

Intersectionality - Wales sets the agenda for the wellbeing of future generations

GGI caught up with Sophie Howe, Future Generations Commissioner for Wales, to discuss some of the lessons ICS leaders might learn from their counterparts in Wales, where public bodies have been required to collaborate closely since the Well-being of Future Generations Act was passed in 2015.

The Well-being of Future Generations Act is designed to improve the social, economic, environmental and cultural wellbeing of Wales. It sets out seven wellbeing goals:

1. prosperous
2. resilient
3. healthier
4. more equal
5. cohesive communities
6. vibrant culture and thriving Welsh language
7. globally responsible

Achieving these goals means thinking differently, developing an awareness of intersectionality, finding new ways to collaborate, focusing on the long term, prioritising prevention and maintaining a holistic view that concentrates on citizens – all principles that will resonate strongly with ICS leaders in England.

The role of Future Generations Commissioner is to advise the Welsh public sector on how to deliver social, economic, environmental and cultural wellbeing for current and future generations, and to assess and report on how they are delivering. The Guardian described Sophie as the 'world's first minister for the unborn'.



Tackling wicked issues

One of the requirements of the Future Generations Act was to establish Public Services Boards (PSBs) for each local authority area, comprising the local authority itself, the Local Health Board, the Welsh Fire & Rescue Authority and Natural Resources Wales (similar to the English Environment Agency). Each PSB was also required to invite the chief constable covering their area, as well as Welsh ministers, the police and crime commissioner and at least one charity.

The PSBs were established to address 'wicked issues', those intractable problems that no one had been able to solve before and which would require multi-agency collaboration to fix. But also to set and deliver collective objectives recognising the specific role they can all play if they think and act beyond their traditional organisational boundaries. So the Fire and Rescue Service, for example, may not see themselves as being on the front line of tackling environmental issues but they do have a role in terms of the food services and vehicles they procure, how they manage their estate and what they can do to prevent forest fires in the summer. It's about recognising that your reach expands beyond the obvious.

Sophie says the PSBs got off to a slow start – but they're now showing great promise. She said: "They began by getting together and saying 'We've all got a wellbeing plan which says we should give every child the best start in life. So we'll do that by arranging for health

visitors and vaccinations and so on'. It was quite traditional stuff, albeit with a purpose. But now they are really starting to make progress.

"I'll give you an example. One of the issues that Neath Port Talbot PSB was grappling with was around drug-related deaths, county lines trafficking and so on. The PSB came together to look at things like housing policy allocations, and looking for ways to work with the police and other partners, and with colleges to try and spot vulnerable people early on.

"What they've recognised is that those kids who they are now responding to, trying to draw them away from county lines, are the same kids who were on the social services books 10-to-15 years ago – or even less than that, sadly, in some cases. Instead of just coming together to respond to a problem, they're getting into the territory of thinking about how they can start shifting what they're doing to prevent that problem from happening in the first place."

She says there are plenty of examples across Wales of partners moving into new territory and getting far more involved in things that they wouldn't have traditionally seen as being their responsibility.

More evidence of the effectiveness of this approach is Wales' COVID response, Sophie says: "Look at the differences between Wales and England on test, trace and protect, as we called it. In Wales it's all been done by public service partners – there were no private companies involved. And it's been far more effective than it was in England. And that, I think, is largely because they were able to step up to the plate as a partnership entity because those relationships had already been formed

Health slow to adapt

This new collaborative approach required relationships built on trust and Sophie says these took some time to develop – with the health sector's slowness to adapt being a sticking point. She says: "For the first three years or so, in the conversations I was having with all the different public bodies, one thing that came up from every single one of them, apart from health bodies, was 'Health won't play ball – they're the people with the most money. They're coming to the table, but the answer is always no.'



“The perception was that they wanted everyone else to solve health challenges, but weren’t willing to contribute anything themselves. That was a real problem in terms of trust and relationships and there’s been a big issue, I think, in terms of shifting health into that mindset.

“I think health have been pretty good at talking the talk about health inequalities and the wider determinants, but they’ve been very poor, really, in walking the walk. I’ve got some sympathy for the sector but then again, when you’re taking 52% of the overall Welsh budget, it’s also reasonable that you’re expected to do more of the heavy lifting.”

Sophie sees signs of improvement – with the health sector now engaged in conversations about how to use its procurement power more effectively, and getting involved with community initiatives such as Project Skyline in the South Wales valleys, which is an attempt to reconnect the community to natural resources by empowering them to shape and manage their own environment. There are clear social prescribing benefits to this initiative – but there is also an economic aspect to it, as people in these deprived communities are upskilled for forestry-based jobs.

The leadership challenge

The sort of breakthroughs that have been giving Sophie hope require a genuinely collaborative mindset, but they also call for a different kind of leadership. She says: “I think it’s called helicopter leadership – where you’re sitting above a collection of problems or things that you need to do and trying to work out how everyone needs to be corralled together to solve those issues.

“Our Future Generations Act includes five principles by which leaders should operate, or how systems should operate, more to the point. They are: look to the long-term, aim to prevent problems from occurring or getting worse, integrate everything you do – so, understand the knock-on consequences, positive or negative, of anything that you might be thinking of – collaborate with other bodies, and involve citizens. If you apply those five principles to anything you do as a board or as a leader, then you’re probably not far off from a sensible position.

“In terms of personal leadership skills operating like this does require some risk-taking. And it requires you to have knowledge beyond your sector. It requires you to understand what wellbeing actually is – not in fluffy kitten terms, but in terms of the impact that not addressing wellbeing has on individuals and society, and the knock-on consequences of poor wellbeing on demand for public services later down the line. So it requires you to be an absolute artist in terms of relationship-building, cooperation, negotiation, and powers of persuasion. It also requires you to have the patience of a saint.”