

LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND HOUSING COMMITTEE

MINUTES OF COMMITTEE MEETING

Date: Wednesday 6 March 2002

Time: 2.00pm to 5.00pm

Venue: Committee Room 3, National Assembly Building

Attendance:

Members:

Gwenda Thomas Neath

(Chair)

Peter Black South Wales West

(Deputy Minister)

Rosemary Butler Newport West

Janet Davies South Wales West

William Graham South Wales East

Edwina Hart (Minister) Gower

Peter Law Blaenau Gwent

Dai Lloyd South Wales West

In attendance:

Norma Barry Communities Directorate

Lynne Schofield Communities Directorate

John Bader	Housing Directorate
Philip Gardiner	Housing Directorate
Francois Samuel	Housing Directorate
Dylan Hughes	Office of the Counsel General
Imtiaz Farookhi	Chief Executive, National House Building Council
Rod MacEachrane	Commercial Director, National House Building Council
Christopher Mills	Technical Director, National House Building Council
Alan Wallace	Coalfields Regeneration Trust
Jill Wilde	Project Manager, Coalfields Regeneration Trust
<i>Secretariat:</i>	
Roger Chaffey	Committee Clerk
Liz Wilkinson	Deputy Committee Clerk

Item 1: Apologies and substitutions

1. Rosemary Butler was substituting for Tom Middlehurst, who sent his apologies.

Item 2: Declaration of Interests

2.1 The following declarations were made:

- Peter Black said that he was a Member of Swansea City and County Council;
- Janet Davies said that she was a Members of Llanhari Community 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: Minister's report: LGH-05-02 (p.1)

3.1 There was some discussion about the District Audit report on Merthyr Tydfil County Council. Members expressed concern that the recent disqualification of Councillors could make it difficult for the authority to respond to the report within the designated four month period.

3.2 Members welcomed the consultation on the draft statutory guidance on local authority members' allowances. It was felt that further consideration should be given to the eligibility criteria for the proposed severance scheme. In addition, it was suggested that a single travel and subsistence scheme should operate across all local authorities.

3.3 The Committee noted that four further local authorities had been notified that their proposal for new political structure had fully met statutory requirements, namely the Vale of Glamorgan, Caerphilly, Blaenau Gwent and Ynys Mons. Information about proposals now remained outstanding from five local authorities. The Minister said that Conwy County Council had been required to consult further before its proposals were agreed.

3.4 The Minister agreed to provide details of progress on the identification of potential sources of funding to repair flood damage in Caerleon, following discussion with the Minister for Environment.

3.5 Members welcomed the actions being taken by councils to inform carers about the carers' disregard in the calculation of council tax. It was felt that promotion of the disregard should be combined with carer assessments.

3.6 The Minister agreed to report back to the Committee on the assistance and guidance available to town and community councils on increasing public access to the internet.

3.8 Concern was raised about the time being taken to approve Communities First funding applications in some instances. It was vital to identify the cause of the difficulties being encountered so that approval and allocation processes could be made more efficient.

3.8 Members welcomed the progress being made in respect of the Communities First programme, in particular the involvement of the private sector through an award of £63,600 to Business in the Community to create sustainable links with community initiatives.

3.9 The Committee noted that the boundary review of Llangollen would be completed by the end of March.

3.10 The Minister agreed to provide a report to the Committee on the outcome of the responses to the consultation on 'Freedom and Responsibility – A Policy Statement from the Welsh local Government.'

Item 4: Consideration of the Welsh Assembly Government's Second Annual Report on Social Inclusion in Wales: LGH-05-02 (p.2)

4.1 The Minister said that the Welsh Assembly Government's Second Annual Report on Social Inclusion in Wales would be debated in plenary on 21 March. The targets included in the report had been reviewed following Committee consideration at the 13 February meeting. Targets were aligned with the Welsh Assembly Government's 'Plan for Wales 2001' and Assembly Operational Plans.

4.2 The following points were raised in discussion:

- The Committee agreed that the report provided a comprehensive overview of the work undertaken by the Welsh Assembly Government to promote social inclusion. Members welcomed the inclusion of more robust and quantifiable targets in the report. Appropriate mechanisms were needed to monitor progress against these targets in terms of both outcome and process.
- Concern was raised about the difficulties faced by homeless people in accessing primary healthcare services. The Homelessness Commission's Report included recommendations for the Minister for Health and Social Services to promote equal access to healthcare services. It was suggested that the Social Inclusion Report should include additional detail about the actions being taken by the Welsh Assembly Government to improve accessibility to GP services for vulnerable and socially excluded people. Dai Lloyd agreed to provide the Minister with suggested amendments to the primary health care section of the Report.
- Members emphasised the need to ensure access to primary health care for children and young people. This would assist the early identification and diagnosis of special health needs such as speech disorders.
- It was important to develop strategies to increase access to dentistry services given the shortage of dentists in deprived areas.
- It was suggested that further emphasis should be placed on the provision of services and recreational activities for young people. The Minister said that consideration would be given to including further information about youth services in future Social Inclusion Annual Reports.
- Members felt that consideration should be given to enhancing and sustaining funding for key organisations involved in tackling social exclusion in Wales, such as Care and Repair and Welsh Women's Aid.
- The Committee welcomed the £2 million available to support Post Offices in rural areas. The funding would be used to cover one-off set-up costs of community Post Offices. It was noted that work was also being carried out on proposals to support the retention of Post Offices in deprived urban areas.

- Members highlighted the importance of service provision to assist children of pre-school age. It would be necessary to improve training opportunities to increase the availability of qualified workers to take forward this agenda.
- The Minister agreed to write to the appropriate UK Minister on the implementation of the Waterhouse recommendations and independent advocacy arrangements in the new secure unit for 15-17 year olds at Parc Prison, Brigend.

4.3 The Chair invited the Minister to take account of the Committee's views on the Second Annual Report on Social Inclusion in Wales ahead of the Plenary debate. The Chair agreed to write to the Chair of the Committee of Equality of Opportunity on the actions that could be taken by the Welsh Assembly Government to improve disabled access to services, in particular shops and post offices possibly by involving the Chamber of Trade.

Item 5: Consumer protection in housebuilding and repair - Progress report: LGH-05-02 (p.3)

5.1 The Minister said that the National Assembly had become increasingly involved in consumer issues surrounding housebuilding and purchase, due to problems experienced in estates in South Wales. The Housing Directorate continued to work with the National House Building Council (NHBC) over the issues of soft mortar.

5.1 The following points were raised in discussion:

- The Committee welcomed the liaison between Welsh Assembly Government officials and the National House Building Council to discuss concerns about houses in South Wales built with weak mortar. Nonetheless, Members expressed concern about the inconvenience and emotional stress experienced by homeowners as a result of ongoing investigations. It was felt that, once building defects had been identified, remedial action should be agreed and carried out in a timely manner.
- There was concern about the possible devaluation in house prices as a result of building defects and consequent resale problems.
- The Committee welcomed the evaluation of the UK Government's Quality Mark Scheme, aimed at tackling rogue traders. The UK Government was considering the pilot scheme evaluation report and the outcome would be available shortly.

5.2 The Chair invited the Minister to provide a further progress report on consumer protection in housebuilding and repair in the autumn term.

Item 6: Presentation from the National House Building Council:

6.1 The Chair welcomed representatives from the National House Building Council (NHBC) to the meeting and invited them to make their presentation.

6.2 Imtiaz Farookhi said that the NHBC was a non-profit distributing company that was independent of both Government and the housebuilding industry. The primary purpose of the NHBC was to assist the UK homebuilding industry and housing-related sectors to improve the quality of new homes. He outlined the role of the NHBC in raising building standards and in the provision of building control services.

6.3 The following points were raised in discussion:

- Members asked about the actions taken by the NHBC to encourage registered builders to adopt best practice. Rod MacEachrane felt that best practice devised by the NHBC was being adopted by some housebuilders, but to influence the industry as a whole would take some time.
- There was some discussion about the comparative level of protection provided by NHBC and local authorities. In exercising the building control function, Imtiaz Farookhi said that there was evidence to suggest that the NHBC provided greater protection to homeowners than the public sector. The NHBC agreed to provide statistical information to support this claim, for example, comparing the number of NHBC warranty claims made against properties inspected by local authorities and those inspected by the public sector.
- The Committee raised concerns about the speed with which identified building defects were resolved. It was noted that the length of time taken to resolve problems would vary depending on the complexity of the case.
- It was suggested that, where serious building defects had occurred and problems remained unresolved, the NHBC should purchase properties at market value. Rod MacEachrane said that the NHBC had been involved in purchasing defective properties, although this was a rare occurrence.
- The NHBC agreed to provide information on the number of resolutions dealt with and the level of unresolved problems during the last 12 month period, including the number of properties it had acquired, together with an indication of the action subsequently taken in South Wales.
- Members expressed concern about the independence of the NHBC and suggested a potential conflict of interest as it received funding from the private building sector. Imtiaz Farookhi said that the NHBC levied charges on registered builders to fund both a regulation service to house builders and the consumer and insurance protection it provided for new

homebuyers.

- The Committee expressed concern about the higher incidence of weak mortar problems in South Wales. Members were advised of the possible explanations such as the incidence of on-site mixing and a shortage of skilled labour. The Committee acknowledged the work carried out by the NHBC to date to assist in tackling the problem but felt that further controls were required in cases where the problem could be traced to an individual building company. Members agreed it was imperative to continue efforts to eradicate the problem.
- Members noted that the NHBC was working with house builders on the design of housing developments to facilitate mixed tenure and to achieve sustainable communities.

6.4 The Chair thanked the NHBC representatives for making their presentation to the Committee and for answering Members' questions, and looked forward to receiving additional information in due course.

Item 7: Policy review of community regeneration - Oral consultation session

7.1 The Chair welcomed Alan Wallace and Jill Wilde from the Coalfields Regeneration Trust (CRT) and invited them to make their presentation.

7.2 Jill Wilde outlined the work and the achievements of the CRT to date. She said that the CRT had submitted future funding proposals to the Welsh Assembly Government to support its work over the 3 year period 2002-05.

7.3 Jill Wilde emphasised the involvement of the CRT in the development of the Communities First programme, the way in which it complemented the community regeneration programme and helped to support sustainable communities.

7.4 The following points were raised in discussion:

- It was felt that funding should continue to enable the CRT to build on its success to date. Alan Wallace said that resources secured from the Welsh Assembly Government would be utilised to attract further funding from additional sources. CRT had established a dedicated unit to identify potential funding providers, including those in the corporate sector and the lottery boards. Members suggested that the lottery board was a particularly appropriate source of capital funding.
- Alan Wallace emphasised the importance of capacity building in empowering communities and achieving community sustainability. It was vital to recognise the diverse needs of community organisations and to take account of this when supporting capacity building. It was necessary to increase flexibility of funding to address the needs of individual groups and organisations.

- Members agreed it was necessary to allow organisations to take managed risks when developing and taking forward community regeneration projects. Learning from failed projects would play an important part in identifying priorities for capacity building.
- Jill Wilde highlighted the integral role of community chests in capacity build. These enabled small organisations and groups to access grants to take forward projects aimed at community regeneration. It was suggested that further benefit would be derived from community chests if accessibility was widened and simplified.
- Alan Wallace emphasised the importance of community owned assets in developing self-financing, sustainable communities.

7.5 The Chair thanked the representatives from the Coalfields Regeneration Trust for making their presentation and for answering Members' questions.

Item 8: Policy review of community regeneration - Consideration of emerging issues: LGH-05-02 (p.5)

8.1 There was some discussion about the definition of communities and community regeneration. Members felt it would be important to avoid being overly prescriptive when defining communities.

8.2 The Committee agreed that community involvement was fundamental in the regeneration process. It was vital to adopt an inclusive approach, to promote participation and to engage and gain the commitment of communities, including individuals who were traditionally excluded.

8.3 It was felt that local authorities played a crucial role in the Communities First programme, in particular in developing successful partnerships. It would be necessary to adopt a flexible approach to funding which would allow communities to take managed risks in the development of regeneration projects.

8.4 Members felt that further work was required to examine the role of voluntary organisations in community regeneration. It was important to recognise the diversity of the organisations within the sector.

Item 9: Strategic Forward Work Programme - Consideration of other subject committees' forward work programmes: LGH-05-02 (p.6)

9.1 The Committee endorsed the forward work programmes of the Agriculture and Rural Development Committee and the Economic Development Committee.

Item 10: Minutes of the 7 and 13 February meetings: LGH-03-02 (min) and LGH-04-02 (min)

1. It was noted that 'afternoon' should be replaced by 'morning' in the introductory

remarks included in the minutes of the 7 February meeting. Following this the minutes of the 7 and 13 February were agreed.

SUMMARY OF ACTION POINTS

1. The Minister agreed to provide a report to the Committee on the outcome of the responses to the consultation on 'Freedom and Responsibility – A Policy Statement from the Welsh local Government.'
2. The Minister agreed to provide details of progress on the identification of potential sources of funding to repair flood damage in Caerleon, following discussions with the Minister for Environment.
3. The Minister report back to the Committee on the assistance and guidance available to town and community councils on increasing public access to the internet.
4. The Minister agreed to inform the Committee of any representations received from town and community councils about difficulties gaining access to the internet.
5. Dai Lloyd agreed to provide the Minister with suggested amendments to the primary health care section of the Social Inclusion Report.
6. The Chair agreed to write to the Chair of the Committee of Equality of Opportunity on the actions that could be taken to improve disabled access to services, in particular shops and post offices possibly by involving the Chambers of Trade.
7. The National House Building Council agreed to provide information on the number of resolutions dealt with and the level of unresolved problems during the last 12 month period, including the number of properties it had acquired, together with an indication of the action subsequently taken in South Wales.
8. The National House Building Council agreed to provide statistical information to support this claim, for example, comparing the number of claims made against properties inspected by local authorities and the private sector.
9. The Minister agreed to write to the appropriate UK Minister on the implementation of the Waterhouse recommendations and independent advocacy arrangements in the new secure unit for 15-17 year olds at Parc Prison, Brigend.

