

New plans to strengthen local government

A Green Paper consultation sets out proposals to explore the possibility of creating larger, stronger councils. The Green Paper sets out for debate, possible options on how this can be achieved – from voluntary mergers, to a phased approach with early adopters merging first, followed by other authorities, to a comprehensive merger programme.

Cabinet Secretary for Local Government and Public Services Alun Davies has spent the past few months visiting local authority leaders across Wales to learn more about the unprecedented challenges they face and how these challenges are impacting on the future sustainability of services.

The proposals aim to ensure councils are able to continue to provide excellent essential services by providing the support, recognition and reward for the crucial role they play in our democracy.

Working together regionally remains crucial. It is central to our model of delivery in education and social services and has been led proactively by local government through the City and Growth Deals. This must continue but it is not enough on its own.

Alun Davies said,

“I believe in public service and the fundamental role local government plays in communities across Wales.

“Wales needs strong, effective, empowered local authorities which can weather continued austerity and build local democratic structures fit for future generations. I do not believe that our local authorities, as currently constituted, can fully play this role; and I am not alone.

“Councils have been clear that services are wearing down to the point of collapse and there is a general acceptance that things cannot carry on as they are and a general acknowledgement that more money, even if it were available, would not solve the problem.

“I also know local government has made real efforts to change, adapt and invest for the future but I also understand that in the face of UK Government cuts, there are limited options to ensuring the future sustainability of local services. Unless we do something radical in response to these challenges we all recognise, the role of local government will increasingly be one of managed decline.

“The next step must be game-changing. I believe there are many in local government who understand this and I am committed to working with them to secure change. I have already announced proposals to

increase participation and improve the democratic process for everyone in Wales, today I am launching a consultation on further re-invigorating the local government landscape."

The Cabinet Secretary said that it is important as part of this debate to have an agreed template for a future footprint for local government, which any merger must be consistent with. This would ensure that any changes are aligned with the boundaries other public services operate on.

The Green Paper sets out an approach which reflects the thinking of the Williams Commission and feedback from previous consultations to stimulate discussion to arrive at an agreed approach.

Alun Davies continued,

"I recognise there are a number of challenges in creating larger, stronger authorities; but these challenges are not insurmountable. If we do proceed with one of the options for creating larger authorities in the future, we will provide early practical support to local authorities."

The proposals contained in the Green Paper would be delivered in combination with offering further powers and freedoms to local government, proposals to reinvigorate local democracy, increase transparency, provide more effective scrutiny and better support for elected members. This would form part of a broader approach which includes strengthened regional working in key areas.

New employability plan aims to tackle unemployment and economic inactivity

Whilst unemployment in Wales is relatively low at 5.0 per cent and roughly in line with the UK, nearly a quarter of working-age Welsh adults (24.3 per cent) are economically inactive – neither unemployed nor available for work – compared with 22.0 per cent for the UK as a whole. [The plan](#) aims to address this as well as setting out a long term vision to ensure workers of the future have the skills businesses will need.

Launched today by Minister for Welsh Language and Lifelong Learning, Eluned Morgan the plan sets out how the Welsh Government will support those furthest from the labour market, the economically inactive and those at risk of redundancy, into work. It brings together and builds on several existing programmes such as Communities for Work, PaCE, Jobs Growth Wales, ReAct, Better Jobs Closer to Home and Lift to help people build the skills and

confidence to find and stay in work and to ensure employers can find the skills they require for their businesses to flourish.

The plan, which complements the recently published [Economic Action Plan](#), sets out four main actions for improving employability. They are:

- Providing an individualised approach to employability support that is responsive to an individual's needs and takes account of personal circumstances, barriers, aptitudes and ambitions.
- Providing support to employers to provide inclusive and fair work whilst underlining their responsibility to up-skill their own workers. This will increase a person's employability and skills with the view of securing in-work progression and reducing a household's risk of living in poverty.
- Responding to current and projected skills gaps to adapt to the changing needs of the market and society.
- Preparing for a radical shift in the world of work to ensure the workforce is ready for the challenges and opportunities of tomorrow such as automation, artificial intelligence and robotics

The Minister said:

"Today, Wales has a relatively low level of unemployment, but levels of economic inactivity have remained stubbornly high, despite considerable efforts in this area. There is no doubt that unemployment levels, in particular those not in employment, education or training (NEETS) would have been higher had it not been for significant Welsh Government intervention but we can and need to do more.

"Poverty is still a curse in Welsh society, but employment provides the most sustainable route out of poverty and developing skills is a vital part of this. The better people's skills, the better their chances are of getting fair, secure and rewarding employment. In addition, the stronger the skills base we have, the more chance we have of attracting new businesses and growing existing ones to increase job opportunities and improve prosperity.

"There are several challenges ahead of us. Our population is ageing, technology is developing ever faster and the political and economic uncertainty around Brexit means there will be disruption to our labour market and economy.

"This employability plan sets out how we intend to face these challenges not to simply weather the storm but emerge from it stronger. We cannot do this alone. It will require a great deal of effort from local authorities, further education and private training providers, the third sector, employers and of course individuals, but together we can seize this opportunity to improve the prosperity of Wales."

£2.5m to help adults learn Welsh in the workplace

The funding has been awarded to the National Centre for Learning Welsh to continue its *Work Welsh* programme which began in April 2017. The programme provides training and support ranging from information and advice for employers to online, intensive or residential courses for employees.

More than 4,000 people in workplaces across Wales have participated in *Work Welsh* courses during this financial year, exceeding the targets set at the start of the programme. During the second year of the programme, a range of courses tailored to specific sectors, including health and social care and retail, will be developed. A programme of courses developed specifically for those working in childcare settings will also be delivered.

Announcing the funding, the Minister said:

“BT Cymru Wales was the first private sector company to sign up to *Work Welsh*, which delivered a tailored programme of learning for colleagues at our offices in Swansea and Cardiff. The scheme has given colleagues an opportunity to both learn and improve their Welsh, gaining valuable confidence to use the language in the workplace.”

Amongst the many organisations to have benefitted from *Work Welsh* are BT Cymru Wales and Ceredigion Council.

Alwen Williams, director for BT Cymru Wales, said:

“BT Cymru Wales was the first private sector company to sign up to *Work Welsh*, which delivered a tailored programme of learning for colleagues at our offices in Swansea and Cardiff. The scheme has given colleagues an opportunity to both learn and improve their Welsh, gaining valuable confidence to use the language in the workplace.”

Ellen ap Gwynn, Leader of Ceredigion County Council, said:

“The *Work Welsh* team worked closely with us to deliver fully-funded, expert tuition with flexible learning options. The scheme has enabled us to both support employees’ professional development and fulfil a business need to provide bilingual services for our users. We’re delighted with the results and look forward to

continuing our Welsh language learning journey.”

Efa Gruffudd Jones, Chief Executive of the National Centre for Learning Welsh, added:

“We welcome this additional funding for *Work Welsh* which has already proved popular, delivering new opportunities for thousands of people across Wales to strengthen their Welsh language skills. We work closely with employers to adapt and tailor the scheme for different sectors and are able to offer appropriate training to meet a variety of business needs. There is a real demand, from both employers and employees, for the scheme and we look forward to introducing a range of new courses over the coming months.”

Children's Minister hears views on plans to end the physical punishment of children in Wales

Huw Irranca-Davies visited Pontybrenin School in Gorseinon, Swansea, to discuss the proposals with a group of pupils, the head teacher and other members of the teaching staff involved in embedding children's rights in the day to day running of the school.

The school is committed to creating safe and inspiring places for children to learn, where they are respected, their talents are nurtured and they are able to thrive. The school won the Rights Respecting Schools Gold Award in 2015, which recognises achievement in putting the United Nations Convention on the Rights of a Child (UNCRC) at the heart of a school's planning, policies, practice and ethos.

Huw Irranca-Davies said:

“It was great to hear the views of the children I met in Swansea today about our plans to bring to an end the physical punishment of children by removing the legal defence of reasonable punishment.

“As a Government, we want all children in Wales to have the best possible start in life. We want to support parents in Wales to raise happy, healthy and confident children. Removing the defence of reasonable punishment builds on the growing attitudinal change of parents already underway.

"Prohibiting physical punishment sends strong messages that proven positive alternatives are much better for our children and for their well-being. The children I met in Swansea reinforced this message.

"I want to encourage as many people as possible to have their say on our plans by taking part in our consultation."

The consultation on the Welsh Government's legislative proposal is open until 2nd April.

OECD and Estyn to develop self-evaluation framework for teachers

Speaking at the Secondary Headteachers Conference on 7th March, Kirsty Williams said:

"As we develop and design our new curriculum, we also need to think about how school and system level assessment can drive improvement for all our learners.

"We have been working with a number of secondary and primary head teachers in developing a new system of assessment and evaluation leading to improvement and not a system only focussed on labelling.

"We have also looked at best practice internationally, working with leading academics, and refined and tested that thinking with the profession.

"I am now proposing that the new assessment, evaluation and improvement framework will be primarily based on self-evaluation.

"That's why I have commissioned OECD and Estyn to work with the profession to develop a national self-evaluation framework, which can operate in conjunction with a peer review and endorsement framework.

"We will then want to hear your views on how we can ensure this works well for everybody and provides a clear picture of where and how your school can improve."

Estyn's Chief Inspector, Meilyr Rowlands said:

"Estyn is pleased to jointly lead this review with OECD. The OECD brings extensive international expertise, and we bring our knowledge of the Welsh context.

"Collaboration with headteachers and others working in schools will also be vital in developing the framework."