

# **A business case for a sustainability underpinned strategic vision at the Welsh Local Government Association**

## **Purpose**

This paper seeks to make a business case for the adoption of a new Strategic Vision for the Welsh Local Government Association that is underpinned by and focussed on sustainability principles. The report reviews the strengths of the organisation in this area, as well as the political ambition and policy context that is driving sustainable changes within Wales and makes a case for the organisations alignment to this.

## **Background & Context**

The Welsh Local Government Association (WLGA), established in 1996 (WLGA, 2022) is a national membership organisation that represents the 22 local authorities across Wales, as well as the national park and fire and rescue authorities.

The politically led cross-party organisation works on behalf of councils to promote and champion local democracy in Wales. The WLGA supports authorities with policy development, representation at a national government level and continuous improvement. (WLGA, 2022)

The organisation delivers a number of targeted support programmes on national priorities such as Brexit, housing, waste improvement, regeneration and community safety. These programmes provide expert advice and guidance to councils to help them build knowledge in these areas, overcome issues and deliver on national legislation.

The climate crisis is the greatest challenge of our time and has a significant impact on the work of local authorities across Wales. This means that sustainability, climate change mitigation and adaptation are a key area of focus for local authorities and the WLGA.

There are a number of key pieces of Welsh legislation and policy that set out the responsibilities of local authorities in tackling the climate and biodiversity crisis and ensuring a sustainable environment, society and economy for Wales.

One of these pieces of legislation is the Wellbeing of Future Generations Act. (Welsh Government, 2015) The Act was introduced by the Welsh Government in 2015 and gave a national translation of the United Nations Global Sustainable Development Goals. (UN, 2021) The law placed sustainable development at the heart of public bodies in Wales and made the improvement of the country's social, economic, environment and cultural well-being a legally binding responsibility.

The Act requires Welsh local authorities to be working towards 7 goals;

- A Globally Responsible Wales
- A Prosperous Wales
- A Resilient Wales
- A Healthier Wales
- A More Equal Wales
- A Wales of Cohesive Communities
- A Wales of Vibrant Culture and Thriving Welsh Language

As well as the well-being goals, the legislation also includes a list of 40 clear indicators for public bodies to measure their success against, which provides detail of how the overarching goals should be delivered. The Act also requires Councils to produce annual reports on their progress towards the national indicators. (Welsh Government, 2015)

Another key piece of legislation is the Environment Wales Act 2016 (Welsh Government, 2016). The Act places a duty on Welsh Ministers to set targets for the public and private sector for reducing greenhouse emissions to net zero by 2050, and to produce carbon budgets for each five-year period leading to 2050.

In July 2021 the Welsh public sector made a commitment to becoming net zero carbon by 2030 and set out a plan for how it will achieve this in July 2021 in the Welsh Public Sector Decarbonisation Routemap (Welsh Government, 2021). The routemap focusses on four key priority areas for reducing emissions which impact upon all activities and services of Local Authorities; Transport & Movement, Land Use, Buildings and Procurement.

Following this the Net Zero Wales: Carbon Budget 2 plan was published by Welsh Ministers in November 2021 (Welsh Government, 2021) to set out the carbon budget for the period of 2021-2025. The plan includes a set of commitments for local authorities under each of the four themes mentioned above. Some examples of these commitments are;

#### Buildings

“Develop a strategic plan decarbonising buildings by the end of 2023”

#### Procurement

“Set out carbon reduction specifications in all new or reviewed contracts...”.

#### Land Use

“Carbon sequestration seen by leaders as a valid core purpose for use of public land and opportunities actively pursued by local authorities on their own land, including habitat restoration, tree planting etc.”

#### Mobility & Transport

“All new cars and light goods vehicles being net zero/ultra-low emission by 2025.” (Welsh Government, 2021)

These commitments highlight the significant responsibility that local authorities have in ensuring the Welsh public sector reaches net zero carbon by 2030 and furthermore that Wales reaches net zero carbon by 2050. This makes the case for the important role that the WLGA has in supporting councils, their staff and their elected members through this transformation and delivery of the national commitments.

### **Analysis of Opportunities, Challenges, Strengths and Weaknesses**

In addition to the policy context mentioned above, the current landscape of the public sector in Wales provides a number of opportunities to support the adoption of a sustainability underpinned strategic vision.

There is a growing ambition from the public sector to adapt to climate change, decarbonise and become net zero carbon by 2030 (Welsh Government, 2021). Nearly all local authorities in Wales have declared a climate emergency, many also declaring a biodiversity emergency, evidencing this commitment and ambition to adapt and change their services to tackle the climate crisis.

This provides an opportunity for the WLGA to join these organisations already taking action, and to be vocal about its commitment to sustainability as well.

The WLGA has many strengths that will allow it to take advantage of the opportunity mentioned above, and that place the organisation in a good position to adopt a new sustainability based strategic vision.

The organisation has a skilled workforce of staff that is experienced in working within the public sector in Wales, due to this level of experience staff also have a good working knowledge of the national policies that impact on councils. These skills and experience can be drawn on to help with the development of a strategic vision that is relevant to staff roles and supports the work of councils across Wales.

The WLGA Council is made up of representative elected members from across Welsh local authorities. Sustainability is already listed as a core value in the role description of WLGA Executive Board Members (WLGA, 2022), for the Group Leaders and the Council has a spokesperson dedicated to sustainability and climate change. The WLGA is already committed to sustainability so the development of the strategic vision will align with this commitment and demonstrate this focus to our key stakeholders.

It is recognised though that there will be some challenges to the implementation of a new strategic vision.

The upcoming local government elections, taking place in May 2022, could present a challenge to the adoption of strategic vision. Currently there is strong political ambition and leadership for sustainability within Welsh councils, should there be a significant change in elected members and therefore on the WLGA Council there is a risk that the Leaders' will bring different interests that they may see as a priority over sustainability. Though this risk is very small given the commitment to sustainability across the Welsh public sector, as well as the interest from communities in Wales, which they will represent, to tackle the climate crisis.

The WLGA is a busy organisation and supports councils through a number of important national programmes, therefore there will likely be competing priorities and competing demands for resources. It may be felt that the new vision for the organisation will be an additional demand for staff which may already be feeling like they are under resourced. This will be mitigated through clear communication that this will not mean an addition to workloads but instead is a new way of working that is underpinned by sustainability principles.

As mentioned above, there is a breadth of expertise amongst WLGA staff, though not all will have the technical knowledge around sustainability and climate change in order to fully embed its principles and new vision into their day-to-day work. This weakness however can be overcome through training that ensures staff are aware of how to deliver the new vision through their roles, and knowledge sharing from the teams which already have technical experience in this area.

### **Adding value to WLGA**

By embedding sustainability principles across the organisation, it will enhance the WLGA's services by ensuring that support given to authorities, across all programmes and services, is underpinned by these principles. Sustainability cuts across all areas of local authorities work, and therefore ensuring that the support the WLGA provides recognises this and ensures it's work also threads sustainability through its services it can provide the most effective support to councils.

The WLGA has a strong reputation of supporting local authorities and representing local democracy at a national government level, which means that the organisation is able to guide and be a leader for councils on sustainability issues. Adopting a new strategic vision that supports this will demonstrate that the organisation is “walking the walk” and provide confidence to its members that its vision and values align with their commitments and responsibility on sustainability.

### **Engagement & Communication of the new Strategic Vision**

Effective and efficient communication of the new strategic vision will be key to ensure it is adopted and delivered through the work of the WLGA.

The key stakeholders for the development of the new strategic vision and the sustainability principles which underpin it will be the staff of the WLGA, the WLGA Council, and its members – both local authority staff and elected members.

It is important that these stakeholders have an opportunity be involved from the beginning to help form the new vision, this will help ensure that the new direction is as relevant to their priorities, interests, and roles as much as possible.

The table found in Appendix 1 sets out a stakeholder engagement plan which identifies the key stakeholders for the adoption of a new Strategic Vision underpinned by sustainability principles, as well as the key messages to convey, considering their specific interests, and the channels through which to communicate them effectively.

### **Conclusion**

As set out above the current policy context, political ambition and positioning of the Welsh Local Government Association provides an ideal opportunity for the organisation to revisit and revise its strategic vision with a new focus on sustainability.

By doing so the organisation will align with its priorities of the Welsh public sector, it will improve its services to its members whilst also supporting the work towards a more sustainable environment, economy and society for Wales.

| Stakeholder         | Key Messages                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               | Engagement Channels                                                                                                                                                                                                                                      | Frequency of communication                                                                                                                                                                                       | Influence |
|---------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------|
| <b>WLGA Council</b> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- New Strategic Vision for WLGA underpinned by sustainability</li> <li>- How sustainability underpins all areas of work of Welsh Councils.</li> <li>- How their role has an impact on climate change and decarbonisation.</li> <li>- The Council's role as leaders in driving Welsh local government forward to net zero</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Council Meetings</li> <li>- Briefing papers circulated at Council Meetings</li> <li>- Wales Partnership Council meetings</li> <li>- Email</li> <li>- WLGA Website</li> <li>- WLGA social media pages</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Key consultees in the development of the strategic vision.</li> <li>- Updates provided at monthly meetings.</li> <li>- Ad hoc as queries arise from members.</li> </ul> | High      |
| <b>WLGA Staff</b>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- New Strategic Vision for WLGA underpinned by sustainability</li> <li>- The impact of the new vision on individual roles</li> <li>- How individual roles have an impact on climate change and decarbonisation</li> </ul>                                                                                                           | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Monthly staff meetings</li> <li>- Sharepoint</li> <li>- WLGA Staff Bulletin</li> <li>- Staff Lunch and Learn Sessions</li> </ul>                                                                                | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Updates provided at monthly meetings.</li> <li>- Ad hoc as queries arise</li> </ul>                                                                                     | Medium    |
| <b>Trade Unions</b> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- New Strategic Vision for WLGA underpinned by sustainability</li> <li>- The impact of the new vision on individual roles</li> <li>- How individual roles have an impact on climate change and decarbonisation</li> </ul>                                                                                                           | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Decarbonisation Strategy Panel</li> <li>- Email</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                      | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Updates provided at monthly meetings.</li> <li>- Ad hoc as queries arise</li> </ul>                                                                                     | Medium    |

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| <b>Members of the WLGA including 22 Local Authorities and associate members</b> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- New Strategic Vision for WLGA underpinned by sustainability</li> </ul>                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                            | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Decarbonisation Strategy Panel</li> <li>- Email via established WLGA networks</li> <li>- WLGA website</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Ad hoc as queries arise from members.</li> </ul>                                                                                                          | High |
| <b>Partnership Council for Wales</b>                                            | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- New Strategic Vision for WLGA underpinned by sustainability</li> <li>- How sustainability underpins all areas of work of Welsh Councils.</li> <li>- How their role has an impact on climate change and decarbonisation.</li> <li>- The Council's role as leaders in driving Welsh local government forward to net zero</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Papers presented at the Partnership Council for Wales</li> </ul>                                                 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Updates provided at quarterly meetings.</li> <li>- Ad hoc as queries arise</li> </ul>                                                                     | High |
| <b>Decarbonisation Strategy Panel</b>                                           | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- New Strategic Vision for WLGA underpinned by sustainability</li> <li>- How sustainability underpins all areas of work of Welsh Councils.</li> <li>- How their role has an impact on climate change and decarbonisation.</li> <li>- The Council's role as leaders in driving Welsh local government forward to net zero</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Paper presented at monthly meeting of the Strategy Panel.</li> <li>- Email</li> </ul>                            | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Key consultees in the development of the strategic vision.</li> <li>- Updates provided at monthly meetings.</li> <li>- Ad hoc as queries arise</li> </ul> | High |

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|---------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------|
| <b>Local Government<br/>Climate Change<br/>Officers</b> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- New Strategic Vision for WLGA underpinned by sustainability</li> <li>- The Council's role as leaders in driving Welsh local government forward to net zero</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Paper presented at quarterly meeting of the Climate Change Group.</li> <li>- WLGA Website</li> <li>- Email</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Key consultees in the development of the strategic vision.</li> <li>- Updates provided at quarterly meetings.</li> <li>- Ad hoc as queries arise</li> </ul> | Medium |
| <b>Welsh Government</b>                                 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- New Strategic Vision for WLGA underpinned by sustainability</li> </ul>                                                                                                | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Email</li> <li>- Via informal catch ups with the Local Government team that occur on a weekly basis</li> </ul>        | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Ad hoc as queries arise</li> </ul>                                                                                                                          | Low    |

## Reference List

Welsh Government, (2015), *Well-being of Future Generation (Wales) Act 2015*, available at <https://gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2021-10/well-being-future-generations-wales-act-2015-the-essentials-2021.pdf#:~:text=The%20Well-being%20of%20Future%20Generations%20%28Wales%29%20Act%20is,local%20health%20boards%20and%20other%20specified%20public%20bodies>. (accessed on 10/03/22)

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United Nations, *The 17 Goals*, available at <https://sdgs.un.org/goals>, (accessed on 10/03/22)