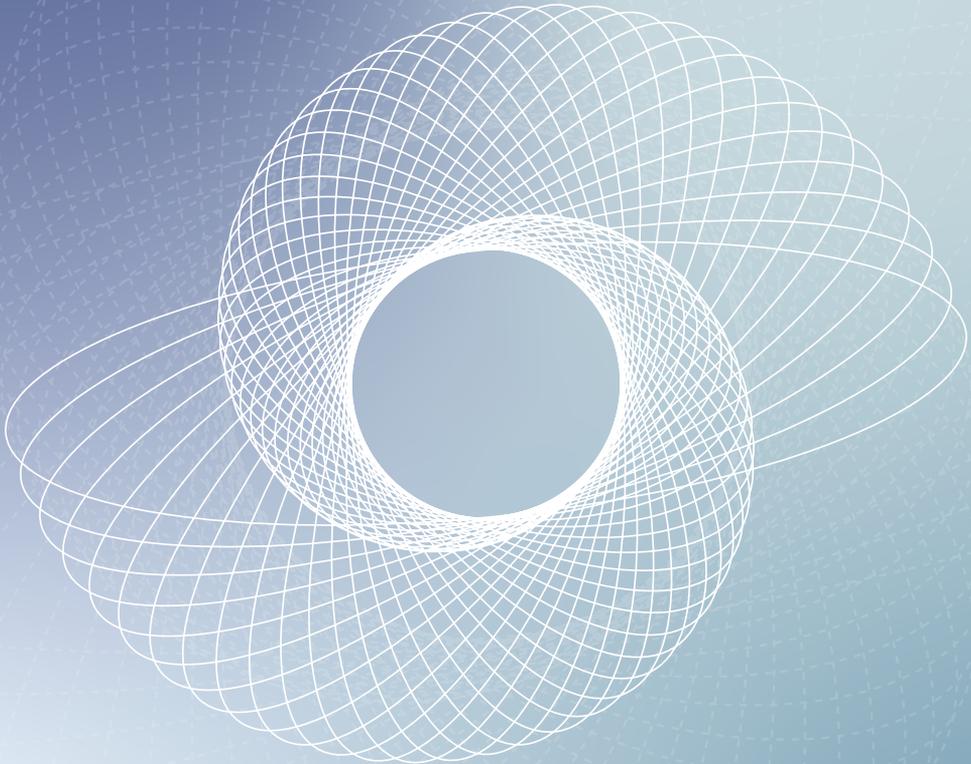


# The experimentalist polity

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# Experimental governance – the principles

With both the legitimacy and efficacy of democratic governments currently in question, the only enduring response is to re-imagine new, more effective and accountable forms of democracy and democratic governance: to “make hope practical”, as Raymond Williams said of such projects. We propose that **Experimental Governance** (EG) – a form of multi-level organization in which goals are routinely corrected in light of ground-level experience of implementing them – is already re-imagining delivery of public services and regulation in ways that take up this challenge.

Our engagement with sectors central to social and economic wellbeing – including affordable housing, dignified eldercare and sustainable food provisioning – suggests the most successful national and sub-national governments are those in which the jurisdictional authority abandons the pretence of command and control. Instead, rules are subject to revision, to be corrected when challenged by compelling argument and evidence. This new understanding goes hand-in-hand with the advent of porous organisational structures that are more transparent and more open to participation by outsiders than traditional hierarchies.

These new forms of government are, in fact, forms of **co-governance**, in which officers of state and members of civil society work together to overcome the traditional and self-limiting division of labour between experts and government officials. Citizens and stakeholders in EG governance help redesign policy, recreate trust in the public realm, and re-imagine their own identities as subjects rather than objects of the state, making hope practical in ways that contributes to more sustainable forms of development and deeper forms of everyday democracy.

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## The devolved polity

Decentralisation to local governments has been one of the major governmental trends of the past 50 years, signalling a ‘silent revolution’ in the governance systems of both developed and developing countries – the most tangible result of which has been the proliferation of the devolved polity and its growing significance in economic and social development. In OECD countries, local governments now represent a significant share of public spending, accounting in 2016 for 16% of GDP, 40% of public spending and 57% of public investment. At the sub national level, education represents the largest share of public spending (25%), followed by health (18%), general public services (administration), social protection and economic affairs/transport (OECD, 2019).

The role of devolution is misconceived in two contradictory ways, both of which distort the relation between levels of government as seen by EG. In the conventional misconception, the lower levels are the worker-bee agents charged with passively implementing the policy designs of higher level principals. But this view supposes, incorrectly, that the principals have precise and reliable ideas of what to do and how to do it. This kind of unerring foresight is simply impossible in an age of uncertainty. For this reason, the process of local policy implementation must be a creative, problem-solving activity, not a passive execution of higher policy designs.

The top-down view acknowledges this obliquely, conceding that although sub-national governments have inferior political status, they are closest to the citizen and by far the most knowledgeable about local problems. This recognition, together with the continuing failures of top-down government, explain why devolution has gone so far, but also why we need more of it: why those who feel the immediate pinch of their problems should be empowered and encouraged to better utilise their unique knowledge and experience in solving them.



But the second, bottom-up misconception is to think such empowerment is sufficient for successful devolution. It isn't. The ground-level actors know best what their problems are; indeed, it's hard to imagine effective solutions at all without their participation. But that doesn't mean local experience and initiative is all that's needed. Local actors have to learn from what's worked and hasn't elsewhere, and from pertinent experience in other domains: in short, they have to learn from the pooled experience of actors beyond their immediate ken. EG is designed to do that: it is a form of democracy in which the experience of the "higher" levels is corrected by the "lower" ones, and vice versa, in a continuing cycle that allows the initial and necessarily provisional goals to be adjusted in the light of experience.

EG, then, is neither top-down nor bottom-up. It does not aim to replace a failing form of government with an alternative, however appealing, that suffers mirror-image defects. At its most ambitious, EG is democracy in which legislation is in continuing and close touch with lived experience and the popular sovereign – commonly depicted as asleep except for periodic elections – is finally awake.

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## An experimentalist polity in the making?

After 20 years of devolution in the UK, the Welsh Government might legitimately claim to be an experimentalist polity in the making, being the first European government to adopt sustainable development as a statutory duty, the first to embrace the Foundational Economy as part of a political repertoire for social and economic wellbeing, and the first in the UK to launch a programme of local experimentation designed to incubate and scale public sector innovations – all of which involves a more iterative and equitable relationship between the Welsh Government and its interlocutors in local government and civil society, a relationship hitherto based on a command and control style of governance.

The widely acclaimed Wellbeing of Future Generations Act introduces 7 wellbeing goals (illustrated in Exhibit 1) that provide a more capacious conception of development than the conventional goal of GDP per capita growth that dominates the developmental agenda in most countries today. The legislation places a *statutory* obligation on all public bodies in Wales, including the Welsh Government itself, to demonstrate how they are taking action to meet the national wellbeing goals, all of which are aligned with the UN's Sustainable Development Goals.

At the national or all-Wales level, the Act establishes a statutory Future Generations Commissioner for Wales, whose role is to act as a guardian for the interests of future generations and to support public bodies to work towards achieving the wellbeing goals. At the local level the Act establishes Public Services Boards (PSBs) for each local authority area, each of which has a duty to engage local citizens to co-design and co-produce a local wellbeing plan to improve the economic, social, environmental and cultural wellbeing of its area (Welsh Government, 2016).

In EG terms, the Act establishes a radically new framework for place-based development and mandates a new process of co-production that challenges the hierarchical division of labour between the state and the citizen. The potential scope for such a new framework was increased when the Welsh Government officially embraced the Foundational Economy: the essential social goods and services that form the basis of civilized everyday life. These include *material services* through pipes and cables, networks and branches distributing water, electricity, gas, telecoms, banking services and food; and the *providential services* of primary and secondary education, health and care for children and adults as well as income maintenance (FEC, 2018).

To nurture local experimentation, the Welsh Government launched a new Foundational Economy Challenge Fund, inviting co-production partnerships between municipalities and their civil society partners and dissolving the traditional barriers between policy makers and policy takers. The Fund supports “experiments and innovation which adopt a collaborative approach to help inform ways Wales can realise the potential of the foundational economy”, and acknowledges local policy will have to be made locally. “There is no exact template we can lift and shift to Welsh communities, though undoubtedly there are lessons to be learned from others” (Welsh Government, 2019).

In 20 years of devolution, this is the first time the Welsh Government has ever conceded there is “no exact template” for public service reform or local development.

But the weakest part of the WFG legislation is the provision for monitoring and delivering the wellbeing goals. One of the key challenges of the next 20 years will be to transform the good intentions of the Act into good practice. To do this, the Welsh Government will have to break with the habit (hardly unique to Wales) of treating leading and lagging performers the same, as if noticing the difference was a form of discrimination, rather than the first step towards improvement for all.

Once that habit is broken, a modest reform of monitoring the PSBs could be of further help. Since the local PSB wellbeing plans are by law required to have regard for certain key sectors such as health and policing, it makes sense to institutionalize annual or more frequent peer review by a federated body including local and national actors. Similar functions in different local authorities could be compared horizontally and the assessments linked vertically to the Future Generations Commissioner and the Welsh Government. This would help generalize local successes quickly and detect local problems early, underscoring that participation is as important in implementation as it is in design. A demonstration that locales can learn from each other – and that government can help them learn, while also learning from them – might itself contribute to the restoration of trust in the public realm.

# References

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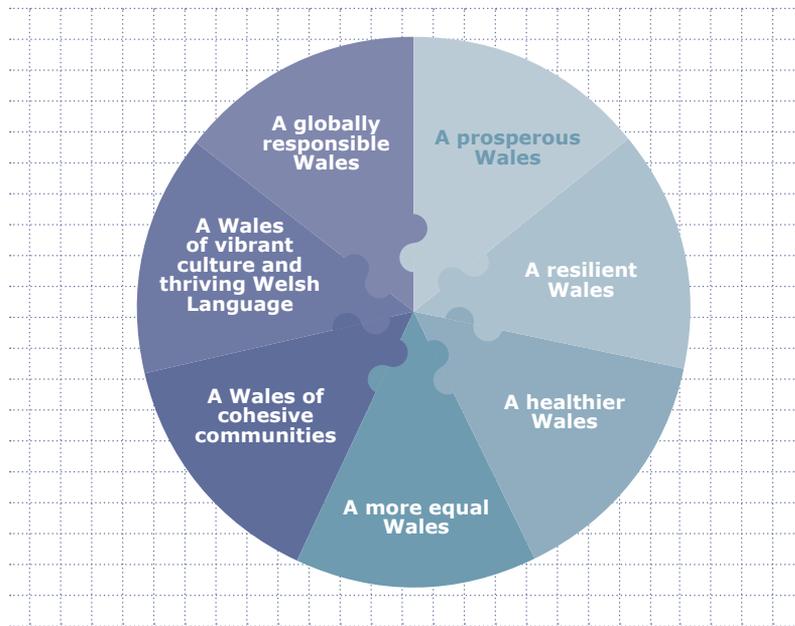
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## Exhibit 1

### Well-being Goals





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This work was part of Nesta's Radical Visions  
for Future Government collection, 2019

<https://www.nesta.org.uk/report/radical-visions-future-government/>