Report of the Deputy Chief Executive

Audit Committee – 8 December 2020

An Update on a Review of Partnerships

Purpose:	This report provides a summary of the Welsh Government's and WLGA's Review of Strategic Partnerships. The report also outlines action taken by the Welsh Government to date and indicates implications and potential actions that Swansea Council should consider.
Policy Framework:	None.
Consultation:	Access to Services, Finance, Legal
Recommendation(s):	It is recommended that:
1) The committee review and discuss this report.	
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1.   Introduction

1.1   The Welsh Government and the WLGA agreed in April 2019 to undertake a Review of Strategic Partnerships and report to the Partnership Council for Wales. The final document was completed in June 2020 during the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic, therefore the amount of progress that has been made has been limited.

1.2   The aim of the Review was to consider the partnership landscape in Wales, identify key areas where there was unnecessary complexity or duplication and to identify opportunities for simplification and

rationalisation in a focused and pragmatic way. The review sought to identify:

- action which could be taken immediately by the relevant partnerships to rationalise partnerships/improve alignment;
- action the Welsh Government could take immediately to rationalise partnerships/improve alignment;
- action which would require legislative change through the Local Government and Elections Bill (Wales)

2. Background

2.1 The complexity of the strategic partnership landscape is a theme which has been consistently highlighted in numerous reviews of Welsh Pubic Services over the years. Previous reviews have included;

- Beyond Boundaries: Citizen-Centred Local Services for Wales, Beecham et al, (2006),
- Local, Regional, National: What services are best delivered where? Simpson et al, (2011),
- The Commission on Public Service Governance and Delivery, Williams et al (2014),

2.2 Following those reviews, it is not clear to what extent actions were taken to address proposals from previous reviews on the complexity, and importance, of partnership working. New partnerships have been established since the publication of those reviews. Consequently, many Public Service and Third Sector partners are engaged in several partnerships covering a range of issues, priorities or themes.

2.3 During the time taken to undertake this review, the following work on the strategic partnerships in Wales was either underway, or has recently been completed including;

- A Working Group on Local Government (2018).
- The National Assembly for Wales' Economic, Infrastructure and Skills Committee's inquiry into Regional Skills Partnerships (2019).
- A self assessment tool for Regional Partnership Boards (2020).
- Wales Audit Office's Review of Public Service Boards (2019).
- A workshop to consider the arrangements between Regional Partnership Boards and Public Services Boards, Keith Moultrie (2019).
- A Regional review of partnership working – Gwent.
- A Regional review of partnership working – North Wales.

2.4 This Review therefore sought to minimise additional burden on public services and has considered and incorporated observations from these wider reviews.

3. **Methodology**

3.1 The first stage of the Review was a call for written evidence from Public Service Leaders and Chairs of Partnerships. A total of 33 responses were received from Councils, Local Health Boards, other Public Sector Bodies, Inspection and Audit Services and Third Sector representatives. An interim report was considered at the Partnership Council for Wales on 2nd October 2019. The overall interim findings from the interim report suggested that there was no consistent view on how to simplify the partnership landscape and no support for a legislative solution.

3.2 The second stage of the Review involved testing emerging hypotheses for rationing partnership working and to develop a series of recommendations. This stage involved defining and identifying Strategic Partnerships in the scope of the review, identifying the basis for the formation of each strategic partnership e.g legislation, or funding and identifying the known problems and likely solutions.

3.3 The key findings from the Review are outlined under the following themes; the definition of partnerships, the alignment of strategic partnerships, barriers to aligning and rationalising Strategic Partnerships, governance and accountability.

4. **The Definition of Partnerships**

4.1 The Review identified two types of strategic partnerships; the first being multi-purpose high level boards with long term goals and objectives and the second being single purpose policy boards with a focus on issues of strategic importance.

4.2 Examples of multi-purpose high level boards included;

- Public Services Boards.
- Regional Partnership Boards.
- City Deals / Growth/Ambition Boards.

4.3 Examples of single-purpose policy boards included;

- Community Safety Partnerships.
- Adult's Safeguarding Partnerships.
- Children's Safeguarding Partnerships.
- Regional Skills Partnerships.
- Regional Housing Support Collaborative Groups.
- Area Planning Boards (substance misuse).
- VAWDA SV Partnerships.
- Mental Health Partnerships.

4.4 Single sector collaborations or joint services e.g. school improvement consortia, or the proposed Corporate Joint Committees were not in scope for this Review.

4.5 The Review identified a number of different drivers underlying the formation of partnerships. Some partnerships were established as a result of statutory requirements to form a partnerships, others were formed in relation to funding or grant requirements and others were formed in relation to local priorities and arrangements.

5 The Alignment of Strategic Partnerships

5.1 Although the Review found overall support for the closer alignment and better connections between partnerships, there was no consensus on structure. In addition, there was no support for a top-down restructure, or instructions to mandate structures.

5.2 The current Strategic Partnership landscape in Wales has developed over a 20 year period. Some of participants in the Review suggested that new Partnerships has been introduced by different Ministers and administrations, without due regard to existing arrangements – leading to a crowded and confused landscape.

5.3 The Review also found that the complexity of the partnership landscape was compounded by a range of different area foot-prints such as Principal Councils, Local Health Boards, Economic regions, Fire and Rescue Services and Police Forces. However, some respondents mentioned that policy alignment was more important than the alignment of geographical footprint. It was suggested that a greater involvement from the partners facilitated a greater "buy in" to the partnership such as the newly formed City Deals and Growth Partnerships.

5.4 Respondents mentioned a number of options for the re-alignment of partnerships, which varied by sector and region, suggesting that there are several options rather than one optimal one, depending upon local arrangements and existing relationships. Options suggested included;

- Community Safety Partnerships, VAWDASV and Safeguarding – could group together or connect their work.
- Community Safety Partnerships could report to PSBs (and do so in at least some areas).
- Violence against Women, Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence (VAWDASV) partnerships – although these partnerships should continue to work regionally on an RPB footprint, different respondents suggested they could report via PSBs or RPBs.
- Safeguarding Boards could being managed through the RPB (although the RPB did not have scrutiny arrangements through local government).

5.5   Comments were also made about missed opportunities for alignments by not having Police membership on Regional Partnership Boards to support the joining up to support mental health in an area and not joining up Area Planning Boards (substance misuse) and VAWDASV partnerships.

5.6   Some respondents suggested that local flexibility could be used to align partnerships on a temporary basis to meet local priorities. Structural change to partnerships would not be required as partnerships would come together to work on current priorities with the flexibility to re-organise if local priorities changed.

5.7   Some participants suggested that it wasn't always clear how boards were connected and rather than merge boards or increase reporting lines, partnerships should consider how they are connected through people ie common members of boards. This could give the partnerships and the public confidence that they are joined up and working towards a common goal, rather than duplicating effort.

5.8   The Review also found some examples of local areas which had developed their own arrangements to improve the alignment of partnerships and rationalise partnership working e.g the North Wales Leadership Board and the G10 Leaders Group in Gwent.

5.9   A significant number of responses were made about the relationship between Public Services Boards (PSBs) and Regional Partnership Boards (RPBs). Both Strategic Boards focus on different but interrelated aspects of well-being, sometimes with unclear operational relationships. Some respondents suggested that RPBs had become more operational as they had the responsibility for managing the Integrated Care and Transformation Fund, whereas PSBs were more strategic in nature looking at a broad range of public services (including Social Services) with a focus on more preventative activities.

5.10   RPBs have received substantial grant funds over the years and in future years RPBs will also be funded to deliver a Healthier Wales and related change programmes. The PSBs do not have an equivalent operational role.

5.11   In Spring 2019, Professor Keith Moultrie (Institute of Public Care) reported on the findings from a workshop relating to emerging arrangements across Regional Partnership and Public Services Boards. The workshop concluded that there is no desire for further legislation or guidance in this area and further joint working between the Welsh Government teams responsible for supporting RPBs and PSBs will be essential.

6.   **The Barriers to Aligning and Rationalising Partnerships**

6.1   The Review identified a number of barriers in terms aligning and rationalising partnerships including;

- Lack of awareness about the options.
- Risk aversion to change in case it proved less effective.
- Lack of enthusiasm from relevant partners – particularly in contributing towards pooled funding.
- Complexities due to overlapping area partnerships footprints.
- Complexities due to differing priorities of boards in terms of actions.
- Concern the purpose of more specific policy partnerships might get side-lined in any merged partnerships. There was some reluctance to allow what might be seen as a power grab or takeover.
- Concern that some partners (e.g. third sector, citizens might get pushed to side-lines in a bigger board) where other partners dominate.
- Size of new partnerships/board may be prohibitive to effective working if all members transferred.
- Purpose of new boards may be confused and complex with a mixture of strategic and operational purposes.
- Recognition that a proposal may push meetings into sub-groups, which could create more meetings overall.

6.2 The Review found that one of the main barriers to the alignment and rationalisation of partnership was cultural and where partners retained their siloed interests and found it difficult to pool budgets and resources to support the partnership.

6.3 The Review also found that another barrier to partnership working was the allocation of additional money to partnerships to support the delivery of collective aims. The allocation of additional money to partnerships did not encourage partners to pool resources or re-prioritise local resources, but instead was focused on the allocation national resources. In addition the of use grant monies within the PSB meant that partnership grants were often allocated on a Principal Council basis, with competition for funding.

6.4 Some respondents suggested that Third sector representatives were not sufficiently supported to provide strategic input and insight across partnerships effectively.

6.5 Overall, the Review concluded that there was no general support for a national restructure of partnership and local leadership was best placed to determine what would work best in their local area. This approach was perceived as likely to have more collective buy-in.

7. Governance and Accountability of Partnerships

7.1 The Review examined the links between partnerships, the nature of meetings, the culture of Partnerships, collective accountability, prescription and regulation, membership, citizen awareness and involvement.

7.2 Some respondents suggested that the link between partnerships could be improved. Some respondents were members of some partnerships, but not members of other partnerships and felt unsighted on work that was happening elsewhere, even when there were clear links. This made it harder for respondents to strategically contribute to partnership work because they were not aware of the full picture. Some respondents suggested that if partnerships were better connected and seen to be better connected this could provide assurance of joint working and prevent duplication.

7.3 The Review suggested that some respondents wanted to reduce the burden of partnership meetings (in terms of meetings, travel time and the preparation of papers). However, respondents also made the point that form should follow function and the focus for improvement should be on improving outcomes from partnership working and adding value to a policy area, rather than just reducing the number of partnership meetings and bureaucracy.

7.4 One of the key theme which emerged during the Review was partnership culture and the impact this had on partnership working. Some of the respondents suggested that organisational sovereignty of decisions and funding is a barrier to partnership working. Some of this is procedural i.e. the need to account for how an organisation's budget is being used to meet an organisational objective, or where the best scrutiny lies (e.g. with local democracy or Ministerial reporting). However, the Review concluded that a significant factor in successful and effective Strategic Partnerships is down to personal leadership.

7.5 The Review also found that partners were subject to a mixture of short-term organisational measures such grants or in-year performance and long-term collective accountabilities. Some respondents felt that this provided mixed motivations for some organisations who usually prioritised shorter term measures required by the Welsh Government or scrutiny committees. For Local Government, some respondents were concerned that the regional arrangements of some strategic partnerships has undermined local democratic accountability.

7.6 Some respondents thought that some partnerships, particularly those long-established or set-up by Welsh Government policy or statute, can be seen to become ends in themselves, rather than a means to an end. Subsequently administration and regulation become disproportionately burdensome, diverting energy and resources from delivering outcomes.

7.7 Many of those responsible for coordinating or supporting the partnerships feel there is over-regulation and too much prescription; the opportunities and value of local flexibility is undermined due to burdens from regulators or the expectations or national priorities of Welsh Government.

7.8 Some respondents raised specific concerns over the membership – or lack thereof – on certain partnerships. There was a particular appetite from

some to be included on PSBs or RPBs . Organisational consistency within partnership working was also an issue– with scope for different representatives from an organisation turning up to different meetings of a partnership; and different representatives sitting on different partnerships.

7.9 Overall the Review concluded that there was a need to improve citizen engagement in and understanding of partnerships. Respondents noted that it was not clear in all partnerships where the citizen voice was valued or sought. It followed that citizen understanding of, at least some of these partnerships is, probably limited. Although citizens tended to be engaged or involved more through constituent public services, transparency of the work of partnerships was desired, as was clarity of purpose and impact. It was suggested that the partnerships should self-assess individually whether they could improve their citizen engagement and respond accordingly.

8. Recommendations

8.1 The Review concluded with a number of recommendations related to clarifying the strategic partnership landscape, making use of flexibility to provide local solutions to aligning partnerships, making the work and impact of partnerships clear and undertaking a periodic and proportionate review

8.2 The recommendations included:

(i) Theme A: Clarifying the strategic partnership landscape

Recommendation 1. No new partnerships should be established or required without referring to the existing landscape or considering whether an existing partnership can deliver the outcome required.

Recommendation 2. No new functions should be given to existing partnerships without considering what obligations can be reviewed or removed or what additional resources may be required.

Recommendation 3. Welsh Government considers whether departments can reduce the partnership arrangements set up to administer specific grant programmes.

(ii) Theme B: Making use of flexibilities to provide local solutions to aligning partnerships

Recommendation 4. Welsh Government to write to Chairs of all partnerships to clarify and confirm that flexibilities exist to for partnerships to review their own arrangements and alignment as appropriate – in terms of policy and geography.

Recommendation 5. All strategic partnerships in an area should seek to play an active role to ensure that they are aligned more closely so that

there are fewer partnerships. The multi-purpose strategic partnerships (such as PSBs and RPBs) have a natural leadership role in initiating this.

Recommendation 6. Welsh Government to provide offer of facilitation for partnerships to review how they are aligned on their footprints.

Recommendation 7. Welsh Government to explore and communicate how funding might best be distributed across strategic partnerships where it may be sensible to do so and to consider the capacity of partners to support these partnerships.

Recommendation 8. All strategic partnerships should commit to, and invest in, board development and the development of collaborative cultures throughout the constituent organisations.

(iii)   Theme C: Making the work and impact of partnerships clear

Recommendation 9. All strategic partnerships should publish basic information online, which is easily accessible, outlining terms of reference, vision, membership, reporting on outcomes/progress and how citizens or communities can get involved.

(iv)   Theme D: Periodic Proportionate Review

Recommendation 10. As part of the normal cycle of review and reporting, all strategic partnerships should seek to build in periodic reviews of their terms of reference, governance arrangements, membership and alignment to other groups or partnerships

Recommendation 11. Partnership Council to periodically review the partnership landscape to consider whether, when and where Welsh Government policy or legislative change may be required.

10.   Conclusions

10.1   The progress made by Welsh Government in terms of meeting the recommendations, the actions already taken by Swansea Council and future implications and/or actions are outlined in Appendix 1.

11.   Equality and Engagement Implications

11.1   The Council is subject to the Public Sector Equality Duty (Wales) and must, in the exercise of their functions, have due regard to the need to:

- Eliminate unlawful discrimination, harassment and victimisation and other conduct prohibited by the Act.
- Advance equality of opportunity between people who share a protected characteristic and those who do not.
- Foster good relations between people who share a protected characteristic and those who do not.

11.2   Our Equality Impact Assessment process ensures that we have paid due regard to the above.

11.3   There are no equality and engagement implications associated with this report.

12.   Financial Implications

12.1   There are no financial implications associated with this report.

13.   Legal Implications

13.1   There are no legal implications associated with this report.

Background Papers: None

Appendices: Appendix A – Progress made by Welsh Government and Swansea Council in terms of implementing the recommendations from A Review of Strategic Partnerships and future implications and actions for Swansea Council