

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.