

## **Crafting a collaborative Public Services Board culture: A policy briefing for Public Services Boards**

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# Crafting a collaborative PSB culture

A policy briefing for Public Services Boards

## Summary

- Public Services Boards (PSBs) are the key institution for collaboration across the public and third sectors, established by the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act, 2015.
- Recent research in Wales (Woodcock, 2022) has shown that PSBs risk not taking collaborative action on their well-being plans due to a culture of hierarchy, specialisation and managerial accountability.
- The research demonstrated that Action Research (a participatory form of learning through joint action) can help PSBs to build the capacity to negotiate joint well-being objectives and motivate immediate action.
- This policy briefing sets out how PSBs can use action research practices to:
  - Enhance dialogue (open discussion and mutual understanding),
  - Create 'heterarchy' (horizontal decision-making and shared power),
  - Improve stakeholder inclusion (diverse involvement in well-being plans and action).
- The briefing explains how PSB partnerships managers can use peer support forums and an accompanying briefing, 'Creating a Wild Pathways strategy' to build on examples of good practice.
- These policy briefings are based on an extensive period of Action Research by the author with a PSB and partners from the public and third sectors in Wales, undertaken between 2016 and 2019 as part of a doctoral project.

## Public Services Boards and collaboration

Public Services Boards (PSB) are established by the Well-being of Future Generations Act as the key institution to enable public bodies and third sector organisations to act jointly.

To collaborate, and to deliver the other ways of working set out in the Act, studies of strategic governance networks show that they need a culture that is:

**Dialogical:** it encourages open discussion and mutual understanding.

**Heterarchical:** decision-making is 'horizontal', so each partner has equal influence and shares responsibility.

**Pluralist:** decisions take account of and create positive relationships between the diverse aims of members and other stakeholders.

## Current PSB culture

Recent research in Wales (Woodcock, 2022) observed a PSB during its first cycle of well-being planning.

The research found that the PSB adopted specialist, hierarchical and managerial practices that restricted its ability for dialogue, shared decision-making and diverse inclusion.

Consequently, the PSB risked losing its democratic legitimacy and power to act with communities and restricted its members' motivation to pool resources. The PSB's action plans began to reflect the priorities of regional and national policies rather than local concerns, as members turned to these policies for authority and resources.

### Specialisation limited dialogue:

A lack of dialogue at the Board restricted understanding of each member's strategic aims, creating a series of competing priorities or 'lobbies.'

Separate subgroups for each objective created narrow specialisms, perpetuating the lack of mutual understanding.

### Hierarchy prevented shared decision-making:

An implicit hierarchy of 'statutory' and 'invited' members gave some partners more influence over the choice of well-being priorities.

Board members had greater influence on decision-making than stakeholders involved in engagement, leading to the rejection of suggestions of cross-cutting or multi-outcome objectives.

### Managerial accountability restricted diversity:

'Commissioning' of subgroups' plans by the Board reinforced some members' power to veto action.

Evaluation of plans focussed on the efficient delivery of competing objectives, rather than the democratic inclusion of multiple aims.

### Action Research and collaboration

Action research is an approach to learning which aims to enhance societal well-being by strengthening democratic participation in decision-making and changing inequalities.

The research project established two temporary multi-organisation networks which used action research practices to understand how the network partners could collaborate.

The research networks included partners from Natural Resources Wales, County Councils, Public Health, a Primary-care cluster, and third sector organisations.

The networks produced two main findings which can help the PSB:

**Finding 1:** Using action research practices can create a collaborative culture.

**Finding 2:** The partners created a practical 'Wild Pathways' strategy which showed the benefits of collaboration.

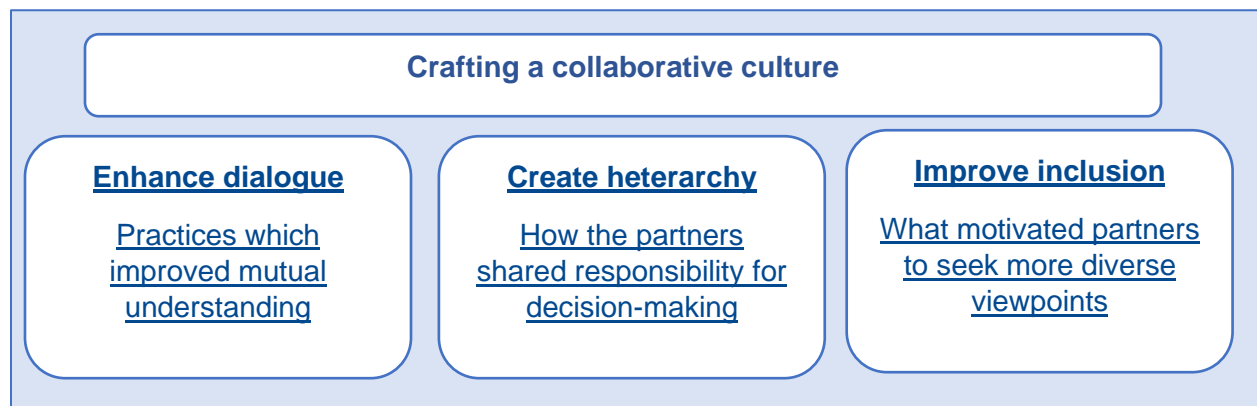
**This policy briefing explains the first finding, how action research practices can help the PSB to reshape its culture.** The accompanying policy briefing, 'Creating a Wild Pathways strategy' explains the second finding. It provides a practical strategy to guide mutually beneficial collaboration between partners interested in environment, health and community development.

## Using Action Research methods in the PSB

This section sets out briefly how the PSB can use action research to craft a collaborative culture which transforms current practices.

Partnerships managers can support each other in this process through their peer support forums and by identifying training needs and opportunities.

PSBs can also use the accompanying policy briefing, 'Creating a Wild Pathways strategy', to build on a practical example of collaborative partnership working.



### Enhance dialogue



Research partners focused on improving mutual understanding by:

- Explaining each other's main aims and strategies,
- Mapping communities' needs and assets and organisations' current work programmes,
- Taking practical action together by combining current work programmes in small pilot projects.



PSB partnerships managers can share examples with each other of ways in which Boards have successfully engaged in dialogue, mapping and pilot projects.

**Focus for transformation:** bring together strategic leads and programme managers to share strategic and practical knowledge.

## Create heterarchy

Research partners created a commitment to shared responsibility and equality in decision-making by:



- Identifying how each organisation's work constrains others' action and limits communities' resilience,
- Identifying ways in which each organisation potentially contributes to the others,
- Combining key action principles (the bases for designing work programmes) from each organisation in a strategy for joint action that delivers mutual benefits.



PSB partnerships managers can use the accompanying policy briefing 'Creating a Wild Pathways strategy' to explore how current practices constrain joint action and how combined strategies create mutual benefit.

**Focus for transformation:** change organisations' relationships from instrumental (treating each other as resources) to reciprocal (contributing to each other).

## Improve inclusion

Research partners extended their alliance to include diverse organisations and people within their organisations by:



- Sharing knowledge of each partner organisation's networks,
- Exploring how meeting one organisation's needs could create assets for others,
- Pooling the resources of existing work programmes for mutual benefit.



PSB partnerships managers can include diverse perspectives by working with managers and engagement officers from each partner body to create multiple sources and forms of knowledge.

**Focus for transformation:** change accountability processes so that managers are accountable for including diverse views in decisions.

## About the research

The author is currently a Research Fellow with the leading local government research institution, Inlogov at University of Birmingham. This briefing is based on her doctoral thesis for which she undertook an extended piece of action research between 2016 and 2019 with a North Wales PSB and the North Wales Wildlife Trust. The latter contributed towards research expenses. The research underwent rigorous peer review as the basis for her PhD in Sociology and Social Policy at Bangor University.

The full research is available at:

Woodcock, E. M. (2022) *Cross-sector collaboration for Wales' national well-being:*

*Transformative action in communities of practice*. Bangor. Available at:

[https://research.bangor.ac.uk/portal/en/theses/crosssector-collaboration-for-wales-national-wellbeing\(a935f539-869b-4be5-a41b-38f91ee738d5\).html](https://research.bangor.ac.uk/portal/en/theses/crosssector-collaboration-for-wales-national-wellbeing(a935f539-869b-4be5-a41b-38f91ee738d5).html).