



Llywodraeth Cymru
Welsh Government

PUBLICATION, DOCUMENT

Streamlining Welsh Benefits Steering Group meeting: 21 March 2024

Summary of the minutes of the meeting held on 21 March 2024.

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Attendees

Fran Targett (Chair), Independent
Adrian Devereux, Welsh Government
Amanda Main, Caerphilly CBC
Anna Friend, Flintshire County Council
Benjamin Gibbs, Welsh Government
Claire Germain, Welsh Government
Glyn Jones, Welsh Government
Helal Uddin, Ethnic Minorities and Youth Support Team
Joanna Goodwin, Centre for Digital Public Services
Karen McFarlane, Children in Wales
Kevin Griffiths, Welsh Government
Launa Anderson, Welsh Government
Leah Whitty, Welsh Government
Lindsey Phillips, Welsh Local Government Association
Lisa Hayward, Welsh Local Government Association
Nigel Griffiths, Bridgend CBC
Nigel Oanea-Cram, The Trussell Trust
Steffan Evans, The Bevan Foundation

Facilitators

Paul Neave, Welsh Government
Mel James, Welsh Government
Sam Pidduck, Welsh Government

Apologies

Simon Hatch, Citizen's Advice Cymru

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Beatrice Orchard, The Trussell Trust
Matthew Evans, Welsh Association of Revenue and Benefits Managers
Victoria Lloyd, Age Cymru
Miranda Evans, Disability Wales

Chairs welcome

The session started with members agreeing to the publication of the group's terms of reference, minutes, and outputs on a Welsh Government webpage. Members also agreed to the sharing of email addresses between members of the group.

Minutes of last meeting

The group approved the draft minutes from the last meeting (14 February 2024).

Feedback from the Digital Advisory Group, WLGA

Following the last meeting, LP met internally with Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA) colleagues and tri-laterally with the Centre for Digital Public Services and the Welsh Government's Chief Digital Officer. As well as presenting on the work to streamline the Welsh Benefits System at the recent meeting of the Digital Advisory Group (DAG).

The DAG consists of the Chief Digital Officer (or equivalent) from each of the 22 local authorities and meets bi-monthly with the WLGA to discuss current needs and priorities.

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Following feedback from the DAG, 6 areas of focus were identified:

1. Buy-in.
2. Ownership.
3. Resources and funding.
4. Local Government representation on workstreams.
5. Communications across Local Government.
6. Understanding of current systems and processes.

Buy-in

The work to streamline the Welsh Benefits System will require access to data, people, and other resources. To ensure success and commitment at senior levels within local authorities is critical.

LP / WLGA put forward a series of proposals to gain / maintain local authority buy-in. Including the suggestion to present a brief to senior council leaders containing further information on what the project is, where it came from and the benefits of involvement.

Furthermore, it was suggested that each local authority could be asked to nominate a lead for this work. These leads would then form a Core Group and become the central source of communication on our work within their local authority.

Additionally, the above points could be complemented by a Memorandum of Understanding to agree and confirm expectations of local authorities.

The WLGA offered to coordinate these actions.

Ownership

Feedback around ownership involved requests for clarity on i) who is responsible and accountable for this piece of work, ii) decision making and governance iii) workstream management and iv) how the implementation plan will be signed off.

Resources and funding

In the current financial climate, feedback from the DAG was that this work requires significant change across sectors and services. This will require human and financial resources.

Local Government representation on workstreams

Local Government will be the key stakeholder for this piece of work in delivering changes, they should be included in every stage at each workstream. This could be delivered with the help of the “Core Group” discussed earlier.

The DAG also reflected the importance of user voice feeding into all work as early as possible.

Communications across Local Government

The DAG shared examples of where awareness and understanding of the work within local authority was low. A need to raise awareness across local government at all levels was identified with the aim of providing clarity on intended outcomes and benefits.

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Understanding of current systems and processes

Whilst there is lots of research and high-level information available on the administration of Welsh Benefits, the next step would be to establish the appropriate level detail for each council. This will involve understanding existing systems, processes, decision makers and user journey.

General discussion

The Chair thanked LP for the presentation and agreed that Local Government and the people who deliver Welsh Benefits are the key stakeholders. Continuing to state that much of the areas raised by the presentation will be addressed as the workstreams progress, but that we will need to keep these points in mind as we go along.

Noting that the work on the Welsh Benefits System was endorsed at the Partnership Council for Wales, CG offered the support of her and her team within the Welsh Government to the WLGA in further addressing the points raised by the DAG, such as the process for signing the implementation plan off and communicating this group's aims.

In agreement and in support of WLGAs offer to coordinate this piece of work, the Chair suggested the steering group sets aside some time to consider these matters.

On increasing awareness of this work, SE shared that a fringe session at the WLGA-Plaid Conference will focus on the work to streamline the Welsh Benefits System.

Whilst recognising the political support provided by Councillor Hunt, WLGA lead finance spokesperson, the Chair echoed the calls for ensuring wider political buy

in within local authorities.

Action Point 1: With support of the group, WLGA and Welsh Government to take forward the above proposals.

Action Point 2: SE / The Bevan Foundation to raise awareness of the work to streamline the Welsh Benefits System at the WLGA-Plaid Conference.

Action Point 3: Future meeting to discuss the approval of the implementation plan and awareness raising.

Workstream facilitator introductions

Since the last meeting, 6 Welsh Government representatives have agreed to facilitate the workstreams.

- Design/data: Glyn Jones
- Research and evaluation: Josh Parry
- Eligibility: Leah Whitty
- Phase 1: Ben Gibbs
- Strategic communications: Adrian Devereux
- Learning and development: Kevin Griffiths

Workstream membership and priorities review

There was a discussion on a document that the Welsh Government produced which brought together the suggestions from steering group members for Workstream priorities and membership. The below is a summary of the discussion.

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Design/data

Priorities

There was general agreement to the proposed aim and priority actions for the Design/data workstream. It was suggested this workstream's immediate focus should be on 2 specific actions

1. Auditing existing software and processes for administering Welsh benefits.
2. Auditing data capture requirements for Welsh Benefits and identification of data duplication. However, this must not come at the expense of other longer term aims.

Membership

It was agreed that some of the representatives from CDPS who were originally placed in this workstream could be moved over to support the work of Phase 1. Meanwhile, this workstream could reach out to representatives from additional local authorities, Data Cymru, Digital Inclusion Alliance Wales and the Department for Work and Pensions.

Research and evaluation

Priorities

Discussions revolved around amending the aim to producing the principles and tenets of an evaluation design for this piece of work, rather than an evaluation method. Additionally, it was suggested the initial focus of this workstream should

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be on Phase 1. Finally, it was agreed this workstream should be renamed to Research, Evaluation and Monitoring.

Membership

It was suggested that the workstream could benefit from the addition of an economist and a Third Sector data / statistics expert, potentially a representative from Citizens Advice policy team who produce the Cost of Living Dashboard. It was agreed that it may be necessary to exclude certain members from commercial discussions should any further research need to be procured if being included would represent a conflict of interest.

Eligibility

Priorities

Discussions focused on the difficulty of decoupling matters relating to eligibility to and value of Welsh Benefits. For example, whilst it is not the place of the steering group to consider the monetary value of Welsh benefits, it may be appropriate to consider the benefits of expanding eligibility at a cost, if it streamlines administration and provides savings.

Membership

It was suggested that the group would benefit from an economist to advise on associated costs/benefits and that the group may have to engage with Welsh Government Legal Services.

Phase 1

Priorities

An amendment was agreed to the overall aim of this workstream. This was to make clear that the workstream is focusing on what is required for the simplification of Phase 1 Welsh Benefits within each local authority, and not the introduction of 1 simplified process across all local authorities.

Membership

It was noted that the Welsh Government leads for Council Tax Reduction Scheme and Schools Essentials Grant have agreed to join the workstream. As was the ability to use the Welsh Revenues and Benefits Managers Group as a natural community of practice.

Strategic communications

Priorities

The proposed priority actions were agreed.

Membership

It was suggested that a representative from an advice sector communications team would be beneficial. The ability to engage with local authorities through existing channels was noted.

Learning and development

Priorities

The proposed priority actions were agreed.

Membership

It was suggested that to fully understand the learning and development challenges that local authorities face, further representatives from local authorities who are in different stages of streamlining process for the Phase 1 benefits would be beneficial.

Broader discussion

It was agreed that workstream facilitators could amend the proposed priority actions and membership, in line with what was discussed.

Finally, and bringing this agenda item to a close, it was agreed that the Chair would not be a permanent member on any of the workstreams but would attend in an ad hoc manner at any workstream meeting as and when appropriate.

Action Point 4: All workstream facilitators to review proposed priorities and membership.

Any other business and next meeting

It was confirmed that the next meeting of the group will be held in person in Cardiff in April. With the following meeting being held virtually in June.

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