



Llywodraeth Cymru
Welsh Government

Our ref: LF/LA -/0705/15

Christine Chapman AM
Chair, Communities, Equality and Local Government Committee
National Assembly for Wales

11 August 2015

Dear Christine,

Thank you for your letter of 13 July regarding Local Government reform and the Armed Forces Community Covenant.

You have asked for further information on the process for finalising the map. My announcement on 17 June provides further clarity on the future configuration of Local Authorities in Wales and sets out our preference for the future structure in South, Mid and West Wales while facilitating further discussion around North Wales. There is now an informal opportunity over the summer for people to provide us with their views.

In publishing these maps, we are conscious there has not, to date, been an opportunity for members of the public, interested organisations and stakeholders to put forward their views formally on our current proposals. In view of the nature of the changes being proposed, it is right that formal consultation is built in and that this formal consultation should be set in the context of the whole of the Local Government Reform Programme. We therefore intend to consult on the map as part of the Draft Local Government Mergers and Reform Bill which will be published in November.

The intention is for the Draft Bill to reflect that there are currently two preferred options for the configuration of Local Authorities in Wales – 8 or 9 new Local Authorities. Alongside the draft Bill, we will publish a consultation document which will set out a range of issues associated with the proposed mergers and will invite views on the future configuration of Local Authorities in Wales. It will then be for the Government after the May 2016 elections to take forward local government reform and mergers including the necessary legislation. This would of course be subject to Assembly scrutiny.

Turning to the Armed Forces Community Covenant, the information you have requested is outlined below.

An outline of what the Armed Forces Community Covenants have specifically achieved in Wales since 2011.

All 22 Local Authorities in Wales have signed a Community Covenant, showing their commitment to the Armed Forces Community, and dedicated champions and lead officers in Local Authorities and Health Boards have been appointed to raise awareness of and promote the Community Covenant amongst their networks. The Community Covenant

Champions events that we hold biannually in Wales provide the opportunity for all Armed Forces Champions, third sector organisations and the MoD to come together to network, determine improvement of joint services, share best practice and information. It is evident the collaboration, signposting and cross-organisational networking taking place is making activity under the Community Covenants real, and provide an opportunity for joining up services.

In terms of specific achievements since 2011, a number of Local Authorities have undertaken work to gain a better understanding of the needs of the Armed Forces Community in their locality. Public workshops were held in Anglesey and Conwy and needs assessments were undertaken in Newport and Denbighshire. A majority of Local Authorities established local and regional forums and worked on improving information. On-line information has been developed in Caerphilly, Denbighshire, Swansea and Wrexham with a help-line set up in Ceredigion. Specific projects include the provision of mentoring opportunities in Anglesey, working with the Royal British Legion on the information hubs and in Wrexham developments with First Choice Housing on the delivery of supported accommodation for ex-forces personnel.

At the recent Champions Event held on the 14 May in Wrexham, Local Authorities provided case studies and spoke about their achievements, namely awareness raising in Caerphilly, proposals for Veteran housing in Wrexham and support for Afghan translators in Monmouthshire. Local Authorities are also supporting charities such as Royal British Legion, including the establishment of advice and information hubs and outreach locations. These locations are a tangible example of the Community Covenant in action as the establishment of a number of the hubs have been achieved as a result of joint working between the Legion and Local Authority partners via local Community Covenant groups.

Details of any discussions you have had with the UK Government about the delivery of Community Covenants in Wales.

I met with Anna Soubry MP in December 2014. Discussions included support for the Armed Forces Community and the Community Covenant funding. I have yet to meet with her successor Mark Lancaster MP. However, I will be writing to him as part of the review of the Package of Support. My officials regularly engage with the Ministry of Defence Covenant team and attend the UK Covenant Reference Group.

Details of any evaluation that has been undertaken by the Welsh Government of the support it provides to the armed forces, including any areas for improvement identified by any such evaluation.

Officials are engaging with the MoD on Armed Forces Covenant measurements, reviewing existing data and identification of evidence gaps, taking on board the information from the Integrated Household Survey and the RBL Household Survey. Discussions held with our partners at the Expert Group and Armed Forces Champions Event have resulted in the development of a National Framework for Wales. This will provide us with stronger and more effective communication and governance structures. It will also enable us to disseminate information and share good practice to the Armed Forces Community in Wales. 160 Infantry Brigade and Headquarters in Wales has taken the lead in its development, adopting a partnership approach to achieve a framework that is fitting for all.

Whether the Welsh Government's package of support will be renewed at its existing level in the autumn.

I intend to refresh the package of support during the summer. This will include taking on board feedback and views from stakeholders to ensure we target resources where needed. I also see the review as an opportunity for us to explore the benefits the Armed Forces bring to our communities.

I can confirm the refresh will not result in a reduction in the level of our commitment and support to the Armed Forces community in Wales.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Leighton Andrews". The signature is written in a cursive style. Below the signature is a long, horizontal, slightly wavy line.

Leighton Andrews AC / AM

Y Gweinidog Gwasanaethau Cyhoeddus
Minister for Public Services