



Dear John,

Response: Closure of the Communities First Programme

Thank you for your letter dated 15th May 2018 seeking further information on the impact of the closure of the Communities First programme. This response builds on our previous evidence submitted to the inquiry undertaken by the Committee.

We have further engaged with all our member Authorities in preparing the Welsh Local Government Association's response to the further queries outlined in your letter:

How effective the closure programme has been, and whether local government has had sufficient support from the Welsh Government in the transition period

The decision to close the Communities First programme came formally on 14th February 2017. The Welsh Government proposed a transition period throughout 2017-18 to provide an opportunity to phase out the programme fully by March 2018 with a view of ensuring its legacy through successor/alternative funding programmes.

Lead Delivery Bodies were expected to submit outline transition plans by 31 March 2017, with more detailed plans to follow by 31 May 2017 – outlining the approach to transition, intended timescales, engagement and involvement arrangements and type of projects to be continued in-year. To support the transition, Welsh Government established a Transition Team, and produced guidance notes and supplementary documents.

Undertaking programme closure will always be a challenge, let alone closing a programme of such significant scale and by that point one that had been operational in some areas for well over 10 years. In many areas, the programme had become the infrastructure within communities that ensured many other services reached those citizens in need of support.

Steve Thomas CBE
Prif Weithredwr
Chief Executive

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Ni fydd defnyddio'r naill iaith na'r llall yn arwain at oedi.**

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Whilst there can never be a “good” time to close a programme however, the general feeling amongst Local Authorities was that the closure of the Communities First programme could have been better managed for several reasons:

- First, the short timescales were a challenge to be able to plan and respond effectively for transition. There is a general feeling amongst the responses that the timescales between formal announcement of closure, and expected transition plans were not sufficient.
- Second, the timing of the announcement came just before the 2017 Local Government Elections. This added further complexity for officers managing the change on a local level.
- Third, at the time of the announcement of closure – clarity and guidance of alternative/replacement funding models were not immediately available. There was also a developing policy landscape in relation to Working Wales and the new employability plan – details of which were still to be confirmed, making forward planning of transitional arrangements difficult.

A point that we should make in relation to the process of announcing the closure of the programme was the impact upon staff morale. Most Authorities have reported that the first their staff knew of the programme closure was through media outlets – putting Local Authorities as employers in an extremely difficult position. This led to a challenging transition year as Local Authorities tried to manage staff retention and morale through transition to a future model that was subject to further approval and uncertainty. Local Authorities were faced with difficult decisions in managing staff retention in balancing financial risk, reputational risk and their obligations as employers to the employees (with some staff having served for many years within the Authorities).

There are contrasting experiences from Local Authorities in terms of support and communication from the Welsh Government throughout the transition period. All responses however, welcomed the Welsh Government’s approach to ensuring regular meetings with relevant Leads across Wales – however many felt this could have been further strengthened by ensuring the timely availability of written guidance to ensure key messages were disseminated clearly.

Despite the uncertainties – most of the Local Authorities have commended the ability to locally determine the resource implications of the transition period, as it allowed Local Authorities to determine approaches that was appropriate to local circumstances and need.

In conclusion, all Local Authorities have indicated that despite the uncertainty and risks during the early part of the transition phase, they have successfully managed the closure of the Communities First programme – and have now adopted entirely new approaches focused around employability within their local areas. Local Authorities were able to engage with their communities and wider stakeholders to develop a new way of working that was fit for purpose for their local area, that focussed around the needs of the individual in a single joined up cross-sector and multi-agency approach, simplifying and consolidating funding streams.

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Data on the number of projects that have been able to continue in some form and the number that have closed down completely

We have explored our response to this question with our Member Local Authorities, as it requires technical data and input to be a comprehensive response. However, local circumstances vary greatly, and providing the data alone of the number of projects continuing or not does not represent an accurate picture of the context of closure within each local community. The Welsh Local Government Association does not retain this level of detail on individual projects within individual Local Authorities. Therefore, due to the timescales and the level of complexity involved in compiling a comprehensive response - we are unable to respond fully to this question. We have however, outlined some key points below that you may find helpful.

To coincide with the end of the programme closure process, each Lead Delivery Body was required to submit a Formal Final Report to the Welsh Government for the year ending 31 March 2018. This final report contains comprehensive information on the detail of programme closure in each cluster area, the details of continuing/closing project activity and the detail of the implications locally upon local communities.

Different approaches across Local Authorities were undertaken, with some unable to mitigate the financial/staffing risks and closed a number of projects during the transition year. With some Local Authorities, the involvement of third party organisations within the delivery model further added complexities and risks to their role as Lead Delivery Bodies. Some Local Authorities were however able to shoulder the risks and able to continue with most of their activity and retain some staff – albeit with many changes to the funding and delivery models.

As a general observation from the responses received, Local Authorities who had already begun to transition towards a more integrated model previously through pilot/pathfinder activity were generally responding more positively about the transition process, and the ability to continue with a higher level of project activity.

To conclude, whilst the experience of Local Authorities managing the transition period has been mixed, they all welcome the approach that they have transitioned to. There is a recognition and support for the “one team” approach, to integrate and align support services around local circumstance. Local Authorities have greatly appreciated the ability to utilise multiple funding streams and approaches – tailored to the needs of their local communities. This approach to integrate and simplify provision is further enhanced through the Funding Flexibilities Pilot, of which there is strong support - to ensure that the people in our communities get the help they require, regardless of funding source or provider. The Welsh Local Government Association looks forward to working further with the Welsh Government and its partners to further develop the Flexible Funding agenda – and that the principles of integration and simplification are fully recognised both in delivery and governance terms.

I hope that this response goes some way in responding to your queries.

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Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of several loops and a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

Cllr Rob Stewart
WLGA Spokesperson for Economic Development, Europe and Energy

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