

Minutes

Date: Friday 6 July 2001
Time: 10.00am to 1.00pm
Venue: Rhyl Town Hall, Rhyl

Attendance

Members

Ann Jones, Chair	Vale of Clwyd
Eleanor Burnham	North Wales
Alison Halford	Delyn
Gareth Jones	Conwy
Alun Pugh	Clwyd West
Peter Rogers	North Wales
Janet Ryder	North Wales
Dafydd Wigley	Caernarfon
Ieuan Wyn Jones	Ynys Môn
Rhodri Morgan, First Minister	Cardiff West

Officials

John Bader	Director of Housing
Brendon Hilbourne	Housing Directorate

Secretariat

Adrian Crompton	Committee Clerk
Howell Rees	Deputy Committee Clerk

Item 1: Introduction and apologies (10.00am to 10.05am)

1.1 The Chair welcomed everyone to the meeting and thanked Rhyl Town Hall for their hospitality. Apologies had been received from Dafydd Elis Thomas, John Marek, Tom Middlehurst, Rod Richards and Karen Sinclair.

Item 2: Minutes and report back from previous meeting - NWR 02-01(min); NWR 03-01(p1)

2.1 The committee noted the report back from the meeting held on 11 May and approved the minutes.

Item 3: Committee annual report 2000-01 - NWR 03-01(p2)

3.1 The committee approved the draft annual report.

Item 4: Housing

4.1 The Chair welcomed John Bader and Brendon Hilbourne to the meeting. John Bader made a brief presentation on the main housing issues for Wales and the development of a National Housing Strategy. Click [here](#) to view the presentation.

4.2 Brendon Hilbourne outlined the main issues relating to the private rented sector. A copy of his presentation is at annex 1.

4.3 The Chair invited comments and questions from members of the committee.

4.4 Houses in multiple occupation and access to mains gas were important issues in North Wales but the highest priority was to provide flood protection.

4.5 Significant investment was needed to improve the condition of housing. It was important to have comprehensive data on the state of the stock and a detailed national survey should be conducted. A national housing needs survey should also be conducted to link housing, development and other strategies. Did the Assembly have sufficient data on which to base its policies?

- John Bader said that the last house condition survey had been carried out in 1997. A major new survey was planned for 2002-2003. There was a balance to be struck between obtaining good quality data at the national level on which to base the Assembly's housing policies and the more detailed data needed by local authorities. It was therefore necessary for the Assembly to work closely with local authorities to ensure consistency in data collection.

4.6 It was important that the National Housing Strategy and community regeneration were co-ordinated.

- John Bader said that there was close co-ordination between the National Housing Strategy and the Communities First programme. It was also important to co-ordinate housing with other social and economic policies.

4.7 In rural areas house prices made it difficult for local people to get into the housing market. What had been the take-up of the 'Homebuy' flexible tenure scheme?

- John Bader said that £1.3 million of the £1.5 million available for Homebuy had been taken up in

2001-2002 to deliver 140 homes. Decisions over the future shape of the scheme, and its operation in rural areas, would depend on feedback received from local authorities.

4.8 Owner occupation levels were high in Wales but not enough money was being put into renovation grants to meet demand. It was suggested that younger people and those living in older houses should be targeted. How could waiting lists for renovation grants be reduced?

- Brendon Hilbourne said that local authorities were able to use the money they received from the National Assembly for renovation grants in accordance with locally decided priorities. The Assembly had also made £50 million capital funding available this year to support strategic schemes by local authorities. Proposed changes to the renovation system would encourage a more flexible and strategic approach by local authorities.

4.9 The proportion of elderly people in Wales was increasing and they needed support to be able to stay in their own homes if they chose to do so. Care and Repair provided a valuable service but the administration costs were high. It was suggested that private sector experience could help reduce costs and enable more to be spent on repairs.

- John Bader said a review of the new Home Energy Efficiency Scheme Care would be undertaken after the first year of operation, this would include an evaluation of administration costs to ensure that these represented VFM. The funding of Care and Repair was currently being reviewed.

4.10 If housing problems in Wales were to be addressed effectively it was necessary for the First Minister to pressurise central government to devolve the operation of the housing benefit system to the Assembly.

- The First Minister said that the administration of housing benefit included local authority and National Assembly elements but was funded by central government. He was not convinced of the need to devolve it to the Assembly.

4.11 There was strong cross party support in the Assembly for the introduction of a licensing system for houses in multiple occupation and the private rented sector generally.

- The First Minister agreed that a licensing system for houses in multiple occupation was important but felt that a higher priority was to deal with specific matters, such as dangerous gas appliances in rented accommodation, which could be addressed without a change in the law.

4.12 What progress had been made by the four multi-agency task groups set up to help develop a national housing strategy?

- John Bader praised the work of the tasks groups in developing the draft strategy issued for consultation. The National Consultative Forum on Housing would be involved in its ongoing

review and development. The National Housing Strategy would be debated in Plenary session of the Assembly on Thursday 12 July and copies would be available from the Housing Directorate and on the Assembly's web site.

4.13 The Chair then invited questions from members of the public. She said that the points raised in the meeting would be summarised in a letter to be sent to the Minister for Finance, Local Government & Communities and the Chair of the Local Government and Housing Committee.

4.14 Arthur Holland Williams from Blaenau Ffestiniog asked when improvements to existing legislation would be introduced to enable local authorities to tackle private sector landlords who rented unfit accommodation. He was disappointed that there were no proposals in the Queen's speech to introduce licensing.

4.15 Mike Espley, North Wales Private Landlords Association, said that a licensing system would assist good private landlords. The Association was working to change the attitude of tenants and the public perception of the private rented sector.

4.16 John Patterson, Denbighshire Tenants & Residents Association, asked what the Assembly's view was on stock transfer. The Assembly should be arguing to allow local authorities to borrow money to carry out repairs rather than having to transfer their stock to another landlord.

- John Bader said that the Local Government and Housing Committee had reviewed the policy of stock transfer and its main recommendation was that the Assembly should seek to change the rules governing local authority borrowing. The Minister for Finance, Local Government & Communities was considering the committee's recommendations.

4.17 Paul Diggory, North Wales Housing Association, said that local authorities should have to provide housing to similar standards to those required of housing associations. He agreed that the rules on borrowing requirements should be changed to allow local authorities to carry out repairs to their stock and that the housing benefit budget should be transferred to the Assembly.

4.18 Sian Foulkes from Caernarfon, who was disabled, said she had applied to her local authority for a transfer to more suitable accommodation but had been told that nothing was available. She asked who was responsible.

- The Chair suggested that as this was a personal matter she take it up with one of the Assembly Members at the end of the session.

4.19 Simon Walkling worked for a charity developing bond schemes to provide security for private rented sector tenants. He felt the Assembly should provide resources to set up a bond guarantee scheme.

- John Bader said that providing bond guarantee schemes in all areas of Wales was a priority

objective for the Assembly and consideration was being given to how this could be achieved effectively.

4.20 Diane Hannan said that social problems were being caused by people from urban areas moving into private rented sector accommodation in North Wales. Local authorities had to pay their housing benefit. The problem needed to be addressed and she suggested that people should not be allowed to move into an area and claim housing benefit unless they had a local connection such as employment or family ties.

4.21 Paul McHugh, North Wales Housing Association, said that homelessness was not just about a lack of accommodation. Most homeless people had other problems related to drugs, alcohol or mental health. A joined up approach from a range of agencies and funding streams was needed to address the problem.

4.22 Pat Howell, Buxton Court Residents Association, said that anti-social behaviour was a problem on local authority and private estates. The Assembly should address the fact that it was very difficult to obtain anti-social behaviour orders.

4.23 Councillor Peter Douglas, Denbighshire County Council, said that investment had to be made in education and social services if the cycle of deprivation running through families was to be broken.

4.24 Mr Robinson said that he was not satisfied with the quality of work done on his home funded by a renovation grant from Denbighshire County Council. Work carried out by local authorities should be of a high standard with suitable guarantees.

- The Chair suggested that he took the case up with his local Assembly Member. John Bader said that the question of quality of renovation work was a matter for individual local authorities.

4.25 A councillor from Denbighshire County Council, said that local authorities had to offer their tenants the option of transferring their homes to other landlords because they were not allowed to borrow money to carry out repairs. In such circumstances it was not surprising that tenants would vote for stock transfer.

4.26 Barry Ecclestone, Unison, Conwy, said that local authorities should be given more money to allow them to carry out repairs to their stock. He suggested that the receipts from council house sales could be used to finance repairs.

- John Bader said that if the Assembly changed the rules to allow local authorities to spend their receipts on repairs the Treasury would reduce the amount of money allocated to Wales by the same amount. The net financial benefit would therefore be zero.

4.27 Helen Snedker, Welsh Women's Aid, welcomed the National Housing Strategy but was disappointed that the needs of women and children suffering abuse did not feature. She asked if it was intended to include them and how their needs would be recognised.

4.28 Bryn Williams, Age Concern, Denbigh, said that the needs of people in private nursing homes should be included in the National Housing Strategy and there should be a link between the Strategy and strategies for elderly people.

4.29 Mark Saddler, SCOVO, was disappointed that the needs of people with learning difficulties were not mentioned in the draft National Housing Strategy and asked for an assurance that their housing needs would be addressed.

4.30 Steve Bennett, North Wales Race Equality Network, asked for an assurance that the National Housing Strategy would address race equality issues.

4.31 John Bader said it was difficult to meet the expectations of all interest groups and give them the explicit coverage they wanted in the Strategy. The Strategy would be an evolving document that would be changed and updated. It would cover issues including domestic violence, the elderly, people with learning difficulties and ethnicity. A study was to be undertaken on housing for the elderly. It would look at how effectively existing housing stock was being used and would include residential care homes.

Item 5: First Minister (12.05pm to 12.55pm)

5.1 The First Minister welcomed the high turnout at the meeting and said that it demonstrated the importance of the regional committees in extending democracy in Wales.

5.2 Eric Moor, Chairman of Wrexham Tenants Association, raised the issue of the unfairness of the Housing Benefit system, which means that council tenants have to subsidise rebates but housing association tenants do not.

- The First Minister accepted there was an anomaly and asked Mr Moor to write to him with the details.

5.3 Alison Hay, Denbighshire Mediation, asked if the First Minister advocated mediation as part of social policy.

- The First Minister said he supported mediation in all forms of dispute and was sympathetic to the development of such schemes.

5.4 John Gillibrand, National Autistic Council, said that regional committees were well placed to help develop regional strategies for services for autistic people.

- The First Minister said the Assembly had provided funding to rebuild and modernise facilities at Ysgol Plas Bron Dyffryn and praised the services it provided.

5.5 Arnold Pennant from Bodfari, Denbigh said that foot and mouth disease had had a significant impact on rural tourism. There was uncertainty in the area about why blood testing was being carried out.

- The First Minister agreed that rural tourism had been badly affected by foot and mouth. He said that foot and mouth was difficult to spot in sheep and blood testing was necessary to show that there was no infection remaining in the flock.

5.6 Gwyndaf Hughes from Ruthin referred to the government's plans to reform incapacity benefit. The reforms would have a bigger impact in Wales because proportionately more people claimed incapacity benefit than in England.

- The First Minister agreed that there was a greater proportion of people in Wales on incapacity benefit. He said it was easier in areas of low unemployment, such as the south east of England, to move people off incapacity benefit and into work because a wider choice of jobs was available. He was well aware of the significance of the any reform given the situation in Wales.

5.7 Huw Edwards, Caernarfon Town Council, said that local authorities did not have enough money to renovate their housing stock. He also pointed out that, although, the A55 had been completed, there was still a lack of jobs in north west Wales.

- The First Minister said he had opened a factory extension in Llanberis, an example that was bringing 30 good quality jobs to the area. The A55 made it easier for people to commute to work but some did not wish to do so and it was important to attract new employment to the area.

5.8 Councillor Klaus Armstrong-Braun, Flintshire County Council, said that the Assembly should investigate the failure of it and the Countryside Council for Wales to implement the European Habitats Directive.

- The First Minister said that the classification of sites for designation was a massive task and it had to be done correctly or Wales could lose out on Objective 1 funding as Europe linked compliance with environmental legislation and designations with economic development grant. He invited Mr Armstrong-Braun to write to him with details of his complaint.

5.9 David Barratt from Wrexham was concerned that people from across the border in England would take advantage of the provision of free prescriptions for people under 25 in Wales. He felt that only people resident in Wales should receive free prescriptions.

- The First Minister said that devolution made it inevitable that differences would arise across the border. He understood that the administrative costs of preventing people from England taking up free prescriptions in Wales were greater than the potential savings.

5.10 Lazlow Kovac complained that council tax in Denbighshire had increased significantly this year but

that services provided had not been improved.

- The First Minister said that from time to time it was necessary to revise the grant formula to allocate money to local authorities. When that happened inevitably there would be winners and losers in the process. Measures had been introduced to dampen the effect of the changes.

5.11 Councillor Radcliffe from Llandudno was concerned that local people were unable to afford to buy a house in their communities because incomers were able to pay higher prices. This had a detrimental effect on the Welsh language. Action was being taken in the Lake District to help local people and the same should be done in Wales.

- The First Minister said that this problem tended to arise in cycles and followed the housing market in south east England which was currently high. The problem in north west Wales was exacerbated by its relatively low wage economy. He did not feel it was right to interfere with individual choices by local people in north west Wales as regards who they sold their property to but local people unable to buy homes locally could be helped in other ways such as the promotion of local social housing supply.

5.12 Mike Espley, North Wales Private Landlords Association, said that local authorities were failing to administer housing benefit efficiently or correctly. As a result private landlords were losing money.

- The First Minister said that if complaints could not be resolved locally individual cases could be taken up with the Ombudsman.

5.13 Meirick Davies, Denbighshire County Council said that it was difficult to travel by road between north and south Wales.

- The First Minister said that there was a tension between improving the north/south road links and protecting the environment. The Assembly had concentrated on improving rail services but had also commissioned a study on north south road links by Babbie and Co, consulting engineers, that would be completed soon.

5.14 Tom Price, Unison Wrexham said that the Care Standards Act would put local authority residential care in jeopardy and asked how it could be maintained.

- The First Minister said that he had no objection to the continued involvement of local authorities in the provision of residential care. As the Act would not come into full force until 2007, there was time for the issue to be addressed.

5.15 Councillor Andrew Bailey, Wrexham County Borough Council, asked why, although there were no cases of foot and mouth disease in the area, carcasses continued to be dumped in landfill sites.

- The First Minister said that landfill sites were being used to dispose of animals slaughtered under the Welfare Cull operated by the Intervention Board for which the Department of the Environment Food and Rural Affairs was responsible. These were clean animals which could not be moved back to their home farm or for which there was no market. There was likely to be a problem in the autumn with light lambs which were usually exported and for which there was no market in the UK and some might also need to be disposed of in landfill sites.

5.16 Dianne Thomas, Eastside Residents Association, Holyhead, was concerned that traffic leaving Holyhead port made crossing the road near the port exit dangerous. She said that temporary measures should be put in place until a proper road link was completed.

5.17 Meirion Davies, Menter yr Iaith said that people moving into a Welsh speaking area needed more information about the Welsh language including how and where they could learn the language. Menter yr Iaith produced leaflets with this information and he suggested that these should be made available to local authorities, housing associations and the private rented sector.

- The First Minister said he was happy to see information made available as a matter of good practice. It was for individual landlords to decide whether to make use of them.

5.18 David St George, Celtic Dimensions, said that subject committees should meet in the regions and hold question and answer sessions.

- The First Minister said this was a matter for the Presiding Officer and the Panel of Committee Chairs and that he would take the matter up with them. As far as he was aware, the subject committees already did meet all over Wales.

5.19 The Chair thanked the First Minister for attending the meeting and answering questions.

Item 6: Election of the Chair for 2001-02 (12.55pm to 1.00pm)

6.1 The Chair said that she had enjoyed her year as Chair. At the start of the year she had been determined to get the public in North Wales to engage with the Assembly. She thanked the public for rising to the challenge and hoped the high level of attendance would continue.

6.2 The Chair then invited nominations. Gareth Jones paid tribute to the work done by Ann Jones as Chair of the committee and nominated Eleanor Burnham. There were no other nominations and Eleanor Burnham was duly elected as the new Chair. Eleanor Burnham said she saw the committee as an ambassador for the Assembly in North Wales and an ambassador for North Wales in Cardiff.

6.3 The Chair said the next meeting would be held on 26 October and would consider the strategy for elderly people. The venue was yet to be decided.

Private Rented Sector – Housing in Wales

The National Assembly's draft National Housing Strategy outlines its proposals for the private rented sector in Wales.

The Assembly recognises the important role that the private rented sector plays in meeting the housing requirements of those who are unable or choose not to purchase their own homes. It has made it clear that it wants to see the development of a healthy and vibrant, well managed private rented sector with homes in good condition.

Although the private rented sector forms a relatively small part of the total housing stock in Wales [around 9%] the Welsh House Condition Survey in 1998 found that problems of unfitness were proportionally greatest in privately rented housing [around 18% .]

Many of the problems with poor condition and management are often concentrated amongst Houses in Multiple Occupation [HMOs].

Although the Assembly has proposals to tackle problems in the private rented sector it is important to remember local authorities already have significant enforcement powers and are able to give grants.

This can help strike a balance with incentives for landlords to improve the condition of homes.

Authorities can also work in partnership with registered social landlords, often involving the conversion of HMOs into self-contained accommodation. There are good examples of this approach here in Rhyl .

Local authorities can also introduce HMO registration schemes, which extend their powers to insist on better standards of condition and management. The Assembly is encouraging local authorities to develop strategies to tackle problems in the private rented sector using these registration schemes.

The Assembly has given resources of almost £3.4 million to local authorities this year [2001-2002] specifically to support strategies to tackle problems in the private rented sector. This is in addition to the resources that local authorities themselves are able to use to tackle these problems.

The Assembly recognises that although local authorities already have extensive powers to tackle problems in the private rented sector, changes are needed.

The Assembly has therefore made a commitment to introduce licensing.

A national licensing scheme for HMOs should provide safe, acceptable living conditions without reducing the supply of privately rented accommodation.

The introduction of a licensing scheme will require primary legislation affecting both England and Wales and the timing will depend on the Government's legislative programme.

Although the legislation for licensing will be on a national UK basis, the Assembly will use its powers through subordinate legislation to implement the new arrangements. That will ensure that they will be sensitive to the needs of Wales and tackle the particular issues which are of concern to local authorities, tenants and reputable landlords.

The Assembly also has proposals for selective licensing of other parts of the private rented sector.

Much of this part of the private rented sector does not present widespread difficulties and tackling any problems needs a more selective approach. For example this could concentrate on geographical areas or particular sectors of the market.

The Assembly wants to take account of views from those likely to be affected on the scope and operation of such selective licensing to ensure that the arrangements are suitable and appropriate to tackle the particular issues faced in Wales.

In due course the Assembly will therefore be consulting on discretionary selective licensing arrangements.

In summary;

- local authorities already have extensive powers to tackle problems in the private rented sector,
- but the Assembly recognises that changes are needed and is proposing a range of new measures to strengthen and enhance the existing powers;
- the timing of these changes is uncertain and will depend on the Government's legislative programme.