

LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND HOUSING COMMITTEE

REPORT FROM THE ASSEMBLY SECRETARY

Publication of 'Simplifying the System - A consultation paper on Local Government Finance in Wales'

1. On 22 September the Assembly Cabinet published a consultation paper setting out our views on how we might make the local government system in Wales simpler and clearer, particularly for those who use and pay for the services councils provide. Members of the Committee should by now have received a copy of the paper. The deadline for responses is 31 December. A separate consultation is being carried out by the DETR in England.

Inter Ministerial/ Senior Civil Service policy seminar - 27 June 2000

2. At the Committee on 14 June I said I would report back to you on this Seminar which I attended with John Bader.

3. The Seminar was organised by the Centre for Management and Policy Studies, and its purpose was to examine how different parts of government can work more closely without burdening people at the ground level with too many policies and initiatives.

4. In setting the scene for the seminar Hilary Armstrong, Minister for Local Government and Louise Casey (Director of the Rough Sleeping Unit), demonstrated how the joining-up process was being handled in tackling rough sleeping. It had been recognised early on that a cultural divide had to be overcome, and this was set about by drawing staff from a range of different policy areas to work together in a team approach and focusing on specific targets, with the backing of a Ministerial Committee whose task it was to push forward the Government's policy on dealing with rough sleeping. The creation of working partnerships is seen as crucial in developing the joining-up process, both Hilary Armstrong and Louise Casey acknowledged that it was still early days but some lessons were already emerging which could be useful in other contexts. Among these lessons were the need for flexibility, including funding regimes; recognising that change has to be managed, not forced, and that real communication must be achieved both within the team working environment and with the external world.

5. The seminar divided into syndicate groups from which emerged issues to be addressed for effective joining-up. The most important of which were changing departmental culture,

achieving better prioritisation, building trusts and relationships within and outside team working and again communications. In addition, it was recognised that any priority requires an ongoing government commitment and the need for ministers to be in a position to drive forward, in a constant way, specific policy areas.

6. Finally, there was a recognition that if there were to be major achievements in improving the linkages between policy areas then it was important to develop a sense of ownership with those involved, and also ensure that they were empowered to carry forward their programmes. There was a recognition that devolved administrations are able to tackle cross cutting issues effectively because the various government functions and policies are under one roof.

7. I concluded that there are lessons to be learned in Wales, but to a large extent we are better placed to achieve the joining-up of policies because of our size and the way in which the National Assembly is structured. However, the joining-up process is not just about administration or structure but is about achieving an appropriate culture which sees this as a priority.

General Consent to housing authorities

8. In accordance with Standing Orders, formal notice will be given to the Assembly of my intention to introduce a revised general Consent allowing housing authorities to apply three additional conditions relating to energy efficiency, rent levels and the re-use of portable buildings when approving renovation grants under Section 52 of the Housing Grants, Construction and Regeneration Act.

9. The revised Consent would allow: the improvement of energy efficiency to the purposes for which grant can be given; permitting local authorities to negotiate fixed rent levels where they have given grants to landlords; permitting local authorities to re-use specialised disability equipment provided by grant when it is no longer needed.

'Putting Wales First: A Partnership for the People of Wales'

10. I would like to draw the Committee's attention to the new Cabinet statement 'Putting Wales First: A Partnership for the People of Wales'.

11. In the section on Local Government, you will note that we are committed to a number of new policies:

12. Firstly, we will be insisting that council cabinets meet in public except where they are discussing contractual, legal or personnel issues. This clarifies the position after a long period of debate on the issue and means that cabinets under modernised structures will largely have to operate according to the same rules on Access to Information as applies at present.

13. Secondly – and I know this will be welcomed by some members of this Committee – we have agreed that local authorities in Wales will be offered the option, available to the Assembly in the Local Government Act, to operate a modified, streamlined, committee structure rather than introduce executives. This means that I will be issuing Draft Guidance on this matter as soon as possible and draft regulations to describe how these alternative arrangements might work in practice. I should stress that this is not a status quo option. Local authorities who opt for this arrangement will need to show that they are introducing structures which are more efficient and accountable than the old and this will include the need for an Overview and Scrutiny function.

14. Thirdly, we will be making arrangements in order to carry out a comprehensive review of voting systems for local government elections. I will return to the Committee in due course with more details on this.

Housing Revenue Account Subsidy (HRAS) – Consideration on making an Order under Section 8 of the Electronic Communications Act 2000

15. I propose to bring forward an Order so that HRAS Annual Determinations can be issued to local authorities electronically via the Department's web-site and e-mail facilities. I consider that having available such facilities for use in Wales would be a useful and effective option.

Advantages

16. This change will contribute to increasing the use of electronic communications in Assembly business. The benefits for authorities of our distributing the material electronically would be:

- to replace the current paper and time intensive manual system in which we have to distribute a good number of pages of documentation to each authority.
- authorities would have access to the material earlier than with paper distribution.
- material will be available in electronic form for use in modelling and for distribution within the authority.
- the process will contribute to any targets to increase the use of electronic means of communication.

Statutory guidance to Registered Social Landlords

17. I have approved the publication of statutory guidance to Registered Social Landlords on the recruitment of staff for supported housing projects. This guidance has now been issued to all Registered Social Landlords, and it will help them to ensure that their most vulnerable

tenants are protected from people who may abuse their position of trust.

Launch of Police5.Net

18. On 20 September at Hawthorn Leisure Centre I launched an exciting new vehicle crime initiative - Police5.Net. The project is based around the creation of a database of vehicles, details of which are released onto the Internet if they are stolen. It is the brainchild of the University of Glamorgan and Predatorr, a software development company, and is being piloted in Taff Ely in conjunction with the Taff Ely Neighbourhood Watch Association. Neighbourhood Watch volunteers visit car owners wishing to participate, take down their particulars and take a digital photograph of the vehicle. This is then stored on a database and, should the vehicle be stolen, details are immediately released onto the Internet and to the police. Anyone who spots the stolen vehicle can then notify the police. If the pilot is successful the scheme will be rolled out into the rest of Rhondda Cynon Taff and will eventually operate Wales-wide. A report and CD of the launch is being sent to the Home Office and to police forces.

19. I applaud Police5.Net which poses such a novel and commonsense approach to the problem of vehicle crime, which, unfortunately, is still endemic in many parts of Wales. It is also encouraging to see such committed volunteer effort and ordinary people combining to tackle the problem.

Peter Law October 2000