

WLGA Executive Board



Minutes 15th December 2023 via Teams

Present:

WLGA Presiding Officer, Cllr Huw David OBE (Bridgend)

Cllr Stephen Thomas (Blaenau Gwent)
Cllr Sean Morgan (Caerphilly)
Cllr Huw Thomas (Cardiff)
Cllr Darren Price (Carmarthenshire)
Cllr Bryan Davies (Ceredigion)
Cllr Charlie McCoubrey (Conwy)
Cllr Jason McLellan (Denbighshire)
Cllr Geraint Thomas (Merthyr Tydfil)
Cllr Steve Hunt (Neath Port Talbot)
Cllr Jane Mudd (Newport)
Cllr David Simpson (Pembrokeshire)
Cllr James Gibson-Watt (Powys)
Cllr Rob Stewart (Swansea)
Cllr Anthony Hunt (Torfaen)
Cllr Lis Burnett (Vale of Glamorgan)
Cllr Mark Pritchard (Wrexham)

Apologies and substitutes

Cllr Ian Roberts (Flintshire) – substitute Cllr Dave Hughes
Cllr Dyfrig Siencyn (Gwynedd)
Cllr Llinos Medi (Isle of Anglesey) – substitute Cllr Robin Williams
Cllr Mary Anne Brocklesby (Monmouthshire)
Cllr Andrew Morgan OBE (Rhondda Cynon Taf)

WLGA Officers: Chris Llewelyn, Naomi Alleyne, Jon Rae, Tim Peppin, Lisa Hayward, Karen Higgins, Sharon Davies, Dilwyn Jones, Jo Hendy, Lindsay Phillips and Evelyn James

Item 1. Welcome and apologies for absence

1. Apologies and substitutes were noted as above. Members wished Cllr Roberts a speedy recovery. All members noted the pressures Cllr. Morgan had with the recent car crash in Coed Ely and the Fire on Treforest Industrial Estate and understood why he could not attend today's meeting.
2. The resignation of the First Minister Rt. Hon Mark Drakeford MS: The WLGA Presiding Officer expressed his appreciation and those of members for his dedication throughout the pandemic and the acknowledged he had championed the cause of local Government and adopted a collaborative approach.
3. Cllr. Pritchard added that it was imperative for the next First Minister to commit to support councils across Wales, especially given the significant financial challenges ahead.

Item 2. WLGA Leader & Spokespersons Update

4. In the Leader's absence Cllr. Rob Stewart, WLGA Deputy Leader, provided an update and also expressed his appreciation for the work of the departing First Minister.
5. Cllr Stewart reported Cllr Morgan has undertaken a significant amount of work prior to the Welsh Budget and LG Settlement and his efforts are continuing. There is uncertainty regarding the Care Action Committee and assessment delays and a presentation will be circulated to members following the meeting.
6. Baroness Wilcox (former Leader of the WLGA) approached Cllr Morgan as current WLGA Leader and Cllr Stewart as WLGA Economy Spokesperson for a discussion about the work of the UK 2070 Commission. The meeting was held earlier in the week with Baroness Wilcox and also involved Prof Michael Henson who is chair of the UK2070 Taskforce programme.
7. The Commission is an independent inquiry into city and regional inequalities and regional development in the UK that has been running for some time now, initially focused on a lot of academic research. More recently, the Commission has been setting up locally based task forces to look at particular places and their economic opportunities, and how to progress those in practical ways 'on the ground'
8. One of the Task Forces already established is for Teesside, where their focus has been on net zero economic opportunities and creating a global centre of excellence including green hydrogen opportunities. On the green hydrogen front, links have been made with South Africa who want to become a net exporter of cost-effective green hydrogen. Commonwealth connections are being used to help develop those links.
9. Trade missions with South Africa have taken place already and more are planned in 2024 to establish strategic partnerships that can promote the use of green hydrogen.

Aircraft fuel, bus and freight transport uses are being explored, whilst also looking at wider technology and skills development opportunities.

10. Baroness Wilcox has been working for Wales to get involved and a UK2070 Welsh Taskforce is at the discovery and scoping stage and opportunities and potential in relation to the new freeports can be explored as part of the involvement. Some initial exploratory discussions have taken place with officers in Cardiff Capital Region and the Commission are open to discussions with Swansea Bay City region and possibly Mid and North Wales if there is interest.
11. Cllr Stewart brought it to the Executive Board's attention to make sure Leaders are aware of the developments. It was suggested that a meeting with relevant Cabinet Members is organised for the new year which the WLGA will look to take that forward.
12. At this stage, it is too early to tell if there are genuine employment and investment opportunities for Wales that could come out of this, but it seems worth being involved and finding out more information.
13. The Commission has been set up to address regional inequalities in the UK for some time. Trying to engage locally based taskforce and to progress. Teesside and others have been involved for some time exploring Net Zero employment opportunities and exploiting green hydrogen opportunities. Considering the same in Wales. South Africa want to be a net exporter. Developing community connections and trade links. Use will be in Aircraft, bus, and freight networks. Baroness Wilcox seeking to get some focus on Wales. Exploration discussions held in Cardiff seeking to persuade them to come to Swansea. Focus on growth and regional deals. Intention to gather Cabinet Members and have a Leader meeting in 2024 to explore the potential of employment and investment opportunities.
14. The Chief Executive, Chris Llewelyn, mentioned it is only the second meeting Cllr. Morgan had missed but he had spoken to him and confirmed lobbying was ongoing in relation to the Budget. There has been speculation that the social services budget is being cut from £45 to £35 million and this has already been raised with the Finance and Local Government Minister.

Item 3. Finance 2024-25 Update

15. The WLGA Finance Spokesperson, Cllr Anthony Hunt, introduced the item and referred members to the accompanying report. Jon Rae, Director of Resources, confirmed the level of pressures had increased due to teachers' pay and pensions.
16. The forthcoming WLGA Senedd Finance Engagement events were noted - SE Wales and Mid & West Wales both (19th Jan), South West Wales (1st Feb) and North Wales (9th Feb). It was reported the Welsh Government budget is being debated in the Senedd on 6th February.

17. Cllr. Pritchard said there was a need to keep a close eye on the grants and the Welsh Government seems to make a decision and then releases information slowly.
18. Cllr Huw Thomas queried whether there was any insight into the Welsh Government attitude to school grants.
19. Cllr. David confirmed there was a real risk around the grants, and he was not sure whether they were finalised at the same time as the LG Settlement. Jon agreed it was the biggest risk councils face and reported there are more than 100 grants to councils - exceeding £1.2 billion - and the lack of information is not helpful for councils when planning services and budgets.
20. Members asked where they could find the data used in the funding formula?
21. Jon acknowledged the volatility in the system and advised there was more fundamental work going on in the longer term in relation to the formula. The Welsh Government census indicators are incredibly old, and the consequences of updating are enormous. The Welsh Government requested that the papers not be shared.
22. Cllr Price noted it had been challenging coming to terms with teachers pay and pensions and emphasised the need to keep lobbying. He confirmed he had also written to the Education Minister.
23. Chris Llewelyn noted there were always more questions about the formula when the settlement was lower. RCT and Gwynedd likely to be most affected. Specific grants are of concern but hopefully more information will be forthcoming before next week. A reduction in the number of specific grants could reduce bureaucracy however, rationalisation also usually brings cuts. A briefing with Leaders' and the Finance and Local Government is arranged for the 18th December and the WLGA will continue to push for more money.
24. Cllr. Steve Hunt queried how much detail the WLGA knew and felt the Leader and Deputy Leader should be told more with the announcement was due 20th December. Cllr Stewart confirmed he did not know anymore. Chris Llewelyn confirmed and provided assurances to Cllr Hunt that the WLGA lobbies constantly and will continue to do so.
25. Jon to take back members view to Welsh Government officials that the total amount of the 'consequentialists' coming to the Welsh Government, as a result of additional funding being made in England, should go to councils (£305m per the Autumn Statement). There was general agreement on a funding floor.
26. Cllr. Huw Thomas emphasised the need to support each other during this time and continue to press for the full amount and although he confirmed that Cardiff's budget had been set on a genuine cost, he would support the funding floor outside the RSG.

27. Resolved:

- 27.1 Members resolved to note the contents of the report; and
- 27.2 Agreed to press the Welsh Government on a funding floor.

Item 4. Development of WLGA Corporate Plan ‘Workshop with Leaders’

28. The Deputy Chief Executive and Director of Social Services and Housing, Naomi Alleyne introduced the item.

29. Time did not permit a full workshop on the issue and members had seen the proposed strategic objectives which had been circulated previously. The plan emphasises working proactively and not reactively, lobbying and using opportunities and assets across the organisation. Officers are willing to discuss and review further if required. The plan has already been discussed with some Spokespeople and the necessary resources will be identified for the next 3-year period. Members were encouraged to feedback any comments, views or suggestions to either Chris or Naomi, particularly in regards to the proactive work which is not already covered by the plan.

30. Cllr. Stewart confirmed he was happy to support and thought the best use of time today, would be to send queries outside of the meeting.

31. Cllr Steve Hunt described it as a fantastic report and described the WLGA as a “Fantastic Organisation” but queried how realistic the objectives are and asked whether the outcomes and deliverables were achievable and if the funding was there to deliver the plan going forward given the current economic climate/outlook.

32. Naomi confirmed members would receive updates on progress twice a year. The Association will be working with academics and ‘think tanks’. The Wales Centre for Public policy is keen to work with WLGA on Net Zero. The WLGA will use its officers and other resources to deliver the plan.

33. Cllr Pritchard was supportive of the plan which he described as aspirational and noted it covered everything.

34. Resolved:

- 34.1 Members noted the report; and
- 34.2 Members considered and agreed the draft WLGA Corporate Plan Objectives as the basis of the WLGA’s Corporate Plan.

Item 5. Take Up of Pension Credit

35. Lisa Hayward introduced the item and noted how it builds on previous work in relation to unclaimed welfare benefits in Wales and the need for councils to continue to encourage those currently eligible but not claiming to come forward and receive the payments they are entitled to.

36. It was acknowledged the demographic of those pension credit is targeted at, can make it difficult as they often have a stigma about claiming benefits and those who haven't claimed - but are eligible - may assume they don't qualify and also worry about scam operations.

37. Members felt dedicated support and strong messaging and communications such as adverts on bus stops across councils will help overcome fears and increase take up of those eligible. Cllr. Sean Morgan mentioned *Caerphilly Cares*, a scheme where residents in need are signposted to the scheme.

38. Resolved:

- 38.1 Members noted the contents of the report and agreed the actions detailed;
- 38.2 Members agreed the approach to engage with councils and other stakeholder groups to promote the Take Up of Pensions Credit; and
- 38.3 Members agreed to use some of the DWP marketing materials to promote the take up of Pensions Credit.

Item 6: Cap on Safe and Legal Routes: UK Gov Consultation

39. Naomi introduced the item and referred members to the report in the papers circulated.

40. To date 19 of the 22 councils who had responded indicated space for 330 people, and it was suggested that could be increased before the final submission on 9th January 2024. Cllr S Hunt noted certain councils had not responded and suggested the WLGA recirculates again and encourages the remaining councils to respond.

41. Resolved:

- 41.1 Members considered and agreed the WLGA response to the UK Government's consultation on the Cap on Safe and Legal Routes, as part of the Illegal Migration Act 2023.

Item 7: WLGA Draft Financial Statements 2022-23

42. Harri Lloyd-Davies, Bevan and Buckland, presented the item and noted there was a year-on-year reduction in income from £33 million last year, to £28 million this year - driven by the project income decrease.
43. He summarised that the WLGA made a small deficit of £147k, but after adding on the interest receivable, this dropped to £62k. Harri drew attention to the movement on the pension scheme. He noted this showed a gain of £9.2 million, confirming that the pension liability has been wiped out and there is a theoretical surplus of £2.5 million instead.
44. This is a totally clean audit. The pension scheme will be impacted in a positive way by interest rates in the next few years.
45. Jon referred the members to the Letter of Representation in the annex which the members needed to endorse.

46. Resolved:

- 46.1 Members approved the WLGA Strategic Report, Report of the Chief Executive and Financial Statements for the year ended 31 March 2023; and
- 46.1 Members approved the Consolidated Statement of Account for the WLGA and Data Cymru for the year ended 31st March 2023.

Item 8: Any Other Business

It was agreed to hold the next meeting on the 19th of January, not the 26th January, due to Holocaust Memorial Day.