

Report from the event:

## “Future Generations Exchange – the power of new ideas”

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*David Harries, on behalf of Quakers in Wales, attended the “Future Generations Exchange – the power of new ideas” event, held, under the auspices of the Welsh Government, at the new International Convention Centre, Newport, on 10 January 2020.*

The event was held under the aegis of, and as a follow-up to, the passing of the ambitious ‘Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act’ in 2015.

The day was a very busy one. Hundreds of people attended.

The above-mentioned Act requires public bodies in Wales to think about the long-term impact of their decisions, to work better with people, communities and each other, and to prevent persistent problems such as poverty, health inequalities and climate change. It is probably unique in the world.

However, as individuals and as members of organisations, those attending this event were all challenged to commit ourselves to “living out” the Act.

The First Minister, Mark Drakeford, was the first main speaker. He declared his continuing commitment to making the Act work. He believes, he said, that leadership should be distributed. With regard to the delivery of public services, both front-line workers and families are experts, so the culture should be collaborative and participatory. (Users of services want less from providers but more of what creates the most difficulties.) This he called an equality issue.

We invitees were then addressed, and invited to ask questions of, a range of impressive, persuasive speakers (from Wales, Scotland and England) – people who have experience of getting things done – in others words, of creating change.

One emphasis was very much on the principles of, and ways of, involving and engaging with what one might loosely term ordinary people, in particular, those who normally have little or no access to political decision making. Priority was accorded to the principle that those with staff and budgets should make relationships with users of services than “ticking boxes” and fulfilling “performance indicators”, back at the office.

Another emphasis was placed on doing things differently. Firstly, project workers and civil servants (the latter were well represented) were encouraged to leave their “silos” and to collaborate with individuals and other organisations. Much reference was made to the “social capital” that lies in communities that can and should be tapped. Moreover, each organisation, in evaluating its projects, should recognise (a) which ones would be better done by another outfit and (b) which ones should be abandoned, because of lack of efficacy.

A further emphasis was placed on “future thinking”. Our context/environment keeps changing, in unexpected ways (see, for example, changes in the UK over the past twenty years. We cannot the future but we should be flexible enough to gain foresight and even to shape it.

In general, I would describe the participants as young and middle-aged. So, I felt that I was one of the oldest present.

I am not sure who the event was primarily aimed at. I presume that it was working age people who have the staff time and budgets to promote community work (in the widest sense) and (particularly as far as the public sector is concerned) to carry out the priorities of the Welsh Government.

Well, as far as Quakers in Wales are concerned, individuals and Meeting are already engaged in community work (in the widest sense): examples are (a) working with pupils and teachers about the topic of peace, and (b) the support of asylum seekers and refugees who have come to Wales.

At our best, in my opinion, we Friends are good at collaborating with other bodies to achieve common goals; at our weakest, we tend to think that only we can do a piece of work or are the best placed to do it, when, strictly speaking, we may not be. In this context, I am pretty supportive of the work of CYTŪN; and I was glad to see my friend Gethin Rhys, policy officer of CYTŪN, at the event, and to talk to him.

So, what implications does such an event have for Friends? In my opinion, there are two matters that we should keep on addressing (and reviewing):

1 How do we best safeguard and promote the future of Quakerism? Doubtless, the Vibrancy Project is playing a role here.

2 Although we are probably fairly privileged (because of being organised and articulate, and some of us being financially secure), how do we Friends, corporately, best participate in political decision making (at all levels)?

To develop the second point a little: we should discern and prioritise topics/matters where we have experience and knowledge and then, in a focussed way, contribute to political processes. We should bear in mind what CYTŪN is doing and what it might do, with sufficient support and encouragement. The same applies to our Yearly Meeting and other Quaker bodies. And I must not leave out “secular” bodies with which we share values and interests.

Doubtless, MFW’s Focus Group has a role to play here, so long as the Meeting is content.

I would caution that we should not try to do too much, and that we should lay down work when it comes to a natural end, or (bluntly) when it does not work.

David Harries

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This report has been circulated to the MFW Wales Focus Group and to Helen Oldridge, Vibrancy in Meetings.