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Review of the Welsh Local Government Association's Equalities Unit January 2011

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Views expressed in this report are those of the researcher and not necessarily those of the Welsh Assembly Government

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report outlines the findings of a review of the Welsh Local Government Association's (WLGA) Equalities Unit undertaken between August and December 2009 on behalf of the Welsh Assembly Government. The overall aim of the evaluation was to review the role and activities of the Equalities Unit and specifically explore the nature and extent of the support provided to local authorities, assess its value from local authorities' perspective, determine whether local authorities desired any changes in the role and purpose of the Unit and assess how far the support given sustains Assembly Government policy aims on equalities in local government.

The findings are based on a review of background and policy related documentation, a review of a sample of resources produced by the Equalities Unit, responses to a web based survey, consultations across eight local government authorities and interviews with key stakeholders.

The review found that the support and information made available by the Equalities Unit is highly valued amongst its target audience. The calibre and professionalism of the team is considered a key strength of the Unit. Furthermore it was felt that a thorough understanding of local government enabled the Unit to provide a tailored and supportive service. The authors of the report believe that the focus of Equalities Unit's work, which has mostly been around helping local government fulfil its legislative duties, has been well aligned to meet the priorities of local authorities.

The review found that in the main the products and services made available by the Equalities Unit are of high quality and are considered to be very useful to authorities with many examples cited where resources were making a difference to their work. However, authorities

do have some concerns, particularly related to the appropriateness and practicality of the Equalities Improvement Framework (EIF).

The fieldwork revealed that the Equalities Unit has not been able to meet the needs of associate members to the same degree as local authorities. It also highlighted some issues about the business planning process adopted by the Equalities Unit and drew attention to the lack of strategic Welsh Assembly Government equalities input into its work as well as raising some questions about the extent to which the Unit has been able to fulfil its objective of providing advice and support to the Welsh Assembly Government.

More generally, the fieldwork found that there still remains a high degree of inconsistency between the way in which different local authorities approach equalities issues suggesting that the Unit may not have been as effective as was hoped in helping to “level up” the differences across authorities. In this context, the findings also suggest that the Unit has been heavily focused on operational level intervention and has found it difficult to engage at a more strategic level.

There was widespread support for retaining the work of the Equalities Unit amongst those consulted and we conclude that there is strong justification for the Welsh Assembly Government to continue to provide financial support for supporting local government on equalities issues. The authors of the report also conclude that funding should be maintained within the Local Government Policy Division but that the lack of strategic equality policy input in the management of the Unit from the Welsh Assembly Government needs to be addressed in moving forward.

There are seven recommendations in the report:

- To continue funding the work of the Equalities Unit for at least another three years and if appropriate that this funding be ring fenced within any single fund made available to the WLGA;
- To maintain the Equalities Unit funding within the Local Government Policy Division and establish a Steering Group with strategic level input from the Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Division to help direct and monitor the work of the Equalities Unit;
- To review and improve the business planning processes of the Equalities Unit making future work objectives SMARTer, and more outcomes oriented (as opposed to process oriented) and similarly that action planning targets become more outcome based;
- That the Equalities Unit places a greater focus upon strategic level intervention and 'non-converted' authorities;
- That the Equalities Unit considers a comprehensive revision of the Equalities Improvement Framework and its related guidance after the new Equalities Duties are adopted;
- That the Equalities Unit revisits and updates the terms of reference for its Networks, and reconvenes Rhwydiaith at the earliest opportunity;
- That the Equalities Unit seeks to reflect the approach of Single Equality Schemes in terms of adopting a less strand specific approach and placing a greater focus on equality and human rights outcomes.