

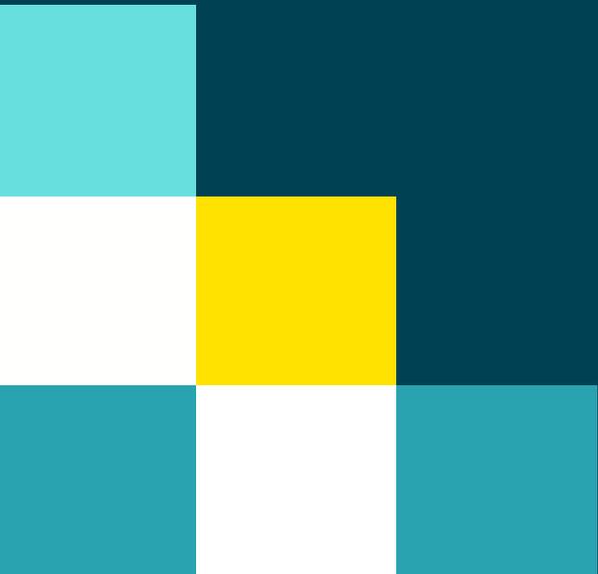


**Wales Centre for Public Policy**  
**Canolfan Polisi Cyhoeddus Cymru**

# Transforming local government in Wales

**Part 1: Exploring the evidence**  
Working paper

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March 2026



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The Wales Centre for Public Policy provides ministers, senior policy makers and public service leaders with authoritative independent evidence and expertise which helps them to identify effective policy responses and practical solutions to some of the biggest policy challenges facing Wales.

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# Summary

- Local government in Wales faces an unprecedented convergence of pressures: financial constraints, demographic change, rising demand and declining public trust. While councils have demonstrated resilience and creativity in maintaining core services, the current model of local government remains fragile and increasingly unsustainable. Incremental efficiency gains are no longer sufficient to meet the scale of the challenges ahead.
- Evidence drawn from Wales, the wider UK and international practice shows that progress is possible when local government invests collectively in its capacity to learn, innovate and plan for the long term.
- Across each facet of local government performance, including impact, efficient use of resources and sufficient governance, there are already places using experimental mindsets to develop, test and implement new ideas.
- This framework of performance, set out in legislation and likely to remain a solid foundation for the foreseeable future, provides a strong starting point for thinking about what comes next.
- Local government performance is focused on very short time horizons, driven by budget constraints and increasing demand for reactive services. Yet the changes that will lead to greater sustainability can only happen over a prolonged period. Leaders guiding their organisations through this challenge will need to hold these two scenarios as equally important. The Three Horizons model provides a framework for doing this, and this report shows how it can be used to develop a vision for the future of local government in Wales and manage the transition from the present to the future.
- This paper argues that meaningful transformation, resulting in a more sustainable future for local government, requires three interlinked actions:
  - A shared vision of what sustainable local government looks like. Without this, neither strategy nor reform can be effectively designed or delivered.
  - Adoption of the Three Horizons model as a framework for transformation. This approach allows current systems to continue functioning while future models are tested and scaled, ensuring continuity of service, rigorous learning and a commitment to a different future.
  - Rebuilding innovation capacity through a collaborative, multi-funded structure. This would build on lessons learned from the first years of the London Office of Technology and Innovation (LOTI), and be jointly funded and governed by local government, the WLGA and Welsh Government.
  - The paper concludes with a call to embed these three pillars within a coordinated transformation programme by 2027, laying the groundwork for a sustainable and citizen-centred system by 2035.

# Introduction

In summer 2025, the Wales Centre for Public Policy (WCPP) approached newydd|new to undertake research into the evidence around local government transformation and to propose recommendations on how local government in Wales might undertake a transformation exercise that leads to a more sustainable future. This working paper is Part 1 of the research. It outlines an iterative programme of work that should ideally involve practical sessions to explore what does and does not work, and to enable adaptation in response. Part 1 provides the basis for conversations and exploratory research that is presented in the workshop report, Part 2: Testing our starting points.

## The context for change

Recognising the urgent need for change in local government, a group of chief executives came together in 2022 to map out a new operating approach for local government in Scotland (Improvement Service, 2022). To guide their work, they asked two key questions:

- How do councils transition from a predominantly service provider-based approach to one that is adaptable, collaborative and creative, driven by strong local democratic mandates that put people and communities at the heart of change?
- How do councils make the shift to a new paradigm, which is outcomes obsessed, delivery agnostic, and involves them holding a strategic vision with and for citizens, to craft economic and social outcomes that are equitable for all?

These questions are important because they do two things. Firstly, they recognise three core elements (Randle and Studdert, 2025) that local government must consider:

- The places they are responsible for and the needs of the people who live there;
- How they make best use of their resources; and
- Where power and accountability reside.

Secondly, they set a direction of travel, in other words a vision. To design a programme of activity that supports innovation and transformation in local government, in Wales or elsewhere, we need to be clear about the direction of travel

and what the ‘third horizon’ (International Futures Forum, n.d.) we are aiming for looks like.

We do not currently have a well-articulated or clear vision for how local government will perform sustainably in Wales in the future.

In their opening paper (Wales Centre for Public Policy, 2025), the working group convened by WCPP articulated their understanding of the purpose and functions of local government in Wales. However, this reflects the current state of play rather than a radical vision for the future.

It foregrounds the role of local government as a top-down deliverer of services. Elected members represent the views of their constituents and councils design and deliver services. There is no explicit statement of intent around greater involvement of citizens in decision making or co-design and delivery of services, although this is hinted at in statements on collaboration and coordination.

It explores the suggestion that some services might be better held by other organisations or partnerships. However, simply moving these services elsewhere is unlikely to make them sustainable over the long term.

Where we see greater alignment between the opening paper and the clearer vision articulated in Scotland is in what the WCPP working group describes as the ‘implications’ of the current model. A shift to prevention; being more enabling and convening; the development of new values, behaviours, capacity and capabilities; and reinvigorating local democracy all point to how local government might perform differently in the future to address the problems created by an unsustainable model.

It is important to state that this paper does not aim to set out a long-term vision for places or the needs of people, and the Scottish questions do not do that either. The primary purpose of local government is local democracy, so local places should set their own visions, and in Wales this already happens to some extent through local wellbeing plans (Cardiff Public Services Board, 2023).

We can, though, begin to outline a vision for how local government might perform differently to be sustainable in the longer term, and how we might support local government to develop and test these new modes of performance. This is what the Scottish questions begin to address, focusing on the transition from service provider to being more adaptable, collaborative and creative, and to a new paradigm that holds a strategic vision with and for citizens.

So, what could this look like for Wales? How do we set a vision and, more importantly, how do we then get there?

The research and recommendations that follow build on these implications and are intended to act as starting points for further conversations about how a sustainable version of local government might perform in the future. Our intention is that they serve as hypotheses that can be tested to help us better understand what this might look like, what is acceptable and needed, and what is not.

The paper uses the existing performance framework of the Local Government and Elections (Wales) 2021 Act (hereafter referred to as ‘the act’), which is likely to be a fixed anchor for local government performance in the short to medium term. We have set a deadline of 2035, as this takes us through the next two local government electoral cycles (2027 and 2031). This is sufficiently long for change to be possible, but not so distant as to feel meaningless.

Finally, we should also keep in mind that there are three potentially complementary transformation agendas that need to be considered here, similarly either set out or implied in the Scottish questions, although it has not been possible to explore all three in depth:

- How we transform the way that local government performs;
- How the enabling environment in which it performs needs to change; and
- How we transform the role of the citizen in line with these changes.

The landscape of local government and public services more broadly in Wales is complex, so it has not been possible to be comprehensive in our research and assessment of what needs to happen or how we bring about change. There will be omissions and errors.

## The Three Horizons model

We must acknowledge a few home truths before we start this work:

- Firstly, change takes time, and we cannot simply switch off the existing system. Any transformation to a new operating model for local government in Wales will require patience, supported by visible progress that builds momentum.
- Secondly, we need to have a clear idea of where we are trying to get to. This should be a vision that is appropriate for Wales, our context, governance structures and challenges.
- Thirdly, we need to be able to hold this future vision alongside our current context and determine how we build a bridge between them as we go.

The Three Horizons model (NPC, 2024), developed by futurist Bill Sharpe as a framework for developing a shared vision and a plan for moving towards it, helps to facilitate this, allowing us to better establish:

- What is currently happening that is no longer sustainable and what might need to be retained (Horizon 1);
- The vision we are aiming for and why this may be more sustainable in the future (Horizon 3); and
- The activities we are going to undertake to bridge between them (Horizon 2).

It is a useful model in this situation because it accepts that the current way of doing things exists and is likely to continue, at least partially, in some form in the future. At the same time, a new version of the future needs to be developed, tested and implemented. We cannot pause the services that local government provides while we bring new approaches to life, so we must hold both the present and the future together while building momentum for change.

### What does the future look like and how does this increase the need for change?

Much has been written about the trends that will shape the next ten years, to the extent that we do not need to repeat that exercise here in detail (Welsh Government, 2021). However, it is worth noting several long-term challenges that will continue to shape performance over the next decade.

Ongoing trends include constrained finances, driven by low growth, inflationary pressures and a lack of long-term investment, demographic change and high levels of service demand. Despite a 4.5% funding rise in 2025 to 2026, councils face persistent inflation, increasing demand and fiscal constraints. An ageing population will intensify pressures on social care and housing, while workforce shortages remain critical, particularly in social care. Rising homelessness and increasing climate and flood risks will further test local capacity.

Technological, environmental and constitutional shifts will also redefine performance. Expanding digital infrastructure offers new potential for service innovation but heightens cyber and inclusion risks. While the Well-being of Future Generations Act continues to steer councils towards long-term, collaborative decision making, it is still not clear how local governments will do this consistently well. Changes to the way Senedd Cymru operates, expanding in numbers but reducing the electoral cycle, create uncertainty about how local and Welsh Government can maintain a strong and productive relationship.

## How we deal with risk and uncertainty

We also need to acknowledge that the future is uncertain and that undertaking any transformation is inherently risky. We cannot be certain that things will work as expected. However, we also need to accept that doing nothing is equally risky, given the current predicament that local government faces. We know that carrying on as we have is unsustainable.

The Three Horizons model allows us space to manage this risk and uncertainty, holding the present, the future and the bridge between the two as equally important components of transformation. We do not need to let go until we have developed and tested possible solutions, but we must recognise that we cannot continue as we are. The way we build our bridge can change as we learn more about potential solutions and the extent to which our envisioned future is emerging.

This also has implications for the future performance of local governments. We need to ensure that the organisations we design for the future are more adaptable and resilient, more flexible and responsive, and better able to act with foresight and anticipation than we are today.

# How might local governments perform differently by 2035?

The Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act (2021) sets out that the performance requirements of local government in Wales are to:

1. Exercise its functions effectively;
2. Use its resources economically, efficiently and effectively; and
3. Ensure that its governance arrangements are sufficient to achieve points 1 and 2.

This provides a useful framework to begin thinking about how local governments might perform differently in the long term, and to start setting a vision that we can test, iterate and implement over the next ten years. It is worth noting that while we will approach each of these areas separately, the three elements interact and overlap, and this should be kept in mind, particularly where a combination of the three might create stronger solutions to our challenges.

## It is exercising its functions effectively

Local government in Wales has broadly been able to exercise its functions over the last 17 years, taking 2008 as the starting point of austerity and the challenges that local government now faces, through a combination of continuous and sometimes more transformative changes to the way it operates. However, there are now fewer areas where change can be made that reduces operating costs without further impairing organisational effectiveness. Each local government in Wales has made, or attempted to make, sufficient changes in line with the changing needs of its local places and its own structures and resources. Transformation and innovation are not new activities, but they are not sufficiently resourced to secure the long-term transformation required to put local government on a sustainable footing.

There is sufficient evidence to suggest that although local governments have continued to exercise their functions, their ability to do so effectively is increasingly diminished. This statement is not made lightly, and it recognises the substantial efforts that both elected and non-elected officials have made to keep their organisations running. This is highlighted repeatedly in research, commentary and position papers by inspectors, commissioners and campaigning organisations. However, we cannot ignore the evidence on outcomes. For example:

- Efforts to improve the responsiveness of the social care system cannot keep pace with increasing, and increasingly complex, demands (Age Cymru, 2024);
- Wales lags behind other UK nations on educational attainment (Sibieta, 2024; mckernan, 2025);
- Public transport performance is less effective in Wales than in other parts of the UK (Coombes and Rodrigues, 2023); and
- Shelter suggest that ‘at current delivery rates it would take over 35 years to provide every household waiting with the home they need’ (Caley, 2025).

So where do we find ourselves and what might the future look like instead?

Using the Three Horizons model, we can begin to map out both where we are now and where we might want to reach in order to improve the sustainability of local government in the long term. The table below provides an indicative, non-exhaustive mapping of values, behaviours, systems and processes, relationships, power, incentives and measurement, skills and capabilities, resource usage and outcomes in the current system (Horizon 1). These are then compared with an alternative vision that should deliver more sustainable results in the long term.

**Table 1 – Comparing current and future local government functions using the Three Horizons model**

| <b>Horizon 1 - The current system (from)</b>  | <b>Horizon 3 - The future, more sustainable system (to)</b>   |
|---|---|
| Services are more likely to be reactive to demand than proactive and preventative;  | Local government is the foundation of a preventative culture. Its proximity to people gives it a unique advantage to shape, enable and deliver the benefits of prevention.  |
| Demand for services is increasing while resources to meet those demands are decreasing, or failing to keep pace.  | Demand for reactive services is falling and the proportion of money spent on reactive or demand-led services is reducing.   |
| The default is to do <i>to</i> citizens rather than <i>with</i> them. As a result, citizens expect services to be delivered for them rather than with them. As a result, citizens expect services to be delivered for them rather than with them. | Those receiving support are co-designing and co-delivering services, and the role of the council is to enable individuals, communities and the wider public and private sector to work alongside the council to deliver sustained improvement in outcomes.<br><br>Local government defaults to being an enabler of services rather than a provider, although it will retain provision in some areas). |
| Councils’ ‘lack the capacity for long-term, strategic decision making as officials and members in leadership positions lack the time to focus on anything that is not related to demand driven services’ (Wales Centre for Public Policy, 2025).  | There is greater emphasis and resource allocated to long-term, strategic decision making and local government is more anticipatory in its decision making.  |
| Placemaking services are usually discretionary and therefore among the first to be cut when savings are required.   | Placemaking (Design Commission for Wales, n.d.) is a shared endeavour between local government and citizens, aligning with Adam Lent’s concept of Withism (Lent, 2025a). The amount of resource allocated to placemaking is increasing as a proportion of spend.  |

| <b>Horizon 1 - The current system (from)</b>  | <b>Horizon 3 - The future, more sustainable system (to)</b>  |
|---|--|
| Innovation is sporadic and led by motivated individuals within local government, rather than systemic. Lessons are often held locally or lost due to a lack of effective evaluation and networking. | Local responsiveness drives creativity and innovation and there is a culture of learning that supports and enables this adaptability.  |
| Services are less likely to be personalised to the needs of the individual and more likely to be somewhat generic and/or siloed.  | People-focused services are joined up and responsive to individual needs. Councils achieve this through localised collaboration and the effective use of data and digital tools.<br><br>Where services need to be delivered, they are more joined up and personalised to the individual. |
| Data and evidence are used to inform decisions, but inconsistently across and within organisations.   | Data and evidence are routinely used to inform decisions and allow citizens to hold public bodies to account.  |

## Momentum for change - the second horizon

As is often the case, versions of the future are already here. Examples of these ways of working already exist and demonstrate activity in the second horizon, the space where new ideas are developed and tested<sup>1</sup>. Those that prove effective are taken on by the system as it moves towards its intended vision, or in some instances support the existing system in new ways.

**From reactive to preventative services:** Gateshead Council’s proactive planning policy on fast-food outlets. By banning new takeaways near schools and in saturated areas, Gateshead reduced the density of fast-food outlets by 14% and saw a 4.8% drop in childhood obesity in its most deprived communities (NIHR ARC North East and North Cumbria, 2024). This illustrates a shift towards preventative action, creating healthier environments rather than reacting to ill-health demand. We are also starting to see examples like this in Wales, with Vale of Glamorgan and Cardiff

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<sup>1</sup> Examples were sourced with support from ChatGPT and have been checked for accuracy.

Council both banning the advertising of junk food on council property (McCarthy, 2025).

**Managing demand via early intervention: the 'Arts on Prescription' initiative** in Gloucestershire. This social prescribing programme, linking patients to community arts activities, led to a 37% reduction in GP visits and 27% fewer hospital admissions (Culture, Health & Wellbeing Alliance, 2023). This evidence shows that investing in early, preventative support can reduce reactive healthcare demand, a principle local councils can adopt in social care and other services.

**Doing with (co-production) instead of doing to:** Barking and Dagenham's 'Every One Every Day' project. This 2017 to 2023 participation initiative worked with nearly 10,000 residents to co-create more than 300 community projects and businesses (Participatory City, 2023). It demonstrates how councils enabling communities, rather than simply delivering to them, can unlock citizen capacity and improve outcomes.

**Embracing long-term, strategic decision making:** Bristol's One City Plan (2050). Bristol's One City Plan is a long-range vision co-created by partners and citizens, defining shared goals up to 2050 (Bristol One City, 2025). By anchoring corporate strategies to this plan, the council takes an anticipatory, long-term approach rather than short-term reactive policymaking.

**Placemaking as a shared endeavour:** community-led high street revival. Treorchy High Street (Rhondda Cynon Taf) was crowned UK 'High Street of the Year' in 2019, supported by community-led events, including outdoor cinemas, arts festivals and parades, and a volunteer-driven digital marketing campaign that raised occupancy to 96% (UK Government, 2020). This success exemplifies local governments and citizens jointly investing in placemaking, rather than councils cutting discretionary place services first.

**Innovation as a culture, not a silo:** Port St. Lucie's whole-organisation innovation (Florida, USA). In Port St. Lucie, the mayor and entire city council participate in innovation training and design sessions alongside staff (Bloomberg Cities, 2025). New employees attend an 'Innovation Academy' and learn to improve processes, yielding tangible results, such as one idea that saved the city thousands of dollars. This case shows how making innovation and learning an intrinsic part of operations, rather than one-off cost-cutting projects, can free up capacity and improve services.

**Integrated, person-centred services:** Hull's Jean Bishop Integrated Care Centre. This frailty care centre uses a holistic 'do with' approach for older people. In its first two years it reached 90% of severely frail residents, halved emergency hospital admissions for that group, and reduced A&E visits for over-80s by 13.6% (Lent,

2025b). Multiple agencies on site and effective data sharing enable joined-up, personalised support, demonstrating the power of breaking silos between health and social services to meet individual needs.

**Data-driven decision making:** Maidstone Borough Council's OneView analytics tool. Maidstone developed a predictive data system that flags households at risk of homelessness. In one year, this approach prevented 100 families from becoming homeless and reduced overall homelessness by 40% (Birchall, 2023). By consolidating more than 15 datasets, the council identified vulnerable residents early and targeted support, showing how routine use of data and evidence can inform decisions and shift resources to prevention.

### Moving forward

We can see from these examples, and there are many more from across Wales and elsewhere, that new ideas already exist in the transitional space between our current system (Horizon 1) and the space we may want to reach (Horizon 3). The challenge for any new transformation programme is to ensure that these ideas genuinely deliver a more sustainable future for local government. Our third horizon suggestions above need to be tested and interrogated to ensure that they do so. For instance, we cannot always say that prevention delivers direct benefits to local government, even where society as a whole benefits. If local government bears the (financial) risk and the benefits accrue to the NHS, how do we incentivise and compensate local government in this context? We require a more granular understanding of outcomes to ensure that new ideas genuinely contribute to a more sustainable future.

## **It can use its resources economically, efficiently and effectively**

We know that local authorities in Wales are stretched, although none have yet had to issue a section 114 notice to date, to the point where the Auditor General has said that:

**'...as the cumulative impact of financial restraint builds, we cannot assume that the future for the sector is sustainable. The position is fragile and sensitive to the competing and complex factors that affect council finance.**

**'...while councils generally know the scale of their funding gaps, they do not have longer term plans in place to address them. This leaves them vulnerable to short term decision making that may not represent value for money or be in the longer-term interests of local communities...' (Audit Wales, 2024a: 4)**

We also know that local government cannot always call on the skills and experience it needs to balance long-term strategic decision making against short-term cost cutting. This presents in two compounding ways. Firstly, there is a lack of skills in specific policy areas, such as planning (WLGA, 2024) and environmental health (Merthyr Council, n.d.). Secondly, around 35% of all vacancies in Wales are due to skills shortages (CIPD, 2023), suggesting that local government is recruiting in a highly competitive marketplace and is likely to find it challenging to match the terms and conditions offered by the private sector in high-demand areas, including digital skills. There is also an ongoing reputational issue, with PWC research suggesting that trust in government can have a significant impact on public perceptions, and therefore on the attractiveness of working in the sector (County Councils Network, 2024).

A recurring theme in conversations with people within, and working with, the sector is the problem of accounting for savings generated by activity in local government but realised elsewhere. For example, preventative work that local governments may undertake through effective social care can generate savings to the NHS. It has been repeatedly suggested that situations like this hold back work on prevention because there is no sufficient way of accounting for such savings when undertaking cost benefit analysis for new investment.

Finally, the rise and accessibility of AI, as a broad term for several new technologies, will create both challenges and opportunities for local government. A recent Senedd enquiry into digital local government highlighted several persistent challenges around the adoption and use of new technologies, including coordination between central and local government, leadership, the funding landscape and collaboration (Griffiths, 2025). The Auditor General has recently stated that the benefits that new technologies should bring are not being realised (Audit Wales, 2024b).

So, what are we moving from and to?

**Table 2 – Comparing current and future local government resource use using the Three Horizons model**

| <b>Horizon 1 - The current system (from)</b>  | <b>Horizon 3 - The future, more sustainable system (to)</b>  |
|---|--|
| Local government is struggling to attract and retain the skills it needs to act strategically, to fill crucial gaps in social care provision, or to keep pace with changing technology and data requirements. | Local government has access to the skills it requires to function effectively and can plan for changing requirements over the long term. This includes a clear approach to mobilising the skills and capacity of its citizens. |

| <b>Horizon 1 - The current system (from)</b>  | <b>Horizon 3 - The future, more sustainable system (to)</b>   |
|---|---|
| Local government is highly reactive to changing technology. New digital systems and processes do not always create the value that they could or should. | It is highly digitally literate. AI (Welsh Government, 2025a) is being used (carefully and ethically, with permission and involvement from citizens (Berditchevskaia, Peach, and Moss, 2025) to free-up human capacity that drives innovation and change within the organisation (Large, Britton, and Iosad, 2025) (not just to reduce overheads) and improves outcomes for citizens. |
| Innovation and transformation are focused almost exclusively on finding budgetary savings, not on improving outcomes for citizens.                      | Its capacity for innovation and learning is rebuilt and intrinsic to its operation.   |
| Policy making is mostly reactive, both to the financial position and the needs of ministers.  | Local government policy making is highly anticipatory in nature, leading to more resilient and adaptable organisations (Gady, Djakonoff, Best-Dunkley, 2025).   |
| Collaboration between bodies is happening but could be stronger. Services are not always joined up in ways that improve outcomes for citizens.          | Collaboration and integration are the norm, particularly between local governments and other public bodies. Services are highly integrated.   |
| Budgets are annual and plans are reactive as a result.  | Instead of an annual cycle of budgets falling short of what is necessary followed by a search for efficiencies, there are multi-annual settlements underpinned by a realistic understanding of need, shared across Welsh Government and local government, alongside a plan to meet need within available resource envelopes.  |
| Budgeting is about savings and survival rather than outcomes for citizens.  | Wellbeing is central to the budgeting process (Gaukroger, 2025).  |

### Horizon 1 - The current system (from)

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Long-term transformation is the responsibility of each local government. This results in a mixed approach to transformation and no clear vision for what a sustainable version of local government looks like in the longer term.

Some resource for transformation exists but it is likely insufficient and often focused on short-term outcomes for the organisation, rather than citizens.

### Horizon 3 - The future, more sustainable system (to)

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There is a shared vision for transformation needed over the next decade, and a plan for how this is reviewed and reset for the following ten.

Dedicated and sufficient resource and capacity for transformation exists within and without local government. It is highly experimental and anticipatory, rather than reactionary.

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## Momentum for change - the second horizon

As above, there are examples that suggest versions of the future are already here.

**Building temporary capacity for innovation:** test and learn activity shows how we can build the capabilities and capacity for innovation in public services. Where needed, partnerships and secondments have been developed to temporarily bolster capacity (UK Government, 2024). In other areas, a ‘flexpool’ model has been developed and tested (UK Government, 2025a), creating a flexible resource that allows motivated and talented individuals to move more easily within government to take on short-term assignments.

**Digital literacy and ethical AI freeing capacity:** Somerset Council’s AI notetaking for social care. In 2023, Somerset piloted ‘Magic Notes’, an AI tool transcribing meeting notes for social workers. It cut weekly administrative time by 46%, sped up reporting by 65%, and saved social workers around 11 hours each week (Horton, 2025). Crucially, the council emphasises ethical use and keeps humans in the loop. This shows how carefully introduced AI can augment staff productivity and free up human capacity for value-added, front-line work.

**Innovation focused on outcomes, not just savings:** Wigan Council’s ‘Deal’ transformation. Between 2010 and 2020, Wigan faced £140 million in cuts but chose to invest in new service models with the community. By training staff in different conversations and funding preventative programmes, Wigan saved money while improving outcomes, for example healthy life expectancy rose by 19 to 31 months. The Wigan Deal’s success, maintaining or improving services despite austerity, is

often cited as an example of rebuilding a culture of innovation and learning rather than pursuing short-term budget cuts alone, although it should be noted that significant job cuts were part of the picture.

**Multi-year, well-being budgeting:** New Zealand's national Wellbeing Budget. Introduced in 2019, it allocates funding based on long-term social outcomes and well-being priorities, such as mental health and child poverty, rather than only on one-year departmental priorities (Schumacher, 2019).

**Building new organisations to support collaboration and convening:** organisations like the London Office of Technology and Innovation (LOTI) demonstrate how shared capacity for innovation (London Office of Technology and Innovation, n.d.) can be created and coordinated. Its ability to bring people together around shared challenges has increased collaboration and generated savings for its members (Greater London Authority, 2024a).

**Federated local government:** in Wales, the creation of a federated model of working in Torfaen and Blaenau Gwent points to new collaborative approaches that have the potential to create stronger foundations for the next phase of transformation (Welsh Government, 2025b; Local Partnerships, 2024). The two organisations share a Chief Executive and senior leadership team. The benefits of federation tested through a pilot phase are suggested to include financial efficiency through reduced administration costs; a single head of paid services leading the officer body to deliver the ambitions of both councils; creating a culture that strives to improve services with residents at the centre, and driving collaboration by fostering shared knowledge and resources.

**Co-location of services to improve outcomes:** community appointment days highlight the value of collaboration between public service organisations, across both the public and third sector. These approaches reduced waiting times for routine physiotherapy appointments by making it easier for people to access the right support at the right time (Lent and Oglethorpe, 2023).

Finally, it should be noted that volunteering rates in Wales continue to rise, suggesting that citizens remain willing to contribute their time and effort (Welsh Government, 2025c), something likely to be increasingly important in the coming years.

## **Moving forward**

It is important to be clear that local government can only use its resources efficiently if it is sufficiently well resourced. Striving to use resources more efficiently should not only mean finding new ways to reduce the volume of resources available to local

government, but thinking about how sufficient resource is deployed in the right place at the right time. The prevention agenda is a good example of this. How do we move existing resource from secondary care to primary care and into the community to ensure that people are well, rather than treating them when they are ill?

It should also be about developing a new balance between long-term planning, facilitated by longer funding settlements, and flexibility and agility to respond in an uncertain world. How do we make sure that the skills we need can be accessed as and when they are required, while developing the behaviours and values that best support a more sustainable future?

## **Its governance is fit for purpose to deliver the two things above**

While on paper accountability for local services seems relatively straightforward, it has not always worked that way in practice. As the interim Chief Digital Officer for Local Government recently pointed out:

**'A number of projects that have come forward, ministerial priorities that have come forward, CDPS are put in as the body to deliver those, and then local government have said, 'Well, this isn't a priority for us at the moment.' So, it's that tension between are we—? You know, who's dictating what activities?' (Phillips, 2025, cited in Griffiths, 2025: 1)**

Recent efforts to better codify the relationship between Welsh Government and local government also recognise the complex nature of relationships between different actors in the system:

**'It is the Welsh Government's responsibility to set the legislative framework and national policy environment across the range of devolved areas to enable local government to determine how best to serve its communities. It is responsible through national elections to the people of Wales...**

**Local government is responsible for developing, planning and providing a wide range of statutory and discretionary services... It is responsible to its local electorate for the decisions it makes...**

**However, governance is complex, and these 2 levels of accountability are not mutually exclusive, rather they can reinforce and strengthen one another if they operate effectively. They are spheres, rather than tiers, of democratic governance in Wales.' (Welsh Government, 2025d).**

Alongside this, the Well-being of Future Generations Act, if implemented effectively, should help to drive the shift from short-term firefighting to future-proofed public services. However, the act is ‘not driving the system-wide change that was intended’ (Audit Wales, 2025: 4). The most recent data from the National Survey for Wales points to a reduction in citizens feeling that good services are available in their area and that they can access these services (Welsh Government, 2025c). More worryingly, fewer than 20% of citizens feel that they can influence decisions in their local area. This feeling also persists in relation to innovation in Wales, where only 20% of people feel that they have power over decision making when it comes to innovation (Welsh Government, 2024). As above, it is helpful to think about where we are moving from and to.

**Table 3 – Comparing current and future approaches to governance in local government using the Three Horizons model**

| <b>Horizon 1 - The current system (from)</b>   | <b>Horizon 3 - The future, more sustainable system (to)</b>  |
|--|--|
| Citizens feel disempowered and unable to influence how decisions about their local area are made.  | Citizens understand how local government functions, know their role in it, know how to shape it and trust it to meet their needs and expectations. |
| While efforts to strengthen the relationship between local government and Welsh Government are ongoing, there is work to do to ensure the relationship is mutually reinforcing and priorities are aligned. | The relationship between local government and Welsh Government is strong and mutually reinforcing.   |
| Participatory approaches that involve citizens in decision making are not well established. Existing examples are outliers and exceptions rather than the norm.  | Local democracy means constant dialogue with citizens, not just local elections (Phillips and O’Brien, 2024).                                      |
| It is not clear what efforts are being made to ensure that the small number of participatory activities currently undertaken are inclusive and representative of the diverse communities of Wales.         | Involvement is inclusive, equitable and representative of the diverse communities of Wales.  |

### Horizon 1 - The current system (from)

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It is focused on short-term output measures at least as much as outcomes. Local politics drive decisions more than citizens.

### Horizon 3 - The future, more sustainable system (to)

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It is outcome focused. A long-term vision for the local area exists and has been developed with citizens and other stakeholders. This is particularly important where work takes place in partnership with central government and other public services. This allows local places to shape delivery with a clearer mandate and permission for action that is suitable for their places.

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## Momentum for change - the second horizon

There are many examples of this in practice, although it is difficult to argue that it is well embedded in Wales.

**Citizen-led movements:** the North Wales 2025 Movement is one example operating at significant scale, mobilising hundreds of people and numerous organisations to tackle avoidable health inequalities (Ruddle and Harvey, 2022).

**‘Constant dialogue’ democracy:** Newham’s Permanent Citizens’ Assembly (London). In 2021, Newham launched the UK’s first permanent Citizens’ Assembly, a standing body of residents that convenes regularly to shape local policy (Newham Council, 2021). This model moves beyond engagement only at elections. For example, Newham’s Assembly has deliberated on greening the borough and other priorities, with residents’ recommendations feeding directly into council decisions. It is a leading example of continuous, institutionalised public dialogue in local governance.

Described as a ‘democratic and cultural information centre’, The Talking Shop is a good example developed in Wales (Omidaze Productions, n.d.). It employs creative approaches to deliberative democracy, encouraging people to engage more deeply with their places and the policies and politics that shape them.

The Centre for Collective Intelligence Design’s Strategy Room is another example, a digital engagement tool that helps local governments understand their citizens’ priorities for net zero (Nesta, n.d.). Alongside this, CCID is working on new methods for involving communities in conversations about AI, ensuring that trust and understanding about the use of new technology is built by those who use, deliver and are impacted by it (Nesta, 2025).

This is also an area rich with international examples, from participatory budgeting in Paris (URBACT, 2017) and Brazil (Gonçalves (2014), where there is a suggestion that participatory budgeting contributed to a fall in infant mortality rates, to citizens' assemblies in Poland (Ross, 2022) and Canada (City of Toronto, 2017). We know how to do this well, with good practice reflected in guides from organisations such as the OECD (2020) and the Scottish Government (2024).

**Inclusive and equitable involvement:** participatory budgeting in Paris. Paris runs the world's largest participatory budgeting exercise, allocating around €100 million annually for citizen-proposed projects. Notably, targeted outreach in recent years has increased participation from low-income neighbourhoods and marginalised groups (Open Government Partnership, 2017).

## Building on the Independent Commission on the Constitutional Future for Wales

It is encouraging to see that efforts are already underway to improve the state of democracy in Wales and how we think about the future of local governance. It is important that any work on governance structures for local government takes account of the work of the Innovating Democracy Advisory Group (Welsh Government, 2025e). In setting out to write this report, I was asked not to explore the structure of governance in Wales or whether the current number of local governments is the right number. However, it is not contentious to say that governance structures in Wales are overly complicated. The existence of overlapping boards that are resourced in very different ways, for example Regional Partnership Boards (RPBs), Public Services Boards (PSBs), and Corporate Joint Committees (CJCs), is not conducive to the kind of innovation required to achieve the change needed to make local government sustainable in the long term.

I make no recommendation about how this should change, simply that it should, and that it should be clear to anyone in Wales who is responsible for what, how they are held accountable and how they involve citizens to yield the greatest benefit from the resources they are responsible for. It would be prudent for the next Welsh Government to consider governance structures in Wales and the extent to which they are fit for purpose.

# Creating a sustainable innovation programme for local government

Having set out where we are (Horizon 1) and where we want to get to (Horizon 3), we can start to think about how we build the bridge between the two (Horizon 2). We will look at what we can learn from the current landscape of innovation and transformation programmes and literature, and we will put forward an initial programme of work that we believe will help deliver the visions set out above.

## Assumptions

We are making several assumptions about the present and the future that shape both the future we have suggested and how we might approach a programme of work to achieve it. It is important that we test these assumptions regularly over the coming years and adapt both the vision and our plans as we learn more about how the future unfolds. The following lists are not exhaustive but capture some of the things we have kept in mind when making decisions about how best to design a new programme of work:

1. Current innovation capacity within local government has been denuded since 2008 to 2009. Rebuilding it will require intentional investment.
2. We need to be pragmatic about funding, accepting that the current situation is unlikely to change for the better in the short to medium term.
3. The terms of the Local Government Act will remain in place for at least the next Senedd term.
4. The primary way to ensure resilience of local services in the long term is to reduce the pressures created by demand-led services.
5. In the future, WLGA are leading from the front, shaping the future of local government performance rather than reacting to the present.
6. Dual running of experimental and current services is not viable at present due to resource constraints.
7. Innovation activities in Wales are not sufficiently well organised or coordinated, nor are they sufficiently well evaluated, and the results shared or exploited.

8. While local places may need different answers to the same question, it is no longer acceptable or viable to test 22 different versions of the same solution. It may be better to develop and test three, based on pre-agreed archetypes of local government in Wales, for example mostly urban, mostly rural and mixed.
9. Local government is capable of working with its citizens to develop meaningful and suitable visions for their places, but not to develop deeper, more participatory relationships.
10. The role of CJsCs and how they interact with other governance structures, including PSBs and RPBs, will become clear in the medium to long term and plans can be adapted as required to accommodate them.

## Lessons from the landscape of innovation and transformation

There are many examples of innovation programmes in public services. These include one-off grant funded cohorts focused on specific topics (Local Government Association, n.d.; UKRI, 2025), test and learn programmes that take a more mission-focused approach and draw on lessons from the private sector (UK Government, 2025b), and innovation labs set up to provide the skills and capacity required to design and test new solutions to more systemic problems (Beattie and Buisman, 2025; Monteiro and Kumpf, 2023; Kumpf and Monteiro, 2024). We will draw on research and evaluations of successful programmes to better understand how to support innovation and transformation for local governments in Wales.

### Bringing Horizon 2 to life - a programme of work

Our programme needs to achieve three things:

1. **Create a more stable operating environment** that is more conducive to innovation and transformation. Without this, it is more likely that the next two elements will fail.

At the same time, we need to undertake a gap analysis between Horizon 1 and Horizon 3 for each of our performance areas set out above, so we can better understand where there is existing knowledge and momentum to build on and where new knowledge is required. Once we have that, our programme needs to:

2. Quickly make the best use of **the existing knowledge** and momentum we already have; and
3. Develop and deploy **new knowledge** where it is needed.

One final note before we get into the details. It is not currently clear whether the right focus for this work is place (for example Llanelli, Carmarthenshire or Cardiff Capital Region) or policy (for example housing or social care), or how to strike the correct balance between the two. For example, do you take housing as a challenge and work on that specific challenge with a few places, which is more akin to a mission-based approach, or do you select a small number of places and try to tackle their challenges more holistically, closer to the Wigan approach? We do not have a view on this at present and would welcome the chance to explore it further.

## A more stable operating environment

We have seen from our work on Horizon 1 that the operating environment for innovation is unstable. The compounding financial pressures and a lack of access to skills, both essential to successful innovation activity, suggest that it will be difficult for organisations to invest successfully in innovation.

It is also not clear what the incentives for innovation are and whether they are effectively aligned for local government. This is particularly true in relation to prevention and the way we account for the value created by it. This also includes a wider culture of learning through failure. As one public servant memorably explained some years ago, ‘we’re absolutely encouraged to fail, right up to the point when we do...’.

We also know that both individual local authorities and the WLGA currently operate on an annual funding cycle, something that appears to be changing in England (UK Government, 2025c). This is not conducive to long-term thinking or, crucially, the retention of skills within an organisation.

### What can we learn from LOTI?

One example we can look to is the London Office of Technology and Innovation (LOTI). Founded in 2019 and funded by members, including local government, Greater London Authority (GLA) and others, and through other sources over a multi-year period, it has demonstrated its ability to save money and build resilient innovation, data and digital capacity across the capital (Greater London Authority, 2024b). Some key takeaways from their work to date include:

- It is funded for multiple years, creating a stable platform for developing new work. Their first four years of operation cost around £2.5 million, although borough memberships are annual and there is some fluctuation in membership numbers.

- It is a convenor, able to foster collaboration between organisations, from small things such as sharing job descriptions to improve recruitment, to larger projects that deliver better data sharing between governments. It also shows how organisations can work together while maintaining their individual sovereignty. LOTI never undertakes work unless at least three members are involved.
- It is a thought leader, advancing members' understanding of best practice in technology, data and innovation.
- It is small and agile, with a relatively small team that acts more like a producer for a population and number of local governments larger than Wales. They are viewed favourably and seen to get things done by their members (Greater London Authority, 2024b). They do a small number of things that are collectively important to those members.
- It is entrepreneurial and able to leverage new money to deliver specific projects, securing around £3 million of additional income in its first four years.

Speaking recently with Eddie Copeland, LOTI's Director, he also highlighted the importance of local places investing in this work rather than relying on central funding. His view was that this created a reason for members to remain involved in projects, while ensuring that LOTI provided value for money with this investment.

There are clearly structural challenges that local government needs to overcome to ensure that the operating environment allows performance to become more sustainable over the long term. However, investment in innovation focused on long-term sustainability is also necessary if we are to find, test and scale new operating models.

## Making the best use of the knowledge we already have

Identifying where others have developed impactful ideas and scaling that impact quickly and effectively in new places is an area where we would hope to make faster progress because we are not starting from scratch. We will need to ensure we do this in a way that builds collaborative service design and delivery with citizens, rather than simply improving the existing system for short-term gains.

We know from the literature that there are core things we need to consider to scale our impact effectively (Gabriel, 2014).

- **Clarifying social, organisational and personal goals.** This is our vision, set out in Horizon 3;

- **Establishing what to scale up.** This is about identifying promising interventions and rapidly evaluating how they deliver our vision and whether any changes are required to fit the local context. It is also about identifying why an idea works, not just the delivery model;
- **Deciding on a route to scale.** This requires understanding how the intervention might be delivered, by whom, and how best to fund and resource it; and
- **Gearing up to deliver a scaling strategy.** This includes building skills and capacities, alongside leadership, communication and engagement, as set out below.

We must move away from the idea that publishing a report alone will allow lessons to take root. Scaling requires investment and effort from the people adopting the idea, so we need to resource and support those efforts effectively.

### What can we learn from the Wigan Deal?

We know that transforming any organisation is hard. We also broadly know how to do it. The literature on organisational transformation consistently points to five factors that need to be present to improve the likelihood that transformation activities will succeed:

- Vision;
- Leadership (both political and organisational);
- Communication and engagement;
- Processes and implementation, including sufficient resources and funding; and
- Capabilities and skills.

Research by the King’s Fund (Naylor and Wellings, 2019) helps us to see how these five factors contributed to the success of the Wigan Deal. We also see all five present in the transformation work taking place in Blaenau Gwent and Torfaen (King’s Fund, n.d.):

**Table 4 – Key factors underpinning successful transformation** (Allas et al., 2018; UK Government, 2025d; White et al., 2023; 83. Bayat et al. 2023)

| <b>Best practice in transformation</b>   | <b>Lessons from the Wigan Deal</b>   |
|--|--|
| Vision: A clear and inspiring vision and purpose are crucial for successful transformations, one that is developed | The most striking feature in Wigan is the constancy of purpose evident both in the |

## Best practice in transformation

with and shared by everyone involved in, and affected by, the change being proposed. Organisations must paint a compelling picture of the desired future and clearly explain the ‘why’ behind the change.

**Leadership:** Effective leaders in successful transformations visibly role-model desired changes, invest emotional energy, and take personal accountability. They ensure sustained focus by managing priorities, using political capital carefully, and planning for continuity.

**Communication and engagement:** Successful transformations are built on a foundation of open and consistent communication from senior management, ensuring that everyone understands both progress and implications. Regular and meaningful engagement with and involvement of frontline employees is essential, as their involvement significantly

## Lessons from the Wigan Deal

senior leadership team and at other levels across the council.

A common vision was forged early on between executive and political leaders, and a clear narrative developed around the changes the council wanted to bring about and why they were needed. This core narrative has remained consistent over time, with leaders making a long-term commitment to changing how the council works with local people.

An enabling style of leadership has meant that staff have had considerable freedom to develop their own ideas about how the principles of the Deal can be put into practice in their day-to-day work.

Senior leaders in Wigan Council emphasise the importance for humility and ‘servant leadership’.

Political leadership has also played a vital role, with councillors willing to make the Deal a non-partisan issue and to find common ground despite political differences.

A significant amount of energy has been invested in communications and marketing to build a shared sense of purpose.

The concept of the Deal and the principles it represents are reinforced at every available opportunity.

Stories from staff and service users have played a particularly important role, providing tangible examples of how

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**Best practice in transformation**

increases the likelihood of success. A compelling change story that clearly articulates the 'why', 'where', 'what', and 'how', and that highlights individual benefits, is more likely to inspire ownership and commitment.

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**Lessons from the Wigan Deal**

local people have benefited from the changes under way and demonstrating to staff that permission to innovate is genuine rather than rhetorical.

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Processes and implementation :  
Effective planning combined with swift action is a hallmark of successful transformations, helping organisations move beyond 'planning paralysis' towards tangible progress. Embracing agile and adaptable processes, rather than slow and rigid hierarchies, enables the pace required for meaningful change.

The changes in Wigan have been characterised by a series of bold decisions rather than gradual incrementalism.  
A key theme throughout the story has been the need to 'hold our nerve' in the face of significant obstacles.

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Capabilities and skills: A common success factor is strategic investment in training beyond the senior team, which helps to build workforce knowledge and capability in relation to transformation.

Changes have included training all staff across the council and partner organisations to have different conversations with service users, radically reshaping the workforce in adult social care, and replacing staff who were unwilling or unable to change how they work with local people.

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Keeping these lessons in mind and applying them to a well-resourced programme that allows local areas to find, adapt, test and deploy knowledge from other places has the potential to generate real momentum for any transformation programme. We should explore how this type of work might act as a catalyst for change, particularly where developing new knowledge may take longer to yield results.

## Developing new knowledge

Sometimes we will need to start from scratch. In those instances, having robust tools, methods and processes for developing, testing and scaling new ideas will be crucial. This is likely to be the area where we need to hold the greatest levels of uncertainty. We know that many of the things we do here will fail and that their lessons will need

to be captured. We also know that some things will succeed and, in those instances, we will need a robust mechanism, for example evaluative, financial or organisational, for implementing and scaling those ideas that should be scaled.

### What can we learn from Innovate to Save?

Innovate to Save (Nesta, 2017) showed that it is possible to improve a service and save money at the same time. However, it also showed that it is difficult and that not everything will work. There will be failures. It demonstrated too that designing for scale from the outset creates the conditions that allow new ideas to flourish.

Flintshire Council's Mockingbird programme, designed to improve the lives of looked after children and reduce expenditure on costly out-of-county or emergency care, clearly demonstrates the impact that the right kind of innovation support and funding can have (Flintshire County Council, 2025).

Key lessons from the programme are set out in the Innovate to Save playbook (Ashelford et al., 2019) and include guidance on choosing the right forms of finance and blending non-repayable and repayable finance to stimulate and support innovation. It also highlights the importance of a phased approach to new ideas: ensuring an organisation is well set up for research and development, supporting that R&D effectively, and then iteratively implementing the idea to make sure it is achieving its objectives.

### What can we learn from Test, Learn and Grow?

The UK government's Test, Learn and Grow programme is in its infancy, but has the potential to show how to undertake rapid and effective experimentation in public services. Anecdotally (TransformGov Talks, 2025), we have heard that factors contributing to its success to date include:

- The importance of senior buy-in and investment.
- Making a series of big bets in a small number of places and missions;
- Approaching these iteratively and learning as they go
- Demonstrator projects that are highly intensive and based on making everything better than it was at the start of the week. The programme is action focused, testing what matters most to learn what works and what does not, without making major investments upfront.

It is early days for this programme and it is not yet clear how the grow element will achieve its wider aims, but we look forward to seeing how it develops over the coming months.

# Recommendations

Based on our known challenges and the lessons from the examples above, the following aims and recommendations are a starting point for further work in this space. As noted at the start of the report, these require further research and interrogation (ideally practical work, learning by doing rather than only talking and thinking) and are probably wrong in many ways. However, our approach embraces the idea that beginning the work is the most useful way of learning what does and does not work.

The recommendations aim to tackle three key challenges:

- That we do not yet have a clear vision (or visions) for what a sustainable version of local government in Wales looks like;
- That we cannot switch off the current system and switch on a new one. The transition will need to be made over a period of time; and
- That innovation capacity focused on long-term sustainability (rather than short-term efficiencies) has been eroded over the past decade and needs to be rebuilt.

Our first recommendation is that the Three Horizon model be explored more fully with a wider group of stakeholders, including a representative group of citizens, for each of the performance areas set out above. Our work here is indicative, not representative, showing how this could be done effectively and where to begin. In the first instance, this should probably be led by the WLGA and a small group of local governments to ensure that the work remains quick and agile and builds momentum for change, rather than becoming slowed by governance and ownership discussions.

The recommendations that follow build on the idea that we need to make changes to the operating environment for innovation. This specifically involves rebuilding capacity and increasing the capabilities of local government and its leaders; making the best use of existing knowledge to build momentum; and understanding where blind spots may lie so that we can invest in R&D that builds new knowledge. Over the next 10 years, this combination of work should ensure that local government builds a more resilient capacity for innovation, allowing it to remain flexible and adaptable in a world that remains uncertain.

## By April 2027

The overarching aim for the next 12 to 18 months is to find a way to increase the innovative capacity of local government in Wales, but to do so strategically and collaboratively rather than individually.

The Three Horizons model has been used as a framework to explore what performance, resource use and governance look like now and in the future with a wider group of stakeholders, and the findings shape the activities that follow. It has been explored in a way that delivers on both the intent and the detail of the Well-being of Future Generations Act, particularly its five ways of working.

### The environment

The WLGA, Welsh Government and a small subset of local authorities invest in an experimental programme that quickly tests and learns how a shared innovation service might function and be governed. Funding should come from:

- A portion of the money provided to the WLGA for 'improvement and digital';
- The Welsh Government's innovation team; and
- The equivalent of small subscriptions from between five and ten local governments of between £10k and £20k each.

This service should explore the benefits and trade-offs of place versus policy as the overarching frame for its work and propose a business case for its continuation or the exploration of alternative models.

The service should also explore the wider landscape of innovation funding and support, and make recommendations about how and where new money can be leveraged for innovation in future.

The WCPP (or a similar organisation) should be separately tasked with researching the incentives for innovation in local government, in particular how we can better account for system-level savings in prevention and how these can be mobilised to support effective innovation.

### Making use of knowledge

The pilot innovation service should set up a small number of pathfinder programmes to test different delivery models for identifying and exploiting existing knowledge, exploring partnerships, policy areas and demographic clusters to better understand how to fund and support future iterations.

A small number of experimental investments are made to help design and test a future scaling programme that is responsive to existing knowledge as well as to the needs of local areas.

## Developing new knowledge

The pilot innovation service should develop a strong relationship with the Test, Learn and Grow team and work with them to design and pilot a similar programme for local government in Wales.

## By 2031

The first five years need to act as our demonstrator, showing continuous improvement in the potential sustainability of local government and the value of investing in innovation. It is about developing and strengthening partnerships that add value to innovative capacity in Wales and building skills, capabilities, behaviours and values needed for a more citizen-centred approach to local government. Most importantly, it is about building momentum towards a more sustainable future.

## The environment

The WLGA, local government and the Welsh Government have made a multi-year investment in innovation and transformation support for local government that includes:

- Dedicated resource to support involvement, convening and participation around shared challenges; and
- Dedicated resource to improve the entrepreneurial outlook of local government in relation to innovation funding. New funding has been secured from research funders, trusts and foundations and invested in innovation support in Wales.

There is a stronger collaborative relationship between local and Welsh government, resulting in clearer shared priorities, building on the recent strategic partnership agreement.

Innovation capacity and skills in local government are returning and are seen to be on an upward trajectory.

## Existing knowledge

Investment is made in successful knowledge identification projects, either through dedicated people or appropriate partnerships with citizens, academics and other knowledge-intensive organisations (such as OPSI<sup>2</sup>).

Rapid testing to understand adaptations required for local environments is undertaken regularly and successfully, using a clear methodology that is endorsed by and involves citizens.

Support and resources (including finance) to enable the take-up of existing knowledge have been tested and deployed effectively.

Support and resources to evaluate the adoption of existing knowledge are in place and delivering usable results.

## Developing new knowledge

We see dedicated support for ideation and co-creation with citizens.

Research and development that considers scale from the outset is undertaken regularly and evaluated effectively.

Support and resources (including finance) are in place to enable the systematic take-up of new knowledge.

## By 2035

By 2035, the environment for innovation in local government is stabilised and the benefits are clear. Local government is on a more sustainable footing (or significantly on the path) and citizens are clear about, and actively playing, their part in how local government operates.

## The environment

The WLGA, Welsh Government and all local authorities in Wales have made a further multi-year investment. Long-term innovation is now a more intrinsic element of the local government landscape.

Savings made through effective prevention work are starting to be reinvested in local government activities.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://oecd-opsi.org/>

Ideas flowing out of Wales are internationally recognised for their impact and methods.

Innovation funding is regularly flowing from alternative sources.

The results mean that demand-led services are no longer the burden they once were, and reduced demand is helping to ensure that local government is more sustainable.

A more equal relationship between local government and citizens has rebuilt trust, and people feel a sense of ownership and agency over their local places.

The role of a dedicated innovation service is reviewed and reframed based on the existing context and challenges. Its role may be revised, or removed if no longer needed.

### Making use of existing knowledge

Local authorities know where to find ideas that are new to them, how to evaluate and adapt them, and how to roll them out appropriately, and are doing this effectively without additional support.

### Developing new knowledge

Citizen-led experimentation is the norm, with new ideas emerging from communities that know how to access support to test those ideas effectively.

Finally, we have not made a firm recommendation that the funding and resource described above be committed to a new organisation set up to deliver research and innovation activity for local government in Wales. The word service is used deliberately. This needs to be explored further with key stakeholders to find an acceptable home where new work can begin quickly.

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# Annex

As is often the case with work like this, more questions are thrown up than answers. To make sure we do not lose the threads that we have not been able to follow fully, we have collected them here. They are not organised in any specific order, simply a collection of things that need to be explored at the appropriate time and added to and edited over time.

1. The economic disincentives to innovate might be too high - savings accrued by the system, not by the originator of preventative work need to be rewarded in a way that encourages innovation. How do we do this?
2. To what extent do the H3 visions set out achieve greater sustainability for local government? How can this be measured?
3. To what extent do the existing performance metrics used by local governments need to change? How will we know we're succeeding? Are the current statutory performance duties enough, or do we need new measures for collaboration, prevention, and citizen involvement?
4. To what extent does this require political buy in and how do you secure this at pace?
5. What's going on in Scotland and what can Wales learn from it?
6. How do you tackle challenges in individual policy areas with this? For example - do you look specifically at housing? Or do you take local areas as holistic places and tackle all the challenges in one go? Place or Policy?
7. Is it better to make a few big bets in a small number of areas that currently create the biggest challenges? Or to allow a thousand flowers to bloom across Wales?
8. Who decides what the 'vision' for local government in 2035 should look like — the WLGA, the Welsh Government, or each council with its citizens?
9. How do we avoid this becoming another top-down exercise, rather than genuinely rooted in local democracy?
10. What does it mean in practice to be "outcomes obsessed, delivery agnostic"? Who holds accountability if delivery is shared or outsourced?
11. Given current financial constraints, where will the money come from to fund experimentation, dual running of services, and long-term innovation? Should this be Welsh Government or will we see better engagement and performance if we adopt a membership model like LOTI?

12. How do we build the necessary skills in local government (especially digital and planning) when we're already struggling to fill vacancies and compete with the private sector?
13. If innovation requires multi-year investment, how do we persuade Welsh Government to move away from one-year funding cycles?
14. What can we learn from Infuse?
15. How do we meaningfully involve citizens in shaping services, beyond surveys and consultations?
16. What mechanisms will ensure inclusivity — that rural, disadvantaged, and minority communities have an equal voice?
17. How do we shift public expectations from “services done for me” to “services done with and by me”?
18. How will tensions between local government priorities and ministerial priorities be resolved?
19. What is the role of Corporate Joint Committees (CJCs) in this vision, and how will local accountability be maintained if more decisions are taken regionally?
20. How do we make governance simpler and more transparent for citizens, rather than more complicated?
21. What tolerance for failure will Welsh Government, councillors, and the public have if “test and learn” projects don't work?
22. How do we ensure innovation is spread quickly across all councils, rather than reinventing the wheel 22 times? How does this sit comfortably with the need for local places to set their own agendas and develop their own solutions?
23. Should Wales establish something akin to LOTI (London Office of Technology & Innovation), and if so, who funds and governs it?
24. What does “sustainability” mean in this context — financial balance, reduced demand, higher citizen trust, or all the above?
25. How do we balance long-term aims (2035) with the short-term demands of residents who need services now?
26. What can Wales learn from the English Devolution Bill?<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.nalc.gov.uk/resource/nalc-briefing-on-the-english-devolution-and-community-empowerment-bill.html>

## Acknowledgments

The author would like to acknowledge the help and support of the team at Wales Centre for Public Policy in drafting this paper, in particular: Helen Tilley, Jack Price, Yasmine Ghorayeb, Ioana Filipas and Dan Bristow.

I'd also like to thank the following people for their advice, guidance, challenge and feedback along the way: Andy Regan, Angharad Dalton, Max Caller, Mary Ann Brocklesby, Derek Walker, Darren Price, Jo Hendy, Eddie Copeland, Toby Baker, Jess Blair, Chris Bolton, Paula Walters, Stephen Vickers, Andrea Prosser, Omar Idris, Owen Wilce, Petranka Malcheva, Gareth Newell, John Rose, Bill Sharpe and Lisa Trigg.

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