

# Stakeholder Engagement: Welsh Government

## Draft Budget 2020–21

Finance Committee | July 2019

The Committee held an informal stakeholder event at the Marine Hotel, Aberystwyth on 27 June 2019. The event focussed on the draft budget for 2020–21.

### 1. Preventative Spend, Health & Social Care

Prevention and early intervention should be at the heart of budget allocation.

Stakeholders discussed the increased pressure on local authority budgets especially within social care due to demographical changes and workforce pressures. Current financial pressures for local authorities include workforce parity of treatment re-dress (eg changes to National Living Wage and sleep-in payments), high-cost high-need care packages and increased responsibilities following introduction of new policies and legislation (eg Additional Learning Needs Bill and Sustainable Drainage Systems Standards). Stakeholders felt that duties or responsibilities of local authorities are not reduced when budgets are cut.

Many local authorities are reaching “saturation point” and cannot absorb any additional costs. This is leading to significant cuts in preventative services despite specific focus in recent legislation on the importance of early intervention and prevention (eg Social Services and Well-being Act, Well-being of Future Generations Act, Violence Against Women Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence (VAWDASV) etc). Cutting non-statutory services such as leisure, culture and transport can have a potentially negative impact on the physical and mental well-being of the local population. In the long term, this can lead to increased pressure on statutory services. Cuts to public transport, for example, can have a significant impact on the local population, especially in rural areas.

Some stakeholders suggested that the affordability of universal services such as free public transport and free prescriptions needs to be revisited by Welsh Government given the current financial climate and reduction in budgets.

Out-of-county placements have huge cost implications for local authorities. It was suggested that local authorities need to work together on a regional basis to develop



specialist, not-for-profit services locally in order to avoid sending children and adults to high cost out-of-county placements.

However, stakeholders discussed the tension between preventative action, which often tends to be longer term, and addressing short term, immediate pressures.

## 2. Long-Term Planning & Strategies

Despite the Finance Committee's recommendations in 2017, the financial implications of new legislation remain difficult for local authorities to plan for. Even when Welsh Government provides assurances that any changes will be "cost neutral", this is rarely the case in practice. It is not just about the direct costs but also the impact of re-direction of resources away from other services. There is often an impact on the third sector too, for example the introduction of the VAWDASV Act had significant resource implications for domestic abuse charities.

Several stakeholders raised concerns about the potential impact of Brexit and the lack of clarity around post-Brexit policy and the Shared Prosperity Fund. It will be necessary to fill some legislative "gaps" post-Brexit but Welsh Government needs to carefully consider the cost implications of this. For example, if Welsh Government is considering raising regulatory standards for farming post-Brexit this could have significant resource implications for local authorities who would be expected to carry out additional inspections. They felt that the Welsh Government should be preparing for a New Deal Brexit, in order to be best prepared for that possible eventuality.

There is a need for more joined up working between health, social care and the third sector, for example on the Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) agenda as this can impact on many areas of society.

Stakeholders stressed that long-term spending and vision were imperative as part of longer-term planning. There was a feeling that short term projects and yearly budgets do not allow for strategic spending nor for value for money – that budgets are being spent for the sake of being spent rather than to follow strategies and with priorities in mind.

A suggestion was made for 'disruptive' budgets, moving away from annual budgets and moving closer to the principles of the Wellbeing of Future Generations Act to ensure requirements are met. Budgets should have an emphasis on meeting the need, working in areas that require action and co-working across sectors rather than adheres to a departmental structures and encourage competition between sectors.



### 3. Economy, businesses & the Third Sector

The Welsh Government needs to do more to promote the economy and business in Wales. Wales should be procuring “from Wales for Wales”, for example, currently most of the education books are procured from England. This is often because procurement rules make it difficult for small suppliers to bid for contracts.

Stakeholders felt that having more support for local businesses would lead to an increase in local economic growth and that the Welsh Government needs to work together with local authorities to achieve this.

The third sector is often expected to “take up the slack” when local authorities are forced to cut services but many of these organisations are also working at full capacity and having to turn people away due to lack of resources. Many smaller third sector organisations have been lost in recent years due to lack of funding or forced to merge with other organisations in order to survive and this has led to a loss of local knowledge, expertise and support.

Public transport was seen as key to communities and especially in rural communities, as well as being integral to enabling economic opportunities. Key considerations around transport were availability, affordability and quality.

Stakeholders were wary of providing funding for large innovative schemes and the risks that may surround that funding and suggested that those resources may be used to support other services. For example, stakeholders questioned whether it was for Wales to take the lead in unproven technologies such as tidal.

Stakeholders discussed the need for a fair work strategy.

### 4. Education funding

Stakeholders suggested that the education budget needed to be clarified and simplified.

Stakeholders from the education sector highlighted that certain industries, facilities and services operate across different areas and rather than competing for budgets, sectors should be working together with outcomes in mind.

### 5. Local services

There were also concerns that community facilities, including leisure centres, were closing. It was noted that this has a significant impact on health and well-being of those communities, which in many cases is preventative, either through opportunities to exercise or for mental health reasons. It was also noted that community facilities provided structures to build social capital.



There was a concern that services and assets were being transferred from local authorities to community and town councils. This leads to a significant risk in terms of the ability of the organisations responsible for service having capacity to operate them, with a local authority likely to have larger specialist teams and a wider pool of expertise compared to a community and town council. Stakeholders suggested that transfer of services needed to be supported by adequate transfer for funding and resources.

Stakeholders suggested that assets needed to be utilised better, and that all tiers of government needed to work together to understand what assets they had and how these may best be used.

There was a general feeling that there was increasing strain being placed upon local authorities due to the lack of funding, which would lead to reduction in staff and a lack of resources, which would only create further issues; stakeholders described this as an endless cycle that wasn't being resolved.

## 6. Housing

Local authorities need more support from Welsh Government to enable them to fulfil their priorities on the availability of affordable housing. For example, when borrowing to purchase own housing stock, it would be helpful if local authorities could pay back at the lower rate rather than the market rate that Registered Social Landlords are required to pay.

Some stakeholders wanted to see a resolution to the 'loophole' in second home tax, wanting to provide local Welsh residents more housing opportunities.

## 7. Transparency & Scrutiny

There's not a clear understanding of Welsh Government's spending decisions and focus needs to be on outcomes and the need of the citizen. The Future Generations Act is integral to impact assessments for local authorities, yet many commented that it has not had a significant impact. Stakeholders acknowledged that the Future Generations Act will likely have a positive impact in the long run, however there will be no immediate benefit and instead will only restrict upon how much money local government will receive. Stakeholders felt that the Future Generations Act needed to be fed into any other additional plans and not be treated as a standalone Act.

Some stakeholders felt that the Welsh Government was overspending and there was an unfairness with regards to funding for health services. Some stakeholders questioned how the Welsh Government is monitoring health boards' spending, given the number of boards in special measures.



## 8. Equality & Vulnerable Groups

Cuts to public transport often have a disproportionate impact on certain groups in society, for example disabled people, older people or victims of domestic abuse. Stakeholders noted that poverty should be at the core of all budget decisions and that the budget should utilise a poverty impact assessment methodology.

## 9. Taxation

Stakeholders were concerned that local taxes were increasing whilst services are being reducing. Stakeholders were keen to understand what additional taxes might be considered for Wales and what might be appropriate. There was an emphasis on the importance of the public being aware what Welsh taxes will fund and cross border concerns with taxes differing in England.

Stakeholders were keen on the idea of a 'Tourist Tax' for people visiting Wales and it's National Parks, arguing that tourists use resources such as the health services, so this could counter balancing that.

