

A One Public Service for Wales

Public Trust and Collaboration

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Executive Summary

The second roundtable held in the Shaping One Public Service in Wales series, again, brought together leaders across public services to explore a key question:

How can public trust and collaboration be strengthened to support a more effective One Public Service for Wales?

The discussion highlighted a strong commitment to working across boundaries in the shared interest of citizens and communities. However, it also brought to life the realities that constrain collaboration in practice: risk aversion, narrow organisational accountabilities, funding structures and the pressure to deliver within silos.

Public trust was discussed as primarily built through lived experiences, both of those delivering services and those directly impacted by them. This reflects wider evidence that public trust is closely linked to how people experience services in practice, not just how they are described.

Where citizens' experiences are fair, reliable and responsive, trust is strengthened. Trust operates at multiple levels: between citizens and institutions, between organisations, and between leaders with overlapping agendas. Where trust is low, collaboration becomes harder and more defensive. Where trust is high, there is more willingness to share risk, information and accountability.

This paper reflects the emerging themes for the discussion and considers what they mean for the future of One Public Service in Wales. The paper also draws on key relevant papers.

Part One

Trust is built through lived experiences

One of the most consistent themes throughout the discussion was the idea that public trust is largely shaped by citizens' direct experience of the public services they interact with or use.

Some participants talked about the fact there is a disconnect between the public bodies who can, at times, make decisions before properly listening to the public to understand how they currently experience public services as well as how they want to experience them in the future.

Public trust grows when people receive a good experience of the public services they are accessing. Participants reflected that currently, these experiences aren't always positive. This is less about people not achieving their 'wish lists' but more about being part of an authentic co-productive experience that takes into account all the relevant factors including budgetary constraints.

If citizens are authentically engaged in service transformation and understand the challenges facing public servants, they are more likely to own and defend a proportionate and sustainable outcome as opposed to the pursuit of something that is strategically flawed or financially unsustainable.

Expectations of public services will continue to increase, and citizens need to be reassured their services will be fair, consistent, and responsive.

Research on public services has long shown that citizens judge institutions largely through their direct services experiences rather than through policy intent.¹

When trying to increase the level of public trust, participants reflected that delivering a great service every time could help to shift that perspective. However, given the current constraints on resource and budgets, this isn't always possible. Although, one way to combat this current reality was the need for public services to be

¹ Van De Walle, S. (2013) The role of trust in public services and public sector reform

‘radically transparent and honest’:

- about when things do go wrong- highlighting the value of being honest about when things don’t go right, and what has/will be done to fix it
- about resource challenges
- about what genuine opportunities there are for people to shape what ‘good enough’ looks like in the context of resource challenges

In relation to radical honesty, this means it is crucial for the messaging and information that citizens receive to be timely, honest and most importantly, for the information to reach communities where they are. Public services can often spend time creating and implementing communications plans that don’t interact or properly land with communities. Participants mentioned the need to work directly with communities to embed services within the fabric of communities, so people know how to get the right services they need. An example was cited from Blackpool where a community connector model hired individuals living within the existing communities who served as honest brokers between services and citizens and were provided with the support and learning and

development opportunities that led in turn to an increase in public trust.²

The gap between policy and delivery

Another key theme was the current relationship between policy ambition and delivery. Wales has no shortage of progressive and ambitious policies, but the gap between the ambition and the ability to deliver them is clear. This reflects wider patterns seen internationally, where governments often find delivery across complex systems more challenging than policy design.³

One reflection was the importance of having the right people, with the right experience and trust within a particular community, from the outset who work with those communities, to design services that can increase the speed and efficacy of delivery as well as:

1. Ensuring services and policies are implementable
2. Ensuring services meet the needs of those who will use them

Participants reflected that the traditional sequence of strategy, policy and delivery can create

² BMC Health Services Research, (2021), Community Connectors (CCx)

³ OECD, (2024), Steering from the Centre of Government in Times of Complexity: Compendium of Practices

challenges when implementation realities are not fully considered from the outset.

There was a view that policy ambition must be grounded in operational and financial realities, and shaped with those responsible for delivery. As one participant noted, ***“it’s not good policy if it’s not designed to be delivered.”***

Participants also shared that building trust in services goes beyond implementation and is also impacted by ensuring feedback and learning opportunities are utilised after a first implementation or pilot phase of a new offer. It is important that people have the opportunity to give feedback and offer insights as to whether a service that was set out to do something specific, is working as expected. This enables organisations to go beyond just setting clear outputs and move into understanding the specifics about the actual outcomes.

Part Two

Alongside discussion of trust and collaboration in practice, participants also reflected on where cross-sector collaboration could have the greatest impact. These reflections moved beyond principles and into areas

where collaboration was seen as particularly necessary, and potentially transformative, if sustained over time.

The discussion didn’t result in a definitive list of priorities. However, several themes emerged as areas where collaboration across public services could make a meaningful difference, particularly in building trust and improving outcomes.

Short-term cycles vs. long-term challenges

Similarly to the first roundtable, participants reflected that short-term funding and project cycles do make sustained collaboration challenging. Services are often treated as time-limited initiatives rather than evolving and continuous systems. This lies in juxtaposition with the long-term challenges which public services face such as poverty, trust, prevention, which require continuity in responsiveness. Systems practice literature highlights that complex social challenges require sustained collaboration over time rather than short, time-limited interventions.⁴

There was a shared sense that current delivery models can create a cycle of planning, piloting and redesigning,

without always allowing enough time for approaches to embed and mature. Some participants questioned whether services are too often treated as projects with an endpoint, rather than as evolving systems that need to adapt over time.

This was seen as having implications for collaboration. Short-term cycles can make it harder to build and maintain cross-service relationships, align priorities or invest in shared learning. Participants noted that collaboration often develops gradually and relies on continuity, which can be disrupted by changing programmes or funding arrangements.

For example, Finland has developed approaches to long-term strategic planning and coordination from its centre of government to create continuity across planning cycles and better align ministries and agencies around shared multi-year goals, illustrating how structured, long-term processes can support cross-cutting collaboration.⁵

Long-term challenges were viewed as opportunities where cross-service collaboration could have value. Sustained collaboration was seen as better suited to addressing complex

issues that do not fit within organisational or funding boundaries. In this context, collaboration was described not as an additional layer of work, but as part of how long-term challenges can be approached more coherently.

Leadership, culture and risk

Leadership and organisational culture were raised as influencing the possibility of collaboration. Participants reflected that cross-service collaboration often requires leaders to share risk, work with uncertainty and prioritise system-wide outcomes alongside organisational responsibilities. OECD's Trust Framework highlighted that trust is relational and dynamic, extending beyond citizen-service interactions to relationships between services, reinforcing the importance of collaborative working conditions.⁶

There was discussion about how current systems can reward caution and risk management, sometimes making it difficult for leaders to pursue collaborative approaches that carry uncertainty. In this context, collaboration can feel personally or organisationally risky, even where there is a strong commitment to partnership working.

⁵ OECD, (2024), *Steering from the Centre of Government in Times of Complexity: Compendium of Practices*

⁶ OECD, (2021), *An Updated OECD Framework on Drivers of Trust in Public Institutions to Meet Current and Future Challenges*

The OECD highlights New Zealand's Better Public Services programme as an example where political leadership and government coordination were used to align agencies around shared outcomes. Commitment to a limited set of priorities, collective accountability and regular public reporting were identified as important enablers.⁷

Some participants suggested that leadership culture plays a significant role in shaping how far collaboration can develop. Where leaders model openness, learning and shared ownership, collaboration was described as easier to sustain. Conversely, where accountability arrangements focus narrowly on organisational performance, collaboration can become secondary to institutional priorities.

One participant referenced work by a research group in northern Spain exploring multilevel governance and sustainability. They described how bringing together different parts of the system helped participants better understand the value of each other's roles, including the contributions of communities and citizens. This was seen as helping to reduce distrust and build more constructive relationships across the system.⁸

Future leadership was also discussed in terms of recruitment, culture, mindset and learning and development. Participants noted the potential value of attracting and demonstrably supporting leaders who are comfortable with experimentation, have a healthy risk appetite and are hungry to work across boundaries. This included creating more opportunities for senior and emerging leaders to work together, learn from one another, and challenge established ways of working, alongside approaches such as reverse mentoring.

Overall, leadership and culture were seen as both enablers and constraints. They were also identified as areas where shifts in practice could create conditions for more consistent and effective cross-sector collaboration over time.

⁷ OECD, (2024), *Steering from the Centre of Government in Times of Complexity: Compendium of Practices*

⁸ Orkestra, Basque Institute of Competitiveness, (2023), *Research on multilevel governance and regional transformation*

Summary

The second roundtable suggested that trust and collaboration are not simply matters of good intent or individual behaviour. They are shaped by the wider system in which public services operate.

Participants described a public service landscape where collaboration is widely valued, yet often difficult to sustain. Short-term funding cycles, organisational accountabilities and risk-averse cultures can make cross-sector working fragile, even where relationships are strong. In this context, trust can be built slowly but undermined quickly.

Trust was consistently linked to lived experience. **Where services are experienced as fair, responsive and honest, confidence grows.** Where there is a gap between policy ambition and delivery reality, trust is compromised. This suggests that **trust is not separate from delivery but closely connected to how services function in practice.**

The discussion also pointed to the importance of continuity. Long-term challenges such as poverty, prevention and community wellbeing do not fit neatly within short programme cycles. Participants reflected that collaboration often requires time, stability and shared learning to take root.

Taken together, these reflections suggest that **strengthening trust and collaboration requires attention to relationships and the system conditions that shape how public services are designed, funded and led.**