

Partnership Council for Wales – 8 November 2023

Via Zoom

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 to the meeting and apologies were noted. Apologies included the South Wales Police and Crime Commissioner, Alun Michael who, as a result, was no longer able to participate in the discussion under agenda item three but had written to the Minister to set out his views on the matter.
2. The Minister noted the minutes of the previous meeting (10 July) had been circulated and asked if there were any comments or amendments, but there were not.
3. The Minister also confirmed that all actions from the previous meeting were either complete or in hand.
4. The Minister took the opportunity to welcome Charles Janczewski, Chair of Cardiff and Vale University Health Board to Partnership Council for Wales, who replaced Maria Battle as the new Local Health Board Chair representative.

<p>Action 1: Secretariat to circulate to members of Partnership Council for Wales the Police and Crime Commissioner's letter to the Minister regarding agenda item 3.</p>
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Agenda item 1: Progress Towards Net Zero and Climate Resilience

5. The Minister introduced the item on progress towards net zero and welcomed the Minister for Climate Change (MCC) to the meeting to lead the discussion. The Minister also welcomed Rhiannon Hardiman who attended on behalf of the Future Generations Commissioner.
6. The Minister highlighted the progress made by local authorities, Public Service Boards and other key stakeholders on this agenda, particularly in light of current challenges and noted that Climate Change was a matter which sits across all areas of our work.
7. The MCC opened the discussion by highlighting the following key points:
 - The MCC was grateful for the opportunity to talk to Partnership Council for Wales members.
 - The MCC welcomed a shared commitment to the Net Zero targets and highlighted the financial challenges and macroeconomic policies needed to achieve targets. In light of this, it was felt that opportunities to lever investment from other sources, such as the UK investment bank, should be considered.

8. The second part of the agenda item was an update from the Local Government Decarbonisation Strategy panel. The Minister noted the significant amount of work being undertaken and overseen by the Panel with the support of the WLGA.
9. Tim Peppin provided an update on the work of the Panel and an overview of the summary paper.
10. The paper, including its recommendations, had been circulated to members in advance of the meeting.

Agenda item 2: Simplifying the Welsh Benefits System

11. The Minister introduced agenda item two on the proposed approach to streamlining the Welsh Benefits System. A paper on the proposed approach and a final draft of the Welsh Benefits Charter had been circulated to members in advance of the meeting.
12. The Minister welcomed the Minister for Social Justice and Chief Whip (MSJCW) to update members on the proposed approach.
13. The MSJCW's updated included the following keys points:
 - The MSJCW was grateful to partners, including local authorities, for their input into the development of the Welsh Benefits Charter and recorded her particular thanks to Councillor Anthony Hunt for his support throughout the process.
 - The MSJCW was keen for everyone to access the benefits they were entitled to. She felt that developing the Welsh Benefits System would ensure this would happen in a more coherent way and would make a real difference to hundreds of thousands of people in Wales.
 - The MSJCW shared the vision of the Welsh Benefits System that an individual should only need to tell their story once in order to access their entitlements.
 - As a result, MSJCW felt there was no need to mandate the adoption of the Charter as she appreciated that all partners, including local authorities, were committed and already working to this vision.
 - The MSJCW confirmed her intention to establish an External Steering Group to bring together all key stakeholders, including local government, other public sector bodies, and third sector partners and organisations, to ensure relevant actions were implemented.
 - The MSJCW also sought Partnership Council members' approval to oversee progress on this work, as it was a collective challenge that needed to be collectively owned.
14. The following key points from Partnership Council members were raised:
 - Councillor Anthony Hunt (Leader of Torfaen County Borough Council and WLGA Finance Spokesperson) stated that he would be happy to agree the Welsh Benefits Charter in work and spirit and to assist in sharing best practice across Wales. He also felt it was important that partners did what they could to ensure people were able to access the benefits they were entitled to.

Councillor Hunt also noted the invaluable partnership working with the Citizens Advice Service across Wales.

- Fran Targett, attending on behalf of the WCVA, welcomed the draft Charter and agreed the importance of joint working between local authorities and the independent voluntary sector.
- Mike Theodoulou, Chair of One Voice Wales and also in his capacity as Chair of Shelter Cymru, supported the proposed approach to streamlining the Welsh Benefits Systems but highlighted the importance of communication to ensure people who can benefit are fully aware of the changes, and understand how to access what they are entitled to.

15. The MSJCW agreed for the need to launch the Charter in a way that communicated clearly that it was about us all taking ownership and making sure everyone knew what was available and how to access it. She also stated that there was a need to ensure that Revenue and Benefits teams within local authorities received sufficient training and support as they will be integral in identifying and achieving the desired outcomes. Schools and community groups would also have important roles in terms of helping to reach parents and wider communities. The MSJCW concluded by reiterating to members the importance of removing the barriers and achieving a single point of contact for benefits.

16. The Partnership Council for Wales members agreed to promote the implementation of the Welsh Benefits Charter across their respective sectors and to the proposals for streamlining the Welsh Benefits System.

[Agenda item 3: Delivering shared priorities through strategic partnerships – some reflections from Cardiff’s Public Service Board.](#)

17. Before introducing Councillor Huw Thomas, Leader of Cardiff Council, the Minister provided an update on the work to review regional partnerships, which was discussed at July’s meeting.

18. The Minister thanked members who had provided comments on the Regional partnership review report over the summer period and confirmed that officials would be in touch with those members who had come forward to form part of the working group.

19. The Minister introduced Councillor Huw Thomas to present his experience of aligning partnership working in Cardiff. The Minister also confirmed that she would welcome offers from other members to share their experiences and lessons learned of partnership working, or other relevant issues, at future meetings of the Partnership Council.

20. Councillor Huw Thomas stated that he welcomed the opportunity to speak at today’s Partnership Council meeting to share Cardiff’s experience of working together through existing partnerships and frameworks.

21. Councillor Thomas began by noting how working together in partnership was within the context of a complex landscape. This was as a result of many contributory factors, including geographical issues and an array of partners, (UK as well as Welsh partners) but without them it would be difficult to deliver most commitments / priorities. For example, half of Cardiff Council's own manifesto commitments rely on partnership working and the Public Service Board is crucial to that. Creating a culture of openness and trust was crucial but could also be a challenge.
22. Gareth Newall, Cardiff Council, delivered a presentation outlining how partnership working had been reformed throughout Cardiff.
23. Partnership Council members thanked Councillor Thomas and Gareth for their presentation, which others were keen to have a copy of to learn from.

Action 2: Secretariat to circulate the Cardiff Council/PSB presentation.

[Agenda item 4: Programme for Government Commitment: Reducing the Administrative Burden on Local Government](#)

24. The Minister provided a short update to members on the Programme for Government commitment to reduce the administrative burden on local authorities and its programme of work.
25. The Minister reminded members that the programme of work had been split in to two workstreams with three objectives:
 - to pay fewer grants to councils with more going into the Revenue Support Grant
 - to have more proportionate administration of remaining grants; and
 - for there to be no increase in other administrative or information requirements as a result.
26. The Minister confirmed that considerable work had been undertaken across portfolios within Welsh Government to review existing revenue grants, with the aim of proposing changes for the 2024-25 financial year.
27. In July's meeting of Partnership Council, the Minister had informed members that she intended to hold a special meeting of the Finance Sub Group (FSG) during the autumn where proposals were to be discussed and, if in agreement, ratified. However, the Minister now informed members of her decision to delay the meeting until early 2024 to ensure the work to minimise the bureaucracy in the grants process did not become conflated with funding decisions on the grants for the 2024-25 settlement.

28. The Minister had stressed that she taken this decision to ensure complete transparency with FSG members about the basis for Welsh Government's decisions relating to the quantum of both the revenue support grant and hypothecated grants for 2024-25.

Concluding remarks

29. Before bringing the meeting to a close, the Minister drew members' attention to the following matters:

- the Elections and Elected Bodies Bill was introduced to the Senedd on 2 October. This Bill takes forward proposals for improving and modernising the administration of elections to help reduce the democratic deficit, including establishing an Electoral Management Board, simplifying voter registration and improving the way that electoral reviews were conducted.
- Officials were working at pace to introduce a Local Government Finance Bill as part of the First Minister's third year legislative programme.
- A Tackling Abuse in politics event was scheduled to take place on Wednesday 31 January. It will include representatives from the police, Public Services Ombudsman for Wales, Adjudication Panel for Wales, local authority monitoring officers and standards committees.

30. The Minister thanked members for attending and for their contributions to the meeting and confirmed that the next meeting will take place on 13 March 2024.