

Episode 1: A Unique Perspective: in conversation with the Auditor General

Betsan Powys

Hello and welcome to The Exchange. And thank you very much for finding us. So the us in this instance is as you can see, two of us. And the important one, is the man who's been in charge of keeping an eye on Wales's public spending for nearly the past eight years, trying to make sure, as Auditor General, that your taxes and mine, and so much more, is spent well in Wales and that if it isn't, and I'm afraid to say that sometimes it isn't, that he does something about it. He is Adrian Crompton.

Welcome, Adrian.

And I'm Betsan Powys, a political commentator who's relied on Adrian's knowledge of how things are done in Wales very many times over the past few years. So it's very good to be here and after, well it'll be a good eight years next summer Adrian, you're off.

Adrian Crompton

That's right. I hope it's been a good eight years, but, yes, I finish next July. It's an eight-year appointment. And so, yeah, just welcoming the chance really to reflect on all that I've seen and learned over the last seven and a half years. And are you already thinking ahead to your plans for post eight years? Well, at the moment, yeah, very much in the thinking stage. My priority at the moment seems to be learning the banjo, which was a present for my birthday, a couple of months ago.

And that's eating up quite a lot of my spare time. But, I'm sure I'll, well I hope, I'll be able to move on to do something else more serious as well.

Betsan

But that means for the next podcast, you can play us out.

Well I hope, so you need to practice. That really is a niche audience. But the plan now just for you to know what our plans are, for four fairly short and sharp episodes of this podcast and is to give you, Adrian, a chance to say some things that you feel need saying, before you go.

So this is a one off series, a treat for the listeners.

We hope, so if you've ever wondered where your money is spent, how your money is spent, if you have a view on that. If you've wondered why Wales' public services aren't always doing brilliantly, if they're not doing better, if you're hoping to get your hands on power next May and want ideas on how to tackle Wales' public spending challenges, public spending challenges, get that out.

You're going to hear that a few times, then this podcast is for you. We hope. So we're going to start with an idea of just how much money we're talking about in Wales. Who gets what, how it's spent. Second episode will spell out the challenges. In the third, I'm warning you now, we're going to have a stab at the solutions.

And then if all goes well, we'll record a short fourth episode with a look to the future. So hope that sounds like a plan. Sounds like a plan. Good. So, let's start at our feet then, and start making you work. And say when we say public services in Wales, when you hear that on the news, what are we talking about?

Adrian

Who are we talking about? Okay, so as Auditor General, I oversee the expenditure and the performance and governance of pretty much the entirety of the devolved Welsh public sector, plus a few other bits. So, what that means in practice is organisations that spend about £28 billion of

taxpayers' money, that's almost a third of Welsh GDP, a very, very significant sum. That's got to be spelled out, hasn't it?

Betsan

Because these days, a million, a billion. I'm not sure it means much to us anymore. A billion is a lot of money. 28 billion is a lot more.

Adrian

Exactly. So, within my remit is, oversight of all of the organisations that make up the devolved Welsh public sector. So that's the Welsh Government and the Senedd themselves, through all parts of the NHS, all of the local government sphere, an array of arm's length bodies that are sponsored by the Welsh Government, fire, police authorities, the national parks, you name it, right down to the 730 or so town and community councils in Wales.

So it's an amazing role with a kind of unique, privileged overview of the entirety from the very largest to the very smallest public organisation in Wales.

Betsan

And as a headline, if I were to ask you. Okay, as you prepare to leave, how are you leaving things, you know, how are our public services these days? Because people who will be listening, I'm sure, will hear about them every day and the problems they face. So how are they doing?

Adrian

I think quite a lot of what we will talk about over the course of these episodes will be focusing on the things that aren't right or need improvements. I wouldn't want to lose sight of the bigger picture. I think our public services are remarkable, and we rely on them in every way.

All day, every day. In hospitals, schools, the roads, the environment, our communities, everywhere. And they face enormous challenges. Over the last couple of decades, there's been a huge squeeze on public finances, as we all know, but huge, external challenges as well. Climate change, Brexit, geopolitical events that come home to roost here in Wales, and despite all of that, our services still continue to function to a really high standard in most cases.

The most extreme shock, I guess, to the system came a few years ago with the Covid pandemic. And though that was a dreadful time, you know, I look back on it now and reflect that I think we saw some of the very best in terms of public service, during that time. You know, frontline staff adjusting to maintain services to people in extraordinary conditions.

And at a more strategic level, we saw the government, local government, the NHS, all parts of the public service really collaborating effectively together to deliver some phenomenal, literally lifesaving programs, like the vaccination program, the testing, trace and protect program. So, I point to that time I guess, whilst dreadful for so many people, like I say, is reflecting really positively on what the public sector can achieve when it's genuinely united around a shared common purpose, and everyone is pulling in the same direction.

Betsan

So do you have to have that sort of emergency to achieve that I suppose is the question?

Adrian

Exactly. We can't live in that sort of emergency time all the time. And when we're spending as much money as we are, the public have a right to expect that level of collaboration, at that pace of delivery, all the time, not just in emergency.

Betsan

Another interesting point I've heard you make is that Covid changed the way we as service users behave and some of our expectations, perhaps, of our hospitals, of our schools and so on. Is that right? Can you quantify that something changed in the way we expected our services to behave at that time, and are behaviours changed since?

Adrian

Yeah. Undoubtedly and I think Covid definitely drove some of that behavioural change for us, as clients of the public service, but other factors are affecting that as well. You know, the media landscape, you know, the information landscape, general views of politics and public service delivery, all these things are affecting in some way, the way that we as a citizens look to engage and what we expect from our public service.

One impact of the pandemic, undoubtedly, that we're still feeling the effects of now, was the huge scale of pent-up demand that couldn't be dealt with during that time, for obvious reasons. But we're now needing to deal with the effects, several years later. And of course, it also left us with a public sector workforce that bluntly, was pretty, pretty tired and worn out, as we all were by that period. So bring those two things together, and that's part of the reason why we have such a squeeze on our public services at the moment.

Betsan

Okay, so before we drill down into the detail here, let me ask you one question. Which is why are we doing this?

We all know that you're off next summer, but is this a case of getting something off your chest, or do you want to prepare your successor, whoever they might be? Why did you want to do this? Assuming that you did and weren't forced to, of course.

Adrian

No, I genuinely wanted to do it. I think it's really important, you know, I described earlier how privileged and unique this role that I hold feels, to me, to be completely independent of government. To have that breadth and depth of perspective, is something that is unique to this role, and this organisation. And I think, although a lot of our work surfaces through the media, and politicians in the Senedd and so forth, not all of it does.

And so I feel like it's really important for me to try to put some of that on record. To do it at a time when I hope it will, provide a sort of starting point for my successor when they come in. But really importantly, at this time, you know, next year we're going to see a huge fundamental change in the Senedd.

And I would hope that some of what I can offer today might be picked up by some of the political parties. I certainly feel as though there is a need for them to do that, if we're going to deliver the kind of sustainable public services I'm sure we all want.

Betsan

Okay, well, fair warning there, I think. Okay, so let's stop there. We'll have a breather. Then we're going to lay out the challenges facing public services in Wales. So that's quite a biggie in the next episode. So join us for episode two.