

Information Further to Ministerial Answers

Information further to the debate on the annual report of the local government partnership scheme on 3 November 2004, issued by Sue Essex, the Finance Minister, on 23 November 2004

To William Graham:

I promised that I would respond to you in writing concerning the points you raised in the recent debate on the local government partnership scheme annual report 2003-04.

I turn firstly to the point you made about police funding. Responsibility for the police is not devolved. Nevertheless, I understand that Edwina Hart has tabled a paper about police funding for discussion at the next meeting of the Social Justice and Regeneration Committee. The paper will explain that police authorities receive their non-hypothecated funding from the Government in two streams. Firstly, there is the police grant, which is paid by the Home Office. In addition there is a revenue support grant and non-domesticated rates, which are paid via the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister in England and the Welsh Assembly Government in Wales. In addition to these two streams, there is a series of specific grants, which the Home Office is responsible for allocating but which Welsh police authorities may bid for. In terms of the element of funding provided by the Welsh Assembly Government, the RSG provision for Welsh police authorities in 2005-06 gives a 4 per cent increase over provision for 2004-05. This is, however, subject to adjustment to take into account transfers to the Home Office for central initiatives.

The Assembly Government produced an early local government settlement last year and this was the first time the final settlement had been produced before Christmas and was some six to eight weeks earlier than in previous years.

I have written to Sir Michael Lyons requesting an early meeting so as to set out the Assembly Government's view of the balance of funding local government in the context of the terms of reference of Sir Michael's review.

The Welsh Assembly Government is pursuing a number of initiatives in relation to gypsy travellers, following last year's 'Review of Service Provision for Gypsies and Travellers' undertaken by the Assembly's Committee on Equality of Opportunity. On accommodation aspects, the Assembly Government has consulted on revised guidance on managing unauthorised camping and will be issuing the finalised guidance very shortly. We are seeking tenders for research to examine the demand for, and supply of, gypsy and traveller accommodation in Wales. We will be resuming the twice-yearly count of gypsy and traveller caravans and there will be consultation on revision of the Welsh Office circular 2/94, 'Gypsy Sites and Planning'. The Housing Bill received Royal Assent on 18 November and this new legislation will ensure that local authorities take a strategic approach in determining and meeting the needs of gypsies and travellers. It will place a duty on each county/county borough council to assess the accommodation needs of gypsies and travellers in its area, and to produce a strategy as part of its overall housing strategy detailing how these needs will be met. It may be opportune to discuss these matters at the partnership council. In terms of timing however it may be better to await the results of the research project on accommodation which is expected next summer.

The recently announced local government settlement reflects increased pressures faced by fire and rescue authorities in Wales. In addition, we are in discussions with the ODPM over the transfer of resources following devolution, this will be in addition to our existing £5m community fire safety budget, which supports the development of fire safety initiatives, such as arson reduction teams, in Wales. Taken together the Assembly Government is ensuring that

the service in Wales is adequately placed to meet the new demands placed upon it. The national framework for the service emphasises the importance of training as part of the integrated personal development system. In addition to the first class facilities and training provided nationally by the Fire Service College, the South Wales Fire and Rescue Service received agreement from the Assembly Government and the ODPM to proceed with a new dedicated training centre, a PFI project, to which the Assembly Government will provide over £15m of revenue support. The project will meet the training requirements of both uniformed and non-uniformed personnel of SWFRS, and disseminate best practice and improve fire safety and fire awareness within the region through the provision of education and training services.

Although housing benefit is not devolved, the Assembly is monitoring the effects of the pathfinder project to establish whether the proposed reforms produce anything which may impact on devolved housing policy. Officials are liaising closely with officers from Conwy and adjoining authorities in north Wales. In addition, the Department for Work and Pensions has commissioned independent research to evaluate the outcome of the project and is producing a series of interim reports. It may be appropriate to discuss the issue with the partnership council but much will depend on the outcome of the project and is producing a series of interim reports. It may be appropriate to discuss this issue with the partnership council but much will depend on the outcome of ministerial discussions between Edwina Hart and DWP Ministers.

I am unsure if you are requesting discussion of Project Dragon and the partnership council or the Social Justice and Regeneration Committee. I have sought advice from officials and I believe it would be more appropriate for this to be discussed at the Social Justice and Regeneration Committee, of which I understand you are a member.

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To Gwenda Thomas:

During the recent Plenary debate on the local government partnership scheme annual report 2003-04, you expressed the view that community safety partnerships must have a role in child protection and that this should feature regularly on future agendas of the partnership council.

I wrote to Jane Hutt AM seeking her views on your proposal. Jane has now responded and is fully in support of any initiative to encourage information sharing and to promote best practice in child protection. She is happy for the partnership council to discuss this at its meetings. You will be interested to learn that she will be considering wider issues around these subjects in taking forward the implementation of the Children Act 2004. Jane is also working towards the establishment of the new local safeguarding children boards. The boards will also have all the key agencies as members and will have a statutory duty to co-operate with the appropriate children's services authority and to have regard to any guidance given to them by the Assembly. During 2005, consultation will take place with other agencies on the guidance and regulations and this will clearly cover such issues as information sharing and best practice.

Jane has also suggested that you may wish to consider, in the first instance, looking at these issues as part of your review of safeguarding vulnerable children and to bring forward in your report some specific recommendations that she can consider further.