

Inquiry into preparations for replacing EU funding for Wales

Response from Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council

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We write in response to the Finance Committee's terms of reference of its inquiry into preparations for replacing EU funding streams in Wales, after the UK leaves the EU:

Core Principles

We would like to see any re-placement funding streams based upon similar principles to those underpinning EU cohesion policy. That is, an aim towards convergence between wealthier and less developed areas, and at least in part, re-distributive in nature.

As an area with challenging levels of poverty, disadvantage and some skills gaps, we advocate the importance of "levelling up" and ensuring no area is left behind. Decisions on the investment of the UK Shared Prosperity Fund should reflect this need and focus a higher proportion of resources upon areas of deprivation.

We believe this is important for translating the governments' commitment to social justice to action but also more broadly to help deliver a cohesive and an equal Wales, in line with important legislation and approaches such as the Well-being of Future Generations Act.

Policy priorities

We are given to understand that post Brexit, the opportunity to continue to benefit from and participate in some EU programmes such as INTERREG is likely. This serves as a positive example of a programme with capacity to share knowledge and expertise. It seems sensible to develop new arrangements with one eye towards developments in the EU to maintain an understanding of common areas for prioritisation and collaboration.

Where possible it should maximise the benefit of Wales' own funding arrangements alongside participation in EU programmes, especially in light of the ongoing squeeze on public funding and projections around economic performance post-Brexit.

Administrative arrangements

Having participated in and benefited from a number of EU funding programmes, we suggest there may be room to simplify some administrative arrangements. While we fully support robust systems to monitor and account for funding, we would like to see these made as simple as possible to ensure maximum participation in future schemes both from professional organisations and from smaller community run groups and organisations. Indeed, there is an argument to suggest that future funding streams could provide greater funding flexibility i.e. built into core funding rather than in the form of specific grants.

Delivering Outcomes

We welcome the move in recent years to increase assurances that publically funded and commissioned projects are delivering real outcomes for people and communities. We want to see this approach maintained under new arrangements and built into all aspects of arrangements to emphasise the centrality of change that funding should deliver.

Communication and engagement

The vote to leave the EU in Blaenau Gwent, as in other parts of the UK with similar socio-economic profile, was arguably in part a reflection of a *perception* some communities had about the EU and EU funding. Learning from this, new arrangements must pay due consideration to the socio-economic profile of communities across Wales. They must robustly communicate where funding has come from, how it has been used and what benefits it has delivered.

Regional Working

Given the movement towards regional working and increased regional collaboration in public services and local government, future arrangements should reflect and be responsive to regional collaborations and make due regard to spatial considerations for areas that sit within or are associated with multiple regional footprints.

However, any such arrangements should design out situations where regional projects are in “competition” or result in duplication.