

Facing the Future: In conversation with the Auditor General – Episode 4

Betsan Powys

And here we are, the fourth and final episode of this one-off podcast series with me, Betsan Powys just here to ask the questions of the outgoing Auditor General in Wales, Adrian Crompton.

I keep saying outgoing, it's not until next July.

Adrian Crompton

Don't wish my life away.

Betsan Powys

There's quite a few months to go before you leave, but you know, you must be thinking of the future and I just wanted to ask you once again why you wanted to do this. What's it about? Is it about, you know, leaving your mark, getting a few things off your chest? What's been idea behind the question?

Arian Crompton

It's certainly not about getting things off my chest. You know, I have the chance to do that. in my job all the time if I really feel the need. But I think it is important in a role like this just to step back and reflect on all that I've seen and all that our work identifies for us. And the themes that we've explored are quite big picture, high level things.

I'm very conscious of that. They're not super specific, but that's kind of the point. I think we need to see some fairly fundamental change in our model of public service delivery if it's going to be sustainable for the longer term. And that's why I've pitched it at that kind of level.

Betsan Powys

Listen, you've talked about an awful lot of challenges. We're terribly aware of them as service users in Wales, enormous challenges really.

And you know from experience of many years that they're not easy to put right. And yet you're quite optimistic, I think, you know, realistic and optimistic in the same measure perhaps. But I just wondered, given what you know and how you see things and the challenges coming at us, on what you base that optimism.

Adrian Crompton

Well, I'd say it's optimism, but I don't think it's easy. Tempered optimism, yeah. So where to start, really? You know, but let's step back for a moment and think what we've got going for us.

You know, we discuss we are a small country. From next year, we've got a legislative parliament in the Senate greatly enhanced in its capacity.

We have a Welsh Government with very significant autonomy and powers legislatively in fiscal terms. We have a public spending budget approaching £30 billion, a third of Welsh GDP nearly. So really big financial leverage.

And despite all of the workforce challenges and pressures that we've discussed, you know fundamentally we've still got a very high quality, well-motivated public service. We're big enough that we can do things on a strategic level. We're small enough that we can get everybody together in a room in Llandrindod Wells: We can bring all the main players together. So those are huge advantages for us to leverage.

I'm also optimistic in a tempered way because I see from our work here at Audit Wales that there are choices that could be made about how we deploy the scarce financial resource that we that we've got. There are opportunities to deliver better value for money.

There are opportunities to change how we deploy resources that we've got.

Betsan Powys

Why don't you give a concrete example of that thing? Because as you say, this is these are huge headlines.

So is it an example of where you've seen you know something worked to the benefit of users of the service.

Adrian Crompton

So some work that we're just in the in the middle of right now has looked at the issue of delayed discharges so from hospitals.

So, you know, what we've seen there in the most recent year is something like 17,500 patients being kept in hospital when they're medically fit to be discharged.

Translate that into financial terms and the capacity and the bed space and the resource that those people are then consuming. And it's something like 185 million pounds in a single year.

So that's 185 million pounds that we're spending on keeping people in hospital who don't need to be there. Now, one of the reasons that they're kept in hospital is because we don't have the social care capacity or the community care facilities to allow them to exit.

So we have choices. You know, if we can deploy that sort of resource in a different space, in a different way, We can ideally deliver services more efficiently, certainly more effectively for those patients, and at the same time, perhaps unlock the system so that tracks all the way back to people waiting for you know access to A and E units sitting in ambulances. It's all part of the same issue of flow through the system.

So that's one example. We could point to numerous others, but... real significant opportunity for us if we could break out of some of the pattern of delivery that we're in at the moment. Because talking about figures and spending it in the right way, think one figure is that if you can spend £1 on good prevention, you save £14 on getting someone out of trouble and, you know, the money you're spending on them later, which is enormous, isn't it, when you think of all of us in Wales? Absolutely, absolutely.

And, you know, I think that 1 to 14 ratio is from our colleagues in Public Health Wales. We've seen other examples through our own work. You know, it's a few years old now, but we did some a study four or five years ago which looked at rough sleeping in Wales.

And we tried to put a figure there on the cost of dealing with the incidents that arise from rough sleeping. So, you know, incidents of antisocial behaviour that

call in the police and others, ah the cost that local authorities and the NHS face in dealing with medical emergencies and so forth.

And we estimated that could be as high as £200 million pounds a year, dealing with the consequences of rough sleeping, not trying to address the root causes of why people find themselves in that situation in the first place. So we have these options available to us to deploy resource in a different way.

But you're absolutely right. You know part of the difficulty for politicians is the time lag to get from A to B. You know, nothing to do with us in Wales, but I was looking at some data just the other day on the impact of the steps taken in London and Paris to try and take cars out of the centre of the city.

Really sharp improvement in air quality in both cities. But you only have to think about how unpopular those measures are, how difficult those measures will have been to implement, and how actually the real benefits in terms of improved health outcomes, quality of life and so forth, are even further down the track before we start to see those coming to fruition.

Betsan Powys

So listen, next May there'll be an election. We'll have a Senedd that looks and feels different. We may well have a government. It looks like it that might well feel and sound quite different. So as Auditor General, you'll be staying out of the politics, but you will be dealing with whoever's there after May. So whoever they may be, what's your message at the end of our final episode four of this podcast run?

Adrian Crompton

So my term as Auditor General will end in July. And so I will be in post for the election and the immediate aftermath. What would my message be? Before this role, you and I knew each other when I worked in the Senedd.

I know firsthand, you know, the arguments that have been deployed over the years for the expansion in the Senate. And one of the principal ones was to strengthen the scrutiny, capacity and role in the institution.

I really hope that that is what we will see after the next election, because that change has been hard fought for over a long period of time.

It would be easy to squander it. And if it's squandered, I fear it will feed into that a diminution of trust and confidence that we've spoken about already.

One of the ways to do that, I hope, will be to listen to some of the messages that I've tried to set out here. I'm not naive enough to think that this will be taken lock, stock and ah barrel as the manifesto for whoever's in the Bay or in the government.

But I hope some of this will resonate and there will be a serious attempt to try to address some of the sort of transformation changes that I've laid out and I think are necessary.

Betsan Powys

Well, Adrian Crompton, there's a Welsh, saying 'y sawl sydd a chlust i wrando gwrandawed' it means 'those who have ears, use them to listen'. And we hope you have listened and enjoyed to our four episodes of this podcast. And I've heard a lot that you will remember and make note of.

I've certainly learnt a lot and I've very much enjoyed seeing that brain that's been at work behind the scenes in the Welsh political life for very many years put to work on something so interesting and so important for all of us in Wales.

So we hope you've enjoyed the podcast. Adrian Crompton, I think eventually, and I certainly enjoyed the podcast. So thank you for listening and thank you, Adrian, and good luck of your final few months in office.

Adrian Crompton

Diolch yn fawr iawn.

Rhian Jones

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If you have any questions or thoughts, we'd love to hear from you.