



Llywodraeth Cymru  
Welsh Government

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# Foresight for sustainable development and well-being governance in Wales: executive summary

This research explores the challenges and opportunities of integrating long-term thinking through foresight in policymaking.

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# Aim of the research and methodological approach

This research, funded by the ESRC Policy Fellowship scheme that ran between February 2022 and August 2023, explores the challenges and opportunities of integrating long-term thinking through foresight in policymaking and provides the Welsh Government with the evidence base to further develop its foresight functions. The inception phase of the Fellowship was dedicated to the research co-design. During the delivery phase, 35 interviews focussed on the challenges and opportunities of using foresight for policymaking as well as generating insights into different foresight organisational arrangements in other selected governments. Pilots with 3 Welsh Government policy teams provided a granular perspective on what foresight could look like in the context of the Welsh Government, while 2 final stakeholder workshops were organised to review the research findings and discuss enabling mechanisms to develop long-term decision-making in the context of the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 (WFGA).

## Key insights from the literature

The literature reviewed in this report focuses on participatory, perspective, and policy-focused foresight approaches that can be used to support policymakers in navigating uncertainty and develop future-regarding policies. However, while foresight can be potentially transformative, it is not without challenges. Scepticism and resistance, together with scarce resources and low levels of futures literacy, which encompasses the skills needed to apply foresight, can hinder foresight applications in governments. This is exacerbated by the fact that evaluation of foresight activities is a critical but challenging area, and this makes it difficult to articulate and demonstrate the contribution of foresight to

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policymaking. In developing foresight functions, it is important that governments consider local circumstances to build effective and sustainable institutional models.

## Key insights from the international case studies

Approaches to foresight in governments in Portugal, Finland, the United Kingdom (UK), and Flanders were analysed to draw out common themes. These governments use foresight in decision-making in different ways. Foresight functions and their organisational settings vary based on respective priorities, public administration traditions, organisational cultures and needs. In all cases, capacity to support projects and build capabilities across government and beyond is often a challenge. Application of foresight tools alone is not enough to deliver a systemic shift towards long-term and anticipatory interventions. Rather, an organisational focus on developing actions and applying lessons learned from foresight is key. This process is strengthened by in-house dedicated resources that specifically focus on foresight and can ensure that organisations' capacity and capability for foresight is not eroded by demands associated with changing needs (e.g. when responding to an emergency). Building senior leader buy-in is also an important element that helps overcoming scepticism and resistance. In addition, international partnerships and cooperation with other governments or international organisations such as the OECD can increase the profile and effectiveness of foresight activities, thus also increasing its perceived value as a core function.

## Key insights from Wales

Participants from Wales agreed that the WFGA has increased the visibility and the relevance of foresight in terms of language and expectations. The WFGA is

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seen as a common platform that is driving the development of a dynamic foresight ecosystem within the Welsh Government and in the Welsh public sector. In Wales, some of the key public and third sector organisations have strong in-house foresight capabilities and skills and often work together collaboratively on projects or through knowledge exchange. Within the Welsh Government, some Directorates, for example the Strategic Evidence Unit within the Climate Change and Rural Affairs Group, have in-house capacity and capabilities to apply foresight and many long-term Welsh Government strategies, such as the Transport strategy or the Welsh Language Strategy were informed by this practice. Interview data and the 3 policy pilots indicated that there is a strong demand for more foresight work and for more integration of futures thinking in policymaking. However, significant gaps in organisational capacity and capabilities remain. While the WFGA was often mentioned as a key enabler for foresight work, tendencies to work in silos, scarcity of time, futures literacy gaps, organisational mechanisms and disconnects with the political sphere were mentioned as present barriers.

## Conclusions

Foresight enhances well-being and sustainable development governance by integrating long-term perspectives and supporting policymakers in acknowledging and navigating uncertainty and understanding the long-term consequences of decisions. Dedicated in-house foresight resources are key for the continuity and sustainability of foresight especially during crises, but to be transformative foresight should also be embedded in policymaking as a practice. In the Welsh Government, foresight tends to be piecemeal and often conducted ad hoc rather than embedded within the policy cycle or used to directly inform initiatives and decision-making. The WFGA constitutes a transformative platform upon which the Welsh Government can build on existing foresight resources as well as on internal and international collaborations with other governments and stakeholders. Under this legislative frame, the Welsh Government has the

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opportunity to address current futures literacy gaps, and unlock mechanisms to overcome barriers such as existing silos between policy teams and embed long-term thinking in the Welsh Government and in the broader Welsh public sector.

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