



**Briefing 14 -36 October 2014**

## **APSE response to the Welsh Government 'Reforming Local Government' White Paper consultation'**

To: All APSE members including chief executives, main contacts and APSE contacts in Wales. This briefing predominantly concerns issues relating to the Welsh Government but will serve as a point of interest across the UK.

### Key Issues

- The Commission on Public Service Governance and Delivery proposed a number of changes to the governance and delivery of local government services within Wales
- As a result the Welsh Government issued a consultation white paper in July 2014, 'Reforming Local Government'.
- On behalf of APSE members in Wales APSE has now responded to the consultation on these proposals to the Welsh Government
- This briefing conveys to APSE members our response and asks for further comments and suggestions from the APSE membership.

### **1. Introduction**

In April 2013, the First Minister for Wales established the Commission on Public Service Governance and Delivery to allow the examination of all aspects of governance and delivery in the devolved public sector within Wales.

APSE briefing note 14-07 ([briefing 14-07](#)) provided a summary of the Commissions' outcomes.

The Welsh Government has now responded to the Commissions' proposals which include restructuring local government in Wales to move from 22 local authorities to around 12. APSE has

responded to these proposals, put forward in a consultation white paper, 'Reforming Local Government', following a series of discussions with member local authorities in Wales.

## **2. APSE Response**

### ***APSE's response to the consultation is replicated below:***

APSE was pleased to be given the opportunity to respond to the report through consultation. APSE's response in full is set out below:

### **Devolution, Democracy and Delivery White Paper – Reforming Local Government**

The Association for Public Service Excellence (APSE) represents officers and members involved in the management and provision of quality public services. APSE's mission statement positions the organisation as 'The Association which consults, develops, promotes, advises and shares on best practice in the delivery and provision of efficient and accountable public services'. APSE is currently working with 250 authorities within the United Kingdom including all 22 councils in Wales.

The most significant issue from this White Paper is the proposed merger of local authorities and the driver appears to be the financial challenges facing the public sector together with demographic changes and rising public expectations. However, APSE believes that key considerations in any decision about changing organizational boundaries should be how effective these changes are going to be in delivering vital front-line services to the public and the impact that they are going to have on the needs of the community.

The White Paper proposes that Vesting Day for the newly merged councils will be 2020 (2018 for the voluntarily merged authorities). Therefore, these changes are not going to have any impact, even if we are to assume such an impact would be positive, for at least another 5-6 years, when the focus needs to be on the immediate and short-term budget situation. This issue could also be compounded by the disruption that re-organisation will have and the cost of re-organisation itself. The White Paper states that *"the severe financial pressures also mean it is not realistic to expect the Welsh Government to provide large injections of cash to meet the cost of mergers as Central Government*

*has often done in the past when Local Government has been restructured.*" APSE would question how local government would be expected to fund this given the financial pressures that they are facing and welcomes the decision of the Welsh Government to produce a Regulatory Impact Assessment on the costs and benefits. However it is noted that the detailed cost information will only be available many months after this consultation has already been closed off leaving respondents without the necessary cost details, at this important stage of development, on the proposals.

APSE believes that any decision on merging local authorities rests with the local authorities themselves; therefore, as a result of the proposals, if local authorities feel that there would be benefits in merging and they wish to do this voluntarily then APSE supports this. However, APSE does not agree with the proposals to force mergers by legislation where this is not agreed by local democratically elected bodies. APSE believes that merging councils is only one option of many to meet the challenges ahead, which should be explored. From our UK-wide experiences of methods being used by councils to meet the challenges of financial austerity, APSE has developed a 'pillars of excellence' model which includes efficiency, income generation, innovation and demand management. For example, local authorities have used service transformation and service re-design to make efficiencies and develop new income streams to offset costs. APSE believes that these options should also be explored by the Welsh Government rather than merging authorities being viewed as a panacea to the challenges being faced by local authorities.

APSE believes that 'big isn't always beautiful' and our evidence from APSE performance networks on waste collections proves that refuse collection, and indeed many other frontline services, does not benefit from scale. APSE believes that there will be an optimum scale for delivering services and that this does not mean purely making councils larger. In addition, APSE believes that proposed mergers should be examined on a case-by-case basis as one size does not fit all. Therefore, local authorities should have the autonomy and choice of which route is the best option for the communities which they serve.

APSE agrees with the point made by WLGA that there is a fundamental question around what is the Welsh Government's vision for local democracy in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Whilst there are various alternative versions of local government being debated from the co-operative council to the enabling council, APSE has developed its own ethos of the 'Ensuring Council'. This endorses the role of local authorities as stewards of local wellbeing, recognizes the strategic advantages of a strong

core of in-house services delivered in collaboration rather than in competition with alternative providers and grounding local decisions in politics and the values of social justice. The model asserts that local government must be able to maintain the ability to 'ensure' that political, economic and social policy objectives are met within their communities and the Ensuring Council is a flexible model that can be applied to suit specific local circumstances. It is built around 6 core principles of stewardship, core capacity, municipal entrepreneurship, collaboration, politics and social justice. The WLGA has quoted APSE's Ensuring Council model in its consultation document "In Defence of Localism - Elected Government in Wales and the Impact of Austerity" as a model closer to the traditions in Wales, since it proposes an authority with a strong public sector ethos but with a willingness to examine other delivery mechanisms that are not for profit and which reflect a basis of collaboration and cooperation within local communities and local economies. To view the research on this, please click [here](#).

APSE agrees with the Welsh Government that the focus for public services needs to be on prevention rather than cure, to sustain long-term well-being and prevent rather than respond to critical situations. A good example of this is the transfer of public health responsibilities from the NHS to local government in England. Local authorities are well-placed to tackle the wider determinants of public health and well-being, for example through sports and leisure, parks and green spaces, transport, housing, education and school meals and regeneration to name a few.

The White Paper highlights the importance of performance management in meeting the challenges ahead. APSE agrees with the importance of identifying and applying good practice and the need for organisations to learn from each other including the rest of the UK to support innovation and learning across organizational boundaries. [APSE performance networks](#) supports the recommendations on performance management; it includes a set of measures which can be used in determining overall performance, which are robust, streamlined and consistent across organisations. These can be used to help to measure progress towards local and national outcomes and are already used to identify good practice and 'success stories'. All 22 councils in Wales are members of APSE performance networks and APSE will continue to work with councils in Wales to support their performance reporting requirements.

Thank you for the opportunity to respond to this consultation. APSE would welcome being involved in any further discussions on this White Paper.

### **3. APSE Comment**

The issues raised through the consultation are clearly a matter of great concern to APSE member authorities in Wales.

APSE, as we have reiterated in our response to the Welsh Government, is advocating for an evidence based approach to any future changes. The timeline for reorganisation now identified however would allow for a more coherent debate on future changes, albeit of equal concern is the fact that this very lengthy lead-in to any future structural changes may unintentionally fetter the different transformation options, already being considered, by many local authorities in Wales.

If you would like to add your comments to this issue please email Dave Ramsbottom, the new APSE Principal Advisor for Wales on [dramsbottom@apse.org.uk](mailto:dramsbottom@apse.org.uk). APSE will continue to work with our member authorities on this important issue.

**Dave Ramsbottom**  
**Principal Advisor**