

Partnership Council for Wales

2 October 2019

Attendees

Welsh Government Ministers	
Minister for Housing and Local Government	Julie James AM
Deputy Minister for Housing and Local Government	Hannah Blythyn AM
Council General & Brexit Minister	Jeremy Miles AM
Local authorities	
Leader of Welsh Local Government Association and Leader of Newport City Council	Cllr Debbie Wilcox
Presiding Officer for Welsh Local Government Association and Leader of Rhondda Cynon Taff County Borough Council	Cllr Andrew Morgan
Leader of Cardiff Council	Cllr Huw Thomas
Leader of Ceredigion County Council	Cllr Ellen ap Gwynn
Leader of Conwy Council	Cllr Sam Rowlands
Police and Crime Commissioners representative	Mr Alun Michael
National Health Service Wales and Local Health Boards representative	Maria Battle
National Park Authorities representative	Mr Owain Wyn
Community Councils representative	Cllr Michael Cuddy
Public Service Reform Partners	
Wales Audit Office (Observer)	Huw Rees
Wales Council for Voluntary Action (Observer)	Peter Davies, Chair
Welsh Local Government Association	Chris Llewellyn, Chief Executive
Wales TUC (Observer)	Martin Mansfield, General Secretary
One Voice Wales (Observer)	Lyn Cadwallader Chief Executive
Welsh Government Officials	
Reg Kilpatrick, Director, Local Government	

Apologies

Leader of City and County of Swansea Council	Cllr Robert Stewart
Leader of Denbighshire	Cllr Hugh Evans OBE
Leader of Bridgend County Borough Council	Cllr Huw David
Deputy Leader of Carmarthenshire County Council	Cllr Mair Stephens
Fire and Rescue Authorities	Cllr Tudor Davies

Welcome and introductions

1. The Minister for Housing and Local Government (the Minister) welcomed all members and thanked them for attending.

Item 1: Brexit update and local government preparedness

2. The Minister introduced Jeremy Miles AM, Counsel General and Brexit Minister (CGBM) to provide an update on Brexit and to lead the item on local government preparedness.
3. The CGBM summarised the latest events relating to Brexit and the current position in Parliament.
4. The CGBM also briefed on elements of the work underway in Wales with partners, many of whom were present at the meeting, to prepare for a 'no deal' scenario. The Wales Audit Office report had been welcomed, and some comfort could be drawn from its positive findings in relation to this joint work.
5. One observation made by the CGBM, which was echoed by other members, was the significant amount of work, time and effort which were going into the Brexit preparations but which otherwise could be more usefully spent.
6. A discussion ensued on the impact of Brexit in terms of the unpredictability of the situation and the impact on public resources, such as policing.
7. The Minister invited Cllr Debbie Wilcox to provide an update on the levels of local government preparedness on behalf of the WLGA and local government.
8. Cllr Wilcox reported that there was confidence that local authorities have taken sensible and proportionate steps to prepare for Brexit. Risk assessments had been undertaken on the main areas such as the potential impacts on authorities' supply chain and subsequent impacts on social care, food, fuel and medical supplies. The impact of the EU settled status scheme was also discussed.
9. The current situation meant that Trading Standards officers, which had been cut back to minimum levels, were now needed in greater supply, with an estimated additional 80 officers needed to meet expected demand in the case of a 'no deal' Brexit.
10. There was also an expected major impact of a very high number of people returning to Wales from EU countries, with many of them being older and therefore likely to require some form of social care services. Grant Thornton had been commissioned to look into this issue and a report was due late October.
11. The Welsh Government additional funding of £1.25m for food banks was welcomed and the WLGA on behalf of local government formally accepted their role in the process of enabling access to that funding.
12. The Minister confirmed she was happy to hold discussions through the Advisory Panel regarding the extra 80 Trading Standards Officers that were required.

13. The Minister described how the Welsh Government is in discussions with the UK Government to ensure Wales will not be any worse off because of Brexit. Cllr Ellen Ap Gwynn raised the issue of the detrimental impact on the resilience of the farming sector, including potentially on the mental health of farmers. There were also concerns raised that a 'no deal' Brexit could lead to the collapse of the UK and Welsh economy more generally.
14. The lower levels of engagement of the population on Brexit-related issues were of concern although it was accepted that the repeated extensions to the deadline to leave the EU and the ongoing political upheaval were key causes of this. Awareness raising and advisory services were agreed to be very important. Discussions were underway with the Home Office to maximise on opportunities.
15. In terms of the fiscal stimulus mentioned by Cllr Huw Thomas, the CGBM stated that the Finance Minister had announced £85m earlier in the year and that further funding was being sought from the UK Government.
16. Owain Wyn raised concerns about the National Parks and the housing market in rural areas. The Minister agreed the importance of monitoring the issues and putting in place resilience where possible.
17. Cllr Wilcox offered to write a joint letter to the UK Government outlining the key issues faced in Wales.
18. The CGBM asked Cllr Wilcox about the availability of data and the potential vulnerability of the interface between public services and private suppliers which could result in information access problems if we leave the EU without a deal. Cllr Wilcox shared the CG's concern and cited the education data being held in Dublin and the Netherlands and the lack of assurance that we would have access to it post-Brexit. Chris Llewellyn stated the WLGA are liaising on this issue.
19. The Minister thanked the WLGA and all local authorities for the significant amount of work they have invested, and continue to invest, in ensuring Wales is prepared for Brexit.
20. The CGBM left the meeting, following thanks from the Minister.

Minutes of the last meeting

21. The minutes of the last meeting were agreed as a true record of discussions, and all actions were recorded as completed.

Item 2: Local Government funding

22. The Finance Minister had attended a meeting of the Finance Sub Group to provide details of the UK Government's proposed timetable regarding funding.
23. The Minister (for Housing and Local Government) confirmed that Ministers are working hard to keep committees briefed and to work across government to gain clarity as quickly as possible, especially in those areas which provide grants to local government. There is a lot of work going on with Treasurers of authorities to manage messages to not cause unnecessary concern, especially amongst the workforce.
24. Cllr Wilcox commented on the concerns raised at WLGA council the previous week regarding gaps in funding for local services, and these concerns were shared by the Minister and other partners. The Minister again confirmed the work underway with the UK Government to clarify the situation, for example in relation to cuts to non-domestic rates and the shortfall from baselined pension costs. The Minister stated her commitment to continuing to work closely with WLGA and officials going forward, also mentioning the impact of unknowns such as a potential general election.
25. Alun Michael discussed the impact on policing, stating the confusion caused by recent announcements regarding commitments to funding salaries for 20,000 police officers. Little clarity available on the detail.
26. There was appreciation stated from local government members that Welsh Government Ministers are working with them through partnership and transparency. Concerns were discussed around a number of areas where the funding issues were particularly prevalent and services vulnerable.
27. The impact of the uncertainty and the importance of the timeliness of grants to the Third Sector were also discussed.
28. Ministers will continue to work with local government and the WLGA through the Finance Sub Group.

Item 3: Regional working and Corporate Joint Committees – update

29. The Minister stated she wished to have another discussion on the draft proposals in the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Bill regarding regional working and Corporate Joint Committees (CJCs). She understood that this had been discussed recently at the WLGA Council Meeting and was keen to understand views and talk through issues.
30. In terms of the mandated areas, these are all areas where Welsh Government already has well established and accepted statutory powers over local authorities. The focus here was about rationalising the myriad of arrangements, reducing complexity and avoiding future additional layering of arrangements.

31. The Minister emphasised that the Bill proposals meant that Ministers could not add any additional areas to CJsCs, except in cases of performance failure, but that local authority leaders could choose to add areas if they wished. This is about devolving power back to local government for them to control through leader-led, democratically controlled CJsCs.
32. The Minister confirmed she is happy to meet WLGA and local authority leaders at a range of WLGA events or with any grouping of leaders to discuss the proposals further.
33. Cllr Wilcox confirmed her own support of the proposals, and the support of fellow Labour colleagues. However, other parties still had concerns.
34. The Minister further explained the concept of CJsCs, including that they will be made up of leaders, with sub committees which will be created jointly with local government. The Minister gave the example that the Planning Sub Committee would submit its report to the CJC which cannot unreasonably dispute the recommendation of the Sub Committee. The regulations controlling all these arrangements would be co-developed with WLGA and local government.
35. Cllr Huw Thomas welcomed the assurances given by the Minister, but highlighted the particular point of view of Cardiff in relation to voting agreements. Cllr Thomas also welcomed the devolving of power to the CJsCs, but questioned that if Economic Development is one of the mandated areas, why the Welsh Government would not be delegating some of the Welsh Government regional functions into CJC Sub Committees.
36. The Minister confirmed that that is indeed the intention, with civil servants being moved in to Sub Committees to work alongside local government colleagues. The Minister described how the government has struggled to find a mechanism that allows civil servants to move into a shared structure, but that CJsCs have provided a solution to that. CJsCs will also have the advantage of holding land to use for public use, and providing the mechanism to share scarce skills in one place.
37. The minister said that it would be important to have a basis for funding the CJsCs which would operate unless amended locally. It would be important for officials to work with local authority expert groups to take this forward.
38. There was a discussion on how many regions there would be in the CJC model and the Minister confirmed she had invited local government to come back to her with their suggestions and preferred option.
39. Cllr Ellen ap Gwynn stated that her party's concerns regarding CJsCs were mainly on the issue of mandation. The Minister confirmed again that she would be happy to discuss this in detail in any grouping which wished to come together to meet with her.

Item 4 - Review of Strategic Partnerships

40. Kevin Griffiths, Welsh Government, talked through the process undertaken to date by the review team which consisted of Welsh Government, the Welsh NHS Confederation

and the WLGA. Kevin described how an accumulation of legislation and policies over time for partnership delivery had been part of the reason behind the existing plethora of partnership arrangements.

41. There had been over 30 responses to the call for evidence in June. These had confirmed a need for alignment but there was a lack of consensus of what that alignment should look like. There was no support for a single solution or for an imposed solution for all areas, and no consensus that legislation was the answer to these issues.
42. There was a clear recognition across the responses that relationships and partnership working are vital. The interim report was generally welcomed by members, albeit it was recognised that it is much easier to identify the problems than the solutions.
43. Kevin asked Partnership Council members to endorse the next step for the review which would be to test the hypothesis for local solutions.
44. Cllr Mike Cuddy made the case for the increased involvement of Town and Community Councils on Public Service Boards (PSBs), although also highlighted the impact that would have on local resources. Cllr Cuddy was supportive of the idea of an additional resource for central secretariat which he felt would act as a catalyst for change.
45. Martin Mansfield emphasised the importance of workforce engagement and social partnership at all levels. Martin raised the possibility of making closer links between the partnership structures and the Workforce Partnership Council arrangements and the Minister agreed.
46. Peter Davies emphasised the importance of engaging people in communities and commented on how inaccessible some of the partnerships are in terms of the people affected, for example by the Well-Being Plans for each area. Peter also raised concerns over the time spent attending partnership meetings which was not always productive.
47. Owain Wyn made the case for designated landscapes to work better together and made a plea to local government colleagues to recognise that in some cases there was a need to work in a different way.
48. Maria Battle, NHS, stated that whilst it is not necessarily important that people know the partnerships exist, it is very important that they feel the impact. Maria welcomed the flexibility of approach, agreeing that one size does not fit all. Maria would discuss the interim report with NHS partners at their next meeting.
49. Reg Kilpatrick, Welsh Government, welcomed the report and commented that there were not many surprises. Some partnerships work really well, some less well. There is emerging evidence that some Public Service Boards and Regional Partnership Boards are choosing to work together and proving the concept is possible. This is a major, locally-driven, step forward in partnership streamlining and rationalisation. Reg emphasised that the ability of partnerships to work effectively is entirely in the hands of those around the table and there are significant levels of flexibility which allows partnerships to decide themselves whether to do things differently – and if so, how.

Welsh Government would welcome further feedback on what sort of support partnerships might need, such as Academi Wales board development programmes.

50. The Minister stated that she shares some of the frustrations about duplicatory meetings, but emphasised that rationalisation is in the hands of the PSBs and other partnerships to make them work effectively. The Minister is not keen to legislate for this. There are clear reasons to collaborate and work in partnership and evidence shows that by working together individual organisations or sectors can achieve much more.
51. Huw Rees, Wales Audit Office (WAO), raised the review the WAO had undertaken on PSBs. Huw stated the scope was not as wide but that a number of findings were reflected in both. The WAO review had found some positive potential in PSBs, but there were some issues holding them back, such as overlapping remits and clarity on accountability.
52. The Minister stated that she shares some of the frustrations about some duplicatory meetings, but emphasised that the future is in the hands of the PSBs to make them work effectively. The Minister is not keen to legislate for this. There is a clear reason to collaborate and work in partnership as there are some things that no individual organisation or sector can achieve alone.
53. Cllr Wilcox confirmed she was pleased that the WLGA has collaborated with WG on this report and stated that in her view the key to success is to focus on the strategic nature of the partnerships to ensure that scarce resources were focused with purpose and impact.

Close

54. The Minister thanked everybody for attending and said she hopes to see a number of the members at the forthcoming Public Services Summit.
55. The Minister also congratulated Cllr Debbie Wilcox on her peerage to the House of Lords and thanked Cllr Wilcox for her long engagement in Partnership Council for Wales meetings. The Minister stated she hoped to still see Cllr Wilcox in other settings in the future.
56. The meeting was closed.