



The Social Partnerships Bill

Introduction

The stated aim of the Social Partnerships Bill is to 'provide a framework to consider and deliver greater social equality for Welsh workers across the Welsh economy', with ambitions to place a duty on public bodies to work in social partnership, promote fair work goals and produce procurement strategies.

The Housing and Local Government voluntary sector network would support these aims and ambitions. However, we have reservations about the ability of the Bill to achieve them.

A number of voluntary sector organisations sit on the Housing and Local Government voluntary sector network, which meets biannually with the Minister for Housing and Local Government.

Issues with the Bill

Lack of representation and involvement

The Bill wishes to achieve 'an inclusive Welsh economy in which everyone can thrive and no-one is left behind'. However, the driving force behind this statement appears to be the proposed Social Partnership Council (SPC) which, in the form outlined in the White Paper, excludes a number of groups and sectors.

The SPC is proposed to consist of 'membership drawn from representatives of key public and private employers, trade unions and government' – but not the voluntary sector. The voluntary sector workforce in Wales, approximates 100,000 people, while 28% of people in Wales engage in some form of voluntary activity. The sector, which positively impacts individuals and communities all across the country, deserves explicit representation on the SPC. By excluding it, the Bill excludes voices from community level all over Wales.

Furthermore, the proposed membership bodies for the SPC means that there is a risk of, for example, BME individuals and migrants being left voiceless. People from these groups, where in employment, are less likely to be represented by Trade Unions. Non-white workers account for just 9% of UK Trade union membership according to the TUC. And less than a third of Welsh workers are Trade Union members.

In addition to the third/voluntary sector's role as an employer, key organisations, particularly independent advice and advocacy providers, advise significant numbers of employees in Wales on a range of employment issues. This 'real time' evidence (in the form of case studies and data trends) would make a valuable contribution to the development of strong social partnerships. It includes work with the general population and niche groups e.g. EU citizens in Wales. Understanding the current trends and proposed improvements suggested by the sector is vital to delivering greater social equality and the fair work agenda for Welsh workers.

Also, the voluntary sector, as well as service users, must be involved in the coproduction of public bodies' procurement strategies. The White Paper does not indicate this will be the case.

Secure work

Fair work is an integral part of the Bill, but fair work must surely mean secure work, and single-year funding cycles mean that much work within the voluntary sector is extremely insecure. Short-term funding settlements lead to, among many other issues, huge difficulties in recruiting and retaining staff, which in turn makes it harder for organisations to dedicate sufficient resource to bidding for further funding to secure their futures. There is little security and sustainability for many people working within the voluntary sector, despite some pockets of good practice – e.g. longer-term contracts. This must be resolved before the situation of many voluntary sector employees can be referred to as 'fair'. The sector would welcome the sharing of examples of good practice in this area to enable sector and statutory organisations to develop sustainable and integrated partnerships in order to deliver the goals of the fair work agenda and the Well-being of Future Generations Act.

Interaction with stakeholder Boards

There is a lack of clarity within the White Paper as to how Regional Partnership Boards, Public Service Boards and the National Commissioning Board are intended to interact with the SPC. Without clarity, it's difficult to measure genuine progress and impact.

Compliance

There is also a lack of clarity as to how SPC 'compliance measures' may affect any voluntary sector organisations contracted to provide services. The consultation document says that "compliance measures could apply a financial penalty on public bodies that do not adhere to agreements reached at the Social Partnership Council". However, it is unclear if third sector organisations contracted by these public bodies are also expected to be aware of and compliant with these agreements and if they, in turn, could be penalised if they are not.

Asks

We ask that:

- The structure of the Social Partnership Council be looked at again to ensure genuine voluntary sector involvement.
- Welsh Government look to ensure voices from all sectors of society are represented at the SPC.
- There is clarity around how other forums interact with the SPC while ensuring work is not duplicated, and that meaningful impact monitoring is built in from the start.
- Clarity is given regarding how contracted service organisations may be impacted by compliance measures.
- Welsh Government officials and Ministers across all portfolios continue to look at ways to resolve the issues around short-term sector funding cycles.

The voluntary sector Housing and Local Government network

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