

A Framework for Regional Collaboration

Purpose

To provide an update to the Regional Investment for Wales Steering Group on the proposed consistent mechanism for regional collaboration in Local Government.

Background

1. The Welsh Government and local authorities agree that strong local government is essential to the effective delivery of good quality, integrated public services to communities across Wales. They recognise that the strength of the Welsh Government and local government is the democratic accountability which reflects the needs, aspirations and cultures of Wales. They also agree we need to see effective, successful organisations which are fit-for-purpose and representative of the communities they serve.
2. Following the consultation on the Green Paper ‘Strengthening Local Government: Delivering for People’ in 2018, the Welsh Government and local government established the Working Group on Local Government. Its purpose is to work through partnership and mutual respect to develop a shared agenda for reform which ensures the sustainability of local government and local service provision. As part of this role, the Working Group has been reviewing existing regional working arrangements in local government and the appetite and priorities for increased future collaboration.
3. The Minister for Housing and Local Government made an oral statement on the 18th of June updating the National Assembly for Wales on the recommendations on Local Government Working group. The recommendations of the Working Group covered a number of areas including shared services, voluntary mergers, powers and flexibilities, diversity in local government and the mutual respect agenda.
4. The Minister confirmed that the Welsh Government is committed to work with partners to find ways to reduce complexity surrounding collaboration and partnership working in Wales. The Minister also recognised the need to bring consistency and discipline to the Welsh Government’s approach to regional working arrangements across different policy areas where possible.
5. A key recommendation of the Working Group was the need for more consistent mechanisms and structures to support regional working and collaboration. Considerable time and effort is absorbed in creating and recreating the practical working arrangements for joint working, for example which authority will lead on the finance, which authority will be the employer. Members of the Working Group agreed that a single structure for statutory and voluntary arrangements would retain local democratic accountability and deliver consistency and simplification to collaborative arrangements.

6. This will form part of a wider framework to support and encourage regional collaboration. The approach can be broadly framed around two key areas:
 - Providing a **mechanism for consistent regional working** and collaboration with a clear framework for governing collaborative arrangements and providing clarity of expectations on where regional working is important and what local authorities can expect of each other
 - Enhancing the proposed **performance and governance regime** to support regional working by local authorities. (this is not covered in this paper but an update can be provided if required)

Mechanism for Consistent Regional Working

Consistent structures

7. The Local Government and Elections (Wales) Bill (the Bill), due for introduction in to this Assembly later this year, provides the opportunity to deliver a single consistent, simplified and straightforward vehicle for democratically accountable regional working. The Minister for Housing and Local Government confirmed in her oral statement on the 18 June her intention to bring forward powers in the Bill to enable the creation of a new form of joint working vehicle – currently referred to as a Statutory Joint Committee.
8. A Statutory Joint Committee will be a body which has a legal personality and is therefore able to employ staff directly, and hold and manage assets and funding – including for example regional grants or European funding if appropriate.
9. The main purposes of Statutory Joint Committees are:
 - To provide a more consistent mechanism and governance model for collaboration
 - To provide a clear framework to underpin regional working approaches
 - To provide a model which would help simplify regional arrangements, reducing duplication and complexity in regional working and collaboration arrangements
 - To provide a more efficient and effective model for collaboration reducing the effort required in creating and recreating new collaborative working arrangements
 - To maintain democratic accountability, which is the strength of local government and which reflects the needs, aspirations and cultures of Wales
10. The Local Government and Elections (Wales) Bill will provide the power to create a Statutory Joint Committee via regulations. Such regulations would set out the service areas and specific functions of a Statutory Joint Committee and the detailed arrangements for governance, finance etc. In this way it should be

possible for a Statutory Joint Committee to have responsibility for a single service area or as many service areas as was relevant in the specific circumstance.

11. Where a Statutory Joint Committee has functions for a number of service areas it should also be possible for functions to be exercisable by a 'subcommittee', if appropriate or if desired by the membership of the Statutory Joint Committee.
12. To provide flexibility in the arrangements it will be possible to establish a Statutory Joint Committee through two distinct routes.
13. The first route will be on request from local government, where local authorities wish to work together on the basis of shared interests and mutual benefit. In this case, local authorities will identify, as part of the request to create a Statutory Joint Committee, those service areas they wish to be included.
14. It is proposed that this approach will be a shared endeavour with the Welsh Government, with collaborative design of the governance, membership, voting and other constitutional arrangements within any regulation establishing a Statutory Joint Committee and if relevant it's sub-committees.
15. Welsh Ministers will also be able to initiate the creation of Statutory Joint Committees in a number of limited and specified service areas where doing so would provide a more effective, efficient and beneficial way of carrying out these functions. The intention is to focus on those areas where the Welsh Government has already put in place regional arrangements (either statutory or voluntary) or where provision to make regional arrangements already exists. This would mean the potential establishment in service areas such as planning, transport, education improvement and economic development.

A Consistent Framework

16. The Minister for Housing and Local Government confirmed in the oral statement on the 18 June the development of a framework for decision making around joint working to provide greater certainty for those participating in regional arrangements.
17. The WLGA will coordinate the development of a Code of Collaborative Practice for adoption by all local authorities. The Code will provide clear principles for wider regional working outside of Statutory Joint Committees with clarity of expectations on where regional working is important and what local authorities can expect of each other when considering new, or managing existing, joint arrangements.