

# Sustainability Committee

SC(3)-06-09 (p1) : 19 March 2009

## Scrutiny Session - Inquiry into 'How Welsh Assembly Government Sustainable Development Policies and National Targets have been mainstreamed within portfolios'

### Department for Social Justice and Local Government

#### 1. Introduction

1.1 The Department for Social Justice and Local Government is working to improve and deliver excellent public services in Wales, with a particular emphasis on safeguarding and supporting vulnerable people, combating social exclusion and reducing inequality, and promoting safe and sustainable communities.

#### 2. Single Equality Scheme

2.1 The pursuit of equality of opportunity is a continuing challenge to achieve a sustainable Wales. In particular, where equality for all is a core value to all our work, and the six equality themes of age, gender, race, disability, sexual orientation and religion are actively promoted. The Single Equality Scheme will enable the Assembly Government to tackle equality, diversity and human rights issues across all equality strands. It will also help to identify where people might face multiple barriers in their everyday lives.

#### 3. Communities First

3.1 Communities First is the Welsh Assembly Government's flagship programme to improve the living conditions and prospects for people in the most disadvantaged communities across Wales. Communities First now covers over 160 areas and some 20% of the population of Wales.

3.2 As part of the 'One Wales' commitment to take forward Communities First, an Outcomes Fund has been established to support activities which deliver real improvements at a local and tackle key priorities such as child poverty, economic inactivity and job creation. Applications to deliver Demonstration Projects have already been submitted under the revised Communities First Vision Framework. This Framework is based on six themes namely: child poverty; community safety; health and well being; education, skills and training; environment; jobs, business and income generation. The Outcomes Fund will support work across the Communities First programme, building on success to date and focusing on practical solutions to tackling poverty and supporting regeneration initiatives.

#### 4. Child Poverty Strategy

4.1 Addressing poverty and inequality among children and young people is crucial to giving them the opportunity to make the most of their lives. As a result of further developments in the evidence base and in policy focus in recent years, the Minister for Social Justice and Local Government has indicated that work should start on a new child poverty strategy in 2009. Preparatory work has begun with work ongoing to map the evaluation results of existing Assembly Government child poverty programmes. This will provide the foundation for the new strategy.

4.2 There are currently a wide range of policies and programmes operating across Wales aimed at tackling child poverty. These include employment support programmes, childcare initiatives, education and health programmes, Communities First interventions and income maximisation initiatives. Our policy response to child poverty includes a mix of universal and targeted provision, all of which are designed to complement and add value to UK Government interventions through the tax and benefits system and welfare to work programmes. These interventions will be particularly important during the current economic down turn and as Wales recovers from its effects.

#### 5. Post Office Diversification Fund

5.1 The Welsh Assembly Government has always recognised the social and community value of Post Offices, particularly in relation to supporting vulnerable people in our most isolated and most disadvantaged communities. We want to see Post Offices thrive so that they can continue to provide an essential service in the communities they serve. The Post Office Diversification Fund which opened on 1 January 2009 will help sub-postmasters and sub-postmistresses diversify and ensure sustainable and viable Post Offices.

#### 6. Social Enterprise Action Plan

6.1 Social enterprise embodies the principles of sustainable development. It generates innovative solutions that achieve fair, inclusive and sustainable wealth creation in an increasingly globalised economy. The strong commitment in Wales to promoting sustainable development suggests an important role for social enterprise in contributing towards the social, economic and environmental needs of people.

6.2 Social enterprises can be found throughout Wales, offering a huge range of services and operating in fields as diverse as childcare, arts centres, crime prevention, sustainable tourism, food production, furniture recycling, the provision of housing, as well as health and social careworking.

6.3 The Social Enterprise Action Plan 2009 sets out how the Welsh Assembly Government will work with partner organisations to promote social enterprises in Wales to create a thriving sector that will support community and economic regeneration and create local jobs. The plan contains 20 key actions to help the sector expand, to grow existing ventures and help new social enterprises to become established. Amongst other things, the plan includes the development of a Community Asset Transfer Fund to help third sector organisations and social enterprises renovate public buildings to offer services to their communities.

6.4 As valuable partners of the Welsh Assembly Government, credit unions fall within the Third Sector and offer vital community services that aid both the individual and local economy. An explicit aim of the Welsh Assembly Government as outlined in 'One Wales' is to establish credit unions as social enterprises throughout Wales.

## **Credit Unions**

6.5 More widely, we will also continue to champion a successful and sustainable credit union movement across Wales and to support and solidify its position. There are now 29 active credit unions across all of Wales and due to our support, credit union membership in Wales has grown from approximately 10,000 at the end of 2000 to over 47,000 by September 2008, with the combined assets of Welsh credit unions now exceeding £15million. Funding of £1.25 million has been made available in the three years from April 2008 to help deliver 'One Wales' commitments on continuing credit union development. These, in addition to the social enterprise aspect, are to encourage more credit unions to offer Child Trust Fund accounts and to provide every secondary school pupil in Wales with access to a credit union by 2011.

## **7. Community Cohesion Strategy**

We live in a society where international demographic changes and the effects of global issues are evident at even the most local level. Faced with such world wide phenomena we need to continue to strengthen our communities to ensure that they are safe, welcoming and cohesive.

7.1 We have been working in partnership with the Welsh Local Government Association, the police service, the Association of Chief Police Officers Cymru, the Equality and Human Rights Commission, and faith groups among others, to develop the All Wales Community Cohesion Strategy for Wales. A consultation on the Strategy was launched on 12 January 2009 by the Minister for Social Justice and Local Government.

## **8. Local Government**

8.1 The Assembly Government and Local Government have a close working relationship based on long-standing partnership principles that underpin devolved government in Wales. In April 2006 all 22 unitary authorities in Wales (including the 3 national park authorities and the Fire and Rescue Service) signed, with the Assembly Government, a commitment to address climate change through:

Delivering a significant reduction in greenhouse gas emissions;

Improving energy efficiency in council buildings and homes;

Increasing the use of green energy from renewable resources;

Encouraging local residents and businesses to reduce emissions; and

Encouraging the development of practical economically viable and sustainable energy.

8.2 From 2010, local authorities in Wales that meet the criteria of electricity usage and metering will participate in the U.K. Government's Carbon Reduction Commitment emissions trading fund scheme. The intention is that from 2013 caps will be applied to a participating organisation's ability to purchase emission allowances under the scheme with the objective of significantly reducing the carbon footprint of participating organisations. In July 2008 the U.K. Government announced that schools would form part of a local authority's portfolio for the purpose of the CRC scheme. The inclusion of schools and street lighting in the scheme is likely to mean that the majority if not all of Welsh unitary authorities will participate.

## **9. Rates Relief for Small Business**

9.1 We fund business rate relief for around 37,000 businesses across Wales. Our approach is to target resources to those businesses in most need, in particular small businesses, including shops, post offices, registered childminders and credit unions throughout Wales. From 1 April 2008, the Assembly Government made provision to provide rates relief as follows:

Most Business Premises - 50% relief for those with a rateable value up to £2,000; 25% relief for those between £2,001 and £6,500;

Post Offices- 100% relief for premises with rateable value up to £9,000, and 50% for premises between £9,001 and £12,000;

Child Care Premises - 50% relief for premises with a rateable value up to £12,000 which are wholly used for child-minding or day care provision;

Credit Unions - 50% relief for premises with a rateable value up to £9,000 which are wholly occupied by a credit union.

## **10. Public Facilities Grant Scheme**

10.1 From 1 April 2009 the Assembly Government will provide funding for local authorities to apply up to £500 to businesses that allow free public access to their toilet facilities. Participating business will display distinctive signage, and will be publicised on local authority websites.

10.2 This scheme will encourage local authorities to develop a partnership approach with local businesses to increase the provision of public facilities, and will help them to develop innovative strategies for future provision of these facilities. It should also help to increase provision of facilities in areas where demand does not justify the expense of providing dedicated local authority maintained facilities.

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