



Janet Finch-Saunders AM/AC

Assembly Member for Aberconwy
Shadow Cabinet Secretary for Local Government

Aelod Cynulliad dros Aberconwy
Ysgrifennydd yr Wrthblaid ar gyfer Llywodraeth Leol

Strengthening Local Government

By email to:

StrengtheningLocalGov@gov.wales

6th June 2018

Ref: TYH/JFS/HM

Re: Consultation response - Strengthening Local Government: Delivering for people

Dear Cabinet Secretary, Alun,

I write to make a submission in relation to the *Strengthening Local Government: Delivering for people Green Paper* consultation.

With regards to the proposals outlined, I hold considerable concerns at the proposals to enforce mergers on local authorities in Wales. From discussions I have held with local government representatives, leaders, and officials in a number of local authorities in Wales, I am aware that there is not universal support within the sector for such a reform – indeed, I have come across a marked amount of opposition to these proposals, and would urge the Cabinet Secretary to reconsider this stance as a matter of urgency.

For example, I note that Newport City Council has recently sent you their response about forced mergers, which maintains that it should be a stand-alone authority and not merged with Caerphilly – due to the intrinsic lack of shared synergy or local identity between both authorities, as Newport is a developing city – and further raises questions about the true savings such a move would make. This has received cross-party support across the City's Council.

Furthermore, the Vale of Glamorgan has pointed out in its consultation response that their concerns are similar with regard to local identity and synergy, noting that *"Cardiff is a densely populated urban conurbation and capital city with all that that entails, while the Vale's character focuses on a significant rural area..."*. Moreover, it is evident from the Council's reply that bigger isn't necessarily 'better' – explaining that the five highest performing councils in Wales as determined by the Welsh Data Unit (Vale of Glamorgan, Monmouthshire, Gwynedd, Ceredigion and Denbighshire) are not considered 'large' by Welsh Government standards, but their performance outranks some of the larger councils which are being considered as merger partners. Instead, it suggests that performance should be one of the key drivers in changes and, by failing to consider this, the Green Paper has exposed a fundamental weakness.

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Even the proposal to allow councils to voluntarily merge seems to be an incomprehensible ask for local authorities to carry out. For example, Conwy and Denbighshire, who submitted their plans to merge to one of your predecessors, Leighton Andrews, are now dubious as to whether another submission would be unilaterally rejected by the Welsh Government again. Additionally, Vale of Glamorgan, which also had its voluntary merger plan with Bridgend rejected by Mr Andrews in 2015, refuses to voluntarily merge with Cardiff, based on the map you have provided.

The sector has faced unprecedented uncertainty over the past three years as successive Welsh Labour Governments have put forwards three different proposals for reform, and I am concerned that these latest proposals have not been developed after full consultation and discussions with local government directly.

Whilst I appreciate that the current situation may not be sustainable – certainly, the sector is under immense pressures as a result of ongoing settlement cuts from the Welsh Government, and there is little room for them to manoeuvre or plan budgets several years ahead – I do feel that there is a wider picture to be considered here.

The local government sector does not act alone in providing its services to the people of Wales. Integral links and working agreements with other areas of the public sector – including the health service, as required under the Social Services and Well-being (Wales) Act 2014 – are par for the course in many areas.

We are further aware of the considerable concerns facing the health service in Wales. For example, nursing and doctor shortages are endemic within the Welsh NHS, there are systematic failures to keep to waiting times, health board overspends, as well as continuing direct government control of Betsi Cadwaladr University Health Board.

It is therefore difficult to see how your proposals on local government reform fit into and complement the wider landscape of Welsh public services.

I also note that the Welsh Government intends to reorganise the Fire and Rescue Service, potentially through more democratic accountability and wonder whether this might also fit into a programme of such reorganisation. It is clear from the Fire and Rescue Authorities' April response to your letter that they also wish to know how their reforms would fit into local government reforms.

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With regards to other matters address in the consultation regarding the functions and performance of elected members, I would like to reiterate my support for proposals previously brought forward, following calls by myself and others, to mandate for all elected Councillors on local authorities to publish an annual report of their work.

I would also like to take this opportunity to reiterate the need for all full Council, Planning and Cabinet meetings to be live-streamed online, and available for play-back afterwards, and for the online publication of all council spend by each local authority. A sample of exempt items at Cabinet meetings in 2016-17 highlight that some councils are excluding the public from meetings far more than others – including Bridgend, which excluded the public during 93% of their meetings, compared with Torfaen and Cardiff which did not exclude the public in any of their meetings.

Additionally, your predecessor, Mark Drakeford AM promised mandatory live-streaming of council meetings within his package of proposals. Currently 18 out of 22 councils had taken forward live streaming after a £1.25m Welsh Government grant in 2013, with Ceredigion, Neath Port Talbot, Rhondda Cynon Taf and Swansea not providing this service. Furthermore, the level of webcasting differs from council to council, with Monmouthshire live streaming a range of council meetings including Full Council, Cabinet and Planning, Audit and Transport Committees, but Caerphilly only streaming Full Council meetings. Please find below the table of latest webcasts available from each council for your information:

Council	Webcasting Meetings (Y/N)	Notes
Isle of Anglesey	Y	Full Council, Executive, Planning Committee
Blaenau Gwent	Y	Full Council, Executive, Scrutiny and Regulatory Committee
Bridgend	Y	Full Council, Cabinet, Planning and Scrutiny Committees
Caerphilly	Y	Full Council only
Cardiff	Y	Full Council, Planning Committee, Environment Committee
Carmarthenshire	Y	Full Council, Planning Committee, Executive
Ceredigion	N	No dedicated page since 2014

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Conwy	Y	Full Council, Planning Committee, Cabinet, Economy Committee, Finance Committee
Denbighshire	Y	Full Council, Cabinet, Planning Committee, Scrutiny Committee
Flintshire	Y	Full Council, Planning Committee
Gwynedd	Y	Full Council, Cabinet, Scrutiny Committees, Education Committee
Merthyr Tydfil	Y	Full Council, Planning Committee
Monmouthshire	Y	Full Council, Cabinet, Audit Committee, Children and Young People's Committee, Transport Committee, Planning Committee (via YouTube)
Neath Port Talbot	N	
Newport	Y	Full Council, Planning Committee, Scrutiny Committees (but archives only as far back as April 2018)
Pembrokeshire	Y	Full Council, Cabinet, Scrutiny Committee, Schools Committee, Planning Committee; Corporate Governance, Licensing, and Standards Committees
Powys	Y	Full Council, Cabinet
Rhondda Cynon Taf	N	Although the platform is there, nothing is logged onto it
Swansea	N	As Rhondda Cynon Taf above – nothing since 2013
Torfaen	Y	Full Council; Planning, Licensing and Scrutiny Committees
Vale of Glamorgan	Y	Full Council, Planning Committee
Wrexham	Y	Full Council, Executive, Planning and Scrutiny Committees

[Cont.]



Janet Finch-Saunders will treat in confidence any personal information which you may pass on to her, and she will normally allow her staff to see it, so that they can consult with relevant authorities in order to help and advise you. We may wish to write to you from time to time to keep you informed on issues which you may find of interest. Please let us know if you do not wish to be contacted for this purpose.

Mi wnaiff Janet Finch-Saunders cadw unrhyw wybodaeth personol yn gwbl gyfrinachol, ac fel arfer mi fydd rhaid iddi rannu'r wybodaeth 'efo aelodau o staff i'w galluogi nhw i ddellio 'efo'r awdurdodau perthnasol er mwyn eich helpu a'ch cynorthwyo chi. Efallai mi fydd angen i rywun ysgrifennu atoch er mwyn darparu'r wybodaeth ddiweddaraf o bwys. Gadwch wybod i ni os nad oes diddordeb gennych mewn cael eich cysylltu at y diben hwn.



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[Cont.]

These proposals, I believe, would take significant steps towards making the local government sector more open, transparent, and accountable to its electorate.

Yours sincerely,

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