

Local Government Reform White Paper unveiled by Mark Drakeford

The White Paper, which is out for consultation until the beginning of April, is the result of months of discussions between the Welsh Government, local authorities and others on how to strengthen council services in the face of future challenges. It seeks views on proposals for mandatory regional working to deliver a range of services, address workforce issues, and implement electoral reform including allowing voting at 16. It also calls on members of the public to become active participants in local democracy and in the design and delivery of services.

Amongst the proposals are a mandatory economic development footprint that would also cover certain planning functions and transport.

Councils would have some flexibility over what footprint they use to share responsibilities for other mandated services including education improvement, social services, additional learning needs, public protection and promotion of the Welsh language.

Councillors would make up the membership of new, enhanced joint committees which would oversee these services and make decisions on behalf of their respective councils. Funding arrangements would work on the existing practice of pooled budgets.

The local government workforce is an essential part of these proposals and the Welsh Government will consider, through the Workforce Partnership Council, how to support the transition over to the new arrangements, using statutory guidance where necessary.

Councils would still have the option of merging under the new plans and, where there is local agreement for this, the Welsh Government would work with them to make it a reality.

The White Paper also calls for a different and more equal partnership between people and the public services they use. This would see the development of a new set of principles recognising people as the best experts in how to manage their own lives and putting in place small interventions earlier to resolve issues before they escalate further.

The proposals strike a new balance between clear and unavoidable objectives for local government with flexibility for councils to determine how those shared objectives are best delivered locally. Thus the White Paper proposals provide councils with powers to choose between operating a Cabinet or Committee system and to decide how the activities of councillors are best reported to the electorate. Similarly, views are invited on enabling local authorities to adopt either 'first past the post' or 'single transferable vote' election systems. Following passage of the Wales Bill, further conversation will take place on a wider set of measures to reform electoral

arrangements in Wales to improve both voter registration and turn out at elections.

In line with the new proposals, the Cabinet Secretary also announced that he would be considering how the wider local government finance system could be reformed – ensuring a fairer and more sustainable system to support local authorities in the future.

Setting out the proposals for consultation, the Local Government Secretary said:

“This White Paper is not about change for change’s sake. Our councils are working against a backdrop of extraordinary austerity and some services are facing a great deal of pressure. Local government reform is essential if we’re to make these services stronger and more resilient to cope with the demands of the future.

“The new regional arrangements will bring councils together to work more effectively in the interests of people and their communities.

“We want to see a new relationship between councils and their communities where public services support people to live independent lives and intervene only when necessary and only for as long as is required.

“We also want a new relationship between the Welsh Government and our councils; one that is based on mutual respect for the important, and different, roles we each play.

“Underpinning all of these new arrangements will be effective scrutiny and accountability, where councillors act as the champion, advocate and guide for people who elect them.

“I want to thank local authority leaders and others for their help in forming a serious and credible set of proposals. I look forward to working alongside them further following the local government elections in May.”

The consultation will close on 11th April 2017 and is available to view on the Welsh Government’s website: consultations.gov.wales.

New authority to oversee skills and

the higher and further education sectors in Wales

The move comes after the Welsh Government accepted the [recommendations of an independent review carried out by Professor Ellen Hazelkorn](#), with a full consultation to follow in the spring.

Published in March 2016, it suggested:

- Establishing a single regulatory, oversight and co-ordinating authority for the post-compulsory education sector.
- The new body will be responsible for funding provision at all levels, ensuring quality and be the lead funder of research.
- Placing the needs of learners at the heart of the education system by establishing clear and flexible learning and career pathways.
- There should be equal value and support for vocational and academic pathways and connections between qualifications and the labour market need to be improved.

Kirsty Williams said:

“The boundaries between higher education and further education are now breaking down.

“Working lives are now longer, and change rapidly, and we need a system that makes it easier for people to learn and obtain the skills they need throughout their careers. This is happening against a backdrop of rapid change in other parts of the UK and Brexit.

“The various sectors and providers in Wales are regulated and funded in different ways by different bodies, resulting in competition, gaps and confusion for learners.

“Professor Hazelkorn concluded that the current system does not focus sufficiently on learners and does not fully achieve value for money. Her report emphasised the need for post-compulsory education and training to operate as a single sector.

“I have given these proposals careful consideration and the model she puts forward builds on what is tried and tested in successful education systems, and I want Wales to enjoy those same advantages.

“This is an opportunity to shape a system where institutions of all types are encouraged to work together to meet learners’ needs, allowing them to progress and building strong links with business and providing the skills our economy needs.”

Building Regulations Advisory Committee for Wales welcomes six new faces

Alan Jones, Bernadette Kinsella, Matthew Grey, Paul Williams, Steven Harris and Will Phillips all took up their posts on 1 January and have been appointed for a period of three years.

The Cabinet Secretary said:

“The Building Regulation Advisory Committee for Wales plays an important role in advising Welsh ministers on the making and amending of building regulations and other related matters.

“This period of appointment coincides with the Building Regulations Sustainability and Part L reviews. I am confident Alan, Bernadette, Matthew, Paul, Will and Steven will all bring a wide range of expertise and experience to the Committee.”

Members of the Building Regulations Advisory Committee for Wales are appointed on a voluntary independent basis to represent particular fields of expertise and experience.

Latest categorisation figures show school improvement

Published today, the [National Categorisation System](#) has been introduced in 2014 to help identify schools in need of support to improve. Schools are placed into one of four colour-coded support categories to demonstrate the level of support they need.

Each school's category is determined by a range of factors including its performance data and capacity to improve in areas such as leadership and teaching and learning. Local authorities and their regional consortia play a central role in the process which triggers a bespoke package of challenge and support in each school.

Under the system there are four categories – green, yellow, amber and red.

Schools in the green category are deemed to be in need of the least support while schools in the red category are those identified as needing the most support.

This year's results show that there are fewer schools in Wales in need of the highest levels of support when compared to last year. Similarly, there are more schools categorised as needing lower levels of support. In summary:

- the proportion of green schools – those needing less support – has increased by 5 percentage points in the primary sector and 7 percentage points in the secondary sector.
- the proportion of red schools – those identified as needing most support – has reduced by 1 percentage point in the primary sector and 2 percentage points in the secondary sector.
- 41 per cent of special schools have been categorised as green, and needing less support, with only 8 per cent being categorised as red and in need of most support.

Cabinet Secretary for Education Kirsty Williams said:

“This system is not about grading, labelling or creating crude league tables but about providing support and encouraging improvement in our schools. It is about putting schools into a position that helps them to identify areas they can strengthen and what they need to do achieve further improvements.

“The figures we have published today show that 84.4% of primary and 64.6% of secondary schools are now in the green and yellow categories. This increase is to be welcomed, as these schools will have a key role to play in supporting other schools, sharing their skills, expertise, and good practice. In this way they will be making a vital contribution to our national mission of driving forward improvements in Welsh schools and moving us towards a self-improving system.”

The categorisation for all schools is available on the [My Local School website](#) (external link) and the [Welsh Government education pages](#).

[Extra protection for Wales' sea birds and harbour porpoise approved](#)

Following a consultation last year for new Special Areas of Conservation (SAC) for harbour porpoise, the Cabinet Secretary has approved three areas. These have now been submitted to the European Commission for consideration.

The three areas are North Anglesey Marine, West Wales Marine and the Bristol Channel Approaches.

The areas have been identified based on 18 years of data on harbour porpoise distribution and have been identified as important, having persistently higher densities of harbour porpoise compared to other areas. The SACs will complement existing conservation measures in place throughout UK waters to help maintain the favourable status of the species.

The Cabinet Secretary has also approved three additional marine areas as Special Protection Areas.

These include Northern Cardigan Bay which is home to the wintering red throated diver and an extension to two important seabird breeding areas, Ynys Feurig, Cemlyn Bay and Skokholm and Skomer, to include areas which are vitally important to preening and other behaviours during the birds' breeding season.

The Cabinet Secretary said:

"We are committed to creating a network of marine protected areas in Wales so species and habitats can thrive. A rich and healthy marine environment ensures the sustainable use of our seas now and in the future.

"The wide response to Natural Resources Wales' consultation on the protection of marine porpoises shows the value people place in protecting marine life. I am pleased we are taking steps to provide protection for our harbour porpoise and protect important areas for sea birds."

Ceri Davies, Natural Resources Wales' Executive Director for Evidence, Policy and Permitting, said:

"We are proud that the seas around Wales support such a rich diversity of wildlife, which is highly valued by local communities and sustains important businesses such as fishing, tourism and recreation.

"NRW looks forward to working with stakeholders to ensure that these sites are appropriately managed to help conserve them for future generations."