Social Justice And Regeneration Committee

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Date: 19th October 2006
Venue: Committee Room 3, Senedd, National Assembly for Wales
Title: Communities First: Update on Initiatives and Interim Evaluation of Communities First

Purpose

To inform the Committee of the progress made to date on implementing the Communities First Programme.

Summary

During the Committee meeting held in the White Rose Centre in Tredegar on 6 July I gave an update on the progress of Communities First. This paper now addresses progress since that date and invites comments from the Committee on the final Interim Evaluation of Communities First report prior to its debate at Plenary. Key progress is highlighted below:

Mainstreaming

I feel it is important to again re-iterate the importance of organisations at national and local level mainstreaming their programmes and policies to support the activities of Communities First Partnerships. I am working at Ministerial level, and my staff at official level, to ensure that areas across the Assembly and also outside the Assembly mainstream their programmes and policies at Communities First areas. We must accept that the success of Communities First is dependent on other service providers engaging with the programme and with local Communities First partnerships.

Some examples of joint working at the national level include my officials working closely with colleagues in DELLS to ensure the very best training and development opportunities for youth workers employed to work in Communities First areas by Communities First Partnerships and their Grant Recipient Bodies. Communities First is also represented on an Advisory Group which is helping to shape a Youth Service Strategy for Wales. Youth workers employed in Communities First areas are themselves feeding directly into the development of this strategy. In addition, the Minister for Education Lifelong Learning and Skills and I have agreed to work together over the workforce community development training agenda. We have established a Task and Finish Group to discuss how we may ensure that Wales has a sufficient number of professionally trained community development workers and how we can ensure progress. This is particularly important given the discussions at the last Committee meeting around staffing for Communities First.

Welsh Index of Multiple Deprivation

At the last Committee meeting we discussed how the publication of the WIMD 2005 provided a more detailed and up-to-date picture of disadvantage in certain areas of Wales, highlighting new areas for consideration. I outlined my proposals on how to integrate into the Communities First Programme those 46 LSOAs that are now in the top 10% most deprived and not currently designated as Communities First.

I have now written to all key stakeholders in these 46 areas, inviting them to submit applications to become part of the Communities First Programme. The submissions will be required to demonstrate evidence of detailed and inclusive consultation with local residents, community groups and other interested parties. To ensure full local debate and engagement with all local stakeholders, I have given until 30 March 2007 to receive these submissions. I will then consider these submissions and ensure that they focus on the lessons learnt from the evaluation.

Review of Communities First Support Fund Organisations

At Committee last December I informed members that, even though the support arrangements provided to Communities First Partnerships had served us well in the early years of Communities First, I believed it was time to evaluate what support is being provided, to identify what works and to uncover any gaps that need filling.

The Review of Support Organisations has now been completed by the Assembly's Social Justice and Regeneration's Research and Information Unit. The aim of the project has been to establish the nature and range of future support requirements by Communities First Partnerships from 2007 (the current arrangements are in place until March 2007). The review does not include the Communities First Support Network (which was reviewed in 2005) but has included the support organisations that provide support in addition to the Network. A questionnaire was sent to all Communities First Partnerships in order to determine what they saw as being their priorities and the key areas where they would welcome support. In addition interviews were held with the organisations currently providing the support to obtain their views.

The findings show that organisations currently funded to provide support (excluding the Communities First Support Network) do not meet the full needs of partnerships. This is due to the diverse range of partnership priorities; the different levels of development that partnerships have reached; and the varying solutions and approaches that are required in order to prove effective for different communities.

I have been provided with a number of options by which Partnership support can be taken forward and I am considering those options carefully before making a decision. I shall update the Committee on progress when I have made my decision.

Interim Evaluation of Communities First

During the Committee meeting on the 6th July we had a very useful discussion around the emergent

findings of the Interim Evaluation of Communities First by Cambridge Policy Consultants. The final report of the evaluation was published in September and launched at two events held in Powis Hall in Bangor and Afan Lido in Sandfields on the 20th September and 21st September respectively. The attached reports include the Summary of Conclusions and Recommendations and Main Final Report of the Interim Evaluation of Communities First. The evaluation was undertaken by a team led by Cambridge Policy Consultants and included Arwel Jones Associates, Danny Burns (Social and Organisational Learning as Action Research, UWE), MORI, and the Cities Research Centre.

The findings of the Interim Evaluation of Communities First provide a review of progress on the programme as a whole. The evaluation does not provide a measurement of progress for each partnership but has focussed on the overall development of the programme. It has done this by drawing on the resonating experiences of partnerships, co-ordinators, grant recipient bodies, partner organisations, support organisations, umbrella bodies and the Welsh Assembly Government in order to stimulate effective developments to the programme which take account of the effects on all stakeholders.

The main findings of the evaluation highlight the need to focus on programme bending, embedded evaluation and continuous local monitoring in relation to the objectives of the programme to support the identification of needs and opportunities and also linking these together. The findings also highlight the need for strategic connections to be realised at the local level for the benefit of communities. Overall, the evaluation is positive about the approach we have taken with Communities First and applauds the Welsh Assembly Government's commitment to empowering communities in this way. The report also mentions the positive and timely response of policy development to the findings emerging from the action research that has gone hand in hand with this evaluation. The new Communities First Guidance, on which we have recently completed a consultation, is evidence of this commitment. As you will see from the attached Summary of Conclusions and Recommendations the evaluation report includes 40 recommendations for consideration. These recommendations impact more widely than the Welsh Assembly Government alone but have implications for how we work with our partners, with people on the ground and how we shape the programme in the future. I am considering the recommendations and would welcome the Committee's comments on these conclusions and recommendations before the report is debated at Plenary.

The documents are published on the Welsh Assembly Government website at: http://new.wales.gov.uk/about/departments/dsjr/research/?lang=en

Baseline Report on Communities First

In addition to the Interim Evaluation of Communities First, a 'Baseline Report' has been produced to present a range of relevant "baseline" statistics for Communities First areas. I have done this because we need to be able to measure progress against economic indicators in their areas. Officials in the Assembly Government's Social Justice and Regeneration Research and Information Unit have been working with officials from the Statistical Directorate and Cartographics to produce the Baseline Report (attached at Annex B).

The baseline report provides figures from the Census and the Department of Work and Pensions for

each Communities First area for 2001 and it will be updated over time. The report can be found at http://new.wales.gov.uk/about/departments/dsjr/research/c1stinterim/?lang=en

Early feedback from all stakeholders is that this report provides a valuable source of information – statistical and also cartographic since it brings together the detailed maps of all the Communities First areas. Not only can stakeholders and residents compare areas from a statistical point of view, but also by taking into account their physical characteristics.

Cross Cutting Themes

The very nature of Communities First means that it is a cross cutting programme. Work is ongoing to ensure that other policies and programmes are mainstreamed to support the work of Communities First Partnerships. For example, work is being undertaken with the Arts Council of Wales, Health Challenge Wales and Food Co-operatives, Sports Council of Wales and Cymorth.

Action for Subject Committee

The Social Justice and Regeneration Committee is invited to note the progress made to date on Communities First and to comment on its future development. Specifically, the Committee is asked to comment on the Communities First Interim Evaluation Summary of Conclusions and Recommendations report attached at Annex A.

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