



WLGA Sustainable Development Framework

We are not alone: European connections for local sustainability

Paper 2 An EU 'toolkit' for local sustainability

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1 The purpose of this paper: knowing where to look

Paper 1 outlined the broad European context for local and regional work on sustainable development, focusing on the EU Strategy for Sustainable Development (EU SDS), its relationship to Europe 2020 and the relevance of these strategies for Wales. This second paper turns to the many initiatives put in place to support local and regional efforts and seeks to explain where these have come from and how they fit together.

Rather strangely, we need to consider not only the EU SDS but also what is referred to as policy for sustainable urban development because it is this strand of work that has had the most impact in terms of funding and other policy measures available for local authorities to use.

It is important to stress that the term 'urban' is open to interpretation; it may be applied to settlements of all sizes, including villages and small market towns. This matters because practitioners from rural areas can very easily assume that use of the word 'urban' in a document indicates that it has no relevance for them when this is not necessarily the case.

The following points are also worth noting:

- Although urban policy is not a formal EU competence, the adoption of urban measures at EU level has long been justified by reference to the large percentage of the EU population (at least 70% - expected to increase) living in urban areas.
- There now exists a 'European consensus on the principles of urban development' – the so-called '*Acquis Urbain*' – seen as necessary for achieving overall EU objectives, as in the former Lisbon Strategy and EU SDS¹ and currently in Europe 2020.
- EU documents on urban areas very often talk about 'cities'. However, 'cities' are not actors. Rather, local governments responsible for administering urban areas are the actors with whom other levels of government must engage.
- In some European countries the term 'cities' is used to mean 'local authorities'. Although there are indeed EU policy measures specifically targeted towards large urban areas, many initiatives may in fact be used by local authorities responsible for many different types of territory.
- Within the European Commission the Directorate General for Environment (DG ENV) took some of the first steps towards a European urban policy, recognising that both challenges and solutions are concentrated in urban areas. (For example, cities are key sources of pollution but have a great deal of scope for action to reduce and manage this). Several EU Directives (for example on air quality and

noise) impose specific requirements on urban centres with populations over a certain size; local authorities participated in working groups during the drafting process. However, from at least the mid 1990s the lead has been taken by DG Regional Policy (DG Regio).

- Several other DGs (for example those responsible for transport, energy, research and, most recently, climate) have developed their own initiatives for 'cities'. Links between them are maintained through an urban inter-service group convened by DG Regio. DG Regio has recently been renamed DG Regional and Urban Policy, reflecting the fact that (1) urban issues are high on the EU agenda at present, (2) DG Regio is keen to emphasise its leadership and (3) Structural Funds are a key resource for practical urban action.
- Member States remain largely responsible for urban policy, and more generally for setting the frameworks within which local authorities function. However, national ministers responsible for urban policy have been collaborating at European level for nearly 20 years, resulting in some common 'intergovernmental' approaches. They work particularly closely with DG Regio. Their joint activities are highly influential in shaping opportunities for Structural Funds spending in urban areas – and by local authorities.
- European networks of local authorities follow EU developments closely and work directly with the EU institutions. Some – such as CEMR, Eurocities and ICLEI – are also directly involved in the 'intergovernmental' processes. They are in a good position to both influence and benefit from European initiatives for 'cities'.

This paper outlines the main steps towards 'urban' policy at European level – emphasising the local sustainability dimensions. Section 2.1 focuses on developments led by EU institutions and Section 2.2 on intergovernmental efforts, in each case picking out some key initiatives. Section 2.3 highlights some of the most recent proposals. Section 3 comments on the relevance of this agenda for local authorities in Wales. As with Paper 1, hyperlinks in the text provide direct access to the main sources.

2 European steps towards policy for 'sustainable urban development'

2.1 Inside the EU institutions

The European Commission started to work directly with local authorities on sustainable development during the early 1990s, before the Amsterdam Treaty came into effect and well before there was an EU SDS.

The first steps, prompted by the European Parliament, were rooted in concern for the urban environment.

European Sustainable Cities: The 'Aalborg process'

The Commission's milestone **Green Paper on the Urban Environment** published in 1990, mainly known for its impact on town planning, is also significant for work on local sustainability because it led to the establishment by the European Council of an **Expert Group on the Urban Environment** whose members were mainly national civil servants and representatives from individual cities and local government networks. Responding to progress made at the first Rio summit, this group opted to tackle sustainability rather than simply environment. This was in line with the 5th Environmental Action Programme (5th EAP) 'Towards Sustainability' which recognised that local actions would be needed to secure implementation of many of the proposed legislative measures.

The Expert Group produced a policy report on **European Sustainable Cities**² (a distillation of good practice across Europe prevailing at the time) and, with the Commission and local government networks, in 1994 launched the **European Sustainable Cities and Towns Campaign** which local authorities joined by signing the **Aalborg Charter**. In 2004 the Charter was superseded by the more action-oriented Aalborg Commitments.

Local authorities active in this Campaign typically produce integrated strategies for local sustainability respecting the principles set out in the Aalborg Charter. Those signing the Aalborg Commitments are expected to produce a baseline review (the basis for target-setting) within 12 months of signing and to report progress against the targets adopted, making the report available to the public. An **Implementation Guide** is available.

Topics covered by the Aalborg Commitments

Governance
Local management towards sustainability
Natural common goods
Responsible consumption and lifestyle choices
Planning and design
Better mobility, less traffic
Local action for health
Vibrant and sustainable local economy
Social equity and justice
Local to global

As of 2010 there were some 2600 Aalborg Charter signatories across Europe. Around 650 local authorities – not only 'cities' - have signed the Aalborg Commitments.

Progress was to be reported to the Brussels secretariat of the European Sustainable Cities and Towns Campaign. However, dedicated funding from DG ENV ceased in 2004³, not least because much larger resources for collaboration and exchange on sustainable development at local level were to be made available through programmes like INTERREG.

The Campaign continues with the support of several local government networks and the Danish City of Aalborg which hosts the Aalborg Commitments secretariat.

- The baseline reviews and target-setting reports produced by signatories of the Aalborg Commitments represent a useful source of good practice.
- The Campaign gave many of the 'leading' local authorities on SD a basis for cooperation. Aalborg Charter signatories have been some of the most active participants in projects funded by EU programmes like INTERREG and Intelligent Energy Europe (see below).
- The Aalborg Commitments are used as a model for initiatives outside Europe, notably for the **Brazilian Sustainable Cities Platform**.
- Activities within the framework of the Campaign include a series of conferences on European Sustainable Cities and Towns and (previously) an **award scheme**. The **most recent event** - focusing on the green economy - took place in April 2013 in Geneva. Issues addressed at this conference included the future of the 'Aalborg process' in the context of the follow-up to Rio+20 and the promised review of the EU SDS⁴. A key outcome has been the launch of a new **European Sustainable Cities Platform**, signalling continuing commitment to bottom-up action on sustainable development. An Aalborg+20 event is planned for 2014.

Welsh connections

Through a former environmental coordinator, Brett Willers, Cardiff City Council contributed to the early work of the Commission's Expert Group on the Urban Environment and piloted sustainability indicators in the mid 1990s.

Over 100 UK local authorities have participated in the European Sustainable Cities and Towns Campaign. In Wales, Cardiff, Conwy and Wrexham signed the Aalborg Charter. Bridgend made a provisional commitment. However, only 10 UK councils – and none in Wales - are signatories to the Aalborg Commitments. Hampshire County Council and the City of Edinburgh are examples of UK local authorities making recent use of the Commitments to structure their sustainable development activities.

The Council of European Municipalities and Regions (CEMR), of which WLGA is a member, has been involved with the Campaign since 1994.

UK practice example

Sustainable Edinburgh 2020

In March 2012 the City of Edinburgh adopted its sustainable development strategy **Sustainable Edinburgh 2020**. A consultation carried out by the Carbon, Climate and Sustainability Team⁵ in preparing the plan was based on the Aalborg Commitments - seen as providing a useful framework because they cover all of the key issues expected in an SD strategy, including, for example, health, poverty and education and not only climate change and low carbon. All 10 programmes proposed in the Action Plan address issues covered in the Aalborg Charter and there is a link to the Commitments from Edinburgh's website. However, the lack of follow-up to signature of the Aalborg Commitments at European level – with no feedback on proposed actions – means that Edinburgh has only limited interest in maintaining these European links. Launch of the new Platform at least provides an opportunity to publicise the city's efforts to a wide audience of interested practitioners.

EU policy & programmes for 'sustainable urban development'

While many local authorities have heard of the Sustainable Cities Project, the extent to which approaches tested at local level have informed urban policy development inside the EU institutions is generally underestimated.

Alongside the promotion of local authority-wide SD strategies, EU resources were made available between 1990 and 1999 for a series of **Urban Pilot Projects** funded through Article 10 of the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF), and 1994-99 also saw the first round of the **URBAN Community Initiative** which supported area-based urban regeneration projects. Other parts of the European Commission supported local initiatives on, for example, sustainable transport and employment.

Welsh connections

Although no Article 10 ERDF funded urban Pilot Projects were carried out in Wales, Swansea benefited from URBAN I, and West Wrexham from URBAN II.

Lessons from the Sustainable Cities project and these ERDF programmes were consolidated in the Commission's 1998 Communication **Sustainable Urban Development in the EU: A Framework for Action**, which for the first time took a strategic and integrated approach to urban issues across all policy areas, the logic being to enable effective bottom-up action. The Framework established shared policy objectives on employment, environment, social sustainability and governance and called upon European cities to reduce their ecological footprints and to identify multi-purpose 'win-win' (and not only 'integrated') policy solutions. It underpinned a whole range of funding opportunities for local work on urban sustainability, mainly in the Structural Funds (such as through the URBAN II programme) but also, for example, in the research framework programmes.

The Commission has not produced an urban Communication of similar breadth since 1998. However in 2010 the Inter-service group on Urban Development published a **Guide to the Urban Dimension in European Policies** summarising the policy context and all available funding programmes relevant for work on urban sustainability for the period 2007-2013. As is clear from the text of this Guide, most of the initiatives are for 'municipalities', the 'regional or local levels' or specifically 'local authorities' and not only for 'cities'.

Examples of measures most relevant for current work on local sustainability in Wales are set out in Boxes 2.1 to 2.4. They cover aspects of cohesion policy and initiatives for environment, sustainable transport, energy and climate change⁶.

Box 2.1 Cohesion policy measures in the 2007-13 funding period

Besides mainstream Structural Funding, relatively well-known in Wales, there are the **Territorial Cooperation programmes** financed by the ERDF. Local authorities here have been able to access funds for joint working and exchange of experience on SD with partners from other European countries using the **INTERREG IVA Ireland-Wales** cross border programme, **INTERREG IVB Atlantic Area** and **North West Europe** transnational cooperation programmes, the **INTERREG IVC** programme for interregional cooperation, the **URBACT** programme for exchange of experience on sustainable urban development and **ESPON**, which mainly provides evidence relevant for 'territorial development'. UK Contact Points provide free support for project development in the INTERREG IVB programmes and ESPON.

The priorities established in all of these programmes have reflected not only overarching EU strategies – especially previously 'Lisbon and Gothenburg' – but also policy developments in specific fields such as energy, transport, employment, social inclusion and adaptation to climate change.

Welsh connections – some examples

Bridgend County Borough Council was a partner in the URBACT project **CASH** (Cities' Action for Sustainable Housing). Eleven partners from 9 countries shared experience mainly on energy retrofit in social housing using ERDF and other funds, going on to incorporate good practice ideas in local forward planning.

As a partner in the INTERREG IVB project **REGAIN** – on low energy and sustainable design in industrial buildings - Blaenau Gwent secured co-financing for construction of a 500m² business incubator unit – the **REGAIN building** - on The Works site in Ebbw Vale.

Merthyr Tydfil CBC is lead partner of the INTERREG IVB project **SHARE – Safeguarding Heritage and Rural Economies** - which is exploring the role of heritage in making rural areas more sustainable and attractive. There is a practical focus on conservation skills. Partners include the National Trust and organisations in Belgium, France and the Netherlands. With Brecon Beacons National Park, Merthyr is also a partner in **COLLABORS**, looking at better ways to foster place-based business clusters from a sustainability perspective.

There have been 13 INTERREG IVC projects with Welsh partners. However, the only local authority involved has been Powys County Council, a partner in three projects. In **Business to Nature (B2N)**, for example, 10 public institutions from 8 countries compared approaches to entrepreneurship and SME support in areas important for natural environment.

Box 2.2 Environmental tools

The EU's **Thematic Strategy on the Urban Environment** published in 2006, promoted better implementation of existing environmental policies and legislation at the local level through exchange of experience and good practices. It recommended that local authorities set up integrated systems for environmental management⁷ and prepare **plans for sustainable urban transport**. A **guidance document on Integrated Environmental Management Plans** was published in 2007.⁸

Other key environmental initiatives include:

- Extension of the voluntary Eco-Management and Audit Scheme **EMAS** to local authorities.⁹ Originally for use by companies, local authorities have been able to participate in EMAS since 2001. The Commission maintains a dedicated **local authority corner** on its EMAS website. New guidance will shortly be published by Iclei.
- The **LIFE+ programme**, which among other things has supported implementation of the Thematic Strategy on the Urban Environment, mainly via the LIFE+ Environment and Governance strand. LIFE previously funded **projects on urban environment** based on priorities in the 1998 Framework for Action. A **UK Contact Point service** is available.
- The **European Green Capital Award** launched in 2008. One European city is selected annually as European Green Capital for a forthcoming year. The award is given to a city demonstrating consistently high environmental standards, ambitious plans for further environmental improvement, and capacity to be a role model for others. All the finalists provide examples of good practice in urban sustainability.

Welsh connections

The Isle of Anglesey County Council and Gwynedd County Council are among the partners in the **Anglesey and Llyn Fens LIFE+ project**. Led by CCW, this is the largest wetland restoration project so far undertaken in Wales.

The Green Capital for 2013 is **Nantes** (France), twinned with Cardiff.

Box 2.3 Tools for sustainable urban mobility

The Commission's **Action Plan on Urban Mobility** published in 2009 recommended that local authorities prepare integrated action plans for sustainable mobility covering all types of transport including freight. Various support measures are available, including:

- The well-established **CIVITAS** initiative for 'cleaner and better transport in cities'; and
- The **Urban Mobility Portal** ELTIS, a major source of information.

Access to European Commission calls for funding on local transport tends to depend upon having a suitable local transport plan in place.

Further WLGA briefing on EU connections for sustainable transport will shortly be available.

Welsh connections

Cardiff City Council is a member of the **Civitas Forum Network**, open to local authorities wishing to exchange information on clean urban transport whether or not they have received CIVITAS funding for a demonstration project. However, there are as yet no members from Wales in **Civinet UK & Ireland**.

Box 2.4 Key actions for energy and climate change

These include :

- The **CONCERTO** programme, which has supported large scale demonstration projects on energy (for example, on renewables-based district heating) in 58 communities across Europe.
- The **Covenant of Mayors** on energy, through which local and regional authorities voluntarily commit to reducing CO2 emissions by more than the EU's '20% by 2020' target, mainly by increasing energy efficiency and the use of renewable energy sources in their localities. The Covenant now has nearly 4400 signatories, including 37 in the UK.

- Expanded opportunities for local authorities in the **Intelligent Energy Europe** programme. The UK's **EU Energy Focus Team** provides free support.
- Introduction of the European Local Energy Assistance (**ELENA**) facility to enable local and regional authorities to access funds for investment in sustainable energy.
- Launch of the **Green Digital Charter** in 2009 – an example of direct collaboration between the European Commission and a local government network, in this case Eurocities. Local authorities signing this Charter are committed to reducing the carbon footprint of their ICT arrangements, improving energy efficiency in areas such as buildings and transport.
- Establishment of the **Climate Change Adaptation Platform** and associated launch of **EU Cities Adapt**, especially for local authorities, both with an emphasis on practical tools.

Further WLGA briefing on EU connections for climate change and energy is in preparation.

Welsh connections

Cardiff City Council and Llandoverly Town Council are signatories to the Covenant of Mayors. Further **WLGA briefing** is available.

A few Welsh local authorities have participated in projects funded by Intelligent Energy Europe (for example, Swansea in Wise Plans on energy action planning). However, the most active participant with Welsh connections is the Severn Wye Energy Agency. In **ENNEREG**, experience from Wales around the production of sustainable energy action plans has been shared with other regions. Cardiff City Council and Powys County Council have been involved in this project.

The UK page on the Climate Change Adaptation Platform website includes brief information about Wales, including a link to WLGA's evaluation report of the Changing Climate, Changing Places project. However, no Welsh local authorities responded to DG Climate Action's recent web-based survey on adaptation strategies.

2.2 Intergovernmental work on urban policy

Alongside work within the EU institutions, national ministers for urban policy and spatial planning have, since the mid 1990s, taken several steps towards a common approach for 'sustainable urban development'. These efforts have been closely linked to work on a broader '**territorial agenda**' for the EU – building on the European Spatial Development Perspective (ESDP) with which many planners are familiar.

Welsh connections

The original version of the Wales Spatial Plan was grounded in the ESDP. The Welsh Government's former Wales Spatial Plan team was connected to European discussions on 'the territory' via officials in the UK's Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG). There are no active links at the moment.

The most significant 'milestone' statements by the ministers on a common approach to urban policy are probably the 2005 **Bristol Accord** on sustainable communities in Europe and the 2007 **Leipzig Charter on Sustainable European Cities**.

In the absence of a formal EU competence for urban policy, statements like these provide the necessary political agreement for continued cooperation between national governments and the EU institutions on urban matters. They are important for securing EU funds for urban development and for action at local level more generally. Moreover, they strongly influence the kinds of actions which Structural Funds will support. The Leipzig Charter also stressed the need for multi-level governance approaches to deal with urban challenges (with local, regional, national and European government each having some responsibility) and it called for a special focus on deprived neighbourhoods.

One of the most practical outcomes of these intergovernmental processes is the **Reference Framework for European Sustainable Cities**, freely available from February 2013. This is a web tool designed to help local authorities to develop integrated approaches for sustainable development, especially offering a way to prioritise and coordinate proposed actions. With its origins in the Leipzig Charter, the Reference Framework reflects European policy priorities (including legislation where this applies) and draws upon best practice. It includes a suite of indicators to monitor progress and a spreadsheet to enable local authorities to devise their own monitoring systems. The UK government has made a commitment to support the take-up of the Reference Framework across the UK, including in Wales. CEMR has been closely involved and is part of a consortium contracted by DG Regio to support take-up.

2.3 A new focus on urban issues in the context of Europe 2020

Delivering the Flagship Initiatives

Adoption of the Europe 2020 strategy¹⁰ has already had an impact on policy and measures for urban areas. For example, final calls in the EU funding programmes for 2007-2013 have reflected emerging priorities in the **Flagship Initiatives**.

The EU institutions recognise that local authorities have responsibilities for policy areas linked to Europe2020. It is likely that all the Flagship initiatives will have an explicit urban or local dimension, with local government networks lobbying to ensure that this is the case. This means that new measures to support local action can be expected. For example, moves towards green, compact and energy-efficient urban areas are seen as essential for successful delivery of 'Resource Efficient Europe'. Both 'Resource Efficient Europe' and 'The Innovation Union' call for the strategic use of public procurement budgets – including those of local and regional authorities - to finance innovation, with green public procurement already strongly promoted¹¹.

The 'Digital Agenda' already fosters 'smart sustainable cities', focusing on the role of information and communications technologies in energy saving and integration of locally generated electricity from renewables into the grid.

The **Smart Cities and Communities European Innovation Partnership**, building on the Covenant of Mayors, CONCERTO, CIVITAS and the Green Digital Charter, has been under development for the last two years. The aim is 'connection of policy and resources at EU, national, regional and local levels' so as to deliver local 'smart city solutions' around the EU's energy and climate targets. A **stakeholder platform** is in place, along with funding opportunities. There will be yearly calls for proposals to demonstrate 'smart integration' of energy technologies – covering mainly energy efficiency, energy supply and transport – in selected pilot cities. Since the funds come from the research framework programme, local authorities will probably develop proposals in collaboration with universities as well as with private sector energy and transport providers. The main implementation phase is expected to start in 2014. Support from national and regional governments is seen as essential for the success of this initiative. In the UK it complements national measures, notably the **Future Cities Demonstrator Programme** managed by the Technology Strategy Board and opportunities to secure investment funds from the **Energy Technologies Institute**.

Welsh connections

Academics from the Welsh School of Architecture and the University of Glamorgan are members of the Smart Cities and Communities Stakeholder Platform, participating, respectively, in working groups on energy efficiency in buildings and on mobility and transport

Cardiff University and Cardiff City Council cooperated on bids for funding under the FP7-SMARTCITIES-2013 call for proposals. Cardiff was one of 30 UK cities to receive domestic funds for a feasibility study to be a Smart Cities Demonstrator, so should be well placed to secure EU Smart Cities funding in future.

Much stronger urban focus in Structural Funds

For Structural Funds, DG Regio's 2011 report **Cities of Tomorrow: Challenges, Visions, Ways forward** is informative. This indicates the sorts of action and governance approaches that the Commission (on behalf of the broader 'urban policy community') wants to see. Note especially that this document:

- promotes a 'shared vision of European urban development' in which 'all dimensions of sustainable urban development are taken into account in an integrated way';
- takes a 'pragmatic approach' to the definition of 'cities'; the messages are intended to apply not only to the largest cities but also to small and medium sized towns which are seen as having an important role;
- sees cooperation between local authorities – especially trans-nationally using programmes like INTERREG and URBACT - as an essential feature of urban governance; and
- describes 'cities' as 'key to the sustainable development of the EU'. Specifically, they have an essential role in the implementation of Europe 2020 and it is expected that this will be acknowledged in Structural Funds programming.

In October 2011 the European Commission adopted **legislative proposals for Cohesion Policy for the period 2014-2020**¹². The proposals have a strong urban dimension grounded in the years of past work at European level – involving national governments, local government networks and practitioners and not only the EU Institutions.

These proposals:

- represent a return to a specific focus on urban action (as previously seen in URBAN II, for example) after a period in which there was an attempt to 'mainstream' urban initiatives in regional programmes, widely regarded as not very successful; and
- they include new mechanisms for deployment of the funds primarily based on practical partnership approaches developed in collaboration with 'cities'.

Proposed urban dimension for Cohesion Policy 2014-2020

The Commission has proposed :

- allocation of at least 5 % of resources under the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) to **sustainable urban development** , including through **Integrated Territorial Investments** (ITI);
- allocation of 400 million Euros (0.2% of the budget) to a new funding stream for Innovative Urban Actions; and
- creation of an Urban Development Platform of 300 'cities' to strengthen dialogue with the European Commission on the urban dimension of cohesion policy.

The intention is to make access to the funds conditional upon local strategies setting out 'integrated actions to tackle economic, environmental, climate and social challenges affecting urban areas'.

The Commission's associated proposals for **Community-led Local Development (CLLD)** are also worth a comment in relation to work on local sustainability. There is an emerging debate within local authority networks on similarities between CLLD – which is mainly based on the LEADER approach familiar to many in Wales – and Local Agenda 21. To some observers, CLLD is nothing less than the 'institutionalisation of Local Agenda 21 in Europe'.

When it comes to preparation of each country's Partnership Contract for the new funding period (in our case the UK Partnership Agreement) and the new Operational Programmes – currently at a crucial stage, including here in Wales – the Commission asks Member States 'to form partnerships with competent regional, local and urban authorities' and to involve them directly in programming and management.

Member States should also identify particular 'cities where integrated sustainable urban development will receive cohesion policy support', and 'in both the Partnership Contract and the Operational Programmes'... 'indicate the cities implementing integrated actions for sustainable urban development with delegated management and which cities they wish to be considered for

participation in the Urban Development Platform'. It is up to the individual countries to decide what they mean by 'cities' – so they could be sub-regional groups of councils, for example. At the very least it seems important to be on these lists.

The proposals for integrated strategies for sustainable urban development and the devolved management of multi-fund packages by local authorities have strong support from the other EU institutions, especially the Committee of the Regions¹³.

Multi-fund packages managed by 'cities' from 2014 might well include EU resources other than Structural Funds, such as those available through the new framework programme for research and innovation **Horizon2020**. The key to accessing these funds is expected to be adoption of a place-based smart specialisation strategy at city level. The European Commission has set up a **Smart Specialisation Platform** as a source of guidance. The Welsh Government is currently drafting a Smart Specialisation Strategy for Wales to inform the Innovation aspects of the future EU Funding Programmes and has consulted widely during the development process.

Urban environment back on the agenda

Finally, DG Environment seems set to recapture its original interest in the urban environment and local sustainability. In its **proposal for an Environment Action Programme to 2020**, one of the nine priority objectives is 'meeting the urban environment challenge' by 'making cities more sustainable'.

It is proposed to give local authorities the opportunity to show 'the green bill of environmental health to their citizens by agreeing on a common set of criteria that can help them assess their environmental performance'. It remains to be seen whether this satisfies the other EU institutions, and in particular the European Parliament which has been calling for something more ambitious¹⁴.

3 Why all this matters for local authorities in Wales

The European agenda for 'sustainable cities' is to a large extent an agenda for local sustainability, relevant for local authorities of all types.

Much progress has been made over the last 20 years, both in understanding the challenges at local level and developing effective ways to address them.

The activities and measures outlined in this paper have all depended upon direct involvement by local elected representatives – especially leaders of 'cities' – and their specialist officers. Local authority members have had opportunities to raise their profile and to demonstrate effective leadership for sustainable development, and these opportunities are expanding.

A raft of EU legislation, awareness-raising measures and funding opportunities for related research, pilot actions, exchange of experience and more general implementation now exists, along with well-established tools for monitoring and review. New and revised measures are under discussion as the EU looks forward to 2020 and beyond.

More systematic engagement with this body of work could help local authorities in Wales to raise their game, although the capacity constraints facing local authorities are fully recognised in this respect.

We could be much better connected

It is important that practitioners in Wales are aware of just how much is available. EU instruments are generally based on solid research evidence and best practice and intended to raise standards across the board, so when resources are scarce it seems sensible to maximise take-up of whatever is useful in the 'EU toolkit'.

To make the most of the tools at our disposal it helps to understand the purpose of the various initiatives and how they fit together. This is especially true when it comes to funding.

For example:

- To be successful in **competitive calls for tender** (such as in the LIFE+ or Intelligent Energy Europe programmes) it is usually necessary to demonstrate how the proposed project relates to EU policy objectives, or how it represents an advance on current practice. Sometimes it helps to be able to demonstrate existing participation. For example, EMAS registration may help to secure funds for a project on green public procurement. A recent call for clean urban mobility projects in the CIVITAS programme included the advice that applicant local authorities would 'normally be signatories of the Covenant of Mayors on Energy'. (COM signatories are expected to have a sustainable energy action plan covering energy use in all local services, including transport).

- When it comes to **Structural Funds**, innovative schemes piloted in programmes like CIVITAS and CONCERTO should be informing the drafting of new programme priorities, so as to enable large-scale implementation. The Reference Framework for European Sustainable Cities can be used in the preparation of an action plan for sustainable urban development needed to draw down funds.

At the moment, the picture from across Wales is one of very little involvement with these European measures, even though they have been explicitly designed to support local or 'urban' action in line with sustainable development objectives.

For example:

- Despite early interest from Welsh councils in the European Sustainable Cities Campaign, recent approaches to SD here have been developed without reference to the 'Aalborg process'. Lessons from this initiative could inform next steps for SD in Wales, such as any plans to make the Wales Sustainable Development Charter more operational. The new Sustainable Cities Platform offers a means to exchange good practice and to publicise efforts made in Wales.
- No Welsh local authorities are registered for EMAS; none has secured funds for CONCERTO or CIVITAS demonstration projects.
- In 2011 there was no response to direct invitations from DCLG to take part in the funded pilot of the Reference Framework for European Sustainable Cities. Wales was the only part of the UK not to participate, which is disappointing given the emphasis on sustainable development here.
- Although adaptation to the impacts of climate change is high on the agenda, no Welsh local authorities are involved with EU Cities Adapt.
- There have so far been no applications from Wales for the European Green Capital Award.

Good reasons lie behind the lack of involvement. Time constraints are a major factor and, as authorities have downsized, workloads of the key individuals who would need to get involved have increased. When making funding bids there can be a considerable lead-in period before any benefits are realised. Application processes and identification of partners can be time consuming and off-putting, with further bureaucracy associated with record keeping during and after the life of a project. There can also be a perception that participation in European programmes is a 'nice to do' activity of lower order priority than immediate service concerns and pressures. However, none of these is insurmountable. For example, for most funding programmes applicants have access to free support from National Contact Points whose job it is to enable the development of partnerships and efficient completion of successful applications. One of the benefits of participation, as identified above, is that prospects of other European funding improve as a result.

Note, though, that EU connections are not just about funding. Extensive practical guidance is available. Moreover, direct experience of how things are done elsewhere in Europe helps to build local capacity and it can lead to significant improvements 'on the ground'.

There are increasing opportunities to benchmark practice here against what is delivered by local government elsewhere in Europe. As well as helping to identify potential areas for improvement, benchmarking can enable Welsh local authorities to publicise their own achievements in this field.

WLGA role

WLGA is already doing much to raise awareness of relevant European developments and to support the involvement of its members. To make even better use of scarce resources, WLGA could consider, for example:

- using its membership of CEMR to influence and promote European initiatives which support local delivery. For example, CEMR is tasked with promoting take-up of the Reference Framework. WLGA could come to a view on whether this tool is useful for local authorities preparing Single Integrated Plans (which might well become Well Being Plans for sustainable development in the context of the Welsh Government's SD Bill) or in action planning for Structural Funds projects, and consider securing an awareness-raising or training event for Welsh local authorities.
- becoming a regional level 'Coordinator' for the Covenant of Mayors on Energy and
- becoming an associated member of CIVINET UK & Northern Ireland so as to raise awareness of the CIVITAS programme, sources of good practice on transport and EU initiatives for sustainable urban mobility more broadly

All of these suggested actions have resource implications for WLGA and will need to be considered and prioritised in light of competing pressures but they provide examples of how WLGA might further enable local authorities to engage with EU measures designed for their use.

The Welsh Government is a gatekeeper & holds some of the keys to action

The European approaches advocated for sustainable urban development call for practical application of multi-level governance, in which each 'level' of government plays its part. Effective engagement of Welsh local authorities with EU measures to support local sustainability depends to some extent on Welsh Government action to encourage and enable their participation.

Much of the effort at EU level has been directed towards the achievement of coordinated action across different sectors so that joined-up approaches locally are not undermined by 'higher' levels of government. Within the European Commission, different Directorates General increasingly collaborate to ensure that various initiatives impacting upon cities are mutually reinforcing rather than contradictory. In relation to funding, at least, there are now concrete proposals on the table to enable the creation of multi-fund packages to be managed at local level. In England similar thinking characterises the recent work on City Deals in which different government departments pool their efforts – and notably their budgets. There may be lessons here for Wales.

The Welsh Government could usefully identify EU initiatives that can help to support local implementation of policy commitments 'made in Wales' as well as shared European goals.

It might also be helpful for the Welsh Government's strategies to highlight links with the European policy context where relevant. In particular, tools specifically for local authorities could be promoted¹⁵. For example, both the Climate Change Strategy for Wales and Energy Wales could make explicit reference to the Covenant of Mayors on Energy.

To foster cutting-edge work on local sustainability, EU funding opportunities other than Structural Funds need to be publicised on a Wales-wide basis¹⁶.

The preparation of Statutory Guidance following the passage of the SD Bill and other Welsh legislation could offer opportunities to encourage local authorities to look further a-field.

Structural Funds post 2013

The first paper on EU connections made the point that in the EU system funding programmes are always designed to deliver policy commitments. The European Commission's proposals for the Structural Funds post 2013 are no exception. This being the case, it is important to ask how well prepared Wales is to respond to the Commission's specific proposals for sustainable urban development, integrated territorial investment and CLLD.

Recognition and understanding of policy for sustainable urban development at European level and ensuring that programmes and projects are aligned with wider policy objectives seem essential to enhance both funding opportunities and practical outcomes. In this respect:

- Progress on city regions, and last year's launch of a grant scheme for improvements to the urban environment in local communities, offer possibilities to develop a 'Welsh approach' to urban sustainability comparable with that promoted by the national ministers from EU countries.

- The UK lead on this agenda at European level is provided by DCLG. Development of close contact with Welsh Government officials or directly with local authorities in Wales would be beneficial (as is the case with Scotland and Northern Ireland).
- In the Welsh Government no minister currently has an explicit 'urban portfolio' and there is no equivalent to the 'cities units' which exist within UK government departments DCLG and Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS).
- The existence of a European agenda for sustainable urban development – with its associated proposals for Structural Funds - needs to be recognised in relation to work such as the **City Regions Final Report**, the Welsh Government's **EU Strategy** and the recent '**Guilford Review**' and in documents setting out the **Welsh Government's proposals for Structural Funds post 2013**.

The European Commission's proposals for the new Structural Funds programmes offer significant opportunities to pursue integrated work on sustainable development at local level.

Welsh cities (or groups of councils) 'ready to implement integrated actions for sustainable urban development with delegated management' or wishing to be put forward as candidates for the new Urban Development Platform could usefully be identified.

This is taking place elsewhere in the UK, where there is both observable 'positioning' of urban areas so as to take full advantage of the EU funds and full involvement of local government in the design of the new programmes¹⁷.

Whether or not city councils or sub-regional consortia of local authorities are empowered to manage their own multi-fund EU pots will substantially depend upon the treatment of the Commission's proposals for ITI and lists of 'cities' in the UK's Partnership Agreement, currently in preparation. The Scottish, Welsh and Northern Irish administrations are drafting their own 'chapters' of this Agreement, so arrangements for ITI may well be different for different parts of the UK. Some of the largest cities in England – such as Greater Manchester - are already making proposals.

As regards Territorial Cooperation, take-up of the current programmes has been patchy. For example, there has been little Welsh participation in the URBACT programme which has actively promoted Community-led Local Development by requiring every partner in a project to set up a Local Action Group and to prepare a Local Action Plan.

Collaborative working with partners in other European countries features strongly in the EU approaches to sustainable urban development and local sustainability. Cooperation is regarded as a part of 'good governance', and

the Territorial Cooperation programmes, in particular, are available to support this. Up to now the emphasis in Wales has tended to be on the much larger resources available through Objective 1 and 2 and their successor programmes.

Formal consultation on the draft operational programmes for Territorial Cooperation applying to Wales is expected shortly. It will be important for local authorities to respond so as to ensure that opportunities remain for collaborative work with international partners on topics at the heart of the SD agenda.

For the future, more could be done to promote the benefits of partnership working with local authorities elsewhere in Europe, to publicise the resources available and to support take-up across Wales.

In conclusion.....

After 20 years of collaboration at European level, during which local sustainability approaches have become firmly embedded in mainstream EU thinking, many challenges remain. In particular, it is still not always easy to demonstrate that integrated approaches to local sustainability – as exemplified by the 'Aalborg process' and increasingly demanded in mainstream EU funding programmes – actually result in measurable improvements 'on the ground' in terms of environmental, social and economic performance. In Wales, similar questions surround the passage of the SD Bill, with its requirement for all public bodies to make sustainable development their 'central organising principle'. Wales will shortly have a chance to demonstrate that integrated approaches to SD really work, providing local authorities with a solid foundation for making smarter use of these EU connections in the future.

¹ European Commission (2009) *Promoting Sustainable Urban Development in Europe: Achievements and Opportunities* DG Regional Policy
http://ec.europa.eu/regional_policy/sources/docgener/presenta/urban2009/urban2009_en.pdf

² Only the 1996 version is available on line.

³ Although Commission funding for the Campaign ceased in 2004 it was still well-regarded at European level, as this extract from the 2006 EU SD Strategy shows:

29. With regard to the important role of local and regional levels in delivering sustainable development and building up social capital, it is the overall aim to build sustainable communities in urban and rural areas where citizens live and work and jointly create a high quality of life. Approaches like Local Agenda 21 and other processes with broad public participation must be further strengthened and promoted. Municipalities, cities and towns should be invited to sign and implement the **Aalborg Commitments**. Networks at different levels should support these activities.

30. In this connection the Commission is invited to elaborate possible options of how to promote the “**European Sustainable Cities & Towns Campaign**” which provides an exchange of good practice including the elaboration of quality criteria, indicators and instruments like impact assessment. The best sustainable development initiatives taken by regional and local authorities will be awarded prizes on an annual basis. The Commission will invite proposals from other EU institutions and organisations on how best to organise this.

The 2007 Review of the EU SDS continued to highlight the Campaign.

⁴ Explained in Paper 1.

⁵ Contact details : 0131 469 3804 sustainability@edinburgh.gov.uk

⁶ Other programmes, such as **CULTURE** and **Europe for Citizens**, also offer some scope, but they tend not to be first choices for the ‘SD community’.

⁷ Information on a range of different management systems and standards is available on <http://ew.eea.europa.eu/ManagementConcepts>

⁸ Further practical guidance on the development of integrated management approaches for urban sustainability and links to EU policy – especially environmental Directives in fields such as air quality, waste management, water and noise - can be found in the European Environment Agency’s 2009 publication **Ensuring Quality of Life in Europe’s Cities and Towns**

⁹ See also European Commission (2010) *Making our cities attractive and sustainable: how the EU contributes to improving the urban environment*, p. 23

¹⁰ Covered in Paper 1

¹¹ Further WLGA briefing on European connections for green public procurement will shortly be available.

¹² WLGA briefing is available at <http://www.wlga.gov.uk/english/cohesion-and-regional-policy/>

¹³ See for example the **Opinion on Environmentally and Socially Sustainable Cities** adopted by the COTER commission of the Committee of the Regions in July 2012.

¹⁴ See for example their Resolution of 20 April 2012 on the review of the 6th Environment Action Programme and the setting of priorities for the 7th Environment Action Programme – A better environment for a better life.

¹⁵ An omission pointed out by the former European and External Affairs Committee of the National Assembly for Wales in their 2011 report on [Welsh participation in EU research, innovation and lifelong learning programmes](#).

¹⁶ As recommended by the former European and External Affairs Committee of the National Assembly for Wales in [Welsh participation in EU research, innovation and lifelong learning programmes](#).

¹⁷ In England, new funding arrangements for large urban areas are proceeding from the so-called [Heseltine Review](#). This explicitly called for mechanisms to enable effective future matching between domestic sources and EU Structural Funds. Revised arrangements for local funding via a ‘single pot’ (the Single Local Growth Fund, due to be created in April 2015), which brings together budgets from several different government departments, are intentionally aligned with EU proposals for the creation of multi-fund programmes managed at local level. There will be an enhanced role for Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs) which will devise their own strategic plans as the basis for bids from the ‘single pot’ for funding for a 5 year period. However, it currently seems unlikely that local authorities in England will have devolved responsibility for management of the EU funds. It is expected that national government will make local allocations from the Common Strategic Framework aligned with the plans led by LEPs. It remains to be seen how alignment between UK policy goals and the Europe 2020 policy agenda so fundamental to Structural Funds programming will be engineered.