

LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND HOUSING COMMITTEE

MINUTES OF COMMITTEE MEETING

Date: Thursday 7 February 2002
Time: 1.30pm to 3.20pm
Venue: Committee Room 2, National Assembly Building

Attendance:

Members:

Gwenda Thomas	Neath
(Chair)	
Peter Black	South Wales West
(Deputy Minister)	
William Graham	South Wales East
Peter Law	Blaenau Gwent
Dai Lloyd	South Wales West
Tom Middlehurst	Alyn and Deeside

In attendance:

Jim Cowan	ELWa
Derith Powell	Amman Valley Enterprise
Irene Norman	Coleg Lalndrillo College, The Rhyl College
Jenny Turner	Community Agents of Change for the Valleys

Professor Dave Adamson	Expert Adviser
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Secretariat:

Roger Chaffey	Committee Clerk
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Liz Wilkinson	Deputy Committee Clerk
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Introductory remarks

The Chair said that she had received information regarding the arrangements for the summer timetable. She had subsequently contacted the Deputy Presiding Officer to reiterate the wish of the majority of Committee Members that the meetings in the summer term should be scheduled in the afternoon.

Item 1: Apologies and substitutions

1. Apologies for absence were received from Janet Davies, Edwina Hart and Janet Ryder.

Item 2: Declaration of interests

2. The following declarations were made:

- Peter Black said that he was a Member of Swansea City and County Council;
- William Graham said that he was a Member of Newport County Borough Council;
- Dai Lloyd said that he was a Member of Swansea City and County Council;

Item 3: Policy review of community regeneration – Oral consultation session

3.1 The Chair invited representatives to make their presentations to the Committee.

3.2 Jim Cowan outlined the proposed vision and subsequent goals of the National Council – ELWa, which were set out in its corporate plan. The issue of ‘communities’ had been a major theme for discussion throughout the development of the strategy and a definition subsequently had been agreed. He said that community learning was designed to regenerate a community through developing the education and skills of its people and to strengthen the community.

3.3 The different forms of community learning were outlined. Community-led and community-based activity played a key role in engaging those who lacked confidence or experience to become involved in more formal learning at the outset. This activity was underpinned by community groups and bodies which had local credibility, an understanding of community needs and flexibility to meet those needs. At present the systems and structures by which learning was resourced, delivered and evaluated were generally not suitable to developing learning communities.

3.4 Jim Cowan said that by working through communities, community groups and bodies, the National Council – ELWa sought to work with its key partners to find ways to reach those currently excluded from learning opportunities. He outlined their aims in taking this forward.

3.5 Over the next year, the National Council – ELWa would undertake a comprehensive evaluation of existing community learning approaches and activities; review adult continuing education; pilot new approaches to increasing demand for community learning in priority communities and; develop and support the needs of the voluntary and community sectors in learning programmes.

3.6 The following points were raised in discussion:

- The Committee agreed that informal learning played a crucial role in developing the education and skills of communities, particularly learning which comes from participation in arts, cultural, sport and leisure activities. It was vital to use innovative approaches to engage with individuals who traditionally have been excluded from education and learning opportunities.
- It was noted that learning through informal activities, which often benefited the most disadvantaged people in communities, presented problems with accreditation and the quantification of outcomes. Jim Cowan suggested that ELWa should be given the flexibility to adopt innovative approaches and to take managed risks. He said that a credit framework for Wales was being developed which would hopefully take into account the informal training route.
- Jim Cowan said that ELWa had an important role in building capacity to develop individual competencies and social capital. He said that good practice existed amongst providers who were achieving capacity build often through informal processes. These encouraged individuals to develop essential skills and fundamental competencies. A certain level of skill was required before an individual's desire to learn was realised.
- There was some discussion about the role of ELWa in taking forward the Communities First programme.

3.7 Derith Powell said that the community played a fundamental role in taking forward community regeneration. It was necessary to ensure that mechanisms were in place to support grass roots

activity and community involvement in the regeneration process. There was a need to challenge existing power structures which prevented community regeneration. This would involve changing the traditional methods of working by engaging with and empowering communities.

3.8 She said that community development was the process of developing active communities based on equality and mutual respect. This process raised capacity of local organisations and people. There was a need to focus on processes and not merely outputs and statistics. Participation was fundamental to community development.

3.9 Derith Powell highlighted the shortage of skilled community workers to take forward the community regeneration agenda. There was a need for life-long learning opportunities which were appropriate, relevant and accessible. The lack of appropriate community development training would need to be addressed to successfully take forward community regeneration. It was necessary to promote community development work, support practitioners and advance standards.

3.10 She emphasised the need for effective monitoring and evaluation of regeneration initiatives. It would be important to look at processes and not simply outputs and statistics.

3.11 Derith Powell suggested that the current funding schemes often created internal conflict and competition within communities and between community groups. Community groups were under constant pressure to secure adequate funding for projects and initiatives. This was exacerbated due to the complexity of funding streams and application process. There was a need for core funding for community development agencies with a track record of working successfully with communities.

3.12 The following points were raised in discussion:

- The Committee agreed there was a need to streamline funding for community regeneration and to simplify the application process. In addition, it was suggested that sustainable, core funding should be made available for community development work to assist in regenerating deprived communities. There was some discussion on the ability to differentiate between core and growth activities for the purpose of funding applications.
- It was noted that the voluntary and statutory sectors increasingly were working together in the provision of services for young people. It was noted that many unique and imaginative projects had been developed in an attempt to engage with disaffected young people. However, the voluntary sector was often expected to campaign for resources to take forward these projects. It was felt that further work was required by partnerships to develop initiatives, which were aimed at assisting young people.
- There was concern raised about the lack of community development workers. It would be necessary to adopt a strategic approach to increasing appropriate and relevant training opportunities in community development.

3.13 Irene Norman reiterated the need to address the skill shortage in the community development field. There was a need to train significant numbers of community development workers to meet the current demand within the labour market. Firstly, it would be necessary to tackle the lack of qualified community development teachers.

3.14 She felt that credibility, real experience and vocational integrity were prerequisites to a career within community development. It was suggested that cynicism existed amongst community groups and that it was important to avoid tokenism. There was a wealth of existing talent, skills and expertise within communities, which could be utilised to the advantage of those communities.

3.15 It was suggested that a flexible approach to learning should be adopted, which allowed individuals to remain within their own communities and carry out placements whilst gaining a vocational degree qualification. It was felt that the entrance criteria for community development training could be focused on first hand experience. This could be combined with the introduction of a bursary, which would make community development learning financially viable for individuals from the most disadvantaged communities.

3.16 The following points were raised in discussion:

- There was concern raised that communities would suffer if skilled, experienced staff were not available to meet the current demand for community development workers, which resulted from the gain in momentum of the social inclusion agenda.
- The Committee was concerned about the shortage of teachers in the field of community development. It would be important to adopt appropriate measures to attract those with practical experience in the field into teacher training opportunities.
- It was noted that lack of flexibility within the welfare benefit system was often a barrier to training opportunities.

3.17 Jenny Turner emphasised the need to recruit skilled workers to support and stimulate community activity. She said that experienced workers were vital in achieving positive results in community development. Grass roots activists often provided a wealth of experience and local knowledge.

3.18 Jenny Turner outlined the model of support and first step training for grassroots community activists and volunteers, which had been developed by Community Agents of Change for the Valleys. The four principles underlying the practice were networking across the Valleys; participatory approaches; holistic approach and; 'experts on tap and not on top'. This model sought to attract and include all levels in communities, which facilitated the development of self-confidence for community activity. It prepared individuals for further training and the eventual transition into paid or unpaid work to assist in regeneration initiatives.

3.19 The Committee supported the approach to training which had been adopted by Community Agents of Change.

3.20 The Chair thanked the representatives for making their presentations to the Committee and for answering Members' questions.