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Reducing Inequalities and Improving Wellbeing:

Options to help transform our public policymaking and service delivery

Discussion Paper - Summary

Introduction

We all want people living in Northern Ireland to have a decent life, now and in the future. Unfortunately, many people here do not have what they need. The Covid-19 pandemic and cost of living crisis have highlighted and exacerbated pre-existing inequalities in Northern Ireland. People already struggling to get by are being pushed further into poverty¹ and there remain considerable gaps in life outcomes between the best and worst off.

Our public services and policies should help us to improve wellbeing and tackle these inequalities, but years of targeted initiatives have struggled to realise sustained improvements in people's lives, for instance the educational attainment gap between pupils in receipt or not of Free School Meals has hardly changed in the last 15 years.² It seems that while we collectively understand the challenges faced, we need to find more effective ways of addressing them.

SCI's discussion paper explores how, in other places, legislation is being used to help 'hardwire' fairness, sustainability and accountability into public policy and service delivery;

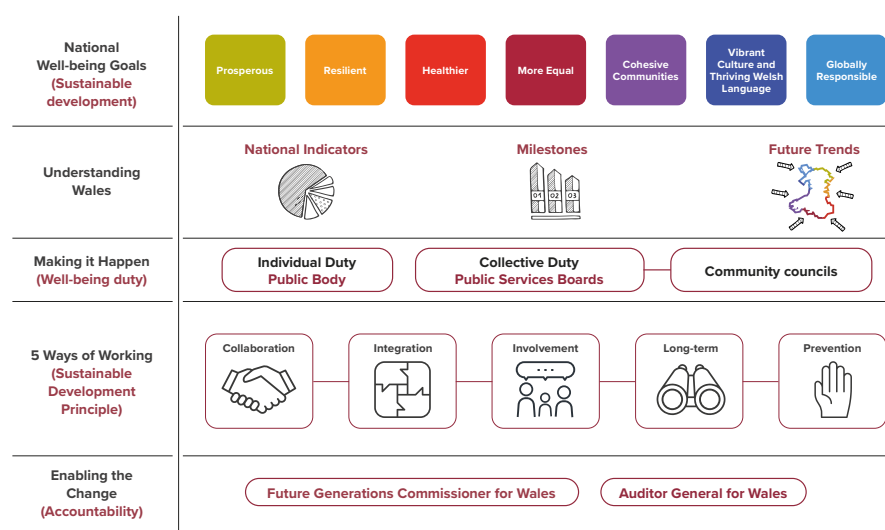
and to make a cultural shift towards more collaborative, sustainable and citizen-involved ways of working. Our analysis points to three important factors, needed in combination: (A) a commitment in legislation to improving wellbeing and reducing inequalities of outcome, (B) strong accountability arrangements, and (C) effective mechanisms for delivery.

A. Legislative Duties to Reduce Inequalities of Outcome and Improve Societal Wellbeing

Other governments seeking to reduce inequalities of outcome and improve societal wellbeing, have made a commitment to do so in legislation. This becomes the core, long-term purpose of public policy and services,

Example 1 – Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015

Well-being of Future Generations Act Architecture



¹JRF (2022) 'Going Without: deepening poverty in the UK', 'Not heating, eating or meeting bills - managing a cost of living crisis on a low income'

²NIAO (May 2021) 'Closing the Gap – Social Deprivation and links to Educational Attainment'. Note - an Expert Panel on Persistent Educational Underachievement also issued its report and action plan in May 2021

transcending the interests of the government of the day and providing direction throughout any political hiatus.

- It confers a duty to act, in support of improved wellbeing and reduced inequality, across all government departments, agencies, public bodies.
- It underpins the design and delivery of other outcome-based legislation, government plans, service provision and resource allocation.
- It provides a guiding light for current and future government administrations.

Example 2 – Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015

Put Scotland's outcomes approach on a statutory footing. Scottish ministers must 'consult on, develop and publish a new set of National Outcomes for Scotland and to regularly report on progress'. The National Outcomes must look to reduce inequalities of outcome resulting from socio-economic disadvantage, be developed with the public, and be reviewed every 5 years.

Example 3 – Finland Constitution

Reducing inequalities is an integral part of the Finnish constitution, legislation and programme for government. Central government and each municipality is required in legislation to reduce inequalities and promote social inclusion.

B. Public Accountability and Transparency

Another key factor to driving transformative change relates to strong and transparent accountability arrangements – ensuring appropriate scrutiny of progress made and clear sight of that progress by the public. Approaches include establishing statutory oversight roles (new commissioners and extended remits for existing, trusted bodies), using established public reports (like budgets) to report on wellbeing, and tying public reporting to electoral cycles.

Example 4 – Welsh Future Generations Commissioner

Established by the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act as the independent guardian of sustainable development and wellbeing outcomes. Gives advice to public bodies, assesses and reports on progress, and makes recommendations to Welsh Ministers for future priorities. Prepares a public progress report in the year preceding a Senedd election and a Future Trends report every 5 years.

Example 5 – New Zealand Joint Working Models

New models enabled by New Zealand Public Services Act 2020:

- Interdepartmental Ventures – new entities delivering consolidated services/functions of 2+ departments. Led by board of department heads, jointly responsible to a nominated minister. Can hold assets, employ staff and enter contracts.
- Joint Operational Agreements – formalises joint working to achieve stated goals.
- Interdepartmental Executive Boards – vehicle to align and coordinate strategic policy, planning and budgeting of 2+ departments. Delivery responsibility remains with individual departments. Jointly responsible to a nominated Minister. Can hold assets, employ staff and enter contracts.

C. New Ways of Working and Allocating Resources

Legislation is also used to address barriers to implementation and effect a change in culture in public services. It set out 'what' wellbeing goals public bodies should work towards, and addresses 'how' they should go about it.

- Introducing duties to collaborate across government and with other sectors; to involve the public in design, delivery and oversight of public policy and services; and to adopt a long-term, preventative and sustainable perspective.
- Legislating for new joint-working structures to tackle the practical barriers to planning, delivering and accounting for resources across public organisations.
- Adopting outcome budgeting for the most complex societal problems, so that resources are allocated and accounted for in a joined-up way.

Example 6 – New Zealand Wellbeing Budget

Introduced in 2019 to break down silos and ensure a clear focus on outcomes that meet the needs of present and future generations. As well as support for core public services, the Wellbeing Budget provides for cross-government initiatives within 5 priority wellbeing areas. The budget reports annually on national wellbeing using a living standards framework and additional measures specific to child poverty.

The full report can be downloaded from the SCI website:
<https://tinyurl.com/SCI-Embedding-Wellbeing>