

Setting of well-being objectives – South Wales Fire and Rescue Authority

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Background: Our examinations of the setting of well-being objectives

- 1 The Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 (the Act) places a 'well-being duty' on 56 public bodies. The duty requires those bodies to set and publish 'well-being objectives' that are designed to maximise their contribution to achieving each of the Act's seven national well-being goals.¹ They must also take all reasonable steps, in exercising their functions, to meet those objectives.
- 2 The Auditor General must carry out examinations to assess the extent to which public bodies have acted in accordance with the sustainable development principle when setting their well-being objectives.² We are carrying out a rolling programme of these examinations, up to early 2025.³
- 3 To do something in accordance with the sustainable development principle means acting 'in a manner which seeks to ensure that the needs of the present are met without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs'. To achieve this, a public body must take account of the five ways of working: long term, integration, involvement, collaboration, and prevention.⁴
- 4 We designed an assessment framework to enable us to assess the extent to which public bodies have applied the sustainable development principle when setting their well-being objectives. **Appendix 1** sets out further information on our approach, including a set of 'positive indicators' that illustrate what good could look like.
- 5 In designing our approach, we considered what we could reasonably expect from public bodies at this point in time. Public bodies should now be familiar with the sustainable development principle and ways of working and be seeking to apply them in a meaningful way. At the same time, we appreciate that public bodies are still developing their experience in applying the sustainable development principle when setting well-being objectives. Therefore, the examinations include consideration of how public bodies are applying their learning and how they can improve in future.

¹ The seven national well-being goals are; a prosperous Wales, a resilient Wales, a healthier Wales, a more equal Wales, a Wales of cohesive communities, a Wales of vibrant culture and thriving Welsh language, and a globally responsible Wales.

² Section 15 (1) (a) Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015

³ The Auditor General must carry out examinations over the period set out in the Act, which begins one year before a Senedd election and ends one year and one day before the following Senedd election.

⁴ Section 5 Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015

Carrying out our examination at South Wales Fire and Rescue Authority

- 6 The aim of this examination was to:
 - explain how South Wales Fire and Rescue Authority (the Authority) applied the sustainable development principle throughout in the process of reviewing its well-being objectives;
 - provide assurance on the extent that the Authority applied the sustainable development principle when reviewing its well-being objectives; and
 - identify opportunities for the Authority to further embed the sustainable development principle when setting or reviewing well-being objectives in future.
- 7 We set out to answer the overall question ‘to what extent has the Authority acted in accordance with the sustainable development principle when reviewing its well-being objectives?’. We did this by exploring the following questions:
 - Has the Authority put appropriate annual review and reporting arrangements in place, as required by the Act and advised in statutory guidance?
 - Has the Authority considered appropriate information that would enable it to determine the extent to which the objectives remain consistent with the sustainable development principle?
- 8 We discussed the timing of the examination with the Authority and we tailored the delivery to reflect its specific circumstances. We completed our fieldwork in November and December 2024.
- 9 We gathered our evidence in the following ways:
 - reviewing key documents; and
 - conducting an interview with an officer involved in reviewing the Authority’s well-being objectives.
- 10 Our approach differed from that used with other bodies due to the circumstances the Authority has experienced. In February 2024, the Welsh Ministers intervened to nominate four Commissioners to exercise the functions of the Authority following the outcome of the Authority’s Culture Review. This removed council-appointed members who had previously been responsible for approving the Authority’s objectives. The Authority has also experienced a significant turnover in key officer roles since the publication of the Review. This has meant that we have conducted fewer interviews than our standard approach. Where the circumstances may have impacted our evidence base, we have noted that in context below.

How and when the Authority set its well-being objectives

- 11 The Authority set its well-being objectives in its Strategic Plan, which covers the period 2020 to 2030. The Commissioners approved a Year Five Update Report in March 2024. **Exhibit 1** sets out the Authority's strategic themes, which it regards as being its well-being objectives. The Plan is available on the Authority's website.
- 12 The Authority also publishes its well-being objectives within its Annual Improvement Plan (AIP). The AIP discharges the Authority's duties within the Local Government (Wales) Measure 2009 (the Measure) to make arrangements to secure continuous improvement. The Auditor General is required to certify the Authority's compliance with the Measure, which he did most recently in November 2024.

Exhibit 1: South Wales Fire and Rescue Authority strategic themes 2020-30

Keeping you safe

Focussing on prevention work to help reduce the need for you to call us

Responding to your emergency

Ensuring we respond quickly and effectively when you need us

Working with partners

Working with the South Wales PSBs and other partners to deliver a Fire and Rescue Service that meets your needs

Involving and communicating

Ensuring all our communities and staff are involved in helping us provide an excellent service

Protecting and enhancing our environment

Carrying out our activities in a way that helps sustain the planet for our future generations

Using technology well

Continually look to use the latest technology where it can improve our service to you

Valuing our people

Supporting a diverse workforce that represents your community, is well trained and motivated to deliver our service

Continuing to work effectively

Ensuring our service provides value for money and is clearly accountable

What we found

The Authority lacks sufficient focus on the sustainable development principle when reviewing its corporate planning

The process for reviewing the well-being objectives

- 13 The Authority's annual planning cycle reviews and adds new improvement objectives to the Strategic Plan. The Authority has set out its approach within a Strategic Planning Framework. This is sufficiently clear to communicate the review stages.
- 14 The Authority's process focuses on compliance with the Measure and not the sustainable development principle. The Authority must set and publish well-being objectives designed to maximise its contribution to achieving national well-being goals. This makes clear the principle should drive the design of the objectives and be at the heart of the planning process. The Authority's process and timing aim to produce annual improvement objectives and the performance report. Improvement objectives are mapped to the well-being objectives only after being developed. As a result, there is insufficient focus on the well-being objectives of the Authority during development. This means the process does not assess whether well-being objectives remain appropriate.
- 15 Whilst well-being objectives are included in the review, it is unclear whether this is meaningful. Since the Authority approved its Strategic Plan in 2020 there have been no significant changes to the strategic themes. Whilst this may be as a result of the Authority's review process, the Authority has not demonstrated this in its evidence. This may be due to the changes within the Authority recently. This increases the uncertainty that the Authority knows whether its objectives remain consistent with the principle.

The use of internal sources of information to review the well-being objectives

- 16 The resources and the Authority's financial position are not clearly considered by the Authority within its review. Whilst officers identified high-level economic risks in their strategic analysis, this was not detailed or linked to the Authority's actual financial performance or context. Reviews are a critical opportunity for the Authority to ensure that sufficient resources are provided to deliver objectives. It is also the opportunity for the Authority to consider how realistic objectives are. At present, the Authority cannot assure itself of the sufficiency of resources to achieve its objectives. This may be due to the lack of evidence from officers previously involved.
- 17 Whilst officers report activity to the Authority regularly, it is unclear how this links to its review of its objectives. The Authority reports the statutory indicators set by the Welsh Government in its performance reporting. This focuses on activity measures only and does not report on the outcomes towards the Authority's objectives. This means that there is not clear evidence to assess progress or review objectives. Through evidence gathered, it is unclear how any performance data is linked to objectives as part of the review.
- 18 The Authority provides opportunities to collect internal views on its improvement objectives annually. The senior and middle management have opportunities to provide their views on proposed improvement objectives and the Strategic Plan. This helps the Authority to gain a range of perspectives to broaden its evidence base. It is not clear how impactful these discussions are in reviewing the Authority's well-being objectives, however.

The use of external sources of information to review the well-being objectives

- 19 It is unclear how the Authority's uses its understanding of its strategic operating environment to review its objectives. To inform its strategic models, the Authority drew on a range of appropriate evidence sources. This included the Independent Culture Review, Chief Fire Advisor Thematic Reports, and the Future Trends report. This shows that the Authority had a wide basis to assess its operating context. However, it is not evident how this understanding impacted its review of its well-being objectives.
- 20 The Authority is not clear how collaboration relates to its delivery to meet its objectives. However, the Authority has not considered or set out how collaborative arrangements will help to deliver its well-being objectives. Consequently, it is not clear how the Authority assures itself about the contribution and accountability of partners. Having a planned approach to collaboration helps partners understand their responsibilities, their commitment, and then to be accountable for outcomes.
- 21 The Authority lacked effective involvement of the communities served to inform its review. It consulted the public online as its primary approach to involvement. The

Authority received 212 responses, of which only 51% responded to whether they agreed with the strategic themes. Only four responses were in Welsh and 135 (64%) were either employees or members of the Authority. This raises questions about how representative the consultation was. This could mean that the impact of the Authority's objectives on some communities may not be fully understood, potentially limiting its success.

- 22 The Authority has considered the impact of some legislative changes to inform its review. Recent law changes now require the Authority to seek consensus or compromise with recognised trade unions.⁵ The Authority responded by seeking external guidance and including this within its planning review process. This led to the Authority adding actions to its revised plan. This demonstrates the Authority consciously responding to external changes.

Recommendations

Application of the sustainable development principle

- R1 When reviewing or setting future well-being objectives, the Authority should strengthen its application of the sustainable development principle. It should more clearly consider and integrate the principle into corporate planning processes to ensure it receives clear focus. To do this the Authority should:
- 1.1 - Ensure it has a process that clearly demonstrates how well-being objectives are designed to maximise their contribution to national well-being goals rather than being driven by the improvement objective process.
 - 1.2 - Take a longer-term view to the setting and review of its well-being objectives.
 - 1.3 - Review the effectiveness of its involvement activity. To help this it should identify and consider new approaches to ensure it is inclusive of the full diversity of the communities served.
 - 1.4 - Ensure that there is appropriate challenge and scrutiny of its review to provide oversight to the process.
 - 1.5 - Consider how best to collaborate with partners in its review, evidence base, and delivery of its well-being objectives.

Resources

- R2 When reviewing or setting future well-being objectives, the Authority should more clearly consider the sufficiency of resources available. This will help to ensure the Authority's objectives are deliverable and realistic.

⁵ The Social Partnership and Public Procurement (Wales) Act requires this of all bodies covered by the sustainable development principle.

Performance

- R3 The Authority should strengthen its arrangements to understand the impact and outcomes of its actions. This should help to demonstrate how actions contribute to the delivery its well-being objectives. This should be regularly reported to senior leaders and Commissioners to enable effective oversight.

Appendix 1

Key questions and what we looked for

The table below sets out the question we sought to answer in carrying out this examination, along with some sub-questions to guide our evidence gathering. They are based on the positive indicators we have previously used in our sustainable development principle examinations, which were developed through engagement with public bodies and informed by advice and guidance from the Future Generations Commissioner for Wales. This list is not a checklist, but rather an illustrative set of characteristics that describe what good could look like.

To what extent has the body acted in accordance with the sustainable development principle when reviewing its well-being objectives?
Has the Authority put appropriate annual review and reporting arrangements in place, as required by the Act and advised in statutory guidance?

<p>Has the Authority put appropriate annual review and reporting arrangements in place, as required by the Act and advised in statutory guidance?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Authority reports on its well-being objectives annually, setting out a clear and balanced assessment of progress against previous well-being objectives. • The Authority has planned appropriate and proportionate review arrangements that reflect its planning cycle. This may include reviewing the objectives to varying degrees across annual cycles. • Where necessary, the Authority publishes changes to its well-being objectives.
<p>Has the Authority considered appropriate information that would enable it to determine the extent to which the objectives remain consistent with the sustainable development principle?</p>	
<p>Has the Authority considered internal sources of information to determine the extent to which the objectives remain consistent with the sustainable development principle?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Authority considers how changes to its resources might impact on its well-being objectives and any changes that may be needed as a result. • The Authority draws on its performance information, including its performance against its well-being objectives but also wider information such as service monitoring. • The Authority uses the results of involvement activity that it has undertaken or may be available from its partners. – whether primary, secondary or a combination – reflecting the full diversity of the population. • The Authority involves key people from across the organisation in the process. • There is appropriate challenge and scrutiny of performance information and any changes to the well-being objectives, and that is taken into account in any revisions.

Has the Authority considered external sources of information determine the extent to which the objectives remain consistent with the sustainable development principle?

- The Authority considers relevant external information on changes in the external environment to help it understand new and potential need, risk and opportunities that may impact its well-being objectives. This is likely to be drawn from a range of local and national sources, such as:
 - Trend information, including the Future Trends report
 - The Future Generations Report
 - The Well-being of Wales Report(s)
 - State of Natural Resources Report (SoNaRR) for Wales – Natural Resources Wales' Area Based Assessments
 - Public Services Board well-being assessments – Regional Partnership Board population assessments – The results of local involvement/ consultation exercises
- The body is drawing on its knowledge of partners' objectives/ activity, its relationships and collaborative arrangements to determine whether the well-being objectives are still appropriate. This could include Ministerial priorities, the Programme for Government and remit letters, where relevant.
- The body considers changes to the well-being goals as necessary.
- The Authority has considered how it will address the requirements of the Social Partnership and Public Procurement (Wales) Act 2023 and its changes to national well-being goals.



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