



**Evidence briefing paper**

# **Policy, governance, and implementation**

This evidence briefing paper summarises some of the key issues related to policymaking, governance and implementation in Wales, and reflects upon issues that we expect the incoming Welsh Government to face after the 2021 Senedd election. The paper presents evidence about the strengths and weaknesses of current approaches to policymaking, governance and implementation in Wales. While these may appear to be slightly abstract issues, they are very important for any government's success.

# Key messages

---

- 1** The next Welsh Government needs to give attention not just to what it wants to achieve, but also how it plans to do so. This means giving careful consideration to how it approaches policymaking, governance and implementation.
- 2** Although the devolution settlement limits Welsh Ministers' formal powers, there is a broad range of policy levers available to them. Ensuring that these are aligned with the Government's priorities, and used in a coherent and coordinated way, will be key to strengthening the economy, tackling inequality and promoting sustainability.
- 3** The current system of governance in Wales is complex and bureaucratic, and undermines the ways of working set out in its ground-breaking legislation that was designed to secure the wellbeing of future generations<sup>1</sup>.
- 4** There appears to be little appetite for top-down restructuring and there are other ways to address current problems. But without a concerted effort to improve current approaches to governance and implementation, they will continue to act as a drag on efforts to improve outcomes for the people of Wales.
- 5** The Welsh Government needs to play an active role in supporting, overseeing and, where necessary, challenging local and regional actors in their efforts to understand communities' needs and aspirations; and to develop effective solutions that respond to them. It should be working with partners to identify and address the current fragmentation in national policy, and the associated accountability and financial structures that local actors encounter.
- 6** At various points since devolution, efforts have been made to address the delivery gap in Wales. But this remains an issue, and there needs to be a greater focus on the processes of implementation. As policy is developed and introduced, it should be possible for those responsible to articulate: who is going to do what; what are they going to stop doing to create the capacity needed to deliver that policy; and what support will they receive to ensure that they have the necessary skills and resources.

---

<sup>1</sup> This was the Wellbeing of Future Generations Act of 2015.



# The need to define an approach to governing



A critical question in public policy is how governments bring about change in society. Policymakers around the world wrestle with [this question](#). And while policymakers are one of the most powerful actors, with direct control over some key policy levers – like taxes, government expenditure and legislation – governments need to work with and mobilise other actors to be able to effect change.

**The impact of the Coronavirus pandemic, and the public sector response, have highlighted both strengths and weaknesses in the system**

The limited range of formal powers available to national policymakers in Wales means that this challenge is both more complex and acute.

The impact of the Coronavirus pandemic, and the public sector response, have highlighted both strengths and weaknesses in the system. As Wales starts to emerge from the crisis, attention needs to be given to how the Welsh Government will work with public services and other actors to achieve its aims. There are three key areas where action will be needed: policymaking, governance and partnership working, and implementation and delivery. Each is discussed below.

# Polycymaking in Wales

As the devolution settlement has evolved, so the Welsh Government has had to build its capacity and capability for policymaking. It is still only relatively recently that it acquired legislative powers and a degree of control over taxation, and there remain some key policy areas over which it has little direct influence.

**There is a need for greater coherence and coordination across different policy domains, and in the ways in which the levers available to Ministers are deployed**

The fragmentation of policymaking at the national and local levels has been an acknowledged issue since the earliest days of devolved government in Wales, and it continues to be a challenge. There is a need for greater coherence and coordination across different policy domains, and in the ways in which the levers available to Ministers are deployed. The Well-being of Future Generations Act provides a framework for this, but it is not fully embedded. Public bodies are still working to realise its aspirations and fully embed its intended ways of working.

As the Wales Centre for Public Policy's work on the recovery from pandemic highlights, the incoming Government will need to clearly define a manageable set of priorities. Importantly, this means deciding what it intends to **stop doing** and what it needs to **do differently**, as well as what **new policies** it introduces.

The evidence that our research and other studies have generated suggests that, in making these decisions, the Government should:

- Consider the mix of policy tools required, recognising the broad range of levers available to governments, beyond fiscal and legislative powers. (These range from 'hard-edged' instruments, such as audit and inspection, through to 'softer powers', such as persuasion and capacity-building.);
- Be ambitious and innovative in articulating policy objectives, but also realistic about the constraints and limitations to what the devolved government can achieve;
- Actively monitor implementation to enable policies to be fine-tuned and to hold actors to account for their performance;
- Learn from evaluations and experience elsewhere;
- Proactively collaborate with stakeholders, and develop coalitions of actors who can support and supplement Government action; and
- Focus on implementation as a key part of the policy process, which starts in the very early stages of development and is sustained right through to assisting 'frontline' or delivery organisations in their efforts to introduce change.

This will require a joined-up, whole government effort, as well as effective governance and collaboration with partners, and a greater focus on implementation and delivery.

# Governance and partnership working

---



Collaboration has been at the heart of the public service reform agenda in Wales for almost 20 years. Various efforts have been made to embed partnership working in the public sector at the local level, including through legislation and funding arrangements. There has also been a focus on [leadership development](#) to nurture behaviours and cultures that facilitate collaboration.

**Efficient and effective public services should be citizen-centred and responsive to local needs**

This is underpinned by the recognition that efficient and effective public services should be citizen-centred and responsive to local needs. Different parts of Wales' public service need to work together effectively to address 'cross-cutting' priorities, such as reducing health inequalities, improving educational attainment and transitioning to a net-zero-carbon Wales. For this to happen, public sector bodies need to work together, across organisational boundaries, to share knowledge and coordinate activity. The current systems of governance in Wales, however, present several challenges to this kind of partnership working.



## The complexity of governance arrangements

In theory, a relatively small country should find it relatively easy to achieve 'joined-up' policymaking. However, with multiple public bodies operating in Wales, often covering different geographical areas, and with overlapping objectives and priorities and differing funding streams and performance regimes, the complexity of the partnership working landscape has long been recognised as an obstacle to fully coordinated action.

As highlighted in the most recent [review](#) of governance structures, successive UK and Welsh Governments have established a plethora of 'strategic partnerships', either in statute or to manage specific grants. The number and diversity of these partnerships, and the blurred boundaries between their remits, lead to inefficiencies, risk creating 'silos' between the different partnerships, and undermine transparency and accountability. And there is a real risk that servicing the numbers of partnerships that public bodies are required to join takes away valuable time and resources from frontline service delivery.

The recent [OECD review](#) of the governance of economic policy in Wales is the latest in a long line of reports to conclude that:

**"A significant rationalisation [of the layers of policy and service intervention] may not be popular among all stakeholders but it would help better channel already strained human and financial resources, and introduce greater clarity in lines of responsibility, thereby boosting accountability. Furthermore, it may reduce 'co-ordination fatigue'."**

It is not clear that there is appetite for the kind of top-down rationalisation of partnership structures the OECD recommends. Nevertheless, incoming Ministers need to be clear about the 'architecture' for delivering change: without meaningful efforts to address the issues created by the existing overlapping structures, these will continue to hamper efforts to achieve positive change 'on the ground'.

**The Welsh Government is uniquely placed to play an important role in steering the development and maintenance of effective collaborations**

In determining this governance 'architecture', the Welsh Government will need to set clear and realistic expectations for partnership working. In some cases, collaboration is designed to facilitate relatively low-intensity information sharing and coordination. In others, it aims for a high degree of connection and interdependency, characterised by actors and agencies working systemically towards shared goals, for example by working on joint strategies and pooling resources.

The form of each partnership needs to be determined by its purpose, and there needs to be awareness that the greater the level of collaboration, the higher the 'cost' in terms of dedicating time and resources into building the necessary structures, processes and relationships.

The Welsh Government and its local partners need to be clear about where high-intensity collaboration is needed, and where lower-intensity cooperation can achieve what is needed, and design collaborations accordingly. This requires attention to a range of formal and informal factors, including:

- The role, skills and capacity of the project manager and leadership;
- Whether there are pre-existing collaborative arrangements;
- Active engagement of all partner organisations;
- Involvement of staff at all levels and from different roles;
- Engagement of service users through co-production and feedback;
- Clear project aims linked to a rationale for collaboration; and
- Ambitious, realistic and measurable outcomes.

The Welsh Government is uniquely placed to play an important role in steering the development and maintenance of effective collaborations. It can build on some past successes in doing so, as well as learn from those partnership structures and processes that have not delivered the desired changes.

## The role of the 'centre'

Across a range of policy areas, the Welsh Government has successfully established broad aspirations, and devolved to local or regional actors the responsibility for analysing 'need' and developing 'solutions' that respond to this. Where this works well, individuals and organisations can be empowered and mobilised to improve. National actors continue to play an active role in supporting this process, through offering constructive challenge and assistance where actors are not making sufficient progress; and through ensuring alignment of policy initiatives, accountability frameworks, and funding streams. The way that the reforms to the school curriculum in Wales have been pursued to date offers one example of this.

**Understanding and responding to need is best done at the local or regional level, but national actors can and should play a more active role in offering assistance and challenge, and ensuring a more joined-up approach to national policymaking**

Similar messages emerge from our and others' reports on the implementation of the Well-being of Future Generations Act, and the Violence Against Women, Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence Act. Understanding and responding to need is best done at the local or regional level, but national actors can and should play a more active role in offering assistance and challenge, and ensuring a more joined-up approach to national policymaking.

In other policy domains, the need for a more active 'centre' has been highlighted. For example, the Parliamentary Review of Health and Social Care argued for increased capacity at the national level that was focused on 'steering' the system. This included streamlining governance and accountability structures; ensuring alignment and coordination of the range of levers for fostering innovation; and supporting the scale and spread of new models of care. Plans to develop a new NHS Executive in response to the recommendations from the review have been delayed by the pandemic, but this remains an important issue which needs to be pursued.



# Implementation and delivery

Alongside addressing the complexity of governance arrangements, and developing approaches to 'steering' local and regional partnerships, greater emphasis needs to be placed on effective policy implementation and delivery. In practice this means focusing on the 'how' as much as the 'what': **how** will the policy feed through to change in practice? This requires that more consideration is given to:

- **Capacity and capability:** How does the change fit with what local and regional agencies currently do? If it is an additional burden on them, do they have the capacity to take this on? And if not, is there agreement on what will be deprioritised or stopped? What kind of training and resources might be needed to enable local government, the health services and other partners to understand and adopt a change in their areas? How is this developed and delivered in partnership with them?
- **Fidelity:** Is it possible to define what 'good' looks like? Is it possible to distinguish between the elements that **have** to be in place, and those elements that can be adapted to fit local context? How will effectiveness be monitored? And how will deviation from this be managed?
- **Sustainability:** if the change is intended to be long-term, how will it be integrated and sustained?

Not all these questions can be answered by national governments as they develop policy. However, unless there is a conscious effort to address them, as the policy is implemented, adoption of the change is likely to be patchy and slow.

**There needs to be transparency and constructive accountability, which acknowledges and responds to failure in a constructive way**

Effective implementation requires an ongoing dialogue between national policymakers and those who are implementing it at regional and local levels, so that problems can be detected early on and policies can be adapted, or even abandoned, where they are not working. To enable this, there needs to be transparency and constructive accountability, which acknowledges and responds to failure in a constructive way. This involves avoiding blaming and buck-passing behaviour, and instead encourages and enables learning and improvement.

## Report authors

Professor Steve Martin is the Director of the Wales Centre for Public Policy

Dan Bristow is the Director of Policy and Practice at the Wales Centre for Public Policy

You can read all of our work on policy making and delivery [here](#).



## About us

The Wales Centre for Public Policy helps to improve policymaking and public services by supporting Welsh Government ministers and public service leaders to access and apply rigorous independent evidence about what works. The Centre works with leading researchers and policy experts to synthesise and mobilise existing evidence and identify gaps where there is a need to generate new knowledge.

The Centre is independent of government but works closely with policymakers and practitioners at national and local level to develop fresh thinking about how to address some of the key economic, social and environmental challenges facing Wales.

The Centre's work covers a wide range of policies but is currently focused in particular on:


- Promoting equality
- Tackling loneliness and social isolation
- Children looked after
- Economy and skills
- Health and adult social care
- Effective governance and implementation

For further information and to download our reports and policy briefings on these and other topics please visit [www.wcpp.org.uk](http://www.wcpp.org.uk)

 **Wales Centre for Public Policy**  
**Canolfan Polisi Cyhoeddus Cymru**

Cardiff University, 10/12 Museum Place,  
Cardiff CF10 3BG

 [www.wcpp.org.uk](http://www.wcpp.org.uk)

 029 2087 5345

 [info@wcpp.org.uk](mailto:info@wcpp.org.uk)

 @WCfPP

