

**City Regions in  
Wales**

**DLP BRIEFING NOTE 101**

Prepared by  
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As discussed in DLP Briefing Note 74, there is a movement towards **City Regions** in Wales at present. This week, the Task and Finish Group appointed by the Minister for Business, Enterprise, Technology and Science published their final report following a call for evidence in February 2012.

The report defines a City Region as *"a network of urban communities, linked by functional economic and social ties to a hinterland"* and refers to them as *"the geography of everyday life."*

There were three drivers behind the report, namely improving the planning system, improving connectivity and driving investment (i.e. planning, transportation / communications and economic development). The report finds that there is in effect two City Regions that ought to be formalised, based on Swansea Bay (South West Wales) and Cardiff (South East Wales). It was concluded that the north east of Wales was not in its own right a City Region, but that there should be considerable support for the Mersey Dee Alliance which crosses the border with England.

The report provides 21 recommendations, covering a range of topics. These can be summarised as:-

1. There should be a **South East Wales City Region**
2. There should be a **South West Wales City Region**
3. There should be collaboration, not competition, between the two City Regions
4. The Mersey Dee Alliance should be strengthened and supported
5. There should be more research to identify each City Region's economic strengths and weaknesses
6. The **Wales Spatial Plan should be replaced, revised or adapted** to ensure a planning framework compatible for City Regions, i.e. an over-arching strategic planning tier and a clear hierarchy of decision-making
7. Measures to identify and address skill gaps should be at City Region rather than Local Authority scale
8. Higher Education needs to engage fully with the City Regions
9. The Welsh Government should consider how to embed sustainability into the City Regions
10. City Regions ought to focus efforts on identifying and winning large-scale projects
11. South East Wales can learn lessons from Edinburgh, Leeds and Vancouver
12. There should be a body similar to a Passenger Transport Executive for South East Wales
13. There needs to be continued lobbying for the electrification of the Great Western Mainline, in conjunction with moves towards a Valleys Metro, improvements to the Swansea Bay bus network and also road improvements such as along the M4 corridor
14. **Housing planning should also be undertaken at the City Region scale**
15. At least for promotional purposes, it should be described as a Cardiff City Region (rather than South East Wales)
16. There should be maximisation of funding available from the EU
17. There should be maximisation of opportunities from other funding sources
18. The method of governance should be the best-fit for the policy and changes intended (rather than focussing on the process itself)
19. There should be a Minister for City Regions, but there should not be a Mayoral appointment for each City Region
20. City Regions need a long-term commitment from the WG, rather than being a short-term fix
21. WG should establish an independent economic research institute
22. WG should review the impacts of City Regions on areas beyond the City Region

## Commentary

It is particularly interesting and encouraging to see the recommendations for strengthening the Wales Spatial Plan, because DLP have long-considered that it is a document that provides little weight and benefit, but could become a tool for holistic spatial planning. Similarly, a strategic planning tier should, in theory, help overcome the insular nature of certain local authorities and consequently help plan, and hopefully, deliver, much needed development across the two City Regions. The difficult matter may be whether the tier is perceived as a bureaucratic and undemocratic level of government, or whether it can pull together local authorities and their communities in a way that regional strategies in England largely failed.

The on-going encouragement for improvements to the transport infrastructure in south Wales is also welcome: it is felt that to be truly successful the City Regions need not only investment, but also integration and management in terms of the public transport networks.

It is reassuring that the report identifies the need to plan positively for housing at the City Region level, because for too long there has generally been a failure for local authorities to co-operate or agree on housing growth and delivery. The strategic planning tier, in whatever form it takes, certainly needs to have the power to ensure the local authorities are committed to housing policy for the region.

One issue mentioned in the report, but not in detail, is that of fuzzy boundaries. Although political boundaries will in some areas provide the edge of the City Region, in many other parts of south Wales it will not be clear precisely where the region finishes. Carmarthen has been mentioned in regard to the South West, and it is reasonable to assume the Cardiff Region covers as far north as the Heads of the Valleys (beyond which lies the Brecon Beacons National Park), but what of places such as Ystradgynlais (arguably within the Swansea travel-to-work area, but located within Powys), Bridgend (which could fall within both, one or neither of the City Regions) and Monmouthshire (which probably is within Newport's hinterland, but possibly not Cardiff's?). It will be a challenge to ensure the City Region covers the necessary areas - which may indeed vary depending on the particular objective.

Finally, it will be interesting to see what consequences there are for local authorities in the short-term, in regards to Local Development Plans. If the Minister agrees with the recommendations, then it is expected that City Regions will be introduced fairly swiftly, although some mechanisms, particularly for planning, will likely follow only after the Planning Act. Some local authorities have supported the concept of City Regions and delays to their LDPs are occasionally inferred to be partly because there is no over-arching tier steering growth. Meanwhile, others may begin to worry at the idea of City Region housing planning and strategic tiers, fearing that this will impose unwanted levels of development on their patches.

DLP continue to actively participate in the work being undertaken by the Welsh Government towards the Planning Bill and also monitor closely publications related to planning and development across both Wales and England.

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