

Shan Morgan
Ysgrifennydd Parhaol
Permanent Secretary



Llywodraeth Cymru
Welsh Government

Adrian Crompton
Auditor General for Wales
Wales Audit Office
24 Cathedral Road
Cardiff

20 December 2018

Dear Auditor General,

The Welsh Government welcomes the findings of the Report on Local Government Services to Rural Communities and offers the following response to the four recommendations contained within it. We have accepted the first recommendation as it is a recommendation for Welsh Government, but have noted the other three recommendations which are for Public Service Boards and Local Authorities.

Recommendation 1 – We recommend that Welsh Government support public bodies to deliver a more integrated approach to service delivery in rural areas by:

- refreshing rural grant programmes to create sustainable financial structures, with multi-year allocations; and
- helping people and businesses make the most of digital connectivity through targeted and more effective business and adult education support programmes.

Accept

Refreshing rural grant programmes to create sustainable financial structures, with multi-year allocations

We recognise the importance of providing multi-year information about funding to our partners and stakeholders to enable them to plan effectively. We also encourage local government and the third sector to provide multi-year grants where it is feasible. It is



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always our ambition to publish funding amounts for longer than 12 months, but this needs to be balanced with our ability to provide realistic and sensible planning assumptions. Where there are high levels of uncertainty we are only able to publish plans for one or two years. As the UK Government has announced its intention to carry out a Spending Review next year, we do not know yet what impact this will have on the Welsh budget, or the period for which we will have a firm settlement.

The Spending Review will also determine what successor funding arrangements will be for our EU programmes. This is a source of investment which the Welsh Government has been able to use to make funding available on a multi-annual basis (a 7-10 year funding cycle). The Welsh Government is calling for the same levels of funding and flexibility to design multi-annual successor arrangements tailored for Wales.

The Welsh Government has also recently negotiated changes to our European Structural Funds programmes to make funding available for a new priority for public services reform and regional working. The new priority will make £27m of EU funding available on a multi-annual basis (to the end of 2023) to act as a catalyst to stimulate new regional solutions, planning and service models, reflecting the strategic approach set out in Welsh Government strategies *Prosperity for All*, the *Economic Action Plan* and the *Employability Plan*. The new priority will help organisations to innovate and work together to find new ways to tackle some of the challenges they are facing and improve the delivery of public services.

The Welsh Government is currently reviewing its priorities in the Welsh Rural Development Programme. The programme aims include fostering innovation and integrating regional territories such as using Community Local Led Delivery to test approaches to service delivery. There are examples where traditional boundaries have been overcome to develop an integrated approach to regional development for the benefit of the areas and their communities. The Welsh Rural Development Programme has provided funding across multiple years to Local Led Action Groups.

Helping businesses make the most of digital connectivity through targeted and more effective business support programmes

Business Wales provides Welsh businesses and aspiring entrepreneurs with access to the information, advice and support they require to start and grow their businesses. It provides general business advice, as well as six specialist strands including equality & diversity; resource efficiency; international trade; skills; procurement; and mentoring. This is in addition to access to the Skills Gateway and Farming Connect.

Superfast Business Wales is a fully-funded business support service that helps make the most of their connectivity. It supports businesses across the whole of Wales to understand, adopt and exploit the digital business technologies that superfast infrastructure makes available. The service can help businesses retain and grow its customer base, boost sales and profits, reduce costs, get ahead of competitors and



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accelerate growth. Support includes a telephone diagnostic with an online business advisor; free master classes and workshops; tailored 1-2-1 support from a digital business advisor; website review; online tools, guides and a software directory.

Helping people make the most of digital connectivity through targeted and more effective adult education support programmes

Digital Literacy is one of the three main priorities within our *Adult Learning in Wales* policy (2017). All adults in Wales are entitled to access free digital literacy classes, provided through Further Education Institutions and Local Authority community learning providers. The courses are aimed at supporting adults to access services and Smart Technology safely and securely.

Since 2015, the Welsh Government's £1million per annum dedicated digital inclusion programme, Digital Communities Wales (DCW), has supported an estimated 120,000 individuals to engage with technology. DCW works with organisations across Wales, including public bodies, which are well placed, through the services they provide, to reach digitally excluded people.

DCW's work with organisations in rural areas includes:

- Training Nat West Community Bankers across north and west Wales to enable them to help customers with basic digital skills. Support for the community bankers to help customers in this way has increased as more bank branches have closed in rural areas.
- A pilot initiative supported by the Bevan Commission will look to engage agencies that provide in-home services, for example meals on wheels and befriending services, with the aim of training volunteers to become 'digital companions', creating a peer-support network.
- Training for staff and volunteers from Dysgu bro adult community learning has enabled them to offer basic digital skills training across Ceredigion.
- Powys Teaching Health Board Pain and Fatigue Unit has received training and kit (ipads on loan) from DCW to enable staff to help their patients to get online and have routine appointments via Skype. Staff now offer support to patients to be able to do this.

DCW ends on 30 June 2019. A successor programme, focussing on digital inclusion and health is currently out to tender. The value of the new programme will be £6million over three years.

Recommendation 2 - We recommend that PSB public services partners respond more effectively to the challenges faced by rural communities by:

- **assessing the strengths and weaknesses of their different rural communities using the Welsh Governments Rural Proofing Tool and**



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identify and agree the local and strategic actions needed to support community sustainability; and

- **ensuring the Local Well-Being Plan sets out a more optimistic and ambitious vision for 'place' with joint priorities co-produced by partners and with citizens to address agreed challenges.**

The Welsh Government has noted the report's findings and its recommendations for Public Services Boards.

The Rural Proofing Tool now forms part of the Integrated Impact Assessment tool currently being piloted within Welsh Government. We are happy to share the Tool with PSBs and other public bodies during the pilot and further iterations of the tool following the review of how effective it has been in supporting an integrated approach to the assessment of impact.

Recommendation 3 - We recommend councils provide a more effective response to the challenges faced by rural communities by:

- **ensuring service commissioners have cost data and qualitative information on the full range of service options available; and**
- **using citizens' views on the availability, affordability, accessibility, adequacy and acceptability of council services to shape the delivery and integration of services.**

The Welsh Government has noted the report's findings and its recommendations for local authorities.

Recommendation 4 - We recommend councils do more to develop community resilience and self-help by:

- **working with relevant bodies such as the Wales Co-operative Centre to support social enterprise and more collaborative business models;**
- **providing tailored community outreach for those who face multiple barriers to accessing public services and work;**
- **enhancing and recognising the role of town and community councils by capitalising on their local knowledge and supporting them to do more;**
- **encouraging a more integrated approach to service delivery in rural areas by establishing pan-public service community hubs, networks of expertise, and clusters of advice and prevention services;**
- **enabling local action by supporting community asset transfer identifying which assets are suitable to transfer, and having the right systems in place to make things happen; and improving community-based leadership by developing**



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The Welsh Government has noted the report's findings and its recommendations for local authorities.

Yours,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Shan Morgan". The signature is written in a cursive style and is positioned above a long horizontal line that extends across the width of the signature.

Shan Morgan

Ysgrifennydd Parhaol/ Permanent Secretary
Llywodraeth Cymru/ Welsh Government



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