

# A One Public Service for Wales

Key Priorities and Leadership

*April 2026*

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# Executive Summary

Wales does not lack vision for its public services. Over the past two decades, it has developed ambitious policy grounded in collaboration, prevention, and long-term wellbeing. Legislation such as the Wellbeing of Future Generations (Wales) Act has set out a progressive and internationally admired framework. However, Wales is not alone in facing a persistent question seen across many public service systems:

## **Why does lived experience of public services so often fall short of policy ambition?**

This was the starting point for the first in a series of cross-sector roundtables exploring the future of One Public Service leadership in Wales. The roundtable was attended by leaders representing a wide range of public service organisations in Wales.

A key hypothesis was shared to open the discussion: **“Wales is rich in progressive policy and rhetoric,**

**but weak in translating this into delivery. The gap between aspiration and implementation is the real challenge.”**

This “delivery gap” became an implicit thread through much of the discussion.

The discussion focussed on a central challenge:

## **How can public service leadership in Wales be shaped, now and for the long term, to better meet the needs of citizens and communities?**

This paper provides a synthesis of that discussion whilst drawing in wider learning from a number of relevant reference documents to support the framing of the observations outlined below.

What emerged from the first roundtable, was not a critique of Welsh public service values. It was a reflection on delivery, leadership practice, and system behaviours.

# Wales is rich in policy, but there is a delivery gap

A recurring theme was that Wales is “policy rich” but “delivery constrained.” Participants broadly agreed with the hypothesis that the gap between aspiration and implementation is now the critical issue for Welsh public services.

This is not unique to Wales. International evidence shows that governments often struggle less with developing policy ambition and more with delivering it consistently across complex systems. The challenge lies in translating priorities into coordinated action across the system. But in a small nation such as Wales, where collaboration is both possible and expected, the delivery gap can be felt more acutely.

Participants reflected that systemic challenges can sometimes lead to the creation of:

- new plans
- new fora
- new boards
- new committees
- new structures

While these responses may be understandable given policy, accountability, or governance requirements, participants noted that structures alone rarely resolve complex system challenges. What is often required is adaptable leadership with the permission to respond to challenges more creatively and rapidly, with risks shared with other system leaders in relation to shared endeavours through allyship and investment in relationships. There doesn't appear to be enough leverage across systems to ensure leaders are held to account to deliver on shared challenges. As one participant captured it:

***"We're not really geared up for the future...we're still very much rooted in the here and now in the structures that we operate in."***

The implication is clear: **the real challenge for the next Government of Wales is less about designing policy and more about how to implement better and faster.**

Yet participants also recognised Wales' distinctive advantages, "Wales has the potential to become a beacon for modern, human-centred public services. Our size is our strength, we should be more nimble, responsive, and innovative in ways that larger nations cannot."

The Wellbeing of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015 was repeatedly referenced as providing unique legislative infrastructure. However, as one participant noted: "It should be a real competitive advantage for Wales, but I'm not sure we've quite unlocked that yet." Transform Wales<sup>1</sup> echoes this, calling the Act a framework that "should be driving transformation but hasn't been fully operationalised."

**"Wales has the potential to become a beacon for modern, human-centred public services.**

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<sup>1</sup> Transform Wales, (2025), *Transforming public services for a modern Wales*.

# Identified priorities for One Public Service

## Poverty as the system pressure shaping everything else

When asked to identify shared priorities demanding whole-system responses, poverty surfaced quickly and unequivocally.

Participants described poverty not as a discrete policy area, but as the underlying driver of demand in particular across health, education, housing and social care. Failure to address it was seen as storing up long-term crisis costs, both human and financial.

There was strong recognition that prevention and early intervention are essential, but also acknowledgement of the political and operational difficulty of sustaining prevention while crisis pressures dominate.

This points to a core leadership challenge:

**How do leaders protect long-term priorities in systems designed to react to short-term pressure?**

## Workforce as the central asset

A strong consensus emerged around workforce as both a critical challenge and opportunity.

### Participants emphasised:

- **Shared workforce planning** and development across organisational boundaries
- **Creating fulfilling work** that attracts and retains people committed to public service
- **Building diverse and inclusive teams** that reflect Welsh communities
- **Developing flexible deployment** models that allow skills to flow where needed

As one participant stated:

***"I think the opportunity for One Public Service Wales is...can we start to share intelligence, can we start to share good practice, can we start to share approaches to recruitment, retention, making this a great place to work?"***

The Australian Centre for Social Innovation's (TACSI) work on "minimum viable systems" suggests that getting the right people with the right capabilities is foundational to achieving just futures.<sup>2</sup>

Transform Wales identifies a critical gap: "While there are small pockets of these skills, they're often too small, unevenly distributed[...]sitting in junior roles without the mandate to lead change."<sup>3</sup>

## **Prevention and early intervention**

Multiple participants highlighted the need to shift from reactive crisis management to proactive prevention:

- Working "further upstream": intervening earlier to address root causes before problems escalate
- Integrating services around people and communities rather than organisational structures

- Taking a life-course approach that connects interventions across different life stages
- Investing in community resilience and social infrastructure

One participant shared that:

***"We're brilliant firefighters, but if you know there's a fire, stop it at source...we seem to be very good at managing the consequence rather than the cause."***

TACSI's framework emphasises "networked collaboration" as essential for prevention work, which inherently requires multiple actors working across traditional boundaries. The framework's concept of "fractal experiences", describes how meaningful change often emerges through multiple interconnected interventions over time rather than single programmes.

In practice, this means sustained coordination between services, aligning interventions around shared outcomes rather than isolated programmes.

## **Integration is a behaviour, not a structure**

Words offered to describe participants' vision for future One

<sup>2</sup> The Australian Centre for Social Innovation, (2025), *Practices for realising just futures*.

<sup>3</sup> Transform Wales, (2025), *Transforming public services for a modern Wales*.

Public Service included *integrated, joined-up, human-centred, inclusive, compassionate, informed, and trusted*.

These are not new aspirations. But the discussion suggested that integration is still too often treated as a structural exercise rather than a behavioural one.

Integration requires:

- shared accountability
- aligned incentives
- transparent data
- trust between organisations
- and leaders willing to act beyond institutional boundaries.

Better use of data is an enabler:

- Breaking down data and information silos to create a shared understanding of needs
- Using evidence to inform decisions rather than relying on assumptions or political expediency
- Predictive analytics to anticipate future challenges
- Demonstrating impact to build public trust and secure continued investment

TACSI's "polyfutures practices"<sup>4</sup> suggest that diverse knowledge systems, including data, lived experience, and indigenous knowledge, need to be integrated.

Their framework recognises that evidence must be balanced with human understanding.

## **Trust is an input and an outcome**

Public trust emerged as both a concern and a goal. Participants noted low confidence in institutions and a need to rebuild faith in devolved government.

Importantly, trust was not framed as a communications issue alone. It was linked to:

- services that work
- fairness and transparency
- visible impact
- honesty about what is and is not possible

There was strong consensus that, in order to gain public trust, it is necessary to achieve quick, tangible wins. These quick wins can help demonstrate to the public that action is being taken in immediately visible ways. By doing so, this provides a mandate and encourages more public patience in tackling the more complex challenges that will take longer to show visible signs of improvement. Trust grows when people experience competence and integrity. It declines when systems appear slow, fragmented or opaque.

# Leadership for One Public Service

When asked what leadership should look like for the next 5-15 years, participants identified several essential attributes and shifts:

## Values-based leadership

Participants emphasised the need for leaders who:

- Navigate competing values transparently, making explicit the trade-offs in complex decisions
- Embody public service values of integrity, impartiality, and service to the community
- Create values-driven cultures within their organisations
- Bridge administrative and political values while maintaining professional independence

## Open and inclusive approach

Leaders must actively seek diverse perspectives and create

psychological safety for difference:

- Looking beyond usual voices to include marginalised communities
- Challenging assumptions through exposure to different lived experiences
- Building diverse senior leadership teams that reflect Welsh demographics
- Creating space for difficult conversations about systemic change

The OECD framework emphasises that

***"diversity at senior levels is both a moral necessity, to strive to have SCS that are representative of the society they serve", and "a business imperative, as it can contribute to better policy and programme design."***<sup>5</sup>

## Networked collaboration

The complexity of modern challenges requires leaders who can:

- Work across organisational boundaries without waiting for structural reform
- Build and maintain diverse networks of collaborators
- Share accountability for cross-cutting outcomes
- Navigate without hierarchical authority through influence and relationships

The OECD identifies networked collaboration as essential:<sup>6</sup>

***"Looking beyond their own organisation, successful SCS are adept at collaborating through networks, with other government actors, and beyond."***

They note that "working through networked collaboration requires an adjustment to traditional leadership styles" and that leaders must

***"think in terms of 'what is good for society', and addressing problems from a holistic point of view, rather than purely a sectoral or institutional one."***

## Comfort with complexity and uncertainty

Future leaders must be able to:

- Make decisions with incomplete information
- Hold paradox and ambiguity without forcing premature certainty
- Experiment and learn from both success and failure
- Adapt rapidly to changing circumstances

The COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated that such leadership is possible when necessary. Several participants wondered how to maintain that energy and flexibility.

## Long-term perspective with short-term delivery

Leaders must hold both time horizons simultaneously:

- Articulating compelling visions of desired futures
- Delivering tangible improvements that build credibility and momentum
- Making decisions today that benefit future generations
- Protecting long-term investments from short-term political pressures

# From conversation to change

Evidence from futures and systems practice suggests that dialogue alone does not create transformation. Change happens when vision is connected to resources, power and ongoing action.

Research on “minimum viable systems” argues that progress often begins with small, practical constellations of relationships and activities that build momentum over time.<sup>7</sup>

In this sense, the One Public Service conversation must move beyond periodic reflection and into sustained experimentation and delivery.

## Listening differently

A recurring tension in public leadership is the gap between what is assumed are long-term priorities versus what citizens experience as urgent in the here and now. Bridging the gap requires effective listening of the ongoing citizen voice.

Possible steps to consider:

- Citizen assemblies or citizen panels
- A clear mandated and demonstrable co-production approach for Wales
- Effective feedback loops to show exactly how citizens have shaped decisions

## Supporting leaders to work differently

Many leaders are a product of systems that reward risk management, compliance and organisational performance over system leadership and innovation.

Supporting public service leaders effectively could include:

- Creating safe and intentional spaces for cross-sector learning and experimentation
- Clear signals from government that thoughtful risk-taking in pursuit of shared outcomes is supported
- Shared accountability models so leaders are not penalised for collaboration across boundaries
- Development programmes that explicitly build adaptive systems and relational leadership capabilities

## Recruiting and shaping future leadership

If One Public Service is sustainable, leadership pipelines need to evolve.

Questions to consider are:

- Do recruitment and promotion systems reward collaboration?

- Are we selecting leaders who are comfortable with ambiguity, partnership and shared ownership of outcomes?

Practical considerations could include:

- Cross-sector secondments
- Leadership roles with shared or joint accountability across organisations
- Recruitment criteria that value relational and systems leadership alongside technical expertise

## Quick wins that build credibility

Visible progress matters, and quick wins aren't superficial if they demonstrate momentum, intent, and build public trust.

Examples could include:

- A small number of national priorities, cross-sector challenges tackled jointly
- Shared workforce initiatives
- Data-sharing pilots focused on prevention and early intervention
- Public reporting on certain shared outcomes

# A moment of opportunity

With a Senedd election approaching, Wales stands at a moment where leadership choices will shape the next decade of public service reform.

**The conversation about One Public Service leadership is ultimately a conversation about how Wales governs itself in an era of constraint and complexity.**

Wales has already articulated the kind of public service system it wants. The risk now is fatigue with reform that feels continuous yet incomplete. Every new plan that does not translate into visible change makes the next one harder to believe in.

If One Public Service is to be more than a recurring aspiration, leadership will need to shift from designing change to sustaining it, when it is politically difficult, slow to show results, or requires letting go of familiar ways of working.

Financial pressures, rising demand and public expectations mean the margin for inefficiency is narrowing. Under these conditions, fragmented leadership is a systemic risk. **The challenge ahead is to deliver public services that work. That will require leadership cultures that reward collaboration, learning and long-term thinking, when short-term pressures dominate.**