



Llywodraeth Cymru
Welsh Government

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Strategic Forum for Regional Investment in Wales meeting, 15 April 2024: minutes

Minutes for the Strategic Forum for Regional Investment in Wales meeting, 15 April 2024.

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1. Welcome

Tom Smithson (TS) welcomed members and noted Huw Irranca-Davies MS is no longer the chair of the Strategic Forum following his appointment to the Welsh Government as Cabinet Secretary for Climate Change and Rural Affairs.

TS explained he would act as Interim Chair until a new independent Chair is selected by the First Minister as the post-EU regional investment policy area has now moved into the Welsh Government's Economic Strategy and Regulation division as WEFO begins to wind down.

TS also noted that following the Welsh Government Cabinet reshuffle, regional investment now falls under Jeremy Miles' portfolio as Cabinet Secretary for Economy, Energy and Welsh Language.

TS welcomed Maria Varinia Michalun (MVM) and Alexis Durand (AD) from the OECD to the meeting, noting that the OECD project was nearing completion and thanked members again for their participation and contribution to the work.

TS also thanked local government colleagues for attending the meeting to provide regional updates on their progress in delivering the UK Shared Prosperity Fund (SPF) in Wales.

The draft minutes from the November meeting were cleared by members for publication on the Welsh Government website.

2. OECD project update

TS stated the OECD report [Regional Governance and Public Investment in Wales, Moving Forward Together](#) would be published on 16 April.

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He thanked MVM and the OECD and noted this report, together with the OECD's first report published in 2020, and the lessons learned from EU funds, current investment approaches and other initiatives will feed into approaches to regional development in Wales in the years ahead.

MVM thanked members for their participation in the project and recapped the key recommendations from the 2020 OECD report:

- Ensuring a long-term strategic approach with a long-term, vision-based regional development strategy
- Enhancing the governance of regional development
- Building national and sub-national capacity

MVM outlined that the new report is the outcome of a range of activities including: focus group interviews, strategy mapping, workshops and vision-setting surveys.

MVM said this work has helped establish clear common ground for a regional development vision, with some differing views on 'how to get there'.

The first key point from the OECD report was the need for a single regional development strategy and a dedicated team for regional development coordination following the dissolution of the Welsh European Funding Office (WEFO).

The second key point from the report was the need for strong local government Corporate Joint Committees (CJCs) with clearly articulated added value to help drive regional development and coordination. MVM emphasised the need for a supportive Welsh Government role with clear expectations, but space for CJCs to tailor action to distinct regional circumstances.

MVM also noted the importance of aligning timelines for regional and local planning to ensure a more integrated approach.

The report's third key point was the need to reinforce multi-level governance relationships around shared principles. MVM recommended new dialogue platforms between the Welsh Government and CJsCs to facilitate better quality exchanges and build additional capacity.

MVM concluded by saying the OECD was finalising action plans with the CJsCs and a toolkit, and that the OECD's synthesis report would be published on 16 April.

Following MVM's presentation, TS noted in the context of the Economic Mission, 'deep dives' or 'short turnaround reviews' are being planned including one on regional investment which stakeholders would be engaged in.

In response to the OECD update, members made the following comments:

- Engagement between Ministers and CJsCs is changing with more regular meetings taking place. There will be more clarity on the CJC role in economic development going forward – the OECD report will help inform that.
- Very important to be clear on which stakeholders and levels of government deliver different elements of any new strategies.
- Need to address where CJC stakeholders fit into addressing the decline in participation in post-16 education.
- Clarifying CJC roles is a step forward. Important the Welsh Government and local government are aligned on role and scope.
- There are significant resource/capacity issues to acknowledge before CJsCs can fulfil additional functions.
- Vital to build intergovernmental trust at all levels including UK Government, Welsh Government, CJsCs and local authorities.

3. Local government update

TS invited Dylan Griffiths (DG), Paul Relf (PR), Carwyn Jones-Evans (CJE) and Peter Mortimer (PM) to update members on the progress of the SPF in each of the regions of Wales.

Mid Wales

CJE said 162 projects had been approved in Mid Wales (as at 31 March) with £37.4 million committed (88% of the total Mid Wales allocation).

Key challenges have been the condensed programme period which has effectively meant two years of delivery rather than three following the UK Government's delayed approval of the investment plan.

CJE added it was unlikely an accurate picture on any financial decommitments would be known until the Autumn which would leave little time to reallocate.

While the situation with Multiply funding is improving, local authorities are still lobbying for some flexibility to move some of those funds to the People and Skills priority.

No further open funding calls are planned due to time constraints ahead of the closure of the SPF by March 2025.

North Wales

DG said 167 projects had been approved, representing 95% commitment of the total allocated funds for the region.

The challenges around Multiply remain and there is a feeling that this element of

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provision is reaching a saturation point.

DG added local authorities are pressing the UK Government for flexibility over both SPF spending timescales and the ability to move Multiply funds to other priorities.

South West

PR said having autonomy with the SPF was a positive experience for local government and that they had been working closely with Welsh Government to avoid duplication of activities.

Commitments in the South West are progressing well. Around £15 million has been distributed to the third sector and £6 million to the private sector.

PR added that broader data on SPF distribution would be available soon.

South East

PM said there were more than 400 active projects in the South East and good cross-sector engagement in project delivery.

Outputs so far include around 300 community organisations and 300 businesses assisted, help for 400 start-up businesses and support for 2,000 economically inactive people.

The Year 3 strategy is based around maximising commitment and spend to ensure no money is lost to the region.

PM added that, similarly to the other regions, Multiply is proving challenging and local government is still seeking flexibility from the UK Government on this issue.

4. Any other business

TS thanked members for attending and noted ongoing feedback from all sectors was important to learn lessons ahead of any new phase of regional investment post-2025.

No further business was raised and TS advised the next meeting would take place before the summer recess.

Annex A: list of attendees

Chair

Tom Smithson, Deputy Director, Economic Strategy and Regulation, Welsh Government

Members

Maria Varinia Michalun, Head of Unit and Alexis Durand, Policy Analyst, Centre for Entrepreneurship, SMEs, Regions and Cities (OECD)

Amanda Wilkinson, Director, Universities (Wales Higher Education)

Lowri Gwilym, Team Manager – Europe and Regeneration (WLGA)

Rhianne Jones, Lead Specialist Advisor EU Exit and Land Management (Natural Resources Wales)

Glenn Bowen, Director of Enterprise, Cwmpas (Third Sector - Social Enterprise)

Harriett Barnes, Director of Policy and Funding (Higher Education Funding Council for Wales)

Matt Brown, Director of Operations, WCVA (Third Sector Partnership)

Eirlys Lloyd, Chair (Wales Rural Network)

Ashley Rogers, Director – Gill and Shaw (Federation of Self Employed and Small Businesses Wales)

Grahame Guilford (Grahame Guilford and Company Ltd)

Leighton Jenkins, Assistant Director, CBI Wales CBI (Business)

Rob Hunter, Head of Strategy (Development Bank of Wales)

Cllr Dyfrig Siencyn, Ambition North Wales (North Wales Partnership)

Cllr James Gibson-Watt, Leader, Powys County Council (Growing Mid Wales Partnership)

Kevin Morgan, Professor of Governance and Development, School of Geography and Planning (Cardiff University)

Peter Mortimer, Rhondda Cynon Taf County Borough Council (Local Government)

Carwyn Jones-Evans, Ceredigion County Council (Local Government)

Paul Relf, Swansea Council (Local Government)

Dylan Rhys Griffiths, Gwynedd Council (Local Government)

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Welsh Government attendees

Peter Ryland, WEFO – Chief Executive

Duncan Hamer, Business and Regions – Director Operations

Geraint Green, WEFO – Head of Programme Management (European Social Fund, European Territorial Co-operation and Agile Cymru)

Alison Sandford, Regional Investment – Head of Policy and Partnership Working

Mike Richards, Regional Investment – Communications Manager

Claire McDonald, Business and Regions – Deputy Director, Economic Policy

Sam Huckle, Social Partnerships, Employability and Fair Work – Head of Employability and Skills

Sarah Govier, Welsh Treasury – Head of Intergovernmental Relations

Rhys Morris, Business and Regions – Chief Regional Officer (North, Mid and West)

David Rosser, Business and Regions – Chief Regional Officer (South)

Janet Owen Jones, Business and Regions – Head of Entrepreneurship and Business Wales (Strategy)

Laurence Smith, Business and Regions – Senior Regional Planning Manager

Chris Stevens, Local Government – Head of Local Government Performance and Governance

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Ann Watkin, Business and Regions – Head of Strategy, Operations Alignment and Planning

Steven McGregor, Public Services and Welsh Language – Deputy Director, North Wales

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