

27th October 2023

APPROACH TO DEVELOPING THE WLGA CORPORATE PLAN

Purpose

1 To seek members views on the most effective ways to engage with WLGA leaders, spokespersons and the wider membership in agreeing priorities for the WLGA. These will be included in a Corporate Plan to support delivery of the Corporate Strategy agreed at the WLGA Council AGM in June 2023.

Background

2 Members agreed a Corporate Strategy at the AGM in June 2023 covering the years 2023-27. The Corporate Strategy sets out the vision and aims of the Association, our values, how we undertake our work and highlights the importance of staff in delivering the ambitions and priorities of the Association's members.

3 A copy of the Corporate Strategy is attached to this report for reference, but the sections below are particularly relevant to the development of specific priorities and objectives to deliver the strategy.

4 We will achieve our vision by:

- Promoting the role and prominence of councillors and council leaders
- Ensuring maximum local discretion in legislation or statutory guidance
- Championing and securing long-term and sustainable funding for councils
- Promoting sector-led improvement
- Encouraging a vibrant local democracy, promoting greater diversity
- Supporting councils to effectively manage their workforce.

5 Reflecting our values, we will seek to be:

- **Ambitious** in our expectations and in our vision for local democracy and services
- **Accountable** to our members and member authorities
- **Proactive** in our defence and promotion of local democracy, our policy development and our engagement with members
- **Receptive** through listening to and considering the range of views of our membership, partners and stakeholders
- **Responsive** through our services and support to our members and member authorities
- **Collaborative** in our approach to governance and partnership working with Welsh government and other stakeholders.

6 Our priorities are underpinned by our core aims to secure:

- Reform, continuous improvement and a commitment to partnership
- Fair and flexible funding
- Commitment to the principle of subsidiarity

7 The Strategy also reflects that in delivering our priorities we will:

- Support councils and other partners in promoting equalities and creating an anti-racist Wales
- Promote a transition to a net zero economy and respond to the wider challenges of climate change
- Work with councils to make Corporate Joint Committees (CJCs) work as efficiently and effectively as possible for the people and communities they represent
- Promote the role of councils in social care with an enhanced focus on prevention and early intervention and community and primary care.

8 The Corporate Strategy also states that moving forward there will be, *“A renewed focus on campaigning, lobbying and public affairs along with a continuing adherence to the needs and priorities of local authorities and other members will share and inform our work. This will inevitably require us to be agile and responsive, reflecting the dynamic policy setting and the continuous but changing pressures impacting on local government and its partners across Wales”*.

9 The recent Independent Review of the WLGA’s Senior Management Arrangements reflected views shared by leaders during interviews that will need to be addressed in the development of the corporate plan. Leaders identified areas of policy where they felt the WLGA needed to be more proactive and offer challenge to the Welsh Government and others if required.

10 During the review, three areas were consistently identified where more proactive work is needed:

social services and health – the need to set out a new vision, not simply reacting to Welsh Government initiatives;

a repositioning of Corporate Joint Committees - reflecting dissatisfaction with the current policy stance and a significant change needed; and

the net zero and decarbonisation agenda.

11 In response to the above, a new social services policy officer is currently being recruited to add capacity in this policy area and additional capacity will also be obtained in the other areas over the next few months.

12 During the review, leaders also reflected that they would like to see WLGA meetings more strategic and policy-focused and a shift the focus to discussion on agreed priorities. Many reflected the need to ensure members have discussed issues in advance of engagement with Ministers. A common theme was ‘what difference have we

made?' and the need to focus on impact and outcome of the work of the WLGA. Leaders also identified and confirmed the WLGA's priorities in terms of advocating for the sector, together with lobbying and influencing on policy.

13 The review however also reflected the competing work priorities and the limited core capacity that exists in the WLGA, exacerbated when individuals are responsible for policy work and management of grant funded services. The workload has increased as the devolution, legislative and regulatory agenda has expanded. The review found that while staff seek to meet all demands placed on them, there is a need for a framework based on priorities against which to make choices to match available resource to workload.

14 The WLGA operates within a dynamic context and is often required to react and support councils in times of crisis. Recently, this has included the Covid pandemic, the war in Ukraine, the cost-of-living crisis and economic problems. This impacts on routine work and capacity and highlights the tension faced between responding to circumstances and proactively promoting a local government agenda. The lack of time and space to stand back and focus on the important rather than the urgent is also impacted by the reactive work of the Association. The internal review noted that to take a more proactive role, more capacity will need to be created, and this capacity will likely have to be released by making choice about priorities. It recommends, "As part of the corporate planning process, agree priorities with the political leadership that facilitate managing activity to current resources. Ensure Welsh Government are advised of areas of policy that the WLGA is able to contribute to only...In essence, produce a resource plan for policy activity matching available resources to demand and being clear on any areas not covered".

Agreeing priority areas of work for the WLGA

15 In addressing the above, particularly the feedback from leaders shared as part of the review, the development of a WLGA Corporate Plan for 2024-27 (in line with the timeframe of the Corporate Strategy) the involvement of members will be key. Identifying clear strategic priorities for the Association and matching ambition and objectives to identified capacity will also require some flexibility to ensure the Association remains able to respond to any crisis that may arise and responding to policy emanating from Government which leaders agree are a priority for the WLGA.

16 The annual report presented to the AGM in June identified the following broad policy areas as strategic priorities the WLGA has been focused on:

- Digital and data
- Economic development and regeneration, including planning
- Education
- Finance
- Housing, including community safety and migration
- Improvement and governance
- Public protection and frontline services
- Social Services
- Sustainable development, including circular economy and climate change mitigation and adaptation
- Workforce issues

- 17 It is proposed that given the current economic outlook and the significant financial challenges facing authorities will also be reflected in each of the priorities agreed by members and this will also reflect the need for improvement and transformation of services, particularly in light of financial challenges, as appropriate.
- 18 Once strategic priorities are agreed by members, specific objectives will be identified to deliver on these priorities and detailed actions plans and outcome measures, advocating for the sector, together with lobbying and influencing policy, along with the necessary allocated resource, will be developed and brought together into a corporate plan. Progress against the plan will also need to be reported regularly to ensure members are content with progress and the direction of travel.
- 19 The engagement of members in developing specific objectives will be important in ensuring these reflect the specific concerns and issues for members and councils. It is therefore proposed that discussions take place with spokespeople on their proposals and suggestions for specific work and objectives in the related policy area and the views of and feedback from relevant cabinet members also be sought. The engagement of Chief Executives and lead Directors of policy areas will also be undertaken to ensure appropriate linkages and input are made. Subject to the agreement of members, it is anticipated that following this wider engagement a workshop for leaders will be arranged.
- 20 In terms of timescale, it is proposed that this engagement will take place over the next few months with a draft Corporate Plan for 2024-27 presented to the Management Sub-Committee in January 2024 prior to being presented to the WLGA Executive Board and WLGA Council before the end of March.
- 21 In line with the need to ensure there is a balance between agreed priority areas of work and appropriate capacity to ensure delivery, we will also need to consider how to respond to expectations from others, such as the Welsh Government, as to the role the WLGA will play in other areas of work. This will also require discussion and agreement with members, that is, any work that WLGA does not feel able to contribute to due to capacity issues, as there are some reputational risks in such an approach, such as the perception being that the WLGA has disengaged or is uninterested in influencing wider issues.
- 22 Another issue raised by leaders during the internal review was the balance between WLGA funded core activities and the work undertaken by grant funded teams. Almost 60% of the organisation is currently made up of grant funded activity, with specific issues to address or work on, some of which align to the WLGA's core purpose, while others do not so clearly. Most funding comes from the Welsh Government but also from other sources such as the UK Government. Management of grant funded team and their activities does impact on some of WLGA's core capacity.
- 23 In the longer-term, the review suggests a more business-like approach in the decision as to if and how the WLGA will host any further grant funded teams, to help minimise any impact on core activity and manage risks the WLGA holds. It is intended however to ensure that the contribution of grant funded teams, both to WLGA core activity, aims and role, and their own objectives, will be reflected in the corporate plan, as appropriate. All objectives in the corporate plan will be implemented through the performance management framework and reflected in each individual's performance objectives, ensuring all staff understand their contribution to the delivery of WLGA's key priorities.

24 For any organisation, the corporate strategy and plan should be the golden thread that runs throughout all its activities. Clearly setting out its role, aims and values along with clear priorities and organisational arrangements to ensure successful delivery. The review recommended a number of actions and changes to improve good management and governance of the work of the WLGA and while these are being planned and taken forward, the development and implementation of the corporate plan is an important aspect of taking forward the review recommendations and ensuring the Association can operate at an optimal level.

Recommendations

25 Members are asked to:

- 25.1 Note and comment on the content of this report, including the context for the development of the Corporate Plan;**
- 25.2 Comment on and agree the proposed strategic areas as set out in para 16 as priorities for the Association, subject to any issues members wish to add or remove or any comments on focus members may wish to make; and**
- 25.3 Support the proposed plans for engaging with members and council officers in developing specific objectives to include in the plan related to agreed priority areas and/or suggest other stakeholders and a workshop for leaders to agree the specific objectives to inform the corporate plan.**

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