

An IWA Report
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Progress, challenges and unleashing transformative potential

*10 years of the Well-being of
Future Generations Act*





About the author

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About the IWA

We are a think tank and charity, independent of government and political parties.

By bringing together experts from all backgrounds, we conceive ambitious and informed ideas which secure political commitments to improve our democracy and economy.

We provide platforms for debate, opportunities for people to make their voices heard and agenda-setting research. We are funded by our members, our events and training sessions, and supported by trusts, foundations and other funding bodies.

This paper follows an event held in January 2026, in partnership with Carnegie UK, the Centre for Welsh Politics and Society / WISERD and the Co-Production Network for Wales.

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In January 2026, the IWA hosted a discussion on **the Well-being of Future Generations Act: 10 years of progress, challenges and transformational potential**. As the title suggests, the event attempted to explore how we evaluate the performance of the Act to date, and what can be done to improve delivery against the Act by public bodies in the years ahead.

Importantly, the event was *involvement* and *collaboration* in action, providing participants with the ability to shape the discussion points and come up with ideas from their experience and point of view.

To bring this event together, we were pleased to work with Carnegie UK, the Centre for Welsh Politics and Society / WISERD and the Co-Production Network for Wales. We also heard insights from Gwendolyn Sterk (CEO of the Co-Production Network for Wales), Shaun Bendle (Policy and Insights Officer at WCVA), and Prof. Calvin Jones (consulting economist and Professor at Cork University). The event was facilitated by Dr Anwen Elias (Reader in Politics at Aberystwyth University) and Mike Corcoran (Consultant at the Co-Production Network for Wales).

The event was oversubscribed, which spoke to the timely topic and to the aspirations of people in Wales to contribute actively to a discussion about the implementation of the Act so far, and to shape what comes next.

This concise report provides some reflections from what was a challenging and fruitful event. The report is built upon participants' written materials and feedback collected throughout the event, focusing on their experiences of the Act, challenges, and next steps.

The opinions expressed here represent an analysis of the discussions on the day and the way forward from **the perspective of the IWA**, rather than those of event delegates.

Introduction

The Well-being of Future Generations Act, and the values and goals it represents, is something we should all be proud of. It is the best piece of legislation the Senedd has created and has influenced every other Bill that has followed it.

It has acted as the cornerstone for the long-term vision and purpose of government and public bodies in Wales - what we want Wales to look like. The goals provide a legally binding common purpose to devolved government, local government and public bodies across Wales, and an increasing number of bodies are falling under its remit, further enhancing its reach and impact.

All of this is an attempt to create what we all want to leave behind, so, critically, this is an Act that must **work** to improve the lives of people in Wales. It is in the delivery of the aspirations of the Act that this event and this report focuses on. For the Act to continue to be effective, it must demonstrate to policymakers, public body leaders, and, vitally, the public, that it is a tool to create a fairer, more sustainable and healthier Wales.

Measuring impact 10 years on

Attempting to analyse the outcomes and impact of such a cross-cutting and all-encompassing Act is understandably tricky. This is made even more complex by the expectation amongst some that the Act will change everything on its own. There is something to be said for being cognisant at the outset of the ambitions and goals, and the resources and powers available to achieve them.

With this in mind, perhaps the best measure of analysing the performance of the Act is considering the [Well-being of Wales report](#), which collates data on the 50 well-being indicators established in the Act.

The annual report sets out a fantastic set of data, which should form the basis of a national discussion on progress (which it too often fails to, a subject we have [discussed](#) previously).

The latest edition of the [report](#) suggests limited progress has been achieved over the past decade. Some progress has been made, particularly on some stabilising and improvement to environmental and place-based indicators. Other areas, however, paint a less pretty picture, with poverty, healthy life expectancy (and inequalities within this) and community cohesion showing stagnation and even regression. Our economy continues to lag towards the bottom of the UK national and regional league table, with tangible consequences for all too many, such as an acute and sustained cost of living crisis.

The report notes that change against the indicators ‘remains gradual,’ with ‘little change’ year on year. Yet a decade into enshrining these goals as the long-term focus of devolved government and public bodies, it is fair to expect some more promising signals of change. The Act, for its radical ambitions, hasn’t delivered radical results thus far.

Equally valid is the non-tangible impact of the Act, how we *feel* it is delivering against expectation. This is especially the case given the nature of the Act: a long-term behaviour change mechanism for public bodies. It is in this area that this event expands upon. People have now had over a decade of **living** and **working with** the Act, and these inform how well we feel it has delivered on its potential.

A Spirit of Productive Scrutiny

The intention of both the event and this concise paper is to provide productive scrutiny to the delivery of the Act thus far and to start a conversation around what's next.

As Wales' devolved democracy continues to mature, collectively, we need to have the confidence to question the Act and how it is delivered. Only through independent scrutiny can we fairly assess the Act a decade on, and few organisations are in a place to provide a platform for such discussion.

In a pre-election period, the approach taken to raising wellbeing whilst embedding long-term policy making is a much needed discussion. But, it is inherently political in the here and now. The general political consensus behind the aspirations of the Act may not continue. As such, we need to be transparent in discussing the challenges of implementing such an ambitious Act. Without this, we risk undermining its aspirations as a long-term policy objective. Independent scrutiny is a crucial part of the mix.

We also have an obligation to assess progress due to the globally pioneering nature of the Act. Indeed, the eyes of the world are on us. Many nations are learning from our implementation of this ambitious agenda and there are, of course, both benefits and risks of being a first mover. Being transparent about the challenges and opportunities of taking a legislative approach to entrenching the sustainable development goals¹ will be valuable to those nations.

IWA co-founder Geraint Talfan Davies once described Wales as the 'land of the pulled punch,' reflecting that we have a civil society which asks questions... gently. But scrutiny must surely be a sign of strength and the first place to start in ensuring the Act lives up to its lofty ambitions. Our event was undertaken in this spirit of purposeful scrutiny.

Discussion

Snap reflections

To begin the event, participants were asked to provide one word to encapsulate their reflections and experiences of 10 years of the Act. These included:

- Potential
- Inconsistent
- Ambition
- Hope
- Variable

¹ Notably, attempts in the Scottish Parliament to establish a [Wellbeing and Sustainable Development \(Scotland\) Bill](#) fell at stage 1 in January 2026, indicating an approach to prioritising long-term wellbeing in policy which does not require legislation

- Stagnant
- Toothless
- Where
- Experimental

These provide a summary of people's perspectives as they joined us: a mix between optimism and frustration.

What follows is a discussion of some of the key themes of the event, with some analysis and recommendations for both the next Welsh Government and the Office of the Future Generations Commissioner for Wales (henceforth, the Office) on where we go next. There is also learning for other nations or regions seeking to take forward a similar approach to long-term, wellbeing-centred governance.

Carrots and sticks

A perennial theme regarding the Act was once again brought up at this event: the question of *carrots and sticks*. By carrots and sticks, we mean what incentives and disincentives are in place to ensure that public bodies implement the Act in their strategies and delivery.

This question has become a recurrent theme regarding the Act, with remarks that it lacks the teeth necessary to ensure compliance.

The Act to date has been delivered through a focus on collaboration, culture change and shared values. Such an approach works for *some* public bodies, giving 'good people an excuse to do the right thing' as a group at the event reflected. But it doesn't work for all of them.

This is the case at an organisational level, but also arguably the case within organisations, as well. A panelist argued that people are not promoted for delivering the Act well in their roles, nor are they sacked for doing it badly. There is also a reluctance to name and shame public bodies for not delivering against the Act.

We heard a number of different opinions on this: many felt that the lack of usable enforcement mechanisms in the Act significantly undermined its delivery and impact.

A contrasting argument was that 'you can't strongarm people into compliance,' arguing that such an approach could encourage 'tick boxing' over 'transformation.' Indeed a panelist noted that the 'stick feels uncomfortable to me' for this reason.

Additionally, it is difficult to envisage what an effective stick would look like, especially given the budgetary pressures felt by most public bodies in Wales. One option could be to lean into the relationship with Audit Wales, whose reports on public bodies are well respected.

So, what's the answer?

Well, the answer *may* lie in the 'horses for courses' approach: encourage and enable those who want to deliver ambitiously against the Act, and closely monitor and publicly scrutinise those who aren't.

Conducting a Section 20 review remains *the* stick that the Commissioner has, albeit one which requires significant capacity and resources to implement.

Amendments to the legislation over the next Senedd term *could* also be part of the solution. But such an approach comes fraught with risk and needs to have a clear answer for what it is trying to achieve and how. It also arguably continues the trend in Welsh policymaking post-devolution; of expecting legislation to solve all of our challenges.

Better monitoring and transparency of public bodies' corporate plans could also contribute to some of this work. Cataloguing all public bodies' steps and wellbeing objectives will enable greater transparency.

This debate has consequences for the Commissioner's Office and the next Welsh Government over the course of the next Senedd, as we collectively consider where this agenda goes next and how we can accelerate delivery of the Act's aims.

Voluntary sector perspective

Shaun Bendle from WCVA, a panellist at the event, expressed a frustration at the way the voluntary sector is currently included as a partner in delivering the Act. He noted the widespread fatigue felt by voluntary organisations in Wales, who, in so many ways, are essential partners in delivering the Act in communities across Wales.

As our public services have faced budgetary pressures, it is often the charity and voluntary sectors which pick up the responsibility of delivering key services which uphold and improve wellbeing in our communities.

Yet these sectors are also facing unprecedented funding pressures, they are expected to deliver more with less and attempt to fix wider holes in the system. These practical difficulties around resourcing limit ambition and keep organisations working in *firefighting* mode, without the conditions to act with long-term certainty.

The voluntary sector is also naturally organised around delivering against the Act's goals. Whether it's prevention, community organising, sustainability or mobility schemes, the voluntary sector is, in many ways, designed around bringing communities together to meet local needs. Unlocking the potential of our voluntary and third sectors to support our collective wellbeing could prove fruitful in the years

ahead.

As such, the argument was made that the Act needs to support and enable the voluntary sector to deliver wellbeing. This was reflected in one of the comments at the event, which offered an idea for the next ten years:

‘Involve third sector - create a forum for the third sector to meet with the Commissioner and share community concerns’

To its credit, the Office already organise a forum where the third sector can meet with the commissioner, which is hosted by WCVA. This comment thus speaks to the need to more widely promote the forum as an avenue for change.

Involvement of the private sector

A number of participants spoke to the importance of engaging with the private sector in order to further extend the impact of the Act.

Although not a primary purpose of the Office, particularly given limited resources and capacity, this is an area where the Commissioner has sought to be more active in recent years, in recognition, primarily, of private sector interest in the Act. This involved publishing a [toolkit for businesses](#) on adopting the Act’s principles. Indeed, a number of private sector organisations have seen the benefit of aligning their strategies with the goals of the Act as an articulation of a set of values representing sustainable and ethical business. The [wellbeing economy](#) mission outlined in the Commissioner’s [Cymru Can strategy](#) also acknowledges businesses as key partners to make this happen.

One group at the event argued that procurement is the way to connect private sector and industry to the future generations agenda. The current and previous Commissioners both focussed time and resources on the vital lever for change that public procurement plays in incentivising sustainable business practices. This approach has indeed borne fruit, with increasing examples of procurement practices which prioritise community wealth building principles. [Transport for Wales](#) are a practical example, notably [procuring their uniforms](#) from a social enterprise in their locality.

That these shifts in procurement strategies of public bodies are taking place, albeit gradually, highlights the impact a [Section 20 review](#) from the Commissioner can have. This is particularly the case when such a review is properly targeted and falls within the public bodies’ existing toolkit. This approach aims to influence business practices through focussing on what the Commissioner can influence directly, i.e. our public bodies.

Resource and capacity

If we want to Act to fulfil its transformative potential, then the Office must be

properly resourced to do so.

Welsh Government's annual budget is over [£27.5b](#) at last count, whilst the Commissioner's Office requested an annual budget of [£1,910,600](#) (for 2024-25) and [received a total](#) of £1,677,902 (plus £30k capital spending, totalling £1,707,902).

This equates to a mere 0.0062% of Welsh Government's overall budget.²

For this, we are expecting the Office to oversee a radical transformation in how public services are delivered. This budget enables the employment of just [23 staff](#) to deliver its broad remit and responsibilities.

This differential between the expected role of the Office and the resources available to it is significant. The Commissioner simply can't do everything.

These systemic constraints in achieving the Act's ambitions have to be taken into account when attempting to analyse the effectiveness of the Act in the last decade, and directing how we turbocharge delivery in the next. If we place the Act as central to creating the Wales we want in the long term, then a budgetary uplift is essential.

Structural challenges to implementation

These structural constraints facing the Office are reflected in wider governance structures which negatively impact the Act's implementation by public bodies. Indeed, some event participants reflected on the wider structural challenges facing public bodies across Wales and how this acts to constrain delivery of the Act.

A particular constraining factor identified was the stringent annual budget cycles public bodies have to plan. This is a problem facing Welsh Government itself, which then trickles down into every public body (with considerable spillover impacts for the private and third sectors). A lack of long-term certainty over public bodies' budgets as well as wider budgetary inflexibility (e.g. to borrow or to carry funds across financial years, allocation of revenue and capital spending) leads to delivery which is in contrast to the long-term intentions of the Act. As one table at the event noted:

'How do annual budget cycles support long-term thinking?'

Equally, as in the discussion about carrots and sticks, there are no financial incentives or disincentives for public bodies to deliver strongly against the Act. Whilst there are good arguments for not withholding funds (however trivial the amount) from public bodies, there are no financial incentives, either.

Another constraining factor was noted by an event participant, who stated that the 'data infrastructure around the Act doesn't support good decision making.' We have the 50 [national indicators](#), which articulate the wellbeing goals in metrics. But translating them into priorities for public bodies is a challenge, especially when some

² This is an estimated figure based on the two sources mentioned in the preceding sentence. Regardless, it falls significantly below 1% of the Welsh Government budget.

of the wellbeing goals can practically be in conflict with one another.

Enabling innovation through the Act

A further theme brought forward at the event was a recognition that implementing the Act requires public bodies to act radically differently, in ways that are innovative. This, again, recognises that this is a transformative agenda, and one in which public bodies in Wales are at the forefront of delivering.

One table at the event suggested the creation of a:

‘Future Generations Prize... funding and support and publicity for new ways of working, build awareness and impact’

This was echoed by another idea:

‘Future gens prize. A big financial prize for a public body to reward work on future gens... the prize can be used to upscale its prize winning work’

A further table floated the idea of a ‘public risk fund’ to support innovative projects.

Each of these ideas recognises the lack of a financial carrot to incentivise ambitious, innovative, potentially more risky projects which would deliver against the goals of the Act.

The IWA have called for this in our [Cenhadaeth Cymru: Mission Wales](#) report: a future generations aligned innovation body to be established, building upon an idea first floated by [Prof. Calvin Jones](#) on the IWA’s *the welsh agenda*.

If we want the Act to have transformative potential, then an innovation or challenge fund approach could be valuable in incentivising new ideas with impact.

The ways of working and involvement

Event participants also touched upon the importance of the *ways of working*. In contrast to discussions on carrot and stick, such a focus attempts to get at the root of making culture change stick.

Our panelist Gwendolyn Sterk noted that there are ‘structural issues’ which institutionalise ways of working which run counter to the five ways of working of the Act. With the pertinent question going forward being: how can we unlock the structural barriers to embedding the five ways of working. If we focus on embedding the ways of working, getting people thinking in a different way, then they will influence the achievement of the goals as a by-product.

Gwendolyn also detailed some great examples of involvement and co-production. But good examples need to lead to better delivery across the board.

Building public understanding, resonance and agency

Further to involvement is the importance of ensuring the Future Generations agenda continually builds public salience. Some event delegates argued that there is a disconnect between the Act and what it means for everyday life in Wales - In their opinion, it doesn't necessarily translate well to the challenges many people in Wales face.

This was reflected by attendees who argued:

*'Need to bring public along - why will they participate if they see no change or feel done **to not with**'*

In his intervention in the panel session Prof. Jones noted that:

'...if you go out and talk to people about the Act, you lose them. The Act requires you to talk to people about what matters to them, not talk to them about the Act'

Both sentiments speak to the need for the Act to better connect to people's everyday lives. Doing so and highlighting the examples of how it tangibly leads to positive difference in their communities is vital.

Building on this was the importance of enabling individual's agency with the Act:

'How can communities understand the impact of the Act and can use it?'

Therefore, alongside increasing public salience of the Act is the need to enable people to use it to hold public bodies to account, but also to co-create solutions which work for their communities over the long term.

A potential way of changing how people understand the Act is by creating a searchable digital platform which logs all public bodies' wellbeing objectives and steps. These could be broken down into a wellbeing goal, a way of working and even be logged against the Commissioner's missions. Such a tool would provide greater resonance and transparency to how the Act is being implemented by public bodies and will enable more effective scrutiny as well as proliferation of best practice. Logging them against Cymru Can mission areas would also determine the degree to which the Commissioner's report impacts public bodies' priorities and strategies.

Political leadership

Ultimately, change comes from the top and Welsh Government's main power comes from providing direction and allocating resources to public bodies. Yes, legislation can achieve some of that, but we have to go further and address the 'delivery gap' challenge that exists between generally strong legislation and relatively poor outcomes.

Central to this is recognising that prioritising wellbeing and governing with **long-termism requires trade-offs today**. It means recognising that **some of the goals will occasionally be in conflict with one another**.

The most recent example of this is the [seeming conflict](#) between the building of housing (helping to achieve a *more prosperous* and a *more equal* Wales) and ensuring river health (a *resilient Wales*).

Another example was the decision by Welsh Government not to build an M4 relief road, and to subsequently create a higher bar for new road building. These placed well-being goals in conflict. In this instance, the Commissioner gave Welsh Government clear advice (in collaboration with a host of other actors in the sustainable transport and environment spaces) to prioritise the environment over the economic arguments for a new M4 relief road. The Commissioner [praised](#) the decision, arguing it ‘demonstrated significant leadership’ which recognised ‘the need for urgent action to curb transport-related emissions.’

It is in these instances that clarity from the top is so vital. Public bodies will take their lead from a Welsh Government which makes bold policy choices.

Leadership on long-termist policy specifically also requires trade-offs in the here and now. For example, trying to re-orientate our health and social care services towards prevention requires allocating resources away from the health budget, which continues to grow year on year. These are political choices which require compromises. A bold Welsh Government, acting with the long term in mind, making difficult decisions today for tomorrow, would provide guidance and set an example for all other public bodies in how they can and should implement the Act. |

These trade-offs can help transcend the accusation of ‘future generations washing’ or ‘tickboxing’ when it comes to the Act - rather than making everyday decisions fit the Act retrospectively, we can truly drive a change in how we make big decisions.

A couple of tables at the event also noted that Welsh Government should provide greater strategic direction and priorities:

‘When lots of things are a priority, nothing is, need one focus’

In other words, we need to focus resources and energy into tackling a few long-term systemic problems at a time. This was reinforced by another table which argued that we should:

‘Pick a flagship project like Marmot Nation commitment and show leadership, drive change and hold people to account’

That the Act is such an all-encompassing, system-wide agenda is both a weakness and a strength. It spreads resources thinly and can lead to a lack of clarity of purpose.

The IWA have argued [elsewhere](#) about the need for a mission-led approach to devolved governance. We think such an approach could prove fruitful for Welsh Government, learning from the mission-led approach the Commissioner has taken in his [Cymru Can](#) strategy.

Furthermore, a number of tables at the event argued that we should ‘celebrate the successes’ of practical delivery of the Act ‘and how this can be used as a model for other organisations,’ to ‘celebrate the bigger picture.’ This is an area which the Commissioner’s Office have been working on in recent years, especially in the lead up to the [2025 Future Generations Report](#).

Finally, a table argued that, ahead of a new Welsh Government incoming after the election later this year, the Commissioner should provide a realistic reflection on the Act which includes:

- A summary of the purpose of the Act
- Detailing the wins and challenges of the Act so far
- A list of 5 actions to ensure the next Welsh Government apply the Act in all of their work.

What next?

The purpose of this event was to seek proactive actions for individuals to coalesce around.

Over a decade after the Act passed, and with a new Senedd mere weeks away, it’s an **opportune moment to renew our commitment to the goals of the Act and the ways of working**. We have an opportunity to ensure that the aspirations of the Act remain priority agendas for Welsh Government and public bodies alike.

It’s also clear that, whilst everyone at the event was supportive of the aspirations of the Act, seeing it as a transformative, globally leading piece of legislation, this is not the case for many. Broad consensus behind these aspirations is not inherent. In an election year it’s important to reflect that the set of ideas underpinning the Act are *political*. Ultimately, however, it will either succeed or fail based on the impact it has on everyday life in Wales.

We have an election coming, but taking a long-term vision to improving our wellbeing should take us beyond the ballot box. Although inherently political in the **here and now**, we must continue to make the case for the Act’s key principles, not because they are worthy, but because they make a difference. At this moment, it’s

important we continue to make this case strongly to all parties hoping to take seats in the Senedd.

Recommendations:

The recommendations from this report have been separated between the Future Generations Commissioner for Wales and the next Welsh Government.

The Office of the Future Generations Commissioner for Wales should:

- Consider using the powers the Act has, namely conducting a Section 20 review:
 - When undertaking a review, be explicitly clear on: what questions it is trying to answer, what outcomes it wants to achieve and how it translates to the powers and responsibilities of the Act
- Consider steps to review the delivery of the five ways of working, identifying and disseminating strong examples of delivery and examining where delivery has been poor. A specific focus on *involvement* and *long-term thinking* as priorities
 - This should be coordinated with Audit Wales, where responsibilities are shared
- Consider publishing a summary of public bodies' responses to the Commissioner's reports, such as the [Future Generations Report 2025](#) to demonstrate impact, best practice and ongoing challenges
- Create a digital repository of public bodies' steps and wellbeing objectives set out as part of their corporate plans in order to:
 - Provide transparency on how public bodies are applying the Act
 - Enable public scrutiny of public bodies implementation
 - Highlight best practice in implementation and delivery
 - Provide a fully searchable database for how public bodies are delivering against each wellbeing goal and way of working
- The Commissioner should provide a long-form reflection on the Act to the next Welsh Government, including:
 - A summary of the purpose of the Act
 - Detailing the wins and challenges of the Act so far
 - A list of 5 tangible and realistic actions to ensure the next Welsh Government apply the Act in all of their work.

The next Welsh Government should:

- Recommit to the centrality of the Act and its goals as the long-term purpose of devolved government
- Ensure the Wellbeing of Wales report is a central document indicating our continued progress towards our shared long-term future

- Establish a Future Generations Innovation Fund - based on Welsh Government long-term challenges
- Increase funding to the Office to meet its ambitions, potentially to a fixed percentage of the overall budget to indicate long-term commitment
- Consider creating a preventative budget code for future Welsh Government budgets, with the expectation that the percentage of the budget allocated against it rises year on year
- Continue to call for reform to the Welsh Government's budget arrangements, with more flexibility of funding arrangements to enable long-term policy making
- Consider taking steps to provide long-term certainty of public bodies' budgets, where possible, to support them to make long-term policy decisions.

Ends.

