



Llywodraeth Cymru
Welsh Government



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Review of social partnerships within the Welsh Government

Summary of findings following a review of social partnerships within the Welsh Government.

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Introduction

Partnership and collaboration are distinctive characteristics of how we work in Wales. Since devolution, the Welsh Government has encouraged social partnership working as a means of finding the best solutions to the challenges facing Wales. There are thus many social partnership arrangements within and between individual organisations, sector-wide representative groups, and recognised trade unions, some with a long history. In the absence of any statutory underpinning those existing partnership structures have developed voluntarily and organically over time taking a variety of different approaches to partnership working.

To strengthen social partnership as a way of working a Programme for Government commitment was made to place social partnership on a statutory footing in Wales resulting in the **Social Partnership and Public Procurement (Wales) Bill**. To support the implementation of the Bill and to help take the social partnership model of engagement beyond the provisions of the legislation a review was commissioned to examine social partnership working across the Welsh Government.

This report constitutes a summary of the review of social partnerships across the Welsh Government. The information gathered provides a baseline understanding and assessment of the structure and function of existing social partnerships and a set of recommendations to support effective partnership working. The review was divided into three phases to create an iterative process with engagement from stakeholders throughout.

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For more information about the review or the legislation contact the Social Partnership Team at socialpartnership@gov.wales.

Summary of findings

Phase 1: review of existing structures

The first phase provided an overview of existing social partnership arrangements across the Welsh Government, in addition to a comparative assessment of their structure, operation, and purpose. This phase captured information on a wide range of government-led partnerships including formally constituted social partnerships and wider engagement groups. This highlighted the complexity of the landscape around social partnership in Wales.

Key findings were as follows:

- The landscape around social partnership in Wales is highly complex with respect to both the number of partnerships and the difference in approaches to partnership working.
- There is no one-size-fits-all model for partnership working across the Welsh Government.
- There are several characteristics common across most, but not all, of the identified partnerships, including the Welsh Government providing secretariat and chair support, the aim for equal status of partners, and the use of terms of reference.
- Several structural characteristics appear important, particularly the

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prerequisite requirements for formally constituted partnerships, but they do not in themselves create nor guarantee effective partnership working.

- Structural and operational characteristics appear a relatively superficial way of delineating between different approaches to partnership working.
- A fundamental aspect of these partnerships appears to be the adoption of, to a greater or lesser extent, the guiding principles of social partnership (including cooperation, respect, trust, voice and participation, and mutual gains).

In the absence of a clear framework for government-led social partnership this landscape presents both a challenge and an opportunity to define what social partnership is and what it means in Wales.

Phase 2: identification of supporting characteristics

The second phase included a diagnostic review of existing partnerships and identified common behaviours and characteristics which support effective partnership working. This phase captured information from a wide range of officials on their experiences of social partnership working, in addition to a review of published literature.

Key characteristics identified were as follows:

- The importance of a clearly defined, and mutually understood, purpose and focus.
- Meaningful and continuous engagement of all parties from the outset and throughout the problem solving/policy development process.

- A clear commitment to collaborative working and social partnership principles which can be captured by a combination of cooperation, respect, trust, voice and participation, and the pursuit of mutual gains.
- Joint understanding of how information and decisions are cascaded and implemented. These should be two-way channels feeding through insights from impact on the ground.
- Clear arrangements to monitor and review success are vital to maintain the commitment to social partnership between partners.

These findings suggested the success of social partnership as a process is significantly influenced by the adoption of key underpinning characteristics, regardless of the sector, membership, or approach to partnership working. These characteristics appear to provide the catalyst required for meaningful engagement that can lead to improved outcomes for public services and well-being in Wales.

Based on these characteristics a Social Partnership Assessment Tool was produced to provide existing partnerships a means of self-assessing the current effectiveness of their own partnership working.

Phase 3: critical assessment of the social partnership landscape

The third phase provided a critical assessment of the existing social partnerships across the Welsh Government to identify what works in practice and lessons learnt from partnership working. The ambition is for this information to help build on the existing successes of social partnership to inform the creation of a

strengthened and more joined-up system at a national level. Views were gathered from the Welsh Government senior management on the structures and arrangements within their Directorates and opportunities to strengthen social partnerships across government.

A summary of responses is provided below:

Benefits of social partnerships

- Ability to build lasting relationships.
- Ease and equity of information exchange.
- Capacity to improve understanding.
- Improvements in policy outputs and uptake.

Disbenefits of social partnerships

- Resource and capacity overhead.
- Differences in understanding.
- Cultural challenges.
- 'Locking out' of wider partners.

Strengthening social partnerships

- Improve understanding of social partnership terminology.
- Maximise the efficiency of the operation of social partnerships.
- Design a package of support and guidance.

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- Create a more flexible and agile social partnership landscape.

The evidence gathered in this phase of the review suggests there are a range of benefits to social partnerships which are highly valuable to government, partners, and the people of Wales. It is, therefore, important these benefits are given a protected space within government and partners can continue to provide value to the policy development and implementation process. It was also evident there are several key areas which could improve social partnerships across government, embed key principles, and continue to strengthen relationships with partners.

Results

The evidence collected across the 3 phases of this review has been distilled into a set of key findings designed to help support and strengthen social partnerships. These findings reach beyond the statutory underpinning for social partnership via the **Social Partnership and Public Procurement (Wales) Bill** and are intended to help to create and embed a uniquely Welsh way of working at national level, underpinned by key principles.

An outline of the findings is provided below:

The social partnership framework at national level

Senior officials expressed a preference for a less resource-intensive landscape to

reduce the overhead on government and partners. The evidence gathered, however, suggests there is no appetite for a fundamental restructuring or streamlining of existing arrangements, and no suggestions were made for current partnerships to be merged or ceased. Several directorates identified potential opportunities for new partnership arrangements, we propose to work with colleagues in these areas to explore options. There may be opportunities to create a more flexible and agile landscape by establishing time-limited arrangements to address specific issues, rather than permanent structures.

Maximise the efficiency of the operation of social partnerships

A product of this review is a 'Social Partnership Assessment Tool', designed to provide social partnerships with a means to assess their own strengths and areas for improvement. It focuses on key characteristics that support effective operation such as: ensuring there is a clearly defined purpose and focus for the group; meaningful and continuous engagement; clarity on how information and decisions are cascaded and arrangements for monitoring and review. The tool can be used to facilitate a discussion and enable all partners to engage in identifying ways to strengthen their existing arrangements.

Improve understanding of social partnership terminology

There is a clear need for standard terminology setting out what defines social partnerships, the structures in scope, and expectations regarding the approach and the shared commitments required from all partners.

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Whilst we will continue to encourage wider engagement with social partners, such arrangements should not be considered as constituting formal social partnerships. A narrative for the ‘Welsh Way’ of social partnership has also been drafted to support a mutual understanding and will be tested with partners.

Design a Toolkit of support and guidance

To maximise the benefits of social partnerships we propose developing a package of guidance and support which will be available to government and partners. Such a package should aim to improve the collective understanding of social partnership and provide criteria for effective ways of working (e.g., values, behaviours, and key principles). Plans for a package of training modules and a wide range of communications material are already under development. A key element of this toolkit will be the Social Partnership Assessment Tool.

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