

Council for Economic Renewal
Reforming Local Government: Resilient and Renewed White Paper

Purpose of paper

1. Paper to note – to provide an update on proposals for Local Government reform following the end of the consultation on the Local Government White Paper.

Context

2. The White Paper 'Reforming Local Government: Resilient and Renewed' was published on 31 January.
3. The White Paper set out proposed arrangements for regional working; a strengthened role for councils and councillors; a framework for any voluntary mergers; and outlined the way forward for community councils. The White Paper also set out the current status of the previous Welsh Government's proposals, which formed part of the Draft Local Government Bill published in 2015.
4. The White Paper also invited initial views on a series of reforms to electoral arrangements for local government. This includes measures to improve voter registration and voting, such as an all-Wales register and postal or electronic voting, as well as a reduction of the voting age for local government elections to 16. In addition, views were sought on the introduction of powers for councils to adopt either a 'first past the post' or 'single transferable vote' election system.
5. The consultation closed on 11 April and 167 responses were received:

Number of respondents

Government Agency / Other Public Sector Body	47
Representative Body, Professional Body or Association	33
Town or Community Council	27
County or County Borough Council	19
Member of the public	9
Political Group / Party	3
Trades Union	3
Third Sector	2
Other	24
Total	167

6. The summary of the consultation responses was published on 18 July and is available on the Welsh Government website.

7. The key messages from the consultation were as follows:

- The proposal that there should be more regional working was generally accepted across most stakeholder groups but there was some difference of view on whether regional working should be mandated or voluntary. Local Government responses, in particular, tended to favour voluntary arrangements. Trades Union responses stressed the need to engage with the workforce as well as issues of democratic accountability and service quality.
- The case for regional working in the areas proposed in the White Paper was generally accepted but with various caveats and comments about how it would work in practice. There were some specific functions where there was a view that it might be better for that to remain a local function, for example aspects of waste collection, and a number of other areas, including economic development activity, where the ability to continue to work locally alongside regional activity was seen to be important. In relation to economic development and related functions of strategic land use planning and strategic transport, there was general support for these being done at regional level.
- In terms of the proposed governance arrangements, respondents generally felt that more detail about the proposals for Joint Governance Committees were necessary.
- There was limited appetite in Local Government to be required to share services but, nonetheless, a number of areas offering potential were highlighted.
- The proposal to provide Local authorities with the option of the Committee system was not supported by the majority of Local Authorities but had more support among the wider respondents.
- There was strong support for the proposal to reduce the voting age to 16 with a preference amongst local authorities for retaining the same method for voting across Wales, rather than having the option of choosing their electoral system. The views on trialling new technology in voting systems, for example online voting or e-counting, were mixed - with support from about half the respondents but concerns raised or opposition from the other half.

Next steps

8. The First Minister in his annual statement on the legislative programme in Plenary on 27 June confirmed a Local Government Bill in the second year of the legislative programme (2018). The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government made a statement on 18 July 2017 setting out:\

- Plans for a root and branch review of town and community councils, which will consider the current variation across the sector and how all community and town councils could be enabled to be as effective of the best.
 - A further more detailed consultation on the conduct of Local elections which will seek views on a number of suggestions for modernising arrangements and seek further ideas to develop.
 - The way forward on the reform of principal councils, including a new approach to regional working to provide councils with the tools to ensure they are resilient both financially and in terms of the services they provide.
9. The Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government has stated his intention that the Local Government Bill announced in the legislative statement should be introduced towards the end of the legislative year (in June / July 2018). This is to enable conversations to continue about the detail and ensure the final proposals are workable and effective.