

Culture Committee CC-2-02(min)

MINUTES

Date: Thursday 17 January 2002

Time: 2.00pm-3.30pm

Venue: National Assembly for Wales

Attendance:

Rhodri Glyn Thomas (Plaid Cymru, Carmarthen East and Dinefwr, Chair)

Jenny Randerson (Liberal Democrat, Cardiff Central, Assembly Minister)

Owen John Thomas (Plaid Cymru, South Wales Central)

Dafydd Wigley (Plaid Cymru, Caernarfon)

Glyn Davies (Conservative, Mid and West Wales)

Delyth Evans (Labour, Mid & West Wales)

Lorraine Barrett (Labour, Cardiff South and Penarth)

Rosemary Butler (Labour, Newport West)

Apologies

Alison Halford (Labour, Delyn)

Officials

Julia Annand (Committee Clerk)

Stephen Thomas (Deputy Committee Clerk)

Adam Peat (Director, Local Government, Housing and Culture)

Margaret Evans (Head, Arts, Lottery and Sport Division) – item 2 only

Also in attendance

Euryn Ogwen Williams (Committee's adviser on the Welsh language review)

Declarations of interest:

- Rhodri Glyn Thomas - member of the shadow board for Cardiff's bid for European Capital of Culture 2008.
- Rosemary Butler- Chair of the shadow board of the National Waterfront Museum in Swansea.
- Dafydd Wigley – recently had a book published under the auspices of the Welsh Books Council

Introductory remarks

- The Chair reminded Members that the next two meetings of the Committee – at Pontypridd on 23 January and Pontyberem on 6 February - were roadshows on the Welsh Language. The meeting on 6 February would be followed by a visit to the National Botanic Garden of Wales. Shuttle buses would be laid on for members on both days.
- The Chair conveyed an open invitation to Members to visit the National Language Centre at Nant Gwrtheyrn.

Item 1: Review of the Welsh Language – Discussion with members of the Local Government and Housing (LGH) Committee

Papers: CC-2-02(p.1)

The Chair introduced the Chair of the LGH Committee, Gwenda Thomas AM, the Deputy Minister, Peter Black AM, Janet Davies AM, Committee member and John Rees from the Housing Directorate. He said that the purpose of this session was for both Committees to

share information about the various housing matters which have cropped up during the course of the review on the Welsh language.

Gwenda Thomas AM gave a summary of the main points of the LGH Committee's discussion with Cymuned on 7 November and its follow-up discussion on the Welsh language on 21 November. These are outlined in Annexes B & C to paper CC-2-02(p.1).

On behalf of the Welsh Assembly Government, Peter Black made the following points in presentation:

- He recognised that the Welsh language is an essential part of community life in many parts of Wales and appreciated that the Assembly's housing policies have the potential to provide support to the Welsh language.
- He said that the National Strategy is a strategy for all the people of Wales and is not restricted to people living in rural areas, or to Welsh speakers. The Strategy also has linkages to many other sectors such as health and culture.
- He outlined the support the Welsh Assembly Government is providing to assist people into home ownership, for example via the Homebuy scheme, but stated that it was for local authorities to decide on the extent to which these schemes are used in particular areas.
- The Welsh Assembly Government also provided specific support to low cost ownership in rural areas, by increasing the maximum equity loan available under the Homebuy scheme from 30%-50%. The allocation to support Homebuy in rural areas was also increased by £3m over 2 years.
- The Assembly was considering responses to a consultation exercise on whether to introduce further restrictions on the Right to Buy and Right to Acquire in rural areas to safeguard the accessibility of low cost housing for local people.
- In conclusion, Peter Black said that given the high proportion of Welsh speakers residing in rural areas, the Assembly's rural housing policies could make a significant contribution to safeguarding the Welsh language.

The following points were raised in discussion:

- There was some discussion about why local authorities have not taken up all of the £1.5m Social Housing Grant (SHG) on offer this year for the Homebuy Scheme. Peter Black said that it was a matter for local authorities to determine priorities for investment and there was no limit to the proportion they could spend on low cost home ownership if this was considered a high enough priority. For this financial year, the Welsh Assembly Government offered to match pound for pound the SHG allocated by local authorities to rural Homebuy. This match-funding was in place to encourage local authorities to take up the Homebuy scheme. Several members indicated that they wished to see an increase in the amount available for the Homebuy scheme.

- Some members indicated their support for the introduction of "welcome packs" to potential in-comers to Wales. This was a voluntary scheme undertaken by estate agents and there was anecdotal evidence suggesting that packs were not always issued. Peter Black said that the Welsh Assembly Government was in discussion with the Welsh Language Board about the production of packs and regional leaflets. The Chair stated that he had also discussed the idea with historians and archivists who were keen to contribute to such packs.
- Delyth Evans AM wanted to express her appreciation of Cymuned's constructive contribution to the discussion on housing and the Welsh language. She supported the need to gain planning permission before changing the status of a permanent home to that of a holiday home and was also in favour of language assessments and welcome packs. She accepted that the Assembly should not limit the individual's right to live in a certain area but said that when there was a conflict between the needs of Welsh-speaking communities and those of in-comers, then the needs of the community should take priority. She felt that the Assembly should be more ready to consider acting in a way that safeguarded the needs of these communities. In respect of the final Committee report, Delyth Evans stated that the Committee should set out its priorities for planning and the language, but should leave it to others to make detailed recommendations. The Chair and other members agreed with this approach.
- Members felt that solutions to the difficulties faced by so-called "heartland" areas needed to be more creative and adventurous than had previously been the case.
- The Chair asked the Committee to consider redefining "heartland areas" as "areas of linguistic significance".
- There was some discussion about the need to gain planning permission before changing the status of a permanent dwelling to that of holiday home. Peter Black stated that any changes to the current position were matters for Westminster rather than the Assembly.
- Members also discussed the Assembly's detailed guidance on planning and the Welsh language – "Technical Advice Note 20" and the fact that local authorities were able to use this in a positive way to help protect the language. The Chair informed members that the guidance had recently been amended and that he would contact Dr Mark Tewdwr-Jones of London University for his analysis of the effects of this amendment.
- Members asked for the proposed date of the next Housing Survey. Officials agreed to supply this information as soon as possible.
- The Chair and members of the Culture Committee thanked the Local Government and Housing Committee for a very constructive debate and for its invaluable contribution to the Welsh Language review.

Item 2: Minister's report

Paper: CC-2-02(p.2)

The Minister updated members on various details contained in the report:

- The report mentioned that more information had been requested from the National Botanic Garden of Wales (NBGW) in respect of its business plan. This information had now arrived and a meeting with the Chair of the Board of Trustees was in the process of being arranged.
- The fourth meeting of Cymru'n Creu was held on the previous day at Treforest. Cymru'n Creu agreed to set up a task and finish group to consider the possibility of establishing a National Sports Museum for Wales.

The Minister also reminded members that she had tabled a motion under Standing 19.13 to authorise a Notifiable Transaction for the disposal of land at Pierhead Street, Cardiff Bay, to the Wales Millennium Centre for a nominal consideration. The Minister explained that this procedure had to be followed because the land was being disposed of at less than market value. The City and County of Cardiff purchased the land from Grosvenor Waterside and conveyed it to the National Assembly for a peppercorn fee; the land was merely passing through the Assembly's hands to the Wales Millennium Centre. By agreeing to release the land, the City and County of Cardiff freed itself from any contingent obligations to Grosvenor Waterside. These now pass to the Assembly. The freehold of most of the site will be owned by the Assembly which will enable it to exert an element of control. The Chair asked the Minister to keep the Committee informed of developments.

The following points were noted in discussion:

- In reply to a question about the composition of the Sports Hall of Fame task force, the Minister said that the Welsh Local Government Association, the BBC, the Council of Museums Wales and the Sports Council would all be represented and have the powers to co-opt other organisations as necessary.
- The Minister was asked to consider additional funding for the Wales in Bloom project, she replied that she was aware of the difficulties faced by the project since its loss of sponsorship and would ask officials to look into the matter.
- Members asked about the possibility of Wales receiving a greater share of lottery funds. The Minister replied that she was having on-going discussions about this with Ministers in other devolved administrations and also recently raised the matter with the Wales Office Minister, Don Touhig.
- Members expressed concern about a recent press announcement that seemed to indicate that the Arts Council of Wales had taken a decision about a National Theatre for Welsh drama. The Minister said that she was not aware of any such announcement but would write to the Arts Council for clarification.
- In reply to a question about the lack of money available for touring theatre companies in Wales, the Minister said that ACW were in discussion with the Arts Council of England about a wider touring programme, and that there were proposals to place these companies on a stabilisation programme in the next financial year.

The meeting concluded at about 15.30 hours.

Committee Secretariat January 2002