

Sustainable development in Wales: understanding effective governance

A particular set of statutory, institutional and organisational arrangements has emerged in Wales to tackle sustainable development. The study examined how different organisations at different levels of governance have approached the agenda both individually and through collaborative forms of action. Evidence was collected from respondents at national and local levels and by examining relevant reports and documents. Research by Paul Williams and Alan Thomas from the University of Wales Swansea found that:

- f** The concept of sustainable development causes considerable confusion, both within and between organisations. This resulted in its lack of progress in many organisations, and influenced the way it was approached in others.
- f** Implementation of sustainable development tended to proceed along two main tracks. One was largely fragmented and incremental. The other, used in this study, was based around integrating and implementing sustainable development into mainstream policy and practice.
- f** The duty on the Welsh Assembly was an important factor in promoting an integrated approach, although the main problem was converting policy into practice. Policy integration strategies were less evident in local government but there was increasing evidence of attempts to use mechanisms such as community strategies, the Wales Programme for Improvement, procurement and spatial planning. However, concerns were voiced about the constraints on progress from a lack of political and executive leadership, organisational design issues, and problems of individual and organisational capacity.
- f** Evaluation and evidence-based policy-making were poorly represented in the policy process. The situation was confused by the existence of different performance management regimes, and an incompatibility between local and national indicator sets.
- f** Efforts to work collaboratively were hampered by complexity, lack of clarity of purpose, multiple accountabilities, insufficient leadership, and inadequate integration between policy formulation and implementation.
- f** Inter-organisational relationships were deficient in several areas, particularly between the Welsh Assembly and local government, and the Welsh Assembly and Assembly-sponsored public bodies.
- f** The researchers recommended that high-level political and executive commitment is needed to raise and maintain the profile of sustainable development, and that the Welsh Local Government Association and the Audit Commission in Wales could do much more to promote the agenda.

Setting the scene

Sustainable development is an example of a 'wicked issue'. It is:

- complex and cross-boundary in nature;
- the subject of different interpretations and understandings;
- difficult to manage; and
- demands an approach to its governance based on integration and forms of inter-organisational collaboration.

No individual agent has the necessary knowledge, influence or resource capability to govern sustainable development independently. But an institutional and governance framework has emerged in Wales to tackle it. In particular, it is characterised by a statutory duty on the devolved Assembly to promote sustainable development and to prepare:

- a scheme for implementation;
- a single, all-purpose model of unitary local government with boundaries coterminous with local health boards;
- a partnership council that mediates the interface between local and national government;
- a scale that is manageable in terms of the numbers of institutions and actors involved; and
- the existence of organisations specific to Wales with sustainable development interests, such as the Sustainable Development Forum for Wales, the Sustainable Development Co-ordinators Cymru, and the Welsh arms of relevant national and international non-government organisations (NGOs).

Several respondents considered that the situation in Wales is conducive to making an important impact on the management of sustainable development. The study therefore set out to assess the extent to which this is being, or might be, realised. The central research question focused on what makes the system most effective – people, structures, duties or mechanisms – and what problems, barriers and issues inhibit the pursuit of successful outcomes.

A framework for analysing the effectiveness of the governance arrangements consisted of four inter-related policy components: policy-framing, implementation, evaluation and co-ordination.

Understanding sustainable development

The concept of sustainable development causes considerable confusion. This is apparent both within and between organisations. The research identified a range of interpretations including sustainable development as a policy area or as a set of principles or overarching framework. Although it is inappropriate to impose a single definition, the researchers believe that clarity of understanding is important in order to make the concept usable. A clear definition would help to secure sufficient consensus so as to promote collective action between individuals and agencies operating within a range of policy areas and at different levels of governance.

Implementation strategies

Sustainable development interventions tended to follow one of two tracks. The first related to making an impact within individual policy areas. This generally resulted in a proliferation of initiatives and projects, invariably influenced by the availability of financial resources and statutory regulation. Such an approach was often limited, opportunistic and fragmented, but could be justified as exemplars of good practice.

This study focused on the second track. This involved strategies designed to integrate or bring sustainable development into the mainstream of an organisation and its activities. It meant 'building-in' rather than 'bolting-on' principles of sustainable development in all stages of policy and practice.

The Welsh Assembly led the way in this second approach, undoubtedly driven by the statutory duty. Although a coherent framework had been assembled, including positioning the sustainable development capability within the Strategic Policy Unit, devising specific political arrangements, and promoting the use of a policy integration tool, the main problem was converting policy intent into practice and service delivery on the ground. The verdict of many respondents both within and outside the Assembly was that significant progress had been made, but the researchers considered that little appears to have been implemented.

Elsewhere, particularly in local government, attempts at integration are embryonic and fragmented. There was some recognition that mechanisms such as community strategies, Wales

Programme for Improvement, procurement and spatial planning offer potentially fertile avenues for integrating sustainable development principles, but current practice leaves much to be desired. Progress is hampered by:

- a lack of political and executive leadership;
- problems associated with communication, awareness and training; and
- the difficulty of making sustainable development operational.

Tensions also exist between the roles and competencies of dedicated sustainable development practitioners and service managers/professionals. The influence that sustainable development officers wield within corporate frameworks is generally low; this is often a reflection of their status and position within the organisation and of an 'environmental' perception of their roles.

Measuring progress

Evaluation and evidence-based policy-making are under-represented in the sustainable development policy process, reflecting in part the considerable conceptual, methodological and practical difficulties.

A confusion and duplication of performance management regimes, together with a lack of compatibility between local and national indicators, complicate the situation in Wales. Overall, there is a preoccupation with performance indicators at the expense of alternative means of evaluation.

Working between organisations

Collaboration between individuals and agencies at all levels of governance on sustainable development is problematic for several reasons. These include intensified levels of complexity, problems associated with establishing clarity of purpose and understanding, the existence of multiple and diverse accountability frameworks, insufficient collaborative culture and capacity, lack of network leadership, and an absence of integrated frameworks which link policy formulation with effective delivery.

These factors contributed to problems with particular inter-organisational relationships and the roles of certain umbrella organisations.

Conclusions

There was broad consensus that the necessary instruments, mechanisms, duties and other arrangements are available in Wales to manage the governance of sustainable development. The challenge is to use these to best effect, and of building personal, organisational and inter-organisational capacities to deliver sustainable development solutions over a sustained period of time.

The researchers concluded that the interfaces and pathways between the Welsh Assembly and local government are confusing and multiple, but that local authorities already have enough powers and duties to engage effectively in sustainable development matters and that no additional duty is necessary.

However, the researchers recommended that:

- High-level political and executive commitment is needed to raise and maintain the profile of sustainable development through the turbulence of ephemeral public policy imperatives and political fashions.
- Sustainable development is best practised through a combination of both vertical and horizontal integration – a twin-track approach.
- Better integration between policy divisions of the Welsh Assembly would help to make the relationship work more effectively on sustainable development matters.
- More support, guidance and advice would help local authorities to integrate sustainable development principles within mainstream frameworks.
- The interfaces between the Welsh Assembly and the Assembly-sponsored public bodies (ASPBs) could be improved through a tightening of the remit letter mechanism and better integration between ASPBs.
- The Welsh Local Government Association and Audit Commission in Wales could be more proactive on sustainable development matters with advice, guidance, support and resources.
- The potential of the Sustainable Development Co-ordinators Cymru to influence mainstream policy arenas and actors is limited by misconceptions of the agenda and the ability of its members to secure access to key powerbrokers, and could be improved.

- The role of NGO engagement in sustainable development policy could move towards more independent challenge and experimentation with new methods.

Although the research was based in Wales, there is much learning that is transferable to other areas concerned with the management of sustainable development such as regional government in England, but also to those concerned with the management of other cross-cutting themes.

About the project

The study was led by Paul Williams and Professor Alan Thomas. The research was based on a case study approach that focused on local and national governance. Documentary evidence, coupled with a series of interviews with a wide variety of individual stakeholders, was used as the basis of evidential enquiry at the Welsh Assembly and with three selected local authorities. The aim was to capture the views and perspectives of a cross-section of interests including politicians, managers in different policy areas, dedicated sustainable development practitioners and representatives of NGOs.

In addition, a number of sustainable development practitioners were engaged on a six-month basis, and the management of sustainable development was examined in the context of the 'Education for Sustainable Development' policy area. A discussion group at the start and end of the project generated additional insights.

A project advisory panel consisting of eight members – two academics, an advisor from the Welsh Local Government Association, a representative of an NGO, the head of policy at Welsh Assembly Government, a director of a 'think tank', a sustainable development co-ordinator, and a JRF staff member – played a helpful role in advising the research team.

A parallel study by researchers at the University of Northumbria has examined sustainable development in England and Scotland. Their report was published in May 2004.

How to get further information

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The full report (in English and Welsh), **Sustainable development in Wales: Understanding effective governance** by Paul Williams and Alan Thomas, is published by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (ISBN 1 85935 215 4, price £13.95).