

1. General comments:

Natural Resources Body for Wales (Natural Resources Wales) is a Welsh Government Sponsored Body. The purpose of Natural Resources Wales (NRW) is to ensure that the environment and natural resources of Wales are sustainably maintained, sustainably enhanced and sustainably used. In this context sustainability means with a view to benefiting, and in a manner designed to benefit, the people, environment and economy of Wales now and in the future. We are responding to this consultation because of our close working relationships with local government and particularly in the capacity as a statutory member of the future Public Service Boards as set out in the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act.

We support and welcome a greater focus on “Place” in the White Paper and the emphasis on the needs and services of the people in that place.

The White Paper, however, makes very little reference to, and therefore recognition of, the role Local Authorities’ play in providing quality accessible natural environments and the maintenance of the services and benefits those environments or resources provide to society and the economy. For example provision of parks and green spaces for leisure and recreation, active or relaxing; the management of Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty; managing environmental risk through water management schemes or action on fly-tipping. Whilst we wouldn’t expect to see a lot of detail in the White Paper, we would expect the environment and natural resource management to be reflected to ensure that the final proposals support delivery of the provisions of the Well-Being of Future Generations Act, which requires integrated consideration and delivery across social, economic, environmental and cultural issues.

2. Specific Comments:

1. Review of funding

Any review needs to establish a funding framework and mechanisms that support delivery of the provisions of the Well-being of Future Generations Act (WoFGA), particularly the need to support longer term decision making and preventative action required to support meeting the goals, for example a low carbon society.

If distribution formula are to be reviewed, the criteria of the review need to reflect the governance principles of the WoFGA to ensure that the formula takes account of socio-economic and environmental/natural resource indicators. This would help enable Local Authorities to meet their requirements under the WoFGA.

2. Partnership rationalisation

We support the general intent of rationalising local partnerships and ensuring these act under a democratic process, however we feel there still needs to be further clarification around:

- Area Boards

Clarity is needed on the link between local Area Boards and Public Service Boards and the roles and responsibilities of each. For example, are Area Boards the community voice into the Public Service Board? Are they a delivery body of the well-being plan objectives? What is their role in respect of other Local Authority activities for example land use planning and delivering the requirements of the Environment Bill?

It would appear that Area Boards may provide part of the community engagement opportunity required under the Environment Bill in respect of establishing Natural Resource Area Statements. However NRW will already be engaged as a statutory member of all the PSBs's and would caution against multiple engagement mechanisms, preferring one mechanism that could service multiple needs. In terms of engaging with PSBs and Area Boards the reform proposals to reduce the number of Local Authorities would be welcomed by NRW. This will allow us and other public sector bodies to ensure that we are fully engaged and at the appropriate level of seniority.

3. Local Governance arrangements

We support the changes proposed for simplifying and clarifying local governance arrangements. We particularly support better training for councillors, for example on Planning Policy and sustainable development principles. This would enable them to better inform their local communities and support sustainable decision making required under the WoFGA, including the role proposed here of effectively challenging the executive with respect to the delivery of the WoFGA.

4. Corporate planning and well-being plan objectives.

The statement in the summary document that Leaders will choose the local priorities that will go in the Well-being plan may lead to some confusion. Whilst we understand that for the Local Authority it is the

Leader who is proposed to be the level that agrees the priorities of the Local Authority, the Well-being plan is to be developed by all members of the PSB. It is our understanding that it is for the members of the PSB to share their priorities and as a group agree the key priorities and well-being objectives for that Local Authority area. The PSB should be about looking for synergies and integrated ways of working to deliver multi-benefits to that Local Authorities community in the most efficient and effective way.

The individual organisations corporate plan should set out the Well-being objectives for that organisation and these are taken to the PSB for an integrated consideration of what should go into the well-being plan. We therefore welcome the requirement for Local Authorities to have a corporate plan which identifies their key priorities and welcome the greater clarity in the full consultation document on the role of the corporate plan in meeting the requirements of the Well-being of Future Generations Bill. This may however be an area that requires further clarification.

5. External scrutiny:

We believe that there is a role for the Future Generations Commissioner (FGC) in the proposed external checks process of a Local Authorities' corporate plan and delivery. The 2 year peer review mentioned could usefully benefit from input from the FGC.

We would welcome greater clarity on the relationship between the role of Local Authority scrutiny as set out in the WoFGA and the strengthening proposals put forward in this White Paper. For example, in respect of the scrutiny of PSBs and other regional and partnership scrutiny, what are the potential roles and responsibilities of the statutory partners on a PSB?

We welcome the proposals for strengthening links between internal and external review bodies.

In the discussion on establishment of local public accounts committees, it refers to assessment of value for money and delivery of outcomes. Clarification may be required with respect to this section as to what is understood by value for money, i.e. that it is considering sustainable development outcomes and is therefore part of the process for ensuring compliance with the WoFGA.