
Senedd Cymru | Welsh Parliament

Y Pwyllgor Cydraddoldeb a Chyfiawnder Cymdeithasol | Equality and Social Justice Committee

Ymateb gan: Prifysgol Cymru, Abertawe | Evidence from: University of Wales, Swansea

Post-legislative Review of the Well-being of Future Generations Act, 2015

Professor Luci Attala

Deputy Executive Director, UNESCO-MOST BRIDGES sustainability science programme at the University of Wales, Swansea

Overview:

The *Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015* is a pioneering piece of legislation that has embedded long-term, sustainable thinking into Welsh public policy. Internationally celebrated, it positions Wales as a leader in aligning governance and practice with intergenerational justice. The Act was not designed to deliver immediate economic returns, but its potential to reduce long-term costs through prevention and resilience-building is profound. Properly implemented, the Act is an investment and an opportunity to avoid future crises by addressing their root causes now. For it to represent enduring value for money, it must continue to be supported by adequate resources. The Act's significant achievements and notable successes are exemplary and groundbreaking in essence. However, as with all things, there is still room for improvement as its full potential has yet to be realised.

This document outlines key achievements, systemic challenges, and areas for strategic improvement, and offers concrete recommendations to enhance the Act's effectiveness and long-term impact.

Executive Summary

This paper proposes a strengthening of the Future Generations Commissioner's Office (FGCO), legislatively, financially and strategically in association with acknowledging the significant and considerable successes of the Act. It recommends a formal extension of the Office's remit to playing a proactive role in shaping the national and global discourse on sustainability and future-oriented governance. A broadening of remit would allow the FGCO to champion the visionary future thinking it embodies, both nationally and internationally, and catalyse the much-needed global action by its very real ability to lead through example.

The Act has laid a strong foundation for sustainable policy in Wales and should continue to do so. However, this proposal responds to criticisms that the Act has been initially overly reduced to a compliance exercise, centred on procurement policies, performance frameworks and meeting KPIs, rather than advancing the kind of imaginative, transformative thinking needed to shape the future that Wales aspires to. The current *Cymru Can* and the *Wales We Want*

initiatives, by instigating national conversations, are beginning to address this gap meaningfully, as are the futuring workshops the FGCO are running. In this context, it would be valuable to reposition the Commissioner's Office as a custodian of collective imagination, not merely a guardian of compliance.

The Act's success hinges on consistent application, adequate resourcing, international engagement and strengthened enforcement mechanisms. Reinforcing these areas will be crucial for continuing the achievements of the Act's timely and ambitious objectives.

Personal Experience and Evidence of the Act's Influence

My own experience engaging with the Act has shown first-hand its potential to inspire meaningful, international policy innovation. During a lecture I delivered to a delegation of Indian officials visiting Wales, I explained the principles and practical impact of the Act sparking in-depth discussion, ultimately catalysing interest in adapting a similar legislative framework for the state of Mumbai. This moment affirmed the Act's resonance beyond Wales, its values and structure offer a scalable, transferable and adaptable model for governance rooted in long-term thinking and intergenerational equity.

In parallel, I work closely with UNESCO's Management of Social Transformations section, who have expressed strong interest in understanding the Act's mechanisms in greater detail, particularly its potential to inform global policy on sustainability and futures thinking. These interactions demonstrate not only the conceptual power of the legislation but its ability to provoke dialogue and inspire concrete steps toward systemic change in diverse cultural and political contexts.

UNESCO-MOST BRIDGES is the only transdisciplinary, humanities-led sustainability science programme within the UN family of organisations. It has established its International Programme Office in Wales, partly in recognition of Wales's exemplary commitment to sustainability, as embodied in the Well-being of Future Generations Act.

The University of Wales Trinity Saint David, in collaboration with the UNESCO-MOST BRIDGES programme, is actively developing a 'Future Generations Quality Mark', a consumer-facing accreditation designed to identify and celebrate companies and organisations that are demonstrably working with the well-being of future generations in mind, across all scales of operation. The 'quality mark' will signal a commitment to the future. It will serve as a visible and credible symbol indicating that an organisation aligns its practices, values, and strategies with the principles of the Act. In addition, it will promote transparency and accountability, support ethical consumer choices, encourage business transformation, foster cultural and ecological regenerations and has the power to bridge global frameworks (the SDGs) with local action. Overall, the Future Generations Quality Mark will be a practical tool for systems change, helping to rebalance the relationship between economy, society and environment through values-led recognition and meaningful accountability in line with the aims of the Act, that others will be able to emulate.

Noteworthy Achievements of the Act and the Future Generations Office

- **Long Termism:** The Act has instilled a long-term perspective within Welsh public bodies, influencing policy areas such as education, health, infrastructure and planning.
- **Policy Impact:** The Act rightly influenced the Welsh Government's decision to cancel a £1.1bn road project, recognising its failure to meet the needs of future generations and a landmark moment reflecting commitment to long-term sustainability over short-term economic gain.
- **International Recognition:** The Act continues to garner global attention and inspire emulation, with the UN Secretary-General, endorsing the concept of a special envoy for future generations, citing Wales as a pioneer and an inspiration.

Key Challenges

- **Lack of Enforcement:** The Future Generations Commissioner has limited powers to enforce compliance, relying on advocacy rather than legal mandates.
- **Resource Constraints:** There is a clear irony in the fact that a body established to promote long-term thinking is working with public bodies constrained by short-term budget cycles, with limited ability to plan and implement effective long-term strategies.

Recommendations

As global issues concerning climate adaptation, mitigation and social justice deepen, and as societies everywhere struggle with inequality and poverty, it is time for bolder action that both leads by example and meaningfully moves the needle in establishing long-lasting, more than surface, system change.

The Act was intended to embed long-termism, sustainability and by association well-being for future generations into decision-making, and it is leading the world in this regard. However, to avoid the Act becoming experienced by public bodies as a procedural checklist, Wales has an opportunity to embrace a shift in focus towards a bold, co-creative framework of future visioning that reimagines Welsh society and what we are striving for, *rather than perpetuates what exists sustainably*. A shift from a focus on maintaining development within sustainable boundaries towards establishing models of regenerative futures that repair damage and adapt to changing conditions is required. This shift must earnestly champion post-growth and circular approaches, and should be locally relevant, co-designed and culturally rooted combining Welsh cultural heritage and multiculturalism.

To reach beyond sustainability to flourishing, resilient, regenerative futures and to continue leading in this regard, the FGCO should be supported to:

1. **Encourage the Nation's Imagination** by bringing art, fiction and speculative design into public policy spaces to imagine and implement radical alternatives.
2. **Support Futuring** by teaching people what designing futures means. This might include funding local projects that co-create place-based future visions rooted in local, cultural and ecological contexts.
3. **Reframe Policy Around the Notion of 'Preferred Futures'** by changing the focus from actions for the "well-being of future generations" to exploring what kind of world we need now to ensure the future, and how do we get there. This reframing requires a shift to policies that proactively shapes futures.
4. **Challenge Systemic Injustice** by understanding that simply guaranteeing a future is not sufficient; we need better futures. Achieving better futures requires dismantling

the systems that create inequality, rely on flagrant consumerism and extractivism and build environments that disconnect people from green spaces and nature.

To give the Future Generations Commissioner ‘teeth’, the role must evolve from primarily advisory and advocacy to normaliser of future thinking and long termism. This can be achieved by,

- Providing comprehensive training and resources to public bodies to enhance their understanding, meeting and bespoke application of the Act's principles.
- Moving beyond aspirational goals and towards the introduction of clearer, enforceable obligations for public bodies to adhere to the Act's principles. By
 - Providing incentives to comply with the Act (e.g.: quality mark)
 - Granting the Commissioner the power to issue directives where public bodies fail to comply with the Act.
 - Enabling the Commissioner to refer non-compliance to an independent ombudsman process.
 - Holding public bodies accountable for their contributions towards the well-being goals by introducing notice for repeated failures to act in line with future generations' interests.
- Ensuring stable, long-term funding is available to support the implementation of change-maker initiatives thereby preventing short-term financial pressures from undermining Wales's long-term goals.
- Increasing the Commissioner's capacities particularly with regard to:
 - Data analysis and systems foresight capabilities.
 - Outreach and education programmes.
 - Regional or local Future Generations officers embedded in public bodies across the nation.

In conclusion, the *Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015* is one of the most forward-thinking laws ever passed. To fulfil its promise, it must be enabled to evolve from its compliance-based beginnings into a dynamic, justice-driven, future-shaping framework. Wales has shown the world what is possible. Now it must strengthen its structures, empower its leadership, and reignite its imagination to lead even further.