

WALES ASSEMBLY GOVERNMENT

LOCAL GOVERNMENT & HOUSING COMMITTEE – 12 FEBRUARY 2003

BRIEFING NOTE ON SOUTH WALES PROBATION ESTATE

1. The decision and announcement by the South Wales Probation Board to close some of its premises and change the status of others led the Wales Assembly Government Local Government and Housing Committee to request information on the background leading up to this decision. This note provides that background information. Information contained in this briefing paper will be developed at the meeting on 12 February.
2. The South Wales Probation area was formed from the amalgamation of the three former Glamorgan probation services in April 2001 as one of 42 areas within the National Probation Service [NPS]. As with all other probation areas the boundaries of South Wales are now co-terminous with those of other criminal justice agencies including Police, Magistrates Courts Committee and the Crown Prosecution Service. A number of significant infrastructure changes occurred at the same time including the establishment of a central directorate, new local governance arrangements and funding on a 100% Home Office basis.
3. The South Wales Probation Board inherited some of the poorest accommodation within the overall probation estate. Several premises were structurally dangerous, many failed to meet an adequate standard of health and safety, and most failed to provide a suitable working environment for staff and offenders. The Board recognised the importance of raising standards and the need for estate rationalisation and afforded this area of business a high priority. An initial strategy and bids for capital were submitted with considerable success. In September 2002 a new operational office was opened in Bridgend incorporating a new integrated Head Office. In January 2003 a new operational office was opened in Merthyr Tydfil. A £1.4m capital building project is currently underway in Swansea that will expand and upgrade an extant operational premise and a capital building programme is shortly to commence in Pontypridd providing new operational offices. As each project has become available it has allowed the Board to dispense with unsuitable and poor quality accommodation.
4. In April 2003 all probation property transfers to the National Probation Service directorate. Current freehold and leasehold property across South Wales transfers on that date. Central facilities and estates management services have been outsourced with local probation areas re-charged on a flat rate basis determined by a 'cost' multiplied by available floor-space.
5. NPS have assessed the overall estate as 30% above the required capacity. This is calculated on the basis of 16,500 staff [as at 1.4.03] occupying 350,000m², an average of 21.2m² per staff member. The NPS strategy is to move towards an average of 15.5m² per staff member. This would mean disposing of 100,000m² of accommodation or 36%. These figures are in line with the SR2000 spending review, which reduced the NPS

baseline to reflect, anticipated cost reductions from accommodation space savings.

6. South Wales occupies 11,300m² of accommodation with a workforce of 455 FTE staff, providing an average of 24m² per staff member. The target space for South Wales is slightly above 7,000m² and therefore current accommodation is 61% above the target set in the national strategy. Probation areas have been provided with a working flat-rate cost per square metre of £180. On the basis of this re-charge cost South Wales would be required to pay £2m in the financial year 2003/04. Comparable costs for the year 2002/03 are £1.4m.
7. South Wales is an under-performing probation area in several critical operational areas. The Board wish to improve the quality and range of its service delivery as they believe that in so doing they will assist in reducing levels of crime. They also wish to expand services in line with increased targets set by the NPS in offender intervention, Drug Treatment & Testing and victim liaison. They recognise that the skilled staff they employ are the primary resource available to them and that 70% of their budget [approximately £11.9m] is allocated for this purpose. Expanding services, improving service range, quality and performance requires additional resources to be allocated to staff and they have given this their budget priority.
8. The resource allocation budget for South Wales in 2003/04 was 12.3% above that of 2002/03. However, in spite of this increase the Board was unable to allocate sufficient additional resources for staff growth. They formed the view, following careful consideration of their resourced budget, that savings from the property re-charge was the only way that funds could be released to support the expansion of operational services.
9. The South Wales Board considered the options at their meeting on 27 November 2003. The details of their decisions were as follows:
 1. 2 offices in Neath and 1 in Port Talbot to be closed as soon as current building work in Swansea is completed thus providing sufficient space for staff to transfer.
 2. 1 building in Swansea providing group-work facilities to close as soon as current building work in Swansea is completed.
 3. Re-designation of Aberdare office from that of general field office to 'court only' i.e. to be occupied only when sentencing courts are sitting.
 4. 2 community punishment workshops to close by October 2003 when other premises are available for existing staff to transfer and provision is made for Enhanced Community Punishment.
 5. A new capital project building in Pontypridd to be pursued.
 6. Re-designation of Barry office from that of general field office to 'court only' i.e. to be occupied only when sentencing courts are sitting. Staff will transfer to existing premises in Cardiff where surplus capacity exists. Space within Barry courthouse will provide a 'court only' facility
10. The South Wales Board wrote to stakeholders – Members of Parliament, Assembly Members, Local Authorities, Courts and Police - of the above decisions on 17 December. In doing so they were aware that the circumstances and timing of their decisions did not permit a genuine consultation process with stakeholders. They were

however cognisant of the implications of reducing the number of probation properties on staff, local communities and offenders and are endeavouring to minimise these where possible. The Board are confident that probation staff will continue to service courts, local community punishment projects and community safety partnerships as before and that whilst some offenders will be required to travel further to be supervised they will not be disadvantaged financially.

11. Overall the South Wales Board are convinced that the benefits of expanding staff and services outweigh the disadvantages of building closures. The effect of these decisions will be to transfer £550,000 from the property recharge heading of the Board's budget to staff growth. An additional 22 staff members will be employed as a consequence of this transfer and recruitment for these posts is already underway. It will leave the Board with a portfolio of 5 generic properties each of which offers staff and offenders an improved environment in which to work including compliance with health & safety considerations, additional interview space and dedicated group work facilities. In addition interview facilities will be retained in a number of magistrates and crown court premises across South Wales. The decisions also provide a more effective use of public funds.

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