

# Social Justice And Regeneration Committee

## SJR(2)-16-06(p1)

**Date: Thursday 23 November 2006**

**Venue: The Newport Centre**

**Title: Minister's Report**

**Report to SJ Committee – 23 November 2006**

### 1. Welsh Police Force Costs for Preparation of Restructuring

In my last Ministerial report, I informed the Committee that following an invitation from the Home Office to all Chief Constables in England and Wales, the four Welsh police forces had submitted a claim for the additional costs they had directly incurred in preparing for police restructuring.

The Home Office has subsequently announced that, with limited exceptions, they will not refund the whole amount spent by police forces in preparing for restructuring, but will cap claims at ?100,000. This means that the Welsh forces will face a combined shortfall of almost ?500,000 (see table below for details). I have written to Tony McNulty expressing my deep concerns about this development.

<b>Force</b>	<b>Amount Claimed</b>	<b>Amount Received</b>	<b>Difference</b>
Dyfed-Powys	£225,891	£100,000	£125,891
Gwent	£96,467	£96,467	N/A
North Wales	£245,020	£100,000	£145,020
South Wales	£326,944	£100,000	£226,944
Total	£894,322	£396,467	£497,855

### 2. Cross Border Working and Vehicle Recognition

This issue has been taken up with the Chief Constables through the Police Liaison Officer. My report to Committee on 19 October (SJR(2)-14-06(p.2)) provided detailed information about the operation of Automatic Number Plate Recognition (ANPR), which is based on the ACPO Strategy 'Denying Criminals Use of the Roads'. Co-operation between Welsh forces and bordering English forces is seen as vital – joint activity includes regular collaboration and staging of joint operations all along the border. Intelligence databases are also shared. For operational reasons it is not possible to give more detailed information about the operations that are to be carried out, but these will include the regular use

of fixed APNR camera sites at strategic locations such as the A55 and the M4, and the use of mobile units along the whole length of the border.

### 3. Figures on Drug and Alcohol Services Expenditure from the Substance Misuse Action Fund

I agreed at the Committee meeting of 21 September to provide figures on drug and alcohol services expenditure from the Welsh Assembly Government's Substance Misuse Action Fund in 2006-07.

Please find attached at Annex 1, a breakdown of each Community Safety Partnership's 2006/07 allocation from the Substance Misuse Action Fund to dedicated drug services, dedicated alcohol services or to organisations that provide a combined drug and alcohol service.

The Substance Misuse Action Fund Revenue budget in 2006-07 is ?10,147,675. A small balance of the allocations to Ceredigion, Pembrokeshire, Powys, Blaenau Gwent, Caerphilly and Newport remains unallocated. These total around ?100,000 or 1% of the budget.

In 2006-07, 21.7% of the Fund is being spent on dedicated drug services, 7.9% on dedicated alcohol services and 70.4% on combined drug and alcohol services. These figures and details on the percentages allocated to these services from the Substance Misuse Action Fund in recent years are shown below.

<b>Year</b>	<b>Budget</b>	<b>Dedicated Drug Services</b>	<b>Dedicated Alcohol Services</b>	<b>Combined Services</b>
2006-07	£10,147,165	21.7%	7.9%	70.4%
2005-06	£9,261,678	21.6%	9.3%	69.1%
2004-05	£6,716,737	22.0%	8.3%	69.7%
2003-04	£4,800,983	23.7%	3.3%	73.0%

It is important to note that the costs of treating drug or alcohol addiction are very different and are therefore not directly comparable. For example, substitute medication services to treat drug addiction are very expensive.

The Welsh National Database for Substance Misuse received data on 6,394 people receiving treatment in 2005-06. Alcohol was specified as the main problem in 4,309 (63%) of cases, drugs were

specified as the main problem in 1,903 (30%) of cases, and in 432 (7%) of cases the main problem was unspecified.

#### **4. Home Office Funding to Support Domestic Abuse Projects in Wales 2006/07**

The Home Office has agreed to provide ?300k revenue funding to support domestic abuse projects in Wales for the period 2 October 2006 – 31 March 2007. A letter was sent to Community Safety Managers and copied to Domestic Abuse Co-ordinators in Wales on 18 October 2006 advising them that the Home Office has allocated funding and is looking to support 4 or 5 projects across Wales (up to ?40k or ?50k per project). The Home Office is particularly keen to support projects on a regional basis that involve co-operation across Community Safety Partnership boundaries.

This funding provides the opportunity to increase capacity in Wales for the provision of a co-ordinated community response to tackling domestic abuse. It will complement funding already provided by the Welsh Assembly Government and applications will need to demonstrate that local action is undertaken to deliver the following key outcomes of the All Wales Domestic Abuse Strategy:

To reduce the prevalence of domestic abuse, particularly in high incidence areas and/or communities,

To increase the rate that domestic abuse is reported, particularly in high incidence areas and/or communities,

To increase the rate of domestic abuse offences that are brought to justice particularly in high incidence areas and/or communities as well as in areas with high attrition rates,

The closing date for applications was 8 November; a small panel consisting of officials from the Community Safety Division & Home Office Crime Team will look at competing bids.

#### **5. Welsh National Database for Substance Misuse**

In my 4<sup>th</sup> Annual Report to the Committee in September, I reported that we had put in place all three strands of our ambitious project to deliver a comprehensive Performance Management Framework for Wales which involved establishing the following:

An All-Wales information database and standardised reporting system.

Key Performance Indicators – both a national and local level.

A research and evaluation programme

The first annual report from the database was attached at Appendix 3 to my report and puts us ahead of the rest of UK in terms of detail and coverage of the information collected. I advised the Committee that this information, together with the information that is now being collected via the

Drug Intervention Programme (DIP), provides us and our local partners with valuable evidence on which to plan future expenditure and policy development.

Data from the database has been published as National Statistics for the first time in October in a Statistical Release published on the Welsh Assembly Government's Statistics website. The Statistical Release and data from the database are classed as "experimental statistics" because this is the first year of operation and some data quality issues remain to be resolved. This Release contains the same information (with some small revisions) that Members have already seen but it is attached at Annex 2 for information.

## **6. Number of Individuals in need of Substance Misuse Services.**

In a supplementary question to the OAQ 0915 from Jenny Randerson on Wednesday, 8 November, 2006, Nicholas Bourne asked if figures were available across Wales on the numbers of people in need of treatment and help who are not yet accessing services. Mr Bourne raises a crucial but complex issue as these people are, by definition, a hidden population and therefore it is extremely difficult to identify them.

There is no one solution to this which is why I am supporting a range of activities that that will help to provide a fuller picture of the scope and nature of the substance misuse problems in Wales.

Firstly, the new Welsh Database on Substance Misuse provides us with valuable data on those accessing treatment. We are also in the early stages of planning research studies that will include prevalence estimating and identifying and examining the barriers to access. It is early days yet, but we envisage work beginning in the next financial year.

In addition to this work we now have the data emerging from the Drug Intervention Programme, which is proving a useful source of information about individuals who have not previously sought help. We are also looking at how we might better exploit intelligence from the Police records system to help build up the picture. I will keep the Committee informed of progress.

## **7. The Home Energy Efficiency Scheme (HEES) – Costs of works**

During plenary on 8 November the issue of costs in relation to work undertaken by HEES Scheme installers was raised with me.

Installers operating under the Home Energy Efficiency Scheme are appointed in accordance with EU Public Procurement Regulations. A part of this process, installers are asked to quote prices for measures based on a series of criteria including property type and geographic area.

Earlier this year an installer re-tender exercise was undertaken and this has introduced a system of harmonised prices. I am therefore confident that each HEES measure will be installed at the same competitive price to the Scheme regardless of installer.

Energy suppliers offer subsidised insulation measures to customers through their Energy Efficiency

Commitment (EEC) programmes. In order to encourage customers to take up measures, suppliers normally endorse contractors to install insulation measures on their behalf. Therefore quotes obtained locally are likely to represent an indicative subsidised offer price for insulation measures and cannot be compared to prices quoted for HEES installations.

## **8. Impact of WHQS on the Home Energy Efficiency Scheme**

Better Homes for people in Wales sets out the Assembly Government's long term vision for housing in Wales in which all people will have the opportunity to live in good quality homes. To achieve this goal, the physical standard and condition of existing housing must be maintained and improved to the Welsh Housing Quality Standard. The Standard covers heating, fuel efficiency, insulation and cost effective upgrading of dwellings' thermal and ventilation performance.

It was recognised that tackling fuel poverty through stock improvement would be a key component of efforts to improve energy efficiency in the domestic sector. It was also acknowledged that the co-operation of social landlords would be crucial to the delivery of the action plan in the domestic sector.

Against this background, and as an incentive to investment, whilst retaining the priority of combating fuel poverty in the private sector, it was originally decided (in 2000) that 30% of the available grant for HEES should be earmarked for social housing tenants on a match-funding basis. This ensured access to funding across all household tenures in Wales whilst encouraging social landlords to invest in their own stock.

Over time, and with the continued level of investment from social landlords, in conjunction with HEES Scheme funding, there has been less demand from social landlords to seek HEES funding. In 2003-04 some ?2.7m was provided to social landlords while in 2004-05 this dropped to ?2.3m. If the original level of funding had been retained (30%) nearly ?6m would have been made available to local authorities this year – in fact ?3m has been earmarked on a match funding basis for authorities. It is expected that this level of match funding will reduce further in the future.

The decreasing level of activity from social landlords has allowed the Welsh Assembly Government to focus assistance on the private sector which has allowed more of more private sector households to access the Scheme.

## **9. Home Energy Efficiency Scheme - Budget**

The Welsh Assembly Government, since taking over responsibility for the Scheme in Wales, has provided over ?93 million in resources to the Scheme.

This has allowed the Scheme to develop from one that primarily provided insulation measures to householders to a Scheme that now provides insulation and central heating systems. The Scheme continues to develop in response to need. We recognise the problems faced by 'hard to heat' homes and will be considering how renewable technologies can be introduced to the Scheme to assist those households.

The level of resources made available clearly demonstrates the Welsh Assembly Government's continued commitment to eradicate fuel poverty across Wales.

## Scheme Budget

	01-02	02-03	03-04	04-05	05-06	06-07	07-08	Totals
<b>Budget</b>	£5.1m	£10.2m	£10.6m	£14.5m	£13.9m	£19.6m	£19.6m	£93.5m

## 10. The Transfer of Council Housing to newly formed Housing Associations or Community Housing Mutuels.

At the last Committee meeting members raised concerns over the misunderstandings surrounding stock transfer. I agreed to ensure that Local Authorities and Tenant Associations receive Q & A literature to help provide a balanced view of information. This can be found at Annex 3

## 11. Housing Management Statistics

I would like to bring to the attention of members, the statistical release on 'Local Authority Housing: Management and Performance 2005-06', published on 16 November 2006. The release gives detailed information about the way local authorities are managing their stock as well as information about recent trends for Wales as a whole. An overview of results can be found at Annex 4.

## 12. Risk Reduction Planning (RRP) by Fire and Rescue Authorities

Following the launch of our RRP Guidance during March, FRAs have consulted on and finalised their RRP's for implementation from April 2007.

South Wales FRA – The Authority met on 9 October and agreed to adopt the draft RRP with some amendments following consultation. There has been some low level media interest in the final plan and the Authority has been proactive in working with communities and representative bodies over the proposals, including presenting details at the Assembly's South East Wales Regional Committee meeting on 27 October.

Mid and West Wales FRA – The FRA's RRP was agreed in its entirety at the Authority meeting on 31 October. The FRA launched the Plan on 31 October in the media and placed it upon its website. Over the course of the next four weeks it intends to publish a detailed implementation plan.

North Wales FRA – North Wales FRA met on the 23 October to consider its plan, which was adopted in its entirety. It has no plans for media or other publicity.

I am aware of public and Assembly Members' concerns over what can be perceived as a diminution of public services by some of the proposals contained within the draft plans during the consultation exercise. Our RRP Guidance states that decisions must be based on robust evidence and take account of comments received during consultation. If necessary I will ask FRAs for further information to ensure that these requirements have been complied with.

I will also be encouraging FRAs, through our regular dialogue, to ensure that they give careful consideration to the implementation and media strategies they intend adopting, to ensure not only the smooth transition of arrangements but also that public concerns in the communities affected are fully addressed.

### **13. Improving Affordability through Non Traditional/innovative Construction Methods.**

Some progress has been made in taking forward Homebuy pilot schemes utilising modular construction within the Social Housing Grant programme.

Potential sites for development in Swansea and Caerphilly have been identified and it is anticipated that the latter project, a development by United Welsh Housing Association of 22 two bedroom houses, could start on site in December 2006. A further report on progress will be made as the scheme develops.

There is also some interest from the private sector in developing the use of innovative construction methods where, in addition to improved quality, the speed of construction is seen to have benefits in terms of cash-flow. This is particularly relevant on large sites requiring significant early infrastructure investment.

A private sector developer is building affordable housing using offsite manufacturing methods at Llantsanfraidd (near Oswestry). Two bedroom flats are being marketed at ?67-69,000 utilising factory built kitchen and bathroom pods. This will lower cost by reducing the site construction time and by making completed homes available for sale sooner than homes built traditionally.

In South Wales a joint initiative between Hafod Housing Association and a developer is investigating the possibility of trialing offsite 'pod' construction for kitchens and bathrooms for 4 flats on a development of 18 general needs homes in Bridgend. The flats will be funded by Social Housing Grant and the developer is considering using the system in developing affordable homes on various sites in Wales.

### **14. Excess Winter Deaths**

On the 21 September I agreed to explore if further research may be undertaken in respect of excess winter deaths. It is generally accepted that poorly heated housing plays a part, although other behavioural factors are likely to be more important. The Wales Office for Research and Development for Health and Social Care (WORD) runs a research fund scheme and the next call for proposals is likely to be early in 2007. Any organisations wishing to bid should contact staff at WORD. In addition, the Older People and Ageing Network (OPAN) funded by WORD includes research into

excess winter deaths and how they may be prevented within its research portfolio.

## **15. Update on Post Office Issues**

### Post Office Card Account

I have received a reply, dated 13 October, to my letter to James Plaskitt MP, Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, reporting the concerns of the Welsh Assembly Government over DWP's decision to withdraw the Post Office Card Account (POCa). In his reply Mr Plaskitt asks the Assembly Government to note that it costs the taxpayer 1p to make a payment into a bank account and nearly ?1 to make a payment into a POca. He also asserts that POca does not contribute anything to the UK Government's policy of reducing financial exclusion. He ends his letter by asserting that funding the POca only until March 2010 is the right thing to do. He points out DWP will be able to honour their obligations to deliver value for money to the taxpayer and ensure that customers can continue to use the post office accessible accounts with greater functionality than the Post Office card account.

Jim Fitzpatrick MP, Under Secretary of State at the Department of Trade and Industry has advised that the UK Government is continuing to work with Post Office Limited to develop a new UK Government – funded product to replace the POca.

### Future of the Post Office Network

We await the decision of the UK Government on its future funding of the post office network, but we are continuing to work with UK Departments directly, and through the Wales Office, to inform UK Ministers of the situation in Wales.

Options for the future of the Post Office Network will be considered by a Ministerial committee of the UK Cabinet, chaired by the Deputy Prime Minister. DTI Ministers have undertaken to stage a consultation on any proposals emerging from the committee.

### Westminster debate on post offices

Concerns on the future of the post office network expressed in the Welsh Assembly Government have been replicated in the UK Parliament. I note the debate in the House of Commons on 16 October, the delivery of the petition on retaining the Post Office card account (POca) on 18 October and also the House of Commons' Trade and Industry Committee report on Royal Mail Group, published on the 30 October 2006. All of these developments confirm that the views already communicated by us to the UK Government are representative of the much wider public opinion.

## **16. Communities @One: Communities of Interest**

The Welsh Assembly Government's Communities @One Initiative is progressing well. The initiative was initially targeted at the 132 geographic Communities First areas. However, I have recently agreed to the inclusion of the Communities First Communities of Interest areas within the Initiative.



These communities are:

- Blaenau Gwent - Ebbw Vale, Communities Affected by the Corus Steel Closures
- Cardiff – Black Minority Ethnic Community of Interest
- Carmarthenshire/Neath Port Talbot – Cross Border Local Authority Community
- Ceredigion – Upland Villages in the Tregaron Area
- Flintshire – Rural North Flintshire Neighbourhoods
- Gwynedd - Llyn Peninsula and Rural community of Interest
- Neath Port Talbot – Domestic Violence Community of Interest
- Newport – Black Minority Ethnic Community of Interest
- Pembrokeshire – Young people community of Interest
- Powys – Dyfi Valley – "Necklaced" Rural communities

## 17. Recent Funding Approvals under the New Ideas Fund

I have recently approved funding of ?133,461 to support 15 research projects under the New Ideas Fund. This Fund offers grants of up to ?10,000 to support small research projects that address themes within the SJ&R portfolio with clear relevance to the strategic objectives set out in ‘Wales: A Better Country’. Ten projects were funded in the first year of the Fund (2005-6), and I will bring outputs of these projects to the Committee’s attention as they are completed. This year 49 bids were received. I have approved funding for the following projects:

Organisation	Research topic
Coedcanlas Enterprises	The Potential for Social Enterprise to reduce social exclusion and promote regeneration in Carmarthenshire, Ceredigion and Pembrokeshire.
Communities that Care	Building safer communities where children and young people are valued.
Gweini	Measuring the contribution of faith communities to civil society in Wales
Sylfaen	Climbing the Walls (documenting a project which worked with women to overcome social and economic disadvantage)
NE Wales NHS Trust	Evaluation of pilot project related to misuse of prescribed drugs, Conwy
TPAS Cymru/Groundwork Cymru	A Study to inform the scope and implementation of the WHQS Environmental Standard
People and Work Unit	Catching the Ripple (ripple effect in community development)
University of Wales, Aberystwyth	Youth Inclusion programme in Rural Wales

Trothwy Cyf	Interventions with homeless prisoners
PAVO	Partnership working in Powys
University of Glamorgan/ Concord	Lunch clubs – the role and function of lunch clubs for older people
Save the Children	Tackling Severe Child Poverty in Wales
CPC	Successful Succession
PAVS	Reducing re-offending – role of the voluntary sector
Shelter Cymru	A sustainable Option? The increase in mortgage possession actions in Wales

## 18. Update on Migrant Workers and Polish Centre Activities

At Committee on 19 October, I agreed to keep members updated on issues surrounding migrant workers and the future work of the Polish Centre.

### A Welcome to Wales Pack for Migrant Workers

The draft pack has been proof-read and translated into English and Welsh. It is now being translated into the relevant migrant workers' languages before it is formatted on to disc for distribution to Assembly Members, Local Authorities and Health boards, voluntary sector organisations, libraries and other public outlets. It is anticipated that the Pack will be issued by the end of the year.

### Polish Centre Activities

On 28 September I agreed funding totalling ?120,865 over 3 years from 2006-07 to the Polish Welsh Mutual Association based at the newly opened Polish Centre in Llanelli. This is to fund the posts of Advice Workers and a Counsellor who would be to help Polish Migrant Workers from the area with accessing a range of essential services, to include:

- Access to ESOL classes to improve the capacity for Polish community to access services themselves.
- Support to access to education at all levels, for children of Polish migrant workers to enter schools, for adults to receive training and up-skilling, for qualified migrant workers to access accredited training and education courses.
- Support to ensure that health needs are met in access to GP cover, Dental and Optical care.
- Support to access appropriate social and private housing, including reducing overcrowding, risk of environment health issues, and raising standards.
- Supporting and advocating for the Polish community in accessing rights, including benefits.
- Assistance with filling in forms, and providing a central base where the Polish community can receive advice and support.
- General capacity building for the organisation and the Polish community.

- Development of links with statutory and non statutory bodies, such as the Police, Local Authority, the County Voluntary Council, voluntary bureaux and other agencies in the area.
- This funding will allow for staff cover 7 days a week at the Centre (apart from Bank Holidays) and extended evening opening and outreach work.

## **19. Update on Voluntary Sector**

### Strategic Action Plan for the Voluntary Sector Scheme

Work remains on course to go out to public consultation on the draft Strategic Action Plan by the end of the calendar year, which will allow the consultation to be completed by the start of the pre-election period.

Extensive ‘pre-consultation’ has been carried out in preparing the draft Plan. This has included two workshops structured around clusters of Ministerial Portfolios, discussions with the VSPC and its Joint Working Group, and a meeting with the Whitehall officials handling the current HM Treasury/ Cabinet Office ‘Review of the Third Sector’.

I will shortly be presenting the draft Plan to Cabinet colleagues. This Committee will be invited to discuss the draft Plan in detail, as a main agenda item at the next meeting.

### Code of Practice for Funding the Voluntary Sector

At a recent meeting with Dr Gibbons we discussed reports of instances where health trusts and local health boards are felt to not be providing fair and equitable treatment to the voluntary sector, i.e. actions not in the spirit of the Voluntary Sector Scheme or Code of Practice for Funding the Voluntary Sector. Examples have included contracts for 12 months only (the Code encourages 3 years), and short notice of cessation of contracts. I have asked my officials to canvass their voluntary sector contacts for actual evidence of such cases and I will shortly be receiving a report on the outcome of this.

There have also been similar issues with local authorities. I have issued a joint letter with the Leader of the WLGA reminding all authorities of their obligations under the Code. The issue was also discussed at the latest meeting of the Voluntary Sector Partnership Council in October. Both the WLGA and the Assembly Government have stressed their commitment to promoting secure funding to the voluntary and community sector and this will be reflected in both the forthcoming Strategic Action Plan for the Voluntary Sector Scheme and in our response to the Beecham Review.

### Funding and Compliance Monitoring Report

The Funding and Compliance Sub-Committee of the Voluntary Sector Partnership Council is charged with monitoring compliance with the Voluntary Sector Scheme and the Code of Practice for Funding. This summer, at the Sub-committee’s request, officials asked each Assembly Government department’s ‘Voluntary Sector Liaison Officer’ to conduct an audit of their department and of its grant schemes, to measure compliance with both the Scheme and the Code.

The results of this exercise were assessed by the Funding and Compliance Sub-Committee on 2 October, and then by the VSPC on 13 October. Most departments and grant schemes were found to be complying with the Scheme and the Code. However there was evidence of some non-compliance by some Divisions. For example, there were instances where Departments had not always notified grant applicants of grant decisions by 31 December, and cases where they had not always given the minimum 12 weeks for consultation exercises. As a result, the Sub-Committee has recommended that:

- ASPBs should be included in the 2007 exercise, and that a requirement to take part should be made explicit in ASPB remit letters;
- The exercise should form part of the Assembly Government's Corporate Commissioning, to ensure senior management commitment;
- There should be mandatory training for all policy and grants staff to improve their awareness of the Scheme and the Code.

My officials are currently pursuing the areas of non-compliance identified by the exercise.

## Procurement

At the Voluntary Sector Partnership Council meeting in February, the voluntary sector presented a paper setting out the issues and barriers it faced regarding public sector procurement, and proposed action to address these. I agreed to take the matter forward.

My officials in the Voluntary Sector Unit held a procurement seminar for the voluntary sector on 4 September. This was attended by 39 people from the sector, representing a wide range of sectoral interests. The focus was on how voluntary organisations could compete for public sector contracts, and on the action needed to facilitate this.

The feedback received indicated that the sector is keen to know much more about this issue. As a result, a further event is to be held, on 5<sup>th</sup> December 2006. In addition, Value Wales is to work with the sector to produce a procurement charter for the voluntary and community sector, similar to the recent 'Opening Doors' charter for small and medium sized enterprises.

The Funding and Compliance exercise also highlighted the pressing need for an additional section on Procurement to be introduced within a revised Code of Practice for Funding, and officials are pursuing this. Proposals are also being drawn up for an official from Value Wales to be seconded to the voluntary sector, to advise on procurement matters.

## Disadvantaged Groups Development Fund

As I reported in September, a consultation has been taking place on a proposed new Fund, designed

to provide small grants for capacity building in small voluntary sector organisations representing disadvantaged groups. The public consultation ended on 31 October 2006. We received a total of 36 responses representing a cross section of the Voluntary Sector. Responses ranged from large organisations such as the WCVA through to very small local health interest groups. Officials are currently collating the responses and I will provide a more detailed update to the next meeting. In essence, respondents were supportive of the proposed new Fund.

## Partnership Agreement

Our 'Partnership Agreement' with the WCVA continues to be developed. The Agreement was signed in September 2005 and sets out the terms under which the Assembly Government will provide stable, long-term core funding to 'the voluntary sector infrastructure'. Currently, the WCVA are consulting upon and agreeing Minimum Operating Standards for the County Voluntary Councils and Volunteer Bureaux who now receive their core funding under the agreement. A six monthly monitoring meeting between Voluntary Sector Unit officials and the WCVA is planned for 17 November 2006.

## Employee Volunteering

On 24 October, I launched a new Assembly Government guide, 'An introduction to employee volunteering in the public sector'. The booklet is aimed at encouraging more public sector organisations to support their employees in undertaking volunteering activities. Officials will now be contacting local authorities, health bodies, ASPBs, fire authorities etc to encourage them to use the guide and to establish their own employee volunteering schemes. WLGA and WCVA have agreed to lend their support.

The guide explains how volunteering can help employees gain valuable experience, education and life skills, as well as skills directly related to their work. By supporting their employees' voluntary work, employers can demonstrate an interest and concern for their local community, which can significantly enhance their reputation with both staff and the local community. The Assembly Government launched its own employee volunteering scheme in 2005, and feedback from staff has been overwhelmingly positive. Staff can apply for up to 5 days paid leave entitlement to participate in voluntary activities.