Introduction

Parallel to the development of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the agreement that all countries represented at the United Nations (UN) will frame their agendas and policies around them until 2030 (UN, 2015), Wales adopted a new sustainable development (SD) legislation: the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act, 2015 ('the Act') (Welsh Assembly Government (WAG), 2015). The Act was hailed by the UN as "a model for other countries", with the hope that "what Wales is doing today the world will do tomorrow" (Nikhil Seth, Director of Division for SD, UN, 2015). However, as with other SD policies (e.g. the SDGs – see Holden et al., 2017), the Act is vague, open-ended and aspirational, expecting prompt local implementation without much national guidance or support. This paper therefore explores SD policy implementation by analysing and critiquing the Act, and provides a wider understanding of the key factors influencing local implementation of national SD policies.

In line with the rhetoric of Agenda 21 (United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, 1992), the Act legislates for the formulation of place-specific well-being plans by Public Services Boards, the 19 local structures established by the Act to implement its content. These are monitored and assessed by a Future Generations Commissioner, who acts as the legal SD representative. This paper considers the experiences of four Public Services Boards implementing the Act at the local level, seeking to gain a wider understanding of local implementation of national SD policies and to answer the following question:

What are the factors influencing the implementation of SD policies at the local level?

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In answering this question, the paper's contributions are twofold. Firstly, it provides the first empirical analysis of a SD policy lauded by the UN as groundbreaking, based notably on 16 semi-structured interviews and 89 documents. By doing so, the paper complements evaluations by other Welsh public bodies (e.g. Audit Wales, 2020) with an academic analysis. Secondly, the paper provides a critical analysis into the factors influencing the 'successful' implementation of SD policies, focussing on the local level to understand how different practices emerge in different places. These factors are:

(1) Clear formulation at the national level on how/what implementation will look like i.e. it should not be too aspirational nor vague;

(2) Strong relationships between governance levels and across the policy community that are built on consistent communication and participation; and

(3) Support, resourcing and time for local implementation.

We begin by presenting the institutional context of the Act, situating it within the broader governance structures of Wales. Second, we highlight the lack of analysis of SD policy implementation at the local level and the importance of local actors in its success. Third, we outline our research methods. Fourth, we examine the local implementation of the Act in four Public Services Boards to identify the factors influencing the Act's implementation. Fifth, we conclude by reflecting on our findings, suggesting avenues for future research.

The Institutional Context of the Act

Devolution presented the opportunity for SD to become a fundamental principle within Wales' governance structure, demonstrated by the inclusion of a duty to promote SD within the Government of Wales Act 1998 (Stevenson and Richardson 2003). This strong commitment has been expressed through successive legislation; the Act is the fourth and latest Welsh SD

strategy. Building upon the experience of other SD legislation and reflecting Local Agenda 21 on the engagement of local actors, the Act introduces a new regional, collaboarative structure – Public Services Boards (PSBs) – and a Future Generations Commissioner (FGC) to act as the legal SD represenative.

To broaden the legislation, the Act uses the term 'well-being' as a synonym for SD (Wallace, 2019:78). The Act uses the generally understood definition of SD as "the ability to make development sustainable to ensure that it meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987:16) to form 'The Sustainable Development Principle' (WAG, 2015; Part , Section 5). All public bodies in Wales are required to act in accordance with this definition (see Table 1 below), making the Act a unique and pioneering SD legislation, as Wales is the first legislature to enshrine this in law (Davies 2016; Wallace 2019).

Table 1 about here

Supporting this definition, the Act lists four SD pillars – *cultural* alongside the conventional pillars of *social, economic* and *environmental* – and five ways of working, used by public bodies to work towards seven well-being goals (Table 2 below). These encourage public bodies to act creatively, by providing space and flexibility to implement the Act according to local needs. However, the Act's lack of substance, guidance and resources locally can undermine this, which combined with a feeling of distrust between central and local governance structures, means the Act is far from being fully implemented (Audit Wales 2020).

Table 2 about here

Reflecting the emphasis of partnership working in the devolved governance structures of Wales – and despite past experience that haven't always been successful (Downe et al., 2010; Guarneros-Meza et al., 2018) – the Act legislates for regional, collaborative structures: Public Services Boards (PSBs). These work to 'improve the economic, social, environmental and cultural well-being of [their] area' (WAG, 2015: Part 4, Section 36) (Table 1 above). They consist of four statutory members – the Local Authority, the Local Health Board, the local Fire and Rescue Authority, and Natural Resources Wales – and a range of invited partners; although those invited differ across PSBs, ranging from Welsh Government officials to officials from UK Departments. Whilst PSBs mostly follow the local authority boundaries, three areas have chosen to collaborate/merge at the PSB level (Figure 1 below). This adds another layer of governance – for instance, for partners who don't work on these boundaries – to the already-congested institutional landscape in Wales (Entwistle et al. 2014). As we identify below, this is a barrier to collaboration as it encourages hierarchies and distrust between partners.

Figure 1 about here

Through its membership, the PSB is held accountable to its well-being plan and objectives by the FGC for Wales. The FGC has the power to act as 'the guardian of future generations' (Future Generations Commissioner for Wales, 2019a, 2019b), monitoring and assessing 'the extent to which well-being objectives set by public bodies are being met' (WAG, 2015: Part 3, Section 18(a)) (Table 1, above). The FGC's powers and responsibilities reflect a mix of powers of at least nine other countries (Network of Institutions for Future Generations n.d.; Teschner

2013); the experience of New Zealand, Israel and Hungary are most relevant to the Welsh FGC as they are/were the most effective, independent, legitimate, transparent and authoritative of the bodies (Göpel 2012). Despite this, the role of the FGC in the Act's local implementation was at times confusing or resisted by local actors, discussed below in our analysis of four Welsh PSBs.

Critically Examining Sustainable Development: The Question of Local Implementation

Since the World Commission on Environment and Development Report, much research has focused on SD policy implementation (e.g. Berke and Conroy 2000; Howes et al. 2017; Lafferty and Eckerberg 1998; Van Der Straaten 1998), offering a variety of ways to analyse factors contributing to the successful (or otherwise) implementation of national SD policies. Carew-Reid et al.'s (2009) practitioner handbook details ten features common to the successful implementation of National Sustainable Development Strategies. These include continual participation and communication across the policy arena and a strategy with a clear and generally accepted purpose. Successful national implementation also tends to be associated with strategies that are comprehensive and central to other national policies and agendas (Lafferty and Meadowcroft 2000; Meadowcroft 2007). Despite these factors being key for successful national implementation, the extent to which these have been built upon and applied to local implementation is lacking. Those that do, tend to focus on processes, particularly at the national level, rather than acknowledging the importance of negotiations, conflicts and alliances in the formulation and implementation of these policies at the local level. We identified four principal issues with this body of research (Table 3 below), centred around the lack of analysis at non-national levels and recognition that localities influence policy implementation. Theoretical and methodological frameworks also tend to be missing or basic.

Efforts addressing these issues tend to engage with the debate surrounding the operationalisation of SD and the commitment of different actors to enact SD policies (e.g. Baker et al., 1997; Pearce & Paterson, 2017). Here, local actors are identified as contributing to the failure of SD policy implementation, due to having weak visions of SD, resulting from receiving little steer from national governments and a disconnect between short-term political and long-term goals (Liberatore 1997; Pearce and Paterson 2017). Whilst this implicitly acknowledges the role of negotiations at and between different levels of governance, it rejects the idea of local actor agency. Furthermore these efforts tend to place emphasis on the role of the economy and institutions, presenting SD policy implementation as given once formulated, and tending to solely focus on environmental policy at supranational level (e.g. Baker et al. 1997).

Studies that acknowledge the role of negotiations between actors across multiple governance scales emphasise the specific contextual distribution of power behind SD goals, opportunities and constraints (Owens and Cowell 2010; Sneddon, Howarth, and Norgaard 2006; Voß et al. 2007). Local actors are argued to be key to the construction of local sustainability programmes, as they locally operationalise and implement national policies (e.g. Dooris, 1999; Freeman, 1996; Owens & Cowell, 2010; Wild & Marshall, 1999). Characterising this as a political process requires SD governance to encourage consistent communication across the policy arena (e.g. Selman, 1998; Voß & Kemp, 2006). However, these accounts can be descriptive, monitoring the progress and performance of a local programme rather than analysing changes.

Acknowledging place, scale and coordination are vital in analysising SD policy implementation requires case studies that can identify complex sets of interlinked structual causes, knowledge/scoping issues and implementation traps (Meadowcroft, 2007; Voß et al., 2007). For example, case studies of SD policy implementation in regions in Europe (Berger 2003) and Canada (Parto 2004) identify mistrust and conflicts between different "socially constructed and politically contested" governance scales (Ibid:77) as key determinants in successfully implementing national SD policies. This echoes the Local Agenda 21 literature, which argues that trust is a prerequisite for public involvement in SD policy implementation (e.g. Owen and Videras, 2008; Selman, 1998; Selman and Parker, 2007; Wild and Marshall, 1999).

Together, SD governance must be considered messy and unpredictable (Meadowcroft 2009), involving "a deliberate attempt to bring about structural change in a stepwise manner" (Kemp & Rotmans, 2005:42). Transition management models this change as a political process, acknowledging the possibilities of social learning (Grin & Loeber, 2007) and the importance of participation and communication in resolving conflicts between governance levels (e.g. Voß et al., 2009). It offers a path to the integrated change needed to implement SD, through emphasising longer time frames, technical and social innovation, and learning by doing (Meadowcroft 2009). Importance is placed on the involvement and collaboration of key stakeholders to define collective goals and visions of the future and transform deeply embedded, yet unsustainable, practices.

In this section, we explored studies of national SD policy implementation to highlight the lack of analysis at the local level. Without this analysis, implementation is taken as an apolitical process that is given once the policy is formulated, as negotiations and conflicts are overlooked. In contrast, the Local Agenda 21 and transition management literature argues that local actors, and their navigation across multiple governance scales, are key to the implementation and

operationalisation of national policies at the local level. Depending on how and when local actors are involved, SD efforts are either hindered or lead to the total transformation of embedded practices. Therefore, we follow the evolution of different well-being plans, exploring the role of local actors and outlining the centrality of participation, partnership working and collaboration in the local implementation of the Act. The following section outlines our methods for researching the role of local actors.

Research Methods

To examine factors influencing local implementation of SD policies, we build an inductive approach to analyse and critique the Act and provide wider understanding of the efficacy of national SD legislation. We understand induction as an "approach[…] that primarily use[s] detailed readings of raw data to derive concepts, themes, or a model through interpretations made from the raw data by an evaluator or researcher" (Thomas, 2006:238). Rather than testing theories or hypotheses, we a priori reviewed some of the SD policy implementation literature to guide our examination of the Act's local implementation by four Welsh PSBs and illustrate the diversity of practices involved in the Act's implementation. In this section, we discuss case studies, data collection and analysis.

Across the four case studies, we collected six types of data between December 2018 and October 2019. The four PSBs were selected to embrace the diversity of geographical and socio-economic places in Wales and to capture the array of practices surrounding the implementation of the Act. Two rural and two urban PSBs were chosen; each seen to have varying degrees of 'success', as defined by the Welsh Audit Office (Audit Wales 2018) and were randomly ascribed as A, B, C or D. Table 4 below provides basic facts for each PSB, but preserves anonymity due to the size of Wales and its policy community.

Table 4 about here

We conducted 16 semi-structured interviews with 18 interviewees. Interviewees were selected based on their role in the implementation of the Act and included statutory and invited PSB members, employees of the Future Generations Office (FGO), PSB policy support officers in local authorities, and former and current Welsh Government officials and Ministers. The average duration of interviews was one hour. The questions focused, for instance, on what the PSBs' and other organisations' roles were in the Act's implementation, and the difficulties and successes encountered in implementing the Act at the local level. The interviews were recorded, fully transcribed and anonymised, with codes randomly allocated to interviewees: A1 refers to an interviewee from PSB A and a NI code refers to a non-PSB interviewee, representing a national institution.

We collected 89 publicly available documents pertaining to the formulation and local implementation of the Act. These included well-being assessments, draft and final well-being plans, FGC/O and Welsh Government feedback, Welsh Government documents surrounding the development and implementation of the Act, and minutes of PSB meetings (Table 5 below). These documents were read to understand the specifics of each PSB locality and the rationales surrounding the implementation of the Act in different areas and at different levels.

Table 5 about here

Over the project, we held conversations with academic and policy colleagues and attended events where the Act was discussed, which were were collected in a diary by Author A, alongside personal reflections and notes following interviews. These were supplemented with, team discussions, the collection of secondary data, and presentations to Welsh Government during their evaluation of the Act – although the research was not commissioned nor sanctioned by the Welsh Government.

These data were coded with qualitative data analysis software, NVivo 12. The data were analysed inductively to allow themes to emerge and develop without any restraints imposed by structured methodologies (Elo and Kyngas 2007; Thomas 2006). First, data were coded according to general themes such as definitions of SD, understandings of the Act, and tensions surrounding implementation. Certain sources were coded by both authors separately and then discussed to agree codes and ensure consistency. Codes were continuously modified, merged and refined to identify factors involved in the local implementation of the Act, leading us to identify three factors contributing to the local implementation of SD policies, presented in the following section.

The Implementation of Sustainable Development Policies: Four Case Studies in Wales

Based on the inductive, qualitative approach outlined above, we identify three factors that contribute to the local implementation of the Act and lessons for SD policy implementation generally. These are:

(1) A lack of clarity in the national formulation of the Act led to confusion and complexity in localities over the interpretation and meaning of the Act;

(2) A lack of clarity surrounding how the Act sits within the wider governance structure in Wales, affected local collaboration in tackling wicked issues and doing cross-cutting work; and

(3) A sometimes tense relationship between centre- and local-led initiatives can leave localities wondering what 'local' means, questioning how local implementation could be.

Taken together, these echo the need for better resources and support for localities to implement national SD policies. We analyse these factors through interpretations, collaboration, localness and cross-cutting issues.

Interpretations

Most interviewees acknowledged that the Act allowed for local interpretations and it was this that created opportunities for localities to do things differently, as it "helps policy-makers like me think about good decision-making" (D2). Despite this, most interviewees also considered this as a challenge, as different interpretations, most notably in what was meant or intended by several central concepts (e.g. SD or well-being), caused confusion in the Act's implementation. This highlights the need for meaning-making as a critical aspect in SD implementation.

For some, the Act was "a sustainable development bill not an environment bill" (NI5), which allowed localities to take a comprehensive approach to SD by incorporating the other three pilllars of SD: "economic, social and cultural sustainability […] put[ting] sustainability in its broadest context" (D3). The addition of the cultural pillar was praised as "cultural identity and language was an incredibly important part of well-being within Wales" (NI2). This new focus allowed organisations, traditionally too focused on economic development, to have "a more

rounded view of the world […with sustainability meaning…] social and environmental and now cultural as well" (B1).

Interviewees also welcomed the opportunities offered by the five ways of working (table 2 above) to develop local approaches. One regional organisation used them to adopt "a well-being lens… [to ask] six simple questions… that makes it real for people" (A1). Prevention and integration were often used as examples, as despite the "(other) ways of working[…] being embedded[…] they're probably harder to do and identify at a very frontline level" (A1). However, some believed that the ways of working were already happening to some extent before, stating that the Act had not changed things dramatically (D1); instead there was a new impetus to partnership working, not "so much what partners do but how they do it and the way they work together" (D1).

However, the opportunity for local implementation of the Act was undermined by the confusion over the term 'well-being' rather than SD and was apparent across most interviews. One interviewee suggested that the term was not "widely understood or held, or even referred to by the members of the board" and instead was only used "to get consistent buy-in from all the public sector" (C2). This interviewee went on to suggest this confusion originated from "the meaning of well-being in the Social Services and Well-being Act and the meaning of well-being in the Well-being of Future Generations Act being different" (C2). This institutional complexity and confusion led to certain organisations using the term 'sustainable development' rather than 'well-being' or using both interchangeably, creating barriers to what organisations could collaborate over.

This illustrates how local implementation of SD policies depends on how the Act is understood by local actors and whether there is common understanding amongst them. The lack of clarity during its formulation has led to the Act still not being fully implemented five years after it

passed in the Assembly (Audit Wales 2020). This suggests meaning-making is an important factor in the successful implementation of SD policies at the local level, but also that support from the centre and strong relationships between levels of governance matter in mitigating the confusion and complexity.

Collaboration

Collaboration was the most popular 'way of working' mentioned by interviewees. They felt the focus on collaboration in the Act's implementation and long-term effect was "a real catalyst to take strategic partnerships in the public services up to a different level" (D2). However, a lack of clarity over relationships and hierarchies between other legislation, structures, and different PSB member organisations, was considered a barrier to true collaboration and to tackling cross-cutting issues.

For many, the Act and its implementation were all about "cross-sector collaboration in Wales" (C2), although for some this required a "culture shift" and "a bedrock of trust", which itself "takes time and collaboration" (NI2). It was recognised that collaboration and its governance couldn't be "legislate[d]" because of "multi-level governance here, with different voices and different powers involved" (NI4). Instead, the local context, history and actors determined the time and effort spent to organise and build trust, and successfully collaborate.

Referring to the number of different networks and funding streams, some public services acknowledged they were not at the stage of making decisions together and "hold[ing] each other to account" (D1). This was illustrated with the example of two separate funds being awarded to different PSB partners for the same issue. According to one interviewee, this was evidence of a lack of trust in the PSB, meaning the healthy challenge and conflict needed to collaboratively implement the Act was missing from PSBs:

"[T]here should be some kind of conflict there. Challenge and conflict that can be approached in a professional manner […]. While you're around the table, that healthy challenge, healthy conflict, is missing. That's probably missing from all the PSBs. […] It's never been done. […] When I ask for [an issue] to be raised at the main PSB, there is a certain, "Oh, do you want to try to just discuss it outside?"" (A2)

This quote illustrates the importance of strong relationships between and within levels of governance for successful implementation. Interviewees questioned whether the Act "challenge[d] a siloed way of policy-making" (NI4), which posed challenges for negotiation and collaboration. For instance, various organisations involved in implementing the Act were "given their instructions separately, by different departments, as to what they ought to do", leaving these organisations with "very limited capacity for […] thinking together" (NI4). This was echoed by an interviewee who explained that PSBs were still a "traditional hierarchical top-down approach" to policy-making and service delivery (B1), originating from "the guidance for PSBs… replicat[ing] the guidance for single organisational structures", which is "not suitable for collaborative organisations" (C2). This led to a "myriad of complex governance arrangements" (NI3), exacerbated by the lack of clarification on the relationships and hierachies between PSB partners and other national structues, especially those between the PSBs and Regional Partnership Boards (RPB), set up under the Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act (2014). One person recalled "presenting the well-being plan" to the RPB and feeling as though they were "going to seek approval from them", which they didn't think was "true… [or] right" (B2). This conflict was further exacerbated because RPBs had "access to millions of pounds of money" and PSBs had "access to nothing" (A2).

This section has illustrated the importance of trust between and within levels of governance for effective implementation. The conflict over spaces and relationships between them is a process requiring time, trust and negotiation (Guarneros-Meza et al. 2018).

Localness

Most interviewees felt that the Act created space for "local flexibility to do what you want" (D2) according to local needs. However, this was threatened by big national partner organisations (e.g. Natural Resources Wales and the Health Boards), and the FGC 'marking' the plans, leaving interviewees questioning how 'local' local implementation could be. This illustrates the importance of collaboration and consultation at all stages of SD legislation, from formulation to implementation.

Welsh Government was felt to be, at times "dictatorial" (D2), with localities being told to operationalise decisions taken centrally. Despite local actors believing the Act had provided "a framework […] [that] allowed for local difference and local flavour, local culture, the way people feel about their communities" [A3], this was felt to be due to Welsh Government not "hav[ing] a clue on what they were after" (D2) rather than a support for subsidiarity. National actors echoed this by stating that the Act "absolutely allow[ed] that local translation […] influenced by the local community, local need, local circumstances" (NI2); they listed "well-being assessments for public service boards, and the well-being objectives for public service boards, and for individual local authorities" as proof of this localness. This was argued to be part of a process whereby the government was recognising that "each area is different [and that] not every public service board is the same […] with different issues" (D1).

This was threatened by individuals being members of multiple PSBs, especially by big partners who often sit on several. This meant there is:

> *"exactly the same representatives on both public services boards. The same*
> *fire representative, the same police representative, the same public health,*
> *Natural Resources Wales… Virtually every partner, apart from the local*
> *authority" (C2).*

This left members supporting the idea for a more regional implementation of the Act, questioning the "need for a PSB for every county" (A2). For example:

> *"I think there are big issues with having that bigger conversation that's far*
> *more regional. If you look in [area of Wales], we've got four public service*
> *boards. I sit on two of them. The other two are actually collaborating in two*
> *county areas. […]" (B3).*

Although regional integration was supported by others, pre-existing politics and history – particularly between local authorities – were seen as challenges to collaboration. For example, there was "a lot of duplication of effort, meeting time and resource" because two council , geographically close to one another but with opposed political control (Left-Right), are "not connecting because (they're) not looking at it in its widest context" (B3). This interviewee "question[ed] the value of that localness", which one interviewee summarised as a conundrum between localness versus the efficient use of resources:

> *"It's a battle between how much you focus locally and how much you need*
> *to bring it up just to be effective with the limited resource we've got."* (B2)

The FGC 'marking' the well-being plans also led to interviewees questioning the value of taking a local approach if it was going to be judged by national actors. Some PSBs were seen as "going through the motions[…] coming together once a month or once every other month, and […] not necessarily challenging each other". The Commissioner's Office will be asking

"How can [they] get behind them to get their leadership around the PSB table doing the right thing?" (NI1).

The ambiguity of the Act and the legacy of the context within which the Act is being implemented in is illustrated and demonstrated by the centre, including the FGC, emphasising that 'its up to the local level to decide', and yet assessing the well-being plans. This results in local actors wondering what they should be doing and whether they are 'allowed' to implement the Act according to their respective places. This confusion and constrasting mentality between governance levels have hindered the implementation of the Act.

Cross-cutting issues

Where the five ways of working created space to tackle cross-cutting issues in collaborative ways, this was contrasted with stories of no organisation having enough power or resources to affect change. This meant the process of change and implementation was slow, further hindered by the persistence of old structures, silos, and hierarchies.

Most interviewees identified national silos as impeding the implementation of the Act, illustrating the lack of clarity in the formulation and mismatch of old and new structures and ways of working. This was felt to be evident with the Act formulated alongside the similarly named Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act (2014), as key concepts were felt to have different meanings:

> *"the meaning of well-being in the Social Services and Well-being Act and the meaning of well-being in the Well-being of Future Generations Act is different, and that causes confusion. The meaning of integration, in the two Acts, is different. That definitely causes confusion" (C2)*

Funding also created issues, as "Welsh Government and Westminster Government […] will only give you funding for a year […which] is alien to the way that the Future Generations Act want people to work" (D1). This was:

> *"because you still have departments within government that allocate funding and […] there is [no] cross-fertilisation of that at that level [...so] it manifests itself down into individual authority allocations".* (D3)

Many offered a solution of pooled budgets, co-budgets and "participatory budgeting" (B3) to solve "the ongoing frustrations and challenges we've got in terms of finance[…] in a more realistic way" (B1).

Another concern was silos. Even though the Act is:

> *"very innovative[...] brilliant[...], you've got a framework wrapped around it that is very set in the old way of working, which is local-authority led"* (B3).

One interviewee explained that "the legislation put a lot of onus on local authorities […meaning] the responsibility for PSBs has resided with local authorities" (D1). Often the Chair of the PSB is either the Leader or Chief Executive of the Council (still the case for 12 out of 19 PSBs), despite individual advice from the FGC to at least ten of the PSBs. The FGC reminds that "[t]he chair… can have an impact on shifting mindsets" (FGC, 2017a) and commends PSBs like Pembrokeshire for "nominating the Chief Executive of the National Park as chair [of the PSB]" (FGC, 2017b). This old hierarchy and organisational models had hindered cross-working:

> *"[T]he guidance for PSBs has tried to replicate the guidance for single organisational structures… We've developed hierarchies and a bureaucracy*

that suits that single-interest organisation… [but these] are not suitable for

collaborative organisations like the PSB." (C2)

Local actors believed that the timescale was ambitious, because they only had "nine months a year to change the assessments into the plan, which is alright if you're one organsiation but when you're seven…" (D1). This, combined with siloed working, left no chance for organisations to think creatively, as it left them:

"feeling time-pressured […so they] fall back on their single organisational

interest and they say, "This is the priority for my organisation, this is what I

want the PSB to contribute to"" (C2).

This left some exasperated with "the madness of government sometimes and the inability of them to deal with local government reform" (NI3), arguing that the multiple demands on local areas for "leadership, funding, still working in silos, the myriad of complex governance arrangements, performing to targets, reporting arrangements" slowed the process of implementation.

Whilst the Act has gone some way to create a context to think of and address cross-cutting issues, it also highlights the difficulty of cross-cutting work when SD policies are formulated at a national level in traditional silos, not challenging old ways of thinking about governance and public service delivery and creating issues at the implementation stage. Nevertheless, some examples in our case studies illustrated constructive and innovative approaches.

Conclusion

A renewed emphasis on Sustainable Development (SD) policies since the agreement of the UN's SDGs has led to a need for critical examination of how SD policies are implemented.

This paper has explored the implementation of Wales's latest SD Strategy – the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act, 2015. As the Act gives local areas the flexibility for local implementation, through the creation of new regional, collaborative structures: Public Service Boards (PSBs), we chose these as sites for case studies. By doing so, we analyse and critique the Act to provide a wider understanding of the key factors influencing the local implementation of national SD policies.

The Act illustrates the difficulty in formulating policies that try to do different things in drastically different ways, especially within old institutional contexts and the legacy of siloed working. For instance, the novel approach of allowing localities to determine what well-being meant was challenged by funding and accountability still being organised top-down, preventing pooled budgets and joined-up working that the Act encourages.

Following an inductive, qualitative approach to analysing different implementations across Welsh localities, we identify three key factors that influence the success of local implementation of SD policies. These are (1) the clear formulation at the national level of the how/what the policy will look like when it is implemented at the local level; (2) consultation and strong relationship between governance levels and across the policy community; and (3) support, resourcing and time for local implementation. These reveal that Welsh localities see themselves as part of a top-down governance culture and structure, rather than being required to think creatively about implementation. The lack of resources – financial or otherwise – for implementing the Act is compounded by years of austerity and a centralised power structure, which has slowed progress. However, making groundbreaking, far-reaching culture changes to how public organisations think, make policy and deliver services is always going to take time. Relationship building, trust and time within the PSB structure, and with other pre-existing structures are important for implementation. Each area and interviewee constructed their own understanding and practices around these ideas, meaning the Act was made sense of,

interpreted, adapted and negotiated in varying ways across our case studies. This multifaceted aspect of SD policy implementation, and the importance of developing means of documenting these, is part of this study's contribution and has relevance for other research. We believe that successful implementation of complex and ground-breaking SD ideas requires consultation and negotiation throughout the formulation and implementation process (Mouffe 2007 talks of agonism as an approach to negotiation and consensus building).

Other literature offers encouraging avenues for future research in SD policy implementation, particularly localism and street-level bureaucracy. Research investigates how localism might look in different contexts, how it will be defined in line with notions such as space and territory, and whether it provides room for empowerment, participation and community (Clarke and Cochrane 2013). What will constitute that 'space' varies according to the context and negotiations taking place, meaning no national policy will be implemented in the same way in different local spaces. Borrowing from critical traditions, this scholarship emphasises "meaning-making" – how stories or narratives become mobilised – to explain how a policy should be understood and with which consequences. Future studies of SD policy implementation concentrating on the local level could deploy such concepts to make sense of the practices emerging around implementation. Second, as defined by Lipsky (1980), the Act's emphasis of street-level bureaucracy on discretion and relative autonomy from organisational authority also points to the importance of the local and the role of actors in interpretating national policies. Local governance is recognised as a contested site for policy action, with entrepreneurs reinterpreting rules to "bring together the objectives of government policies with […] the priorities and concerns articulated by the community" (Durose 2011: 989). However, our research revealed a lack of these entrepreneurs on the ground, meaning PSB members need to be better able to creatively re-interpret national legislation to align with the "different issues […] and to deliver those priorities within that locality" (D1).

This study has limitations, arising from analysisng only four out of nineteen Welsh PSBs. There is value in gathering data from other PSBs and organisations in Wales to understand how the Act is being implemented, especially as Welsh Government develops new implementation strategies (e.g. the creation of a central team to support local implementation). Documenting these initiatives would present interesting opportunities for examining how the national and local negotiate meanings, interpretations and policy implementation, alongside whether the Act has changed practice and delivers its goals. However, developing such an evaluation that emphasises the informal/soft processes demanded by the Act – e.g. culture change – will be difficult and require blending different methods. The goal-orientated focus of the Act and its lack of detail might mean that evaluating its implementation will be difficult given its constant reinterpretation.

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