

MINUTES LGH-06-03 (min)

LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND HOUSING COMMITTEE

Date: WEDNESDAY 19th MARCH 2003

Time: 09.30am - 12.15pm

Venue: COMMITTEE ROOM 2, NATIONAL ASSEMBLY BUILDING

Attendance:

Members

Gwenda Thomas (Chair)	Neath
Peter Black	South Wales West
William Graham	South Wales East
Edwina Hart (Minister)	Gower
Pauline Jarman	South Wales Central
Peter Law	Blaenau Gwent
Dai Lloyd	South Wales West
Tom Middlehurst	Alyn & Deeside
Janet Ryder	North Wales

In attendance

John Bader	Director of Housing
Joanna Jordan	Deputy Crime Reduction Director for Wales

Stephen Jackson	Communities Directorate
Tamlyn Rabey	Housing Directorate
Francois Samuel	Housing Directorate
Ian Fox	Regional Manager, National Probation Directorate

Secretariat

Roger Chaffey	Clerk
Claire Griffiths	Deputy Clerk

09.30am to 09.35am

Item 1: Introduction, apologies, substitutions and declarations of interest

- 1.1 The Chair welcomed the Committee and members of the public.
2. The Chair advised Members that the launch of the Policy Review Report on Capacity Development and Training would take place on 3 April at Melin Junior School, Neath. She informed Members that the debate on the Report scheduled for Plenary later today (19th March) had been postponed until 25th March.
 - 1.3 The Chair referred Members to the Presiding Office Quality of Service survey which was recently distributed to Members and their support staff, She encouraged Members to complete and to note the extended date (25th March) for completion.
3. The Chair advised that following the Health and Social Services Committee meeting on 12th March during which the implications of the Waterhouse Report were discussed, the WLGA were attending HSS Committee on 26th March on this issue and an invitation had been issued to LGH Members.
4. The Chair advised that Mr Raila Amola Odinga MP, Minister for Roads, Public

Works and Housing in Kenya, and incidentally, the possible future Prime Minister of Kenya, was visiting the Assembly on 27th March, A lunch had been arranged to which Members were invited and she asked those able to attend to advise the Clerk.

1.5 The Chair said that a number of Members had suggested holding a lunch immediately after the last Committee meeting on 2 April. She requested Members able to attend to advise the Clerk.

6. The Chair asked Members for declarations of interest, in accordance with Standing Order 4.5.

None were made.

Item 2: Minutes of the meeting held on 5th March 2003.

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2.1 The minutes were ratified.

09.35am –10.06am

Item 3: Minister's Report

3.1 The Minister presented her report and highlighted the following:

- **Performance Indicators for local authorities** - She said that she had introduced a monitorium for the next financial year on the statutory performance indicators the NAW sets for local authorities and had written to Sir Harry Jones at the WLGA to advise of her intention. This had been done as she had commissioned a review of all indicators that would be undertaken by the Local Government Data Unit.
- **Budgetary Changes** – She advised that a number of changes had been made to the local government budget and she would write to Members outlining the details.
- **Wales Community Fire Safety Trust** – Mr Anthony Feasey had been appointed as the Chief Executive of the Wales Community Fire Safety Trust and was expected to take up the position in the next few months.
- **Right to Buy Scheme** – She advised that following the consultation exercise, the maximum discount available would be reduced to £16,000.with effect from 2nd April 2003
- **Fuel Poverty Launch** – She advised that she was launching the Welsh Fuel Poverty Strategy on 25th March and would be writing to invite Members.
- **Social Housing Management Grant Programme** – Recommendations have been

considered and a decision would be made shortly. She added that she would write to Members outlining the projects involved.

- **Communities First** – She said that now the 79 embryonic partnerships were established she would be looking at expenditure utilised in the Communities First budget and would update members before the end of the Assembly term.

3.2 Members raised the following points:

- **Performance Indicators for local authorities** – the monitorium was welcomed and would encourage a period of stability.
- **Wales Community Fire Safety Trust** – the appointment was welcomed and it was hoped that work in this area could proceed swiftly.
- **Right to Buy Scheme** – One Member expressed disappointment with the way the Minister had announced the reduction without the opportunity to debate in Plenary. She was asked to clarify the difference between the Right to Buy and the Right to Acquire Schemes.
- **Social Housing Management Grant Programme** – looked forward to receiving details on the programme.
- **Communities First** – Grateful for receiving the information requested on the 79 embryonic partnerships. The Minister was asked if she had plans to review the scheme to date.
- **Analysis of Assembly hypothecated and non-hypothecated funding for local authorities** – Members thanked the Minister for providing this detailed information by letter (17th March). They agreed it was a complex issue and that the paper provided a lot of answers but also posed many more questions.

3. In response, the Minister said:

- **Performance Indicators for local authorities** – she was concerned that the current set of indicators didn't provide a focus for all aspects and had noted local government concerns so agreed a period of calm.
- **Right to Buy** – appreciated concerns over the way the announcement was made but timing was paramount. She agreed to write to Members, clarifying the difference between "Right to Buy" and "Right to Acquire".
- **Social Housing Management Grant Programme** – She agreed to advise the Committee on the distribution of Social Housing management grants.
- **Communities First** – She said she would review the scope of Communities First at the end of its third year.
- **Analysis of Assembly hypothecated and non-hypothecated funding for local**

authorities – She thought it would be useful for Members to see the information, which provided a good indication of where the funding went. She reminded Members that some areas affecting local government (Social Services and Education) were out of her control. She suggested that as this is an extremely complex issue, that it may be appropriate for the successor committee to receive a presentation on how the formula's work and look at the cross cutting issues affecting local government. She added that minority views are considered by the Distribution Subgroup and if necessary by the Consultative Forum on Finance to enable a consensus to be reached. She said she would ask officials to prepare a paper for a meeting of the successor committee setting out how deprivation is taken account of in the formula for distributing the revenue support grant and how that has changed over time.

3.4 The Chair referred to the European Directive on Zoos, the subject of correspondence from the Minister on 13th March. She advised that Business Committee had considered the legislation on 18th March and agreed, due to timing restraints, that the draft regulations be subject to "standard procedure" enabling Members to have the opportunity to debate in Plenary on 2nd April.

Action Points

- The Minister to write to Members on budgetary changes
- The Minister to circulate a note on the launch of the Welsh Fuel Poverty Strategy
- The Minister to advise the Committee on the distribution of Social Housing Management Grants
- The Minister to write to Members, clarifying the difference between "Right to Buy" and "Right to Acquire"
- Officials to prepare a paper for the successor Committee setting out how deprivation is taken account of in the formula for distributing the revenue support grant and how that has changed over time.

10.06am to 10.26am

Item 4: Update on Post Office Development Fund LGH-06-03(p.1)

1. The Minister introduced the paper that outlined the response to the Post Office

Development Fund and the background to the decision to expand the number of deprived and isolated electoral divisions eligible for assistance from the fund.

2. Members raised the following points:

- They welcomed the support for Post Offices from the Minister
- Representations received from sub postmasters/mistresses asked why grants available to help businesses diversify when 50 – 60% of work being taken away with the changes to the way pensions and benefits are to be paid.
- Appreciate representations made by the Minister and the Chair on Post Office issues.
- Minister was asked to make the criteria for the fund available to Members.
- Planned Post Office closures programme initiated by Post Office Ltd had not considered local circumstances surrounding each Post Office and had ignored representations and opposition made.
- Unfortunate not to have devolved responsibility for postal services but this scheme has enabled the burden to be eased and was positive in supporting the community.
- Pleased to full-page advertisements in national press advertising the Post Office Card Account as a way to obtaining benefit/pension.
- Recent Office of Fair Trading report sighted loss of isolated rural pharmacies to large supermarkets and feel rural post offices will go down the same track.
- Acknowledged that Post Office Ltd had to respond to changing business requirements and that some Post Offices will have to close but concerned that this had not been approached in a considered and measured way.
- Does the scheme criteria allow for applications from post offices outside the designated areas with "exceptional circumstances" to be considered?

3. In response, the Minister said:

- she was constantly keeping the fund under review
- She agreed to provide the criteria used in determining Post Office Development Fund applications and would provide the Committee with a list of the 125 deprived and isolated electoral divisions eligible for assistance from the fund.
- She was pleased to have seen the advertisements in the national press and noticed that post offices in her constituency had recently received posters to display advertising the Post Office Card Account.
- She agreed to look at the possibility of adding "exceptional circumstances" as an eligible criterion to the Post Office Development Fund.

Action Points

- The Minister to provide the criteria used in determining Post Office Development Fund

applications

- The Minister to provide the Committee with a list of the 125 deprived and isolated electoral divisions eligible for assistance from the fund
- The Minister to look at possibility of adding "exceptional circumstances" as an eligible criteria for the Post Office Development Fund

10.26am to 10.38am

Item 5: Mid-term progress/results of the Home Energy Conservation Act

LGH-06-03(p.2)

1. The Minister introduced the paper and advised Committee that she was disappointed with the results to date. To this effect, she had agreed funding for a post at the WLGA to be dedicated to energy issues and had agreed with the Leader of the WLGA that we explore the possibility of including energy efficiency in the next round of policy agreements due to be in place by April 1st 2004.
2. Members made the following comments:

- Scheme not only impacts on the environment but assists with the reduction of fuel poverty.
- Shared the disappointment of the Minister on the poor progress to date and suggested revisiting targets as the results to date showed they are unattainable.
- Welcomed the post at the WLGA.
- The use of LPG gas in rural communities was highlighted and the lack of a Regulator meant there was no control over the price of this fuel.
- Issue of rogue selling of energy supplies was raised.
- The recent survey into housing stocks was mentioned and the Minister asked if this had proved helpful in ascertaining areas where progress was being made on the targets?
- A progress report on the Warm Home Zones project promoted by British Gas was requested.

1. In response, the Minister said:

- She did not feel reviewing the targets was the issue and would be talking to local authorities to get them to work towards achieving the targets set.
- On LPG, she agreed to write to the DTI about concerns that there is no regulation in respect of the sale & distribution of LPG gas.
- She too was concerned about the activities of rogue salesmen in the energy field.
- The local authority stock survey was helpful but only represented a small percentage of

total dwellings. Results were awaited from the Household and Dwelling survey currently taking place.

- The final report on the Warm Zones pilot scheme undertaken in Stockton-on-Tees was awaited.
- She suggested it might be useful to invite Neath Port Talbot local authority to Committee as they had some of the most comprehensive data on household dwellings in relation to HEES and could share best practice and results.

Action Points

- The Minister to write to DTI about concerns that there is no regulation in respect of the sale & distribution of LPG gas
- The Minister to write to the committee on action being taken against the activities of rogue selling of energy supplies
- The Minister to inform the Committee when the results of the pilot project on Warm Zones are available

10.38am to 10.45am

Item 6: Annual Report to Plenary

LGH-06-03(p4)

1. The Chair asked for comments on the draft annual report and on the suggested list of issues for the successor committee.
2. Members agreed the draft annual report adding that it displayed a wide range of topics that had been debated in Committee. The Policy Reviews were noted and Members wished to record their thanks to the expert advisors who had worked with Committee on those and for the high quality of the reports. Members also recorded their thanks to the excellent leadership of the Chair.
3. The following items were suggested for inclusion on the suggested list of topics for the successor committee:
 - Drug and Alcohol Misuse (as a separate item, not taken with Crime and Disorder)
 - Distribution of Special Grants
 - Home Energy Conservation (possible presentation from Neath/ Port Talbot CBC)
 - Partnership between Local Authorities and Housing Associations

Action Point

- The Secretariat to include the above suggestions into Annex B before laying the report in the Table Office.

10.45am to 11.00am

The Committee agreed to break for 15 minutes.

11.00am to 11.29am

Item 7: Review of the Regulation of Housing Associations Consultation Exercise

LGH-06-03(p.3)

1. The Minister introduced the paper that set out proposals for a new approach to the regulation of housing associations. She said she would welcome comments on the consultation exercise.
2. Members made the following points:

- The principle of the review was supported.
- Noted that tenant's interests must be protected.
- Important to have regular contact between the Welsh Assembly Government and housing associations.
- Clarification was sought on how many Regulation Co-ordinators were to be employed.
- Housing associations are increasingly becoming the main suppliers of social housing.
- Consideration should be given to local authorities and housing associations producing joint housing strategies.
- Consider how shared working lists could be best utilised and felt that this was an area to inspire joint working.
- Noted that often a different approach was taken by housing associations in relation to housing provision, environment surrounding homes and that consistency was required.
- Has consideration been given to extending housing association board management to include local authority representation?
- People are judgmental about social housing and the tenants and need to get away from this stereotyping.
- How do housing associations attend to the needs of vulnerable people?

1. In response, the Minister said:

- She thanked members for the valid points made.

- It was important for local authorities and housing associations to work together and she hoped the regulatory system would enable more joint working to be achieved.
- It was anticipated that there would be 2/3 Regulation Co-ordinators from within the existing staff who have expertise in different aspects of housing policy which would be utilised to the best effect.
- The difficulty of being a landlord was recognised but concerns were noted about the appearance of property and surrounding areas.
- She agreed with the suggestion of extending housing association board management to include local authority representation and welcomed the point about the needs of vulnerable people adding that good communication and management was essential to understanding the needs of these people.

Action Point

- The Chair agreed to write to the Minister with the Committee's views on the consultation paper.

11.29am to 12.15pm

Item 8: Presentation on the OASYS System

1. The Chair welcomed Ian Fox, Regional Manager for the National Probation Directorate who had come to inform Committee about the new OASys System – a joint Probation and Prison Offender Assessment System. Before inviting him to give his presentation, she informed Committee that Elfie Wallace, the Director General of the Probation Service, wished to convey her concern over the poor handling of the relocation strategy in South Wales. She offered her assurance that lessons had been learnt and that the way it had been handled would not happen again.
2. Ian Fox advised that the OASys (Offender Assessment System) is the new system developed jointly by the prison and probation services. It is structured to help practitioners assess how likely an offender is to reoffend and the likely seriousness of any offence they are likely to commit. It will assess the risk of harm an offender poses to themselves and others.
3. OASys identifies and classifies offending related needs, such as accommodation and poor literacy. Tackling these specific needs reduces the probability of reoffending. OASys would also help to produce supervision plans and pre-sentence reports to a high standard. The majority of probation areas in England and Wales already use some form of structured risk assessment to inform pre-sentence reports. OASys will replace these systems.

4. Members received a copy of the presentation and a briefing note on the system. A copy of the presentation is at Annex 1.
5. Members thanked Ian Fox for the interesting presentation and made the following points:

- Interesting to see how the system will assist with the whole package concerned with offenders.
- How often will cases be reassessed?
- Does the system extend to people serving custodial sentences?
- How will accommodation issues for sexual offenders be considered?
- When will the system be introduced throughout Wales?
- Does the system allow identification of a child who may require protection?
- How confidential is the system and how many people will have access to the information stored on it?
- Can see many benefits for youth offenders.
- Concerned about the Human Rights issues of people who are included on the database but found to be "not guilty".

1. In response, Ian Fox said:

- Cases would be reassessed on a quarterly basis.
- Prisoners release plans will address the same factors.
- Any person convicted of a sexual offence and considered to be high-risk would possibly remain in semi-secure accommodation with electronic monitoring. The ultimate care would be taken when considering placing people who had sexual offence convictions into society.
- All staff in the Probation Service in Wales had been trained in the system and it is expected that all prison officers would have received training by the end of the year. The system would then be introduced but it would take a while for the database to be built up.
- Should the system identify a child who required protection, immediate action would be taken in conjunction with Social Services and the relevant Area Child Protection Officer.
- Information would be handled with utmost confidentiality and only those officers involved in a case would have access to the system.

1. The Chair thanked Ian Fox for an informative presentation.

March 2003