

Pwyllgor Newid Hinsawdd, yr Amgylchedd a Seilwaith /
Climate Change, Environment and Infrastructure Committee
Blaenoriaethau ar gyfer y Chweched Senedd / Priorities for the Sixth Senedd
PR61

Ymateb gan Cymdeithas Llywodraeth Leol Cymru / Evidence from Welsh Local Government
Association



Suggested Priorities for the Climate Change, Environment and Infrastructure Committee 10th September 2021



CLILC • WLGA

Introduction

1. The Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA) represents the 22 local authorities (LAs) in Wales. The three national park authorities and the three fire and rescue authorities are associate members.
2. The WLGA is a politically-led cross-party organisation, with the leaders from all local authorities determining policy through the Executive Board and the wider WLGA Council. The WLGA appoints senior members as Spokespersons and Deputy Spokespersons to provide a national lead on policy matters on behalf of local government.
3. The WLGA welcomes the opportunity to help inform the Committee's main priorities for the Sixth Senedd.

Feedback on Ministry's priorities

4. "The Welsh Government has set out its ambitions and priorities in its new Programme for Government. Local government shares and welcomes many of these priorities, including the focus on tackling climate change.
5. As one of the core public service deliverers in Wales, local councils will be central to delivering many of the Welsh Government's national ambitions. It is important therefore that local government is involved as early as possible in designing and shaping the emerging policy and legislative priorities, and for these to be proportionate to the ability of local government to deliver these considering ongoing cuts, and continued loss of expertise and capacity within Local Government.
6. Public services are under enormous pressure, and this is further exacerbated by a national shortage of skilled workforce in most of the Climate Change Ministry's priority focus areas. It is therefore imperative for the Minister to work with academia and industry to tackle this shortage and support the development of the requisite range of skills and expertise needed to deliver the priority focus areas and build the resilience and expertise of public bodies.
7. We support in principle with the new Wales Transport Strategy but would like to emphasise that a balanced approach to transport must be taken. The freeze on new roads whilst a review of highway schemes across Wales is carried out should not be seen as a 'no road building statement' but informed where the evidence supports it.

8. The WLGA supports the First Minister's aspiration of '*putting the environment at the heart of decision-making*' which needs to complement the recovery of local economies, support efforts to sustain rural communities and assist in the delivery of local priorities generally.
9. We welcome the inclusion of both the Optimised Retrofit Programme and Welsh Housing Quality Standard among those priorities, both of which will contribute to decarbonisation and tackling poverty, and build on the work already done to drive up housing standards.
10. Welsh Government grants and programmes have historically been developed in-situ offering little opportunities to maximise benefits and cross-fertilisation opportunities. We hope the new Ministry will be the catalyst to better align emerging policies, priorities, and grants across the different WG portfolios, to enable the delivery of holistic and multi-benefit projects and activities.

Suggested priority areas

Climate Change

11. There is a strong focus on mitigation and decarbonisation to meet the stretching targets for reducing emissions of greenhouse gases. However, this strong emphasis is already shifting the attention away from the need to adapt to existing changes, especially with increased flooding and sea level rise. Very little progress has been made in this area due to a range of factors including lack of enabling policies, and large scale studies to facilitate the relocation of communities or other management options. **We would encourage the Committee to explore why adaptation to climate change and sea level rise is not receiving the same level of prioritisation as decarbonisation.**

Tree Planting

12. The Welsh Government needs to design efficient and modern regulation and strategic planning for tree planting to ensure multiple benefits (for biodiversity and carbon and recreation and economy) are achieved rather than one at the expense of the other. We are currently seeing a large number of farms being bought by carbon off-setting companies to turn into vast tree plantations. Whilst this helps meet carbon storage and sequestration objectives it also stops young farmers from starting up at a time when Wales needs to be self-reliant and increase food production post Brexit. **The Committee should explore how the WG should work more closely with National Parks to**

ensure tree planting is done in the right areas and complement peatland restoration and carbon sequestration strategies developed by National Parks.

Environment

13. We welcome the continued investment in Flood & Coastal Erosion Risk Management and updated National Strategy for Flood & Coastal Erosion. However, the government's clear focus is on protecting homes rather than businesses. This policy is likely to impact on prosperity and local economies and does not reflect the ambition set-out in the National Development Framework. Effectively, many Business Parks (Treforest, Connah's Quay for example) would not be eligible for WG funding to increase their level of protection against flood risk and sea level rise. **We would encourage the Committee to take an active interest in this area and identify how these areas which are pivotal to local economy and employment will be protected and funded in the face of increasing risks.**

Transport

14. WLGA is generally supportive of the ambitious proposals in the new Wales Transport Strategy. Implementation of it will require a focus on behaviour change to achieve the desired modal shift. **We would encourage the Committee to investigate what steps will be taken to reinforce this behaviour change and to ensure that policies are 'rural-proofed' so they do not disadvantage or disproportionately affect rural areas.**

Skills & Expertise

15. Wales is facing a significant shortage of skilled workforce impacting on the ability of Councils, Natural Resources Wales, and the private sector to recruit and fill-in specialist posts. Shortages are seen across a range of areas including Flood & Coastal Erosion Risk Management, Climate Change, Energy, Housing, Forestry, and Sustainable Drainage. This can be partly explained by a lack of suitable courses delivered by academia, difficulty of councils to adapt to fast moving policies, and lack of support to implement these policies. **We would encourage the Committee to investigate how the Welsh Government should engage with academia and the relevant industry to support and fund the development of specialist education programmes linked with the delivery of priority areas.**

Welsh Government Grants

16. Grant eligibility criteria, inability to match fund using other grants, and lack of WG cross-departmental working have often limited the ability of councils to deliver multi-benefit activities. Furthermore, programmes tend not to align making the assembly of funding very difficult. The Ministry's priority focus areas and Well-Being of Future Generations Act will require a more holistic approach to delivery and **the Committee should investigate how the various grants and programmes can be more flexible through better synergy and wider remit.**

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