

Transcript: Lesson on leaving the world better than you found it

ABOUT THE SPEAKER

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Sophie Howe safeguards the interests and well-being of the future generations of Wales.

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Wales is a small but progressive country, the only country in the world to have legislated to protect the interests of future generations, the only country to have appointed someone independent to oversee this. Across the world, our systems of government, of politics, of economics have tended to act in the short term. And often, the decisions that are taken discount the interests of future generations and the planet. But in Wales, we're trying to change that by passing a law which requires not just our government but all of our main public institutions to demonstrate how they're acting for the long-term and how the decisions they take don't harm the interests of those yet to be born. And so as a mum of five and the world's only future generations commissioner, I want to share with you today some of the lessons we've learned about how we're trying to leave the world better than we found it.

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First of all, you must involve people in setting long-term goals. Ask them: What's the Wales or the world you want to leave behind to your children and your grandchildren? We held a national conversation -- the Wales We Want -- and people told us, "We want a low-carbon economy. We want you to help us keep people well rather than just treat them when they're ill. We want connected communities and a more equal Wales." And our government legislated to set seven national well-being goals to achieve that. Each institution has to demonstrate how they're meeting those goals, and they're held to account by me.

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You have to focus on the interconnections between different aspects of well-being. You need to talk often about why it's just as important to public health as it is to the environment to tackle high levels of air pollution, why diversity in the workforce is just as important to economic prosperity as it is to addressing inequality.

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Our institutions have a legal duty to act beyond their immediate remit to recognize those connections, work with unusual suspects. And so we're seeing hospitals in Wales working with the National Botanic Gardens to create spaces for nature on their sites. We're seeing offices in our environmental agency helping to find solutions to tackle childhood adversity. Make well-being your metrics. Test everything you do across the four pillars of well-being: social, economic, environmental and cultural. Because for too long, governments have tested their success on the measures of economic growth and increases in GVA.

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But in Wales, our measures of success are around our seven well-being goals. So when the government thought it was a good idea to spend 1.4 billion pounds building a new motorway, a simple application of these well-being metrics told them that, actually, if you want to improve people's health, if you want to meet your carbon emissions targets, if you want to protect nature and if you want to direct your resources to those with the lowest incomes, a much better option would be public transport and active travel. And so that's what they're doing.

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Make it your mission to maximize your contribution to well-being. So when we're seeing plans for economic stimulus in green jobs and energy efficiency measures in homes post-COVID, they're really good ideas. But make sure you target those jobs towards those furthest from the labor market, because otherwise, you'll be missing opportunities to address inequality, too. Think about your projects holistically. Don't save carbon by putting solar panels on your new hospital and then spend it in another area by failing to consider how patients are going to travel there sustainably.

03:31

Well, in Cardiff, our capital city, like many others across the world, we're blighted by high levels of air pollution, long commutes, congested roads and big differences in life expectancy between the richest and the poorest. So what is our act doing to make a difference? Well, first of all, it requires our public institutions to work together. And so, as a result, the public health consultant was seconded from the health board to the local council to lead on the transportation strategy. And when you apply a public health lens to a transport problem, you get a different set of solutions.

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The public institutions realized that between them, they were employing 30,000 people in Cardiff, so they're now incentivizing their employees to travel sustainably. We've seen a tenfold increase in investment in safe routes to cycle and to walk, and we've targeted that cycling and walking infrastructure towards those neighborhoods who have the highest level of air pollution and the lowest life expectancy.

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And in Cardiff, doctors can issue prescriptions, not just for statins, but for free bike hire for those who would benefit from increasing their physical activity. And when we've constructed our cycling infrastructure, we've also built in sustainable drainage, taking away over 40,000 cubic meters of water from an unsustainable drainage system through nature-based solutions. And in doing that, we've created sites for nature, we've cleaned and greened communities, and we've transformed concrete jungles. And when you travel from this area to our city center, you'll be met with areas which are closed off to traffic, where people can meet and businesses can trade outside the splendor of our medieval castle.

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So this is how we're embedding well-being in what we do in Wales. This is how we're protecting the interests of future generations. This is how we're acting today for a better tomorrow.