

# Partnership Council for Wales

01 March 2021

## Attendees

Minister for Housing and Local Government	Julie James MS
Deputy Minister for Housing and Local Government	Hannah Blythyn MS
Counsel General and Minister for European Transition	Jeremy Miles MS
<b>Partnership Council Members</b>	
Leader of RCT Council and Leader of Welsh Local Government Association	Cllr Andrew Morgan
Leader of Ceredigion Council	Cllr Ellen ap Gwynn
Leader of Cardiff Council	Cllr Huw Thomas
Leader of Bridgend Council	Cllr Huw David
Leader of Conwy Council	Cllr Sam Rowlands
Leader of Caerphilly Council	Cllr Philippa Marsden
Leader of Neath Port Talbot Council	Cllr Rob Jones
Leader of Powys Council	Cllr Rosemarie Harris
Leader of Blaenau Gwent Council	Cllr Nigel Daniels
Leader of Pembrokeshire Council	Cllr David Simpson
Leader of Denbighshire Council	Cllr Hugh Evans
Leader of Flintshire Council	Cllr Ian Roberts
Leader of Ynys Mon Council	Cllr Llinos Medi Huws
Leader Vale of Glamorgan Council	Cllr Neil Moore
Leader of Bridgend Council	Cllr Huw David
Leader of Newport Council	Cllr Jane Mudd
Leader of Ceredigion Council	Cllr Ellen Ap Gwynn
Leader of Torfaen Council	Cllr Antony Hunt
Leader of Monmouthshire Council	Cllr Peter Fox
Leader of Merthyr Tydfil Council	Cllr Lisa Mytton
Leader of City and County of Swansea Council	Cllr Robert Stewart
Leader of Gwynedd Council	Cllr Dyfrig Lewis Siencyn
One Voice Wales Chair	Cllr Michael Theodoulou
NHS Wales and Local Health Boards rep	Maria Battle
<b>Observers</b>	
Wales Council for Voluntary Action	Peter Davies, Chair
Welsh Local Government Association	Chris Llewellyn, Chief Exec
One Voice Wales	Lyn Cadwallader Chief Exec
Wales Audit Office	Huw Rees
<b>Apologies</b>	

Police and Crime Commissioner representative	Mr Alun Michael
Deputy Leader of Carmarthenshire Council	Cllr Mair Stephens
TUC	Shavanah Taj

## **Welcome and Introductions**

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

## **Agenda Item 1: European transition**

2. The Minister invited the Counsel General and Minister for European Transition (the Counsel General), Jeremy Miles MS, to provide an update.
3. The Counsel General thanked everyone for the work they had undertaken in preparing for the end of the EU transition period. He stated that the Welsh Government recognises the challenges that local government faces from covid and how they have been exasperated by the end of the transition phase and other seasonal factors.
4. The Counsel General noted that since the last time he had met with Partnership Council members, the Trade and Cooperation Agreement had been published.
5. The Counsel General stated that as part of the final budget, a further £7m of additional funds had become available for transition support, including for transition coordinators to continue assisting local authorities with responding to transition pressures.
6. The Counsel General confirmed that an additional £2m will also be made available to support families in poverty, recognising the impact the new trading relationship will have on food prices. This support had not yet been announced but he wished to share with members today.
7. The Counsel General stated that the impact on local government remains significant and uncertain. He confirmed that tariff arrangements will not be affected for the time being, but changes to trading and other arrangement will offset the benefits of that. New functions and rule changes will have a direct impact on local authorities, such as in relation to state aid and procurement. Most pressing is the relation with the Trade and Cooperation Agreement and the relationship moving forward. A document has been published analysing the associated agreements in an attempt to provide a practical guide to Wales, discussing the implication on businesses and communities. A more detailed document will be made available to businesses with greater detail, as they try to grapple with the new regulations.
8. The Counsel General stated that border ports have been a priority, particularly the management of traffic volume and disruption. He also confirmed the disruption has not been as severe as originally thought, but a report from the

Irish Government advised that the trade volume was down 50% in relation to the same period in 2020. His view was that disruption and additional border control costs were the new reality when trading with the EU, and the WG is working with Holyhead and ports in the South West on managing this.

9. The Counsel General stated that the future prospect for Regional Development funding is of grave concern, The UK Government pencilled £220 million for the whole of the UK to pilot the Shared Prosperity Fund - a cut from the £370 million Wales received before. The Counsel General reported that a framework was being developed and that the new Welsh Government will have an opportunity to reset the relationship with UK Government, request a change of approach and put regional development at the top of the agenda.
10. The Counsel General stated that the Internal Market Act, in particular the financial assistance power (responsible for the delivery of the SPF fund), is unacceptable to Wales and that legal proceedings have begun against the Act. He commented that environmental & public health issues would be compromised if WG doesn't succeed in challenging these issues.
11. The Minister thanked the Counsel General for his update.
12. Cllr Andrew Morgan welcomed the continuation of funding for the EU Transition Co-ordinators and the extra £2m to help tackle food poverty.
13. Cllr Rob Stewart welcomed the arrangements that have been put in place and the announcement around the Shared prosperity Fund (and Levelling Up Fund), offered his support moving forward.

## **Agenda Item 2: Decarbonisation**

14. The Minister welcomed Iwan Davies, Chief Executive of Conwy, for an update regarding decarbonisation.
15. Iwan stated that the decarbonisation panel had been meeting regularly since November 2020, and that the panel had recognised the good work that has already gone on at local level, and wished to encourage and contribute to it if possible.
16. Iwan reported that the Strategy Panel had agreed to use the Public Sector decarbonisation route map (which will be shared after the meeting) which was developed by the decarbonisation team within ESNR. This route map is being used as a strategic framework by health and local government and is based on the four themes set out in *Prosperity for All: a Low Carbon Wales* as priority areas for decarbonisation - Transport, Buildings, Land Use and Procurement.
17. The aim is to support local authorities to embed carbon related matters in all relevant decision making. Iwan reported that 16 local authorities have formally declared climate change a local emergency, 12 have an action plan in place, 6 have plans in progress and 4 are currently reviewing previous plans.

18. Iwan noted that the additional £200k to the WLGA to help deliver changes on decarbonisation was extremely welcome.
19. Iwan confirmed that the UN climate change conference is due to take place later this year and that it is the panel's intention to demonstrate to the world what Wales is doing in regards to the future generations work and leadership around decarbonisation.
20. The Minister thanked Iwan for his update, and all the work undertaken by the panel and across organisations to date.

### **Agenda item 3: Child burials and cremations**

21. The Minister stated that in 2017 Wales was the first nation in the UK to waive child burial and cremation fees, which was only achieved by Welsh Government working in partnership with local government, community and town councils and private sector organisations.
22. The Minister reported that the review of the arrangements demonstrated that current arrangements are working well, and so she had agreed to continue the associated funding for a further 3 years from 1 April 2021.
23. The Minister also announced that in addition to waiving the child burial and cremation fees, a contribution towards funeral arrangements and other associated costs had been approved.
24. The Minister confirmed that she has written to One Voice Wales and the WLGA asking them to reaffirm their commitment to the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) by signing it.
25. Cllr Andrew Morgan thanked the Minister for her update and on behalf of the WLGA welcomed the continuity of the funding and the additional support with funeral costs.
26. Cllr Mike Theodoulou confirmed that One Voice Wales (OVW) is fully supportive of the additional funding and will continue to support the work by signing the MOU.

### **Agenda Item 4: Senedd Elections update**

27. The Minister reported that the Welsh Elections (Coronavirus) Bill (which is awaiting Royal Assent) was introduced in January, and makes contingency plans for the situation if the pandemic worsened and the planned elections on 6 May could not take place at that time. The Bill is only valid up until the election and has no further function thereafter. The Bill will not change the date of the election but does include a mechanism for postponement, although it was hoped this would not be necessary.
28. The Minister stated that changes to the rules regarding flexibility around nomination and emergency proxies have been discussed in addition to

adjustments to territorial descriptors and postal voting, the Minister confirmed that details will be provided on those as soon as possible.

29. The Minister stated that regular dialogue has been undertaken with local authority Returning Officers to discuss all related issues, particularly relating to the safety of venues.
30. The Minister confirmed that the Police and Crime Commissioner elections are on the same day, along with a number of Town and Community Council by-elections. The Minister confirmed that the Bill will provide the power to postpone Town and Community Council by-elections through regulations.
31. The Minister stated that the business of the Senedd will cease on 26 March prior to the Easter recess but that the formal dissolution of the Senedd will not take place until 29 April in case of emergency government business as a result of Covid. However, this would not prevent members of the Senedd standing as candidates for the election.
32. The Minister noted that emergency changes have been agreed enabling people who are self-isolating to nominate a proxy representative up until 5pm on Election Day. The Minister confirmed that the poll count will not happen overnight, but will start on the Friday allowing all officials to get a night's rest to maximise the number of staff available.
33. Cllr Andrew Morgan stated that a number of schools are usually used as polling stations and that normally disruption is minimised by only closing parts of the schools. However, some schools are planning to close in their entirety without considering public health assessments. Cllr Morgan requested Government guidance and the Minister confirmed she had been working with Returning Officers on this issue. The Minister requested that all Returning Officers highlight the issues for their own areas.

#### **Agenda item 5: Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act**

34. The Minister thanked all those who had contributed to the work towards the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act. The Minister noted that the work on the Act was a prime example of how well co-production can work in Wales and reiterated her gratitude to local authority and WLGA officials who had worked with WG officials on the details of the Act.
35. The Minister stated that during March she intended to make three commencement orders which would bring into force the vast majority of provisions of the Act, the first of these being made this week.
36. The Minister also described how, whilst a number of provisions will not come into force until after the 2022 local government elections, she had wanted to make the necessary provisions now, so as to provide authorities with certainty as to what legislative changes will be implemented and when. This would ensure that everyone would be able to make the required preparations.

37. The Minister stated there are consequential Regulations which need to be approved by the Senedd before she could make the second and third Commencement Orders and that these Regulations had been laid in draft to be debated over the next fortnight.
38. Once the three Orders are made, provisions will come into force on a series of key dates:
- 1 April for the performance and governance regime for principal councils
  - 1 May for the remote attendance provisions which would in effect replace the emergency Coronavirus Regulations
  - 1 November for the general power of competence for principal councils
  - The majority of the remaining provisions, including the general power of competence for eligible community councils, will then come into force on 5 May 2022.

### **Agenda Item 6: Hardship fund – spend and allocations**

39. The Minister stated that the Welsh Government had supported local authorities (as at 20 February 2021) with £218m for additional costs and £139m for lost income through the local government hardship fund. A further £92.5m was allocated to the hardship fund at the third supplementary budget, taking the budget to over £600m. The Minister confirmed how the extra funding was split, as follows.
- £25m for savings not achieved
  - £25m for Digital Transformation
  - £7.5m for free schools meals
  - £5m for additional changes in decisions due to policy developments
  - £30m contingency
  - £6.5m for additional costs relating to flooding, including householder payments
40. The Minister confirmed the final budget is to be announced tomorrow and will include funding allocated for the first 6 months of the year to continue supporting the full range of issues due to the pandemic.
41. Cllr Sam Rowlands welcomed the funding announcements, but would like assurance that the hardship fund won't have a cliff edge, as the impact of the pandemic is ongoing.
42. The Minister stated that the funding will be guaranteed for 6 months minimum, at which point it will be reviewed. The two funds that are distributed on the basis of a formula are the council tax and NDR schemes which would have been paid by now, and that everything else is on a claims basis. The Minister provided assurance that there will not be a cliff edge, but stressed that it was not possible to confirm whether there will be further NDR support because the UK Government had not yet made an announcement.

43. Cllr Rowlands and Cllr Ellen ap Gwynn both raised concerns regarding the future levels of funding for care homes and the Minister stated that Julie Morgan MS had recently published a consultation on this issue and encouraged authorities to engage and provide their views. The Minister also agreed that further discussions will be needed when care homes return to normal.

#### **Agenda Item 7: Revising Local Government ethical framework**

44. The Minister stated that the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act includes provisions aimed at providing greater transparency and openness between local councils and communities. The ethical standard framework was first established 20 years ago and is long overdue a review.
45. The Minister noted that the provisions now include new duties for political groups to take reasonable steps to promote and maintain high levels of conduct of members with their groups. There is a requirement for the Group Leaders to cooperate with the Councils' Standards Committees in the exercise of its function, and a new responsibility on established committees to provide Group Leaders with adequate advice and training and monitoring compliance.
46. A number of Leaders thanked the Minister and confirmed their support for this initiative.

#### **Agenda Item 8: Reforming Local Government Finance: summary of findings**

47. The Minister confirmed that the *Summary of Findings* report which was published on 24 February drew together the explorative work on future options for council tax and non-domestic rates, and the wider local government finance system. The report was the culmination of all the work during this Senedd term to explore future reforms to local funding systems. The Minister mentioned a conference which had been held in November and attended by 150 colleagues, which had prompted a lot of discussion and included a thought provoking opening address by Cllr Anthony Hunt.
48. The Minister noted that the document highlights 5 possible aspirations for the future, all of which are based around fairer and progressive systems.
49. Cllr Anthony Hunt stated that reforming local taxation is something everyone agrees is needed, and that just because question is difficult doesn't mean we shouldn't ask it. He felt the current system has been worked to straining point to get things done and that they were trying to shape an outdated and not progressive system into something progressive. He therefore reiterated his support for this work going forward.

#### **End of meeting**

50. The Minister thanked everyone for their engagement as members of the Partnership Council throughout this government term and particularly for their commitment and involvement throughout the pandemic period, across all

political parties. The Minister stated it had been a privilege to have worked with all members.

51. Cllr Andrew Morgan thanked the Minister on behalf of all local government members and the WLGA for her engagement with them and stated that her commitment had been enormously important and appreciated. A number of Leaders also expressed their thanks for the partnership work, particularly over the past year.

52. The meeting closed.