

Senedd Cymru

Y Pwyllgor Cyfrifon Cyhoeddus a
Gweinyddiaeth Gyhoeddus

Craffu ar weinyddiaeth gyhoeddus

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Caerdydd

Welsh Parliament

Public Accounts and Public Administration
Committee

Scrutinising public administration

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1. Introduction

1.0 This note has been prepared in response to an invitation of the Chair of the Public Accounts and Public Administration Committee to suggest issues relating to the machinery of government which the committee might wish to consider.

2.0 It is informed by multiple research projects and involvement in a range of advisory roles over the last 20 years. I acknowledge with gratitude the contributions that colleagues have made to these endeavours and the support provided by funding bodies¹. However, the note offers a personal view and it should not be assumed that it is necessarily shared by funders or colleagues.

2. Context

3.0 The impact of the Coronavirus pandemic, and the public sector response to it, have demonstrated many of the strengths of the 'machinery of government' at both national and local level in Wales. But it has also highlighted some

¹ Funders include the Economic and Social Research Council, Welsh Government, Welsh Local Government Association, Welsh Council for Voluntary Action, Society of Local Authority Chief Executives, the Wales NHS Confederation, Joseph Rowntree Foundation, Big Lottery and Carnegie UK.

longstanding challenges in terms of policy making, governance and implementation.

4.0 In theory, a small country with a close knit policy community should be well placed to deliver effective public administration and good governance. In practice, tackling major challenges, such as increasing economic productivity, improving public services and reducing inequalities, has proved to be as difficult in Wales as in other parts of the UK.

5.0 There are a number of reasons for this, many of which have been examined by reviews commissioned by the Welsh Government over the last two decades. Previous analyses have highlighted in particular important questions about the culture and capacity of national and local government, and the complexity of governance arrangements in Wales (Welsh Government 2006).

6.0 The Committee might wish to focus its scrutiny of public administration on some of these longstanding, but as yet largely unresolved, challenges, in order to help identify the best ways of addressing them in a post-pandemic Wales.

3. Policy making

7.0 **Building policy capacity** – The Welsh Government and other institutions in Wales have strengthened their policy capacity as the devolution settlement has evolved. But the era of austerity took its toll, particularly in local government as councils understandably stood down policy teams and data analysts, in order to protect spending on ‘frontline’ services (Taylor-Collins et al. 2021). The committee may wish to examine the capacity and capabilities that the Welsh Government, local government and other public services in Wales currently possess and what they will need in the aftermath of the Coronavirus pandemic, and in light of other developments such as advances in digital technology and changing ways of working.

8.0 Effective use of powers and policy levers – The Welsh Government has a range of powers and policy levers at its disposal including legislation, taxation, finance, powers of persuasion, and inspection and regulation regimes. But it has a stronger record of creating new duties and guidance than of supporting public bodies to deliver on these and holding them to account for doing so (Connell 2019). The committee might wish to consider whether the Welsh Government’s powers and policy levers are currently being deployed to best effect and if there would be benefits to be had from adopting a more rounded approach to governing.

9.0 Joined up government – All governments find it challenging to ‘join up’ policy making. But the absence of a ‘strong centre’ in the Welsh Government, equivalent to the Treasury and Cabinet Office in Whitehall, arguably makes this particularly difficult. This is important because many of the ‘cross-cutting issues’ that matter most to the public (for example, good jobs, safe public transport, improving educational attainment, reducing obesity, providing decent homes)

require a joined-up, whole government approach. There is good practice that Wales could learn from (Connell et al. 2019), and the committee might wish to scrutinise how well Wales is currently achieving joining up policy making, and where it remains fragmented what might be done to address this.

10.0 Independent evidence and advice – Wales has very few independent, evidence-based sources of new policy ideas, and policy makers often struggle to find the time to engage with the evidence that is available. The committee might wish to consider whether there is a need for further investment in efforts to ensure that policy makers and those on the ‘frontline’ (including teachers, social workers and health professionals), can access reliable independent evidence about what works and are equipped to use it in ways which improves policy decisions and public services.

4. Collaboration

11.0 One Public Service – Collaboration has been at the heart of the public service reform agenda in Wales for the last 20 years. There have been efforts to embed partnership working at the local level through legislation and funding, and

collaboration is one of the ways of working endorsed by the Wellbeing of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015. Leadership development provided by Academi Wales has sought to nurture behaviours and cultures that facilitate partnership working (Price et al. 2020). However, these are often impeded by formidable practical obstacles. The difficulty of integrating health and social care is the most prominent example, but there are many others. The committee might want take a look at the barriers to collaboration and explore ways of tackling them.

12.0 Simplifying governance arrangements – Independent reviews conducted by Sir Jeremy Beecham in 2006 and Sir Paul Williams in 2013 both concluded that the system of local and regional governance in Wales was complex, confusing and bureaucratic. A more recent undertaken by the WLGA and Welsh Government (Welsh Government 2019), and an OECD report on multi-level governance reached the same conclusions (OECD 2020). All of these reports have pointed out that the co-existence of multiple public bodies, with overlapping objectives and priorities, covering different areas, and governed by differing funding streams and performance regimes, gets in the way of coordinated approaches to cross-cutting issues. The number and diversity of local and regional partnerships in Wales risks blurring accountability. The effort needed to service them consumes valuable staff time, and risks ‘co-ordination fatigue’. There is little appetite for the ‘significant rationalisation’ of partnerships which the OECD recommended. Nevertheless, the committee might wish to examine whether there are ways to simplify current governance arrangements without jeopardising effective collaborations.

13.0 Central steering - Across a range of policy areas, the Welsh Government has successfully established broad policies, and devolved to local or regional actors the responsibility for analysing needs and developing solutions. Where this has worked well, the Welsh Government has played an active role in supporting public bodies and their partners, providing constructive challenge and assistance, and ensuring that policy initiatives, accountability frameworks and funding streams are properly aligned. The committee might wish to scrutinise the ways in which the Welsh Government has supported and empowered local partners in this way, and how this approach might be adopted more widely.

5. Delivery

14.0 **The delivery gap** – Wales has an admirable record of consultation and consensus building, with a plethora of advisory and consultative bodies involved in policy formulation. But it has often performed less well when it comes to policy delivery. The Welsh Government has been praised for some ‘worldleading’ legislation, but the outcomes sometimes fall short of ambitious policy statements and ‘action plans’ ([Audit Wales 2020](#)). The Public Accounts Committee’s recent report on the implementation of the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 ([Welsh Parliament 2021](#)) bears this out. One of the problems is that policy makers focus on *what* to do and sometimes fail to give sufficient attention to *how* to do it. The committee might usefully consider the reasons for this, and seek to identify ways of building up delivery capacity at both national and local level.

15.0 **Performance and transparency** – Wales has a range of processes and mechanisms for assessing the performance of government and public bodies and supporting them to improve - including the work of the Auditor General, the inspectorates, and the new peer review framework in local government. However, we have continued to see examples where services have failed to meet expectations and/or operate within their allotted budgets. The committee may wish to consider what more the Welsh Government can do to hold public bodies and public services to account and ensure that they act on lessons highlighted by audit and inspection reports.

16.0 **Good practice** – Public services in Wales are often said to be ‘patchy’, and as a previous PAC committee report noted, good practice often seems to be a ‘poor traveller’ ([National Assembly for Wales 2016](#)). As a result, well run services still sit alongside sub-standard provision, sometimes within the same organisation. Although there have been numerous efforts to encourage sharing of ‘what works’, it seems that public bodies are still not sufficiently adept at learning from each other’s successes or from what has worked in other countries. The committee might wish to consider how the Welsh Government can facilitate a more effective approach to harvesting, disseminating and adopting good practice.

6. References

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