

Partnership Council for Wales – 6 July 2022

Chair's opening remarks

Rebecca Evans MS, Minister for Finance and Local Government.

1. The Minister for Finance and Local Government (the Minister) welcomed members, including the recently elected local authority Leaders, to the meeting. Apologies were also noted.
2. The Minister confirmed the minutes of the previous meeting had been circulated and asked if there were any comments or amendments.
3. Alun Michael requested an amendment to page five of the minutes, the particular reference to a *new, Criminal Justice Board for Wales*. He clarified that this was not a new Board as it had been in existence for some years but it had developed significantly. As a result, he suggested the minutes should be amended to note the significant developments in Criminal Justice in Wales, through the Criminal Justice Board for Wales and the Steering Group that had come into being as a result of collaborative work during the COVID-19 Pandemic.
4. In light of significant developments in relation to Policing and Criminal Justice arrangements in Wales, relevant to the Partnership Council for Wales, Alun Michael suggested an agenda item for the next meeting of the Council in relation to Developments in Partnership Working within Policing and Criminal Justice in Wales.

Action 1: The Minister agreed the minutes of the previous meeting would be amended to reflect Alun Michael's comments, and an item on Policing and Criminal Justice arrangements in Wales would be included on the agenda for the next meeting.

5. The Minister provided an update on the actions from the previous meeting, noting all as completed or in hand.
6. The Minister also provided an update on the continuing work to implement the Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021. Welsh Government officials had engaged with stakeholders on draft guidance relating to a range of matters, including participation strategies and petition schemes which are currently out for consultation. The Minister thanked members for their involvement and encouraged local authorities to submit a response to the consultation which is due to close in July.
7. The Minister informed members that the new Chair of the Independent Remuneration Panel was Frances Duffy, who will be taking forward the recommendations of the 10-year review of the Panel. The Minister noted Bev Smith, the Chair of the Local Democracy and Boundary Commission in Wales, had been appointed to the Panel in order to support more joint working between the two bodies.

8. In addition, it was confirmed that work continued to move forward on the implementation of recommendations from both Richard Penn's Review of the Ethical Framework Report and Peter Oldham QC's Review of the arrangements for dealing with the alleged misconduct of senior officers within local government.
9. The consultation on the *Local Government and Elections (Wales) Act 2021: standards of conduct statutory guidance* closed on 16 May 2022. The final version of the guidance is expected to be published during the autumn.

Agenda item 1:

- **Forward look / work programme**
- **Local Government Scheme**
- **Partnership Council for Wales Terms of Reference**

10. For the purposes of the new members of Partnership Council for Wales, the Minister gave a brief overview of the group's purpose and ways of working, including a summary of the legislative framework and how the agendas for meetings are developed and built around shared priorities: areas of shared concern, shared opportunities and shared endeavours.
11. The Minister suggested it was timely to formally consider future items for discussion at meetings, including current and future standing items. Consideration should also be given to the existing Partnership Scheme (last updated 2017) and Terms of Reference for Partnership Council for Wales to ensure they remained fit for purpose and reflective of the group's current ways of working.
12. The following suggestions were offered by Partnership Council for Wales Members as future items for discussion:
 - Cost of living crisis - focus on support schemes and share new ideas on how best to support people
 - Cost of living for rural areas
 - Criminal Justice - to be grouped with preventative youth justice and community safety.
 - Covid-19 - in light of rising cases and levels of illness.

Action 2: All members to consider potential agenda items for future meetings and to feed back to secretariat or via the WLGA.

Action 3: Secretariat to circulate the Partnership Scheme (last revised in 2017) and the Terms of Reference to members to consider and provide comments on.

Action 4: The Minister confirmed the cost of living will continue to be on the agenda for the next meeting, coinciding with the Autumn budget.

Agenda item 2: Climate Change (standing item)

13. The overall purpose of the item was to update members on decarbonisation and adaptation next steps from the Climate Change Strategy Panel, including the WLGA support programme. The Minister introduced the item and provided an update to members which included the following key points:
- Climate Change has been a standing agenda item for two years now, in recognition of its importance and impact.
 - At the beginning of July, the Welsh Government published the first *Welsh Public Sector Net Zero: Baseline and Recommendations Report*.
 - Focus needs to be on the delivery of the Net Zero Wales plan. Tim Peppin is to provide an update on the WLGA support for the local authority commitments in the plan.
 - £1.8 billion capital investment to tackle the climate emergency was approved by the Senedd as part of the recent three-year budget.
 - The Minister recently took part in a debate on the decarbonisation of public sector pensions. It was agreed the Welsh Government would work with the public sector to agree a strategy to decarbonise pensions by 2030, to bring them into line with current public sector net-zero targets. Councillor Anthony Hunt welcomed the approach and was keen for local government and Welsh Government to work together on the matter. A further discussion outside of Partnership Council for Wales would be welcomed.

Action 5: Wales Pension Partnership to be invited to a Partnership Council meeting in early 2023 or to the finance sub-group to provide an update.

Action 6: Secretariat to arrange, via the WLGA, a meeting to discuss pension schemes.

14. The Minister invited Tim Peppin to provide an update on the WLGA Climate Change Support Programme. A summary paper was circulated to members in advance of the meeting.
15. Tegryn Jones, Chief Executive of the Pembrokeshire Coast National Park Authority, was then invited to provide an update on behalf of the Local Government Climate Strategy Panel (the Panel). The update recapped on the establishment of the Panel and its progress to date, and then sought the endorsement by Partnership Council for Wales' members to the Panel's proposed next steps.
16. The Minister welcomed the updates and the proposals for the next steps. The discussion then opened to members. The following key points were raised:
- Concerns about electricity companies' capacity to support electric vehicles. Welsh Government was urged to seek assurance from companies regarding the provision of quick chargers for electric vehicles across Wales.
 - The importance of local authorities engaging with Trade Union Representatives on their plans for Climate Change. The Unions' 'Green reps' network was cited as playing a valuable role in providing new training opportunities and new resources. Unions are encouraging workforce re-

training through the Welsh learning fund, resulting in upskilling of staff. It was noted that Swansea Council's electric fleet is maintained internally by existing workforce who have been retrained, with no additional costs to the organisation.

- Shavanah Taj encouraged members to learn from the Scotland TUC and Scottish Government in relation to the successful roll-out of their workplace hazards programme.
- The importance of workforces working together in collaboration was emphasised.
- Councillor Huw David shared an update on a pilot of vehicles being run by using hydrotreated vegetable oil.
- It was noted that hydrogen would ideally be the preferred option for local authority fleets, but that current availability and demand was an issue.
- Councillor Mark Pritchard raised concerns about souring fuel costs but felt the expensive upfront costs of purchasing electric vehicles would not warrant the replacement of existing diesel fleet unless a Welsh Government grant to replace them was awarded.
- Councillor Andrew Morgan stressed the importance of not comparing one local authority to another due to different terrains and geographical issues. Rhondda Cynon Taf County Borough Council was intending to change and convert to electric vehicles but noted it would be impossible at the moment for their larger refuse vehicles.
- Councillor James Gibson-Watt confirmed that Powys County Council's Cabinet had approved a scheme to apply for the Electric Vehicles grant fund from Welsh government. This would be to purchase electric vehicles, including e-bikes, for domiciliary care providers who currently walk from client to client, thus enabling them to expand on their range of work.

17. The Minister recognised the comments raised regarding different geographical issues between local authorities and how that may be a concern. She felt a focus on working collectively and looking for opportunities for joint purchasing would be beneficial to all.

Action 7: Minister for Climate Change to provide written update on network capacity

Agenda item 3: Cost of Living Crisis

18. The MFLG welcomed the Minister for Social Justice to the meeting for the discussion on the Cost of Living Crisis.
19. The purpose of the discussion was for Ministers to provide an update on the Cost of Living Crisis scheme and package and also to hear from members on the wider impact the crisis was having on public services.
20. The Minister acknowledged that the Cost of Living Crisis continued to have a severe impact on households across Wales and the UK, hitting lower income families. Recent analysis showed that the number of households living in fuel poverty in Wales rose from 12% in 2018 to an estimated 45% as a result of the April fuel price rise. It was anticipated that the planned increase in energy prices in October would further exacerbate the financial problems that households are experiencing.
21. The Minister for Social Justice confirmed to members that the Welsh Government continued to provide support for households through a more generous 'social wage'. In addition, as part of the fair work agenda, Welsh Government were committed to promoting and encouraging adoption of the Real Living Wage as a way of tackling low pay and in-work poverty.
22. The Minister for Social Justice outlined a number of Cost of Living Events which had taken place, or were due to take place, and the range of initiatives in place to support the crisis.
23. Both Ministers confirmed that the Welsh Government was committed to working collectively and constructively with partners in responding to the crisis and were keen to deliver certainty where possible.
24. The discussion was opened to members as both Ministers were keen to hear the pressures their organisations were currently encountering as a result of the crisis, and what they were doing in response. The following key points were raised:
 - Councillor Steve Thomas confirmed the situation was so bad for many social care staff that they were considering giving up their position.
 - Councillor Andrew Morgan informed members that Rhondda Cynon Taf County Borough Council were looking to support their front Social Care staff by offering advanced payments to assist with fuel costs as there was a delay for claiming expenses. However, he noted that support being provided to staff was being eroded by rising inflation and travel costs. He urged the Welsh Government to contact HMRC about reviewing the current mileage rates and mileage allowances. A rise from 45 pence a mile to 50 pence a mile would help. This was supported by members and also the Minister.
 - Mike Theodoulou was aware that a number of small businesses were supporting the food crisis through a number of useful projects. He encouraged Welsh Government to incentivise local businesses to become involved with initiatives that would provide them with support during the Cost of Living crisis to help them remain sustainable.

- Maria Battle agreed there was a need to negotiate discounts with local businesses and that it was particularly important for lower paid NHS staff. The NHS have an app for staff on accessing local business discounts directly. It would be good for members to share details of available schemes.

Action 8: The Welsh Government to contact HMRC about reviewing the current mileage rates and mileage allowance.

Action 9: Partnership Council for Wales members to share details of known discounts available to staff from local government and public services

Action 10: Minister for Social Justice agreed to feedback the discussion from this meeting to relevant colleagues, including the Minister for Rural Affairs and North Wales, and Trefnydd as the farming community may have a role in contributing to support the crisis.

Action 11: The Ministers invited members to give thought to suggestions that could be relayed to the UK Government. Ministers committed to keeping members up to date with information from HM Treasury.

Agenda item 4: Anti-Racist Wales Action Plan

25. The Minister welcomed the Minister for Social Justice and the Deputy Minister for Social Partnership to lead the item on the recently launched Anti-Racist Wales Action Plan.
26. The Minister for Social Justice was grateful for the opportunity to update the Partnership Council for Wales on the Anti-Racist Wales Action Plan, and in particular to engage with members on the cross-cutting actions.
27. The Minister for Social Justice emphasised the importance of the approach taken to delivering the Anti-Racist Wales Strategy and Action Plan. She felt it was a time for a change and an opportunity to embed Welsh values and enhance Wales as a nation of sanctuary, stressing the need to work together in order to implement and deliver the agenda.
28. The Deputy Minister for Social Partnership confirmed she had worked closely with the Minister for Social Justice around the interconnectivity across partnerships and people delivering services. All partners have an important role to play in delivering the strategy and action plan and the social partnership model underpins the importance of working together.
29. Members raised the following points as part of the discussion on the Anti-Racist Wales Action Plan:
 - Alun Michael thanked Ministers for the update and acknowledged the importance of working together to deliver the agenda, noting there were lots of interdependencies for police who want to work in a devolved environment.
 - Councillor Bryan Davies noted the important issues raised and expressed concern about refugees and people from Ukraine facing racial hatred.

- Aled Edwards noted the positive relationships and the impact from working in partnerships which can be very innovative. He also highlighted that the National Park Authorities are supporting on a community basis.
- Maria Battle confirmed she agreed with points raised. Recognising the shortage of labour in the care sector was important. People from Ukraine want to work and have the skills. She felt there were pressures around accommodation but emphasised the importance of working together with partners and networks to help find solutions, such as reverse mentoring.
- Councillor Mark Pritchard expressed concern about racism and stated that it was still present amongst some. He felt it was unacceptable and urged leaders to take a zero-tolerance approach.

30. The Minister for Social Justice welcomed the critical work that the Police and Crime Commissioners were doing to help drive and support community cohesion. The Minister agreed that refugees could have a significant positive impact on our employment needs, and that public services must take opportunities to recruit suitably experienced or qualified people. The Minister acknowledged that providing suitable accommodation was an important factor in this.

Agenda item 5: Update on Ukraine

31. The Minister for Social Justice provided an update to members on Ukraine. She began by confirming there had been close working at Local Authority Leader and Chief Executive levels. The Minister commented that the response to supporting sanctuary seekers from Ukraine had been inspiring, with Local Authorities, the NHS, Police Forces, Third Sector and other partners all rallying to support as many people as possible to find routes to safety.

32. The Minister for Social Justice confirmed that Wales had welcomed (up until the time of the meeting) 1,300 people through the Super-Sponsor scheme, in addition to a further 2,000 people who arrived directly into people's homes across Wales through the Homes for Ukraine Scheme. There were currently 5,000 Super-Sponsor applications in the system with over 4,000 having visas issued by the end of June. The Minister commented on the positive working between partners to have set up a number of welcome centres around Wales to provide accommodation for people arriving from Ukraine via the super-sponsor route.

33. Due to the positive response, Wales had been able to offer many more visas than originally anticipated. However, at the end of June a decision was taken to temporarily pause the Super-Sponsor scheme to make sure everyone arriving, and those already in Wales, continue to receive an excellent level of care and support. The Minister commented that how we work together to move forward is a priority to ensure everyone arriving from Ukraine has suitable accommodation and support.

34. The Minister for Social Justice was keen to hear members' experiences and to seek views on how the Welsh Government can support organisations to play their full part in supporting the 'Wales as a Nation of Sanctuary' approach. The following key points were raised by members:

- Councillor Dyfrig Siencyn confirmed his support for the Welsh Government approach and stated he was proud to be involved in the work, especially on the welcome centre in Gwynedd. However, he emphasised that much of the pressure of day-to-day support for Ukrainian arrivals falls on local authorities. Councillor Siencyn highlighted that the impact on resources, the support for staff, and the access issues surrounding the creation of welcome centres in rural areas can be problematic.
- Councillor Huw Thomas shared the intense pressure of staffing in Cardiff Council in supporting the Super-Sponsor Scheme and the particular difficulties being experienced in trying to source contingency accommodation in hotels. Councillor Thomas recorded a plea for other authorities who don't have Welcome Centres in their areas to provide support so the pressure can be shared, and also for the wider public sector to help support the people from Ukraine.
- Councillor Rob Stewart agreed with all points raised by members. Councillor Stewart raised concerns about the UK Government booking accommodation directly with no consideration of locality and no contact with the relevant local authority. As a result, there have been instances of Ukrainian people turning up with no information. Councillor Stewart therefore urged that all relevant organisations work to a 'no surprise' rule so there are no further unexpected allocations.
- Councillor Stephen Thomas agreed that all areas should share the pressures. He requested that the Welsh Government helps with advertising, using a Wales-wide approach, to make sure communities are fully aware of the national approach to supporting people from Ukraine.
- Councillor Mark Pritchard encouraged members to keep telling the story, and to work together to do as much as possible to provide support. Councillor Pritchard echoed that on occasion in the past the responsibilities associated with a national response to an issue had not been shared amongst the 22 Local Authorities. Councillor Pritchard also suggested registered landlords ought to play their parts in supporting the current situation.

35. The Minister for Social Justice acknowledged all the comments made and recognised the huge operational management involved, including through the re-deployment of teams to support the crisis. The Minister stated that communication is vital, and that this is an 'All Wales' responsibility, including the requirement to open more Welcome Centres.

Any Other Business

36. The Minister for Finance and Local Government welcomed the Minister for Health and Social Services and Deputy Minister for Social Services to provide an update on Health and Social Care. Both Ministers stated their commitment to working with Leaders on the matter.

37. The Minister for Finance and Local Government introduced the Deputy Chair of the WCVA Fran Targett to provide an update on behalf of the voluntary sector. The update focused on:

- National Principles for Public Engagement
- Social Partnership and Procurement Bill

- The closure of EU funding and the development of the Shared Prosperity Fund
- Charity Commission Revitalising Trusts work and links between councils and the sector.

A paper was issued to members in advance of the meeting

Concluding remarks

38. The Minister thanked all members for their input to the discussions, and informed members that the next meeting would be held in the Autumn.