumption as a key component of economic growth, which generally improves the well-being of those living in wealthier areas. A by-product of so much consumption is domestic waste production. This can mean that more waste is produced in more affluent urban areas, which then tends to be disposed of in poorer, more marginal areas. Similarly, on a temporal level, current generations derive benefit from nuclear energy, passing on the challenge of radioactive waste management to generations far into the future. A more inclusive approach to future generations would need to recognise that levels of consumption and waste management practices within current generations are foreclosing opportunities to our communities and the places where they live into the future. We explore this spatial perspective in more detail below.

Spatial differences

The literature on future generations either implicitly or explicitly marginalises a spatial dimension to its analysis. For example, Jacobs⁷⁹ develops a model to illustrate welfare trade-offs over time and while the work has considerable relevance at a national level any subnational implications are glossed over. Climate change, for instance, is couched in national terms but what happens beneath the national level where there is clearly a spatial dimension is ignored. Finnegan⁸⁰ too points to the distributive politics of climate change but in terms of social groups and time but does not mention physical space or the communities that inhabit them. When evaluating welfare distribution, it seems curious to treat

⁷⁹ Jacobs (n63)

⁸⁰ Finnegan (n69)

resources or liabilities as if they are evenly distributed. Groups, such as old age pensioners or young people or environmental assets are highly spatially variable. Communities and community-led thinking is informed by an understanding of place. To marginalise the spatial element of future generations is neither helpful to theory nor to practice.

We suggest that failing to sufficiently address the spatial dimension in well-being planning, we may risk underplaying the factors which might inform growth and degrowth narratives. For example, PSBs exploring the uneven impacts of climate change, biodiversity loss and of access to resources across Wales may give us a better understanding of how these challenges may impact on development and growth paths (and well-being) both now and in the future. Well-being planning offers us the chance in Wales to explore various ‘just’ futures⁸¹ in different localities based on local characteristics to develop a ‘more geographical account of the future’⁸².

Drawing attention to the spatial dimension of well-being planning raises important issues about how to reflect the needs of future generations. As we have argued previously⁸³ public bodies have a vast resource of quantitative and qualitative insights into ‘place’ which need to be better utilised in thinking about future generations. For some guidance we can usefully look towards the land use planning system which has considerable experience of a longer-term perspective that incorporates people and places. Each local authority has a wealth of material and interpretation in their Local Development Plans (LDPs) which could underpin a better understanding of place specific issues and the challenges for land use, transport, biodiversity, flood risk, built environment and infrastructure etc. which will determine well-being for future decades. LDPs are particularly adept at describing the strategic long-term challenges for local communities and how they can be tackled through land use planning and development control.

Land use planning decisions are often of significance beyond the current generation, such as infrastructure, the location of development, and the protection of valued landscapes and habitats. Yet there are very few examples in well-being planning where this work has featured in assessing local well-being or in the interventions being undertaken by PSBs. Moreover, the planning system has also promoted innovative ways to consult with citizens about the future of their communities which go beyond many of the consultative exercises in current well-being planning.

In short, we suggest that well-being planning needs to more fully engage with multi-generational time horizons that can identify and enhance prospects for today's and future generations. Rather than marginalising space, thinking on future generations should be making the physical characteristics of communities central to well-being planning. In that way, the inter-relationships between our spaces – where we work and live out our lives – and their ecological sustainability are recognised for mutual benefit.

Strengthening the voice of future generations

Through our work we have found that the well-being planning process, a core part of the WBFGA, is not significantly lengthening time horizons of public service planning or representing the needs of future generations. We suggest, therefore, that a key part of the governance that has been designed to safeguard the interests of future generations is not achieving its purpose of a long-term focus or exploring inter-generational equity. Meaningful insight into long-term outcomes for future generations is limited amongst stakeholders involved in well-being planning. Despite key actors best efforts, well-being planning, to date, presents us with a weak concept of long-term well-being for

⁸¹ Jones R, Goodwin-Hawkins, B Woods, M (2020) From territorial cohesion to regional spatial justice: the Well-Being Off Future Generations Act in Wales *International Journal Of Urban And Regional Research* Doi:10.1111/1468-2427.12909 pg 12

⁸² Jones, R. (2019) Governing the future and the search for spatial justice: Wales’ Well-being of Future Generations Act. *Fennia* 197(1) 8–24.

⁸³ Netherwood et al. (n22)

future generations and indicates that generations to be born are yet to find a voice in this area of Welsh public policy.

Much of the policy discourse we have reviewed includes implicit assumptions that benefits to future generations will accrue as a by-product of activity focused on current generations, without defining how this might impact positively (or negatively) on generations to come. We found little evidence from PSBs asking appropriate questions on behalf of future generations. Indeed, amongst PSBs we see very little discussion of compromise, bargains, choices, or trade-offs between generations that commentators note as being integral to policy making for the longer term.

We suggest that there are several reasons why the aspirations of the WBFGA are being stifled. One is that the various tools for PSBs to consider the long-term have not generated meaningful analysis and insight into long-term outcomes. A second factor is that the accountability framework which has developed around the Act is also failing as it does not specifically address the needs of future generations. The Wales Audit Office, Scrutiny Committees and the Commissioner's activity seem to be focused on the *process* of delivering the legislative requirements of the Act rather than the *content* of the WBPs or the potential long-term *outcomes* of well-being planning.

Our work concurs with that of Wallace⁸⁴ who found that public bodies response to the WBFGA is focused on process and performance management, short term outcomes and delivery, with limited analysis of social progress over the long-term. As a result, many WBPs are focused on more joined-up service delivery for current generations rather than focusing on specific outcomes for future generations in the place that they may live. Currently, well-being planning is reinforcing the 'presentism' described by Thompson⁸⁵ and the Oxford Martin Commission⁸⁶ in doing little to challenge models of short-term institutional governance, policy and behaviour.

Reflecting on our analysis, we believe that in order to give future generations a greater voice in public policy, government, public bodies and the Commissioner need to:

- establish more effective methods of *representation* of the needs of future generations to challenge and inform institutional agendas. For example, PSBs working alongside independent 'place' focused citizens juries or citizens assemblies⁸⁷, with individuals providing advocacy on behalf of future generations to establish dialogue and representation of their needs;
- develop an understanding of how *approaches to development* in communities might play out within and between generations. This could be based on trans-generational, inter-generational, multi-generational and intra-generational perspectives in particular places. Public bodies could utilise this approach to develop long-term plans which truly focus on the distinctive needs of future generations; and
- define specific *long-term outcomes* for future citizens as part of public policy and service and place planning, including long-term decadal route-maps for delivery and change; and these should be based on an exploration of trade-offs between generations as described above. Policy makers need to become more adept at defining how future citizens benefit from decisions made today, what risks might occur and the opportunities that decisions might offer for long-term well-being.

⁸⁴ Wallace, J (2019) Wellbeing and Devolution: Reframing the Role of Government in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Chapter 4 *Well-being as Sustainable Development* Palgrave McMillan.

⁸⁵ Thompson (n 60)

⁸⁶ Oxford Martin Commission (n 47)

⁸⁷ Citizens Assemblies are well-established mechanisms in UK government which help to gather ideas, reflect on important policy matters, develop policies, explore public views and engage public bodies and industry in dialogue about policy and response e.g. UK House of Commons Citizen Assembly for 'A Path to Net Zero'

While we have drawn attention to the limitations of governance, institutional and policy reform within public sector partnerships as a result of the WBFGA, we recognise that change often takes longer to achieve than its advocates would have hoped. Our findings that are focused on PSBs and Wales are applicable to a much wider audience which is grappling with the challenges of how to better meet the needs of future generations and planning for the long-term. Our work shows that establishing statutory obligations, new governance procedures and a Commissioner is no guarantee that future generations will be better represented by public services. Institutional reform and new mechanisms only provide the potential to reframe public service delivery.

In conclusion, we suggest that PSBs and individual public bodies can innovate in the way that they approach their planning for future generations. The public sector in Wales can strengthen their approach to well-being planning independently of any further statutory guidance compelling them to do so. Further guidance and support from Welsh Government and other actors will help to realise change although PSBs already have the local expertise and *licence*, as a result of the Act, to think about the communities that they serve over the long-term and provide their future citizens with a voice. The challenge for PSBs and their partners is to reframe their work to meaningfully include generations to come and plan further into the future than they have done so far.