

LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND HOUSING COMMITTEE

MINISTER'S REPORT

Flooding – Bellwin scheme

1. Interim claims have been paid to three local authorities under the Bellwin scheme, Caerphilly, Flintshire and Denbighshire totalling £2.1m. Wrexham has also submitted an interim claim for £231,534 and this is currently being processed. All claims for payment need to be submitted by the end of June.

Flooding – Additional capital works

2. Local authorities have submitted bids for additional capital funding to assist with the longer-term capital works, which are required as a result of the severe weather. The bids, excluding flood defence, land drainage and coast protection, which would fall to be supported under existing schemes, amount to approximately £26 million. Officials have completed a preliminary analysis of the bids and I plan to announce as soon as possible what additional funding can be made available over a period of three to five years.

Foot and Mouth – Bellwin

3. I announced on Tuesday 3 April that a Bellwin scheme was being activated to help local authorities meet the costs of additional work, which they had been undertaking to prevent the spread of foot and mouth disease.

4. Under the Bellwin scheme the incident must have a time-scale placed on it. I have initially set this at four months, running from 25 February when the first suspected outbreak occurred in Anglesey, to 30 June, but this may be reviewed at a later date. Guidance has been issued regarding the types of activity, which would be viewed as eligible under the scheme, and where such expenditure goes above the Bellwin thresholds, authorities will receive support at a rate of 100 per cent.

5. Because several authorities incurred significant costs earlier this year in dealing with the effects of flooding, and are now facing additional costs as a result of the foot and mouth outbreak, I have agreed that expenditure incurred during the first financial quarter of 2001-02 will be counted against the 2000-01 Bellwin threshold. This means that they do not need to start counting against a new threshold from 1 April.

Meeting with representatives from the Voluntary Sector on 14 March 2001

6. This meeting was held under the National Assembly's Voluntary Sector Scheme that requires each Assembly Minister meets representatives of relevant voluntary sector networks at least twice in any

one calendar year. A copy of the minutes of the meeting can be seen at **Annex 3**.

Rural Housing

7. Several measures are being taken in response to concerns that the supply of affordable housing in some rural areas is inadequate to meet local needs.

8. I have already advised the committee that I have invited local authorities and registered social landlords to explain any difficulties preventing them from acquiring existing dwellings in villages and small towns, with a view to making it easier for them to do so.

9. The recent introduction of a 50% equity model for Homebuy Option, for use in rural areas, brings sustainable home ownership within reach of more people on lower incomes. To encourage use of the new model, local authorities' allocation of Social Housing Grant towards 50% Homebuy Option in 2001/02 has been increased by £1,500,000, which will be available to rural authorities which are prepared to put an equivalent amount from their basic Social Housing Grant allocation towards this purpose.

10. I am now looking to develop the rural housing policy further:

10.1 Local Authorities will shortly be written to, to remind them of their powers to restrict the resale of properties bought through the Right to Buy in specified rural areas. The law allows the local authority to require the property to either be sold to a local person or for the local authority to be given the opportunity to repurchase it, if sold within ten years.

10.2 In addition, local authorities and registered social landlords will shortly be consulted on proposed changes to the lists of rural areas within which these restrictions, and those governing the Right to Acquire, apply. The Assembly's intention is that more parts of rural Wales should be included and that there should be no difference in the geographical coverage of the two schemes.

10.3 As a further measure, I will be seeking to persuade the UK government to include within the next Housing Bill provisions to exempt rural areas from Right to Buy, on the same basis as the exemption from Right to Acquire.

10.4 To assist local authorities gather the detailed information that they need on the extent and nature of rural housing needs, funding remains available to help meet the cost of housing needs assessments, and local authorities which have not yet taken up this offer have been reminded of this.

10.5 Finally, several local authorities have expressed the view that high rates of second home ownership are having adverse consequences on local communities. Particular concerns have been raised about the effect on the use of the Welsh language and on the ability of local people to buy a home in the face of competition from wealthier second home buyers. As part of the Planning Research Programme (under Sue Essex), a research study will shortly be commissioned looking at the role of the land-use planning system and second homes.

‘Better Homes for People in Wales – A National Housing Strategy for Wales’

11. The consultation period closed on 30 March. Some 65 responses (containing over 2,000 separate points between them) were received from a broad cross-section of housing interests and are being analysed.

12. A paper detailing the outcome of the consultation exercise will be presented to Committee on 6 June. External representatives of the National Consultative Forum on Housing in Wales have been invited to attend the Committee to contribute their views. The draft strategy is scheduled for debate in Plenary in July.

Housing Management Grant Scheme

13. Promoting tenant participation and ensuring continuous improvement in services through best value are central and complementary elements within the National Housing Strategy, as reflected in the consultation document "Better Homes for People in Wales".

14. This year we have made almost £550,000 available under the Housing Management Grant Scheme to local authorities and registered social landlords to assist in their implementation of Best Value and development of tenant participation.

15. We have invited best value bids that are service-focused and supported by tenants through the Tenant Participation Compact arrangements. Bids must reflect the nature of the joint working arrangements established between tenants, tenants' organisations and the landlord organisation, and must make clear reference to the involvement of tenants in inputting and agreeing the bid.

16. Officials have assessed all the bids received to date. We were very pleased with the overall standard of bids submitted this year and with the wide range of activity proposed across the social landlord sector for the coming year in support of tenant participation and best value. All applicants will be notified of the outcome of the bidding round by the middle of May.

Community Fire Safety Working Group

17. At the last Committee I reported that I had agreed to set up a Working Group to consider:

- Hard wired smoke detectors in social housing.
- Sprinkler systems in Housing in Multiple Occupation.
- Arson.

18. I advised the Committee that the Group would be chaired by the Director of Housing, and that I would keep members informed of progress.

19. Invitations to serve on the Group have been sent to:

Representatives of the 3 Fire Authorities

Representatives of WLGA

Building Control Wales

Environmental Health

Representatives of the Welsh Federation of Housing Associations

Representatives of the Police Forces

20. Others will be invited to participate as appropriate to provide specialist information or expertise, and the constituent membership will be reviewed when the item on Arson is considered.

21. Subject to nominees being available, the first meeting will be held in mid-May.

Consultation on ethical framework

23. Consultation on the new ethical framework for local government has concluded. Over 140 members and officers attended consultation sessions held in Swansea, Merthyr Tydfil and Wrexham. A number of detailed practical issues were raised which will be taken on board in framing guidance.

24. Some respondents were concerned that giving members a duty to report any breach of the law by anyone could lead to a proliferation of reports about minor offences, when the main intention of that part of the code of conduct was to oblige members to report potentially criminal behaviour. Others were concerned that some might construe taking part in demonstrations as "bringing the office of member into disrepute", when that might be a legitimate expression of their views. A small number thought that the requirement to register their membership of all private clubs would be off-putting to potential councillors.

25. Other comments focused on the need for standards committee, tribunal and appeals hearings to be conducted fairly and in accordance with the principles of the European Convention on Human Rights; and on how monitoring officers will cope with overseeing the standards framework in all

community councils in their area as well as in the principal authority.

26. I have considered all these comments carefully and will take them into account as far as possible in the model code of conduct and regulations to be brought before the Assembly for approval.

Commission on Electoral Arrangements

27. I announced the establishment of this at our last meeting. I can now tell you the names of those who have agreed to serve on the Commission.

Professor Eric Sunderland (Chair)

28. Born in 1930, Eric Sunderland hails from Ammanford and is fluent in written and spoken Welsh. His subject is anthropology and most of his teaching career was at Durham, where he rose to Pro Vice-Chancellor, 1976-84. Until 1994 he was Vice-Chancellor of University College of North Wales, Bangor. He is President of the University of Wales, Lampeter. He is President of the International union of Anthropologists, is widely travelled and has extensive experience of public life in Wales.

29. He has been Chairman of the Local Government Boundary Commission for Wales since April 1994 and was re-appointed in July 1997 until 31 July 2000 (subsequently extended until 31st December 2001).

30. He was Chief Counting Officer for the referendum on Welsh Devolution in 1997.

31. He currently serves as Lord Lieutenant of Gwynedd.

Jacky Tonge

32. Having started her career as a teacher – and then headteacher – Jacky Tonge was appointed head of the Advisory and Inspection Service in Somerset's Education Department. Subsequently, she became Director of Education at Calderdale and then Haringey Councils. Jacky Tonge is now Chief Executive of Powys County Council, which covers 2000 square miles, contains 125,000 residents and has 73 elected council members.

Martha Ann Eleri Ebenezer

33. A resident of Aberystwyth, Eleri Ebenezer has spent most of her working life in London, where she worked for the BBC and then local government. She has more than 20 years experience as a member, chair or director of various health organisations as well as related voluntary organisations. Since 1998 she has been the Chair of the NHS Trust for Ceredigion and Mid Wales. She served as a Conservative councillor in the London Borough of Ealing for 16 years up to 1994.

Lord Thomas of Gresford QC

34. Martin Thomas QC became a life peer in 1996. Previously he had been a deputy High Court judge

since 1985, having been called to the Bar in 1967. He was a member of the Criminal Injuries Compensation Board and Chairman of Marcher Sound. Lord Thomas has held many offices in the Welsh Liberal and Liberal Democratic Party, including its Presidency from 1993-97.

Mari James

35. Mari James is Director of GJW Cymru Wales, a political consultancy company. She was a member of the National Assembly Advisory Group and the Assembly Preparations Group, which prepared the way for the creation of the Assembly in 1999. Vice Chair of the "Yes for Wales" campaign, she has previously worked at the Centre for Advanced Studies in Cardiff University and is now Joint Project Manager of Welsh Business OnLine. Mari is a regular contributor to radio and TV programmes on Welsh politics.

Angharad Closs Stevens

36. Currently a politics student at Aberystwyth University. Ms Stevens specialises in research on positive discrimination in elections. She has had short-term jobs as a political researcher with Francis Balsom Associates and assisted in preparing *The Wales Yearbook 2000*. Ms Stevens was previously the National Youth & Student Organiser for Plaid Cymru and NUS President at Aberystwyth. She is currently a member of Plaid Cymru's national executive.

Charlotte Francesca Williams

37. A lecturer in Social Policy at Bangor University, Charlotte Williams was previously a student there and has been associated with this institution for 21 years. She worked in local government, however, for 5 years in the 1980s and lectured in Coleg Menai for 2 years. A specialist teacher in social work, gerontology and women's studies, she has also spent 2 years working on aid programmes in Guyana and has had several published works on race and discrimination. Ms Williams is a member of Mewn Cymru and the National Association of Citizens Advice Bureau Wales Committee and Equal Opportunities Steering Group.

Alun Williams

38. Alun Williams is Area Organiser for USDAW (the Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers). A resident of Aberdare, he has served his Union since 1975. He was a member of the Executive of Labour Party Wales for 12 years and sat on the Labour Party Commission which drew up proposals for the Assembly election system. He also held constituency office in Cynon Valley Labour Party for 29 years up to 1998.

Tony Roberts

39. Tony Roberts worked for thirty years in local government, most recently as Chief Executive of Cynon Valley Borough Council until 1996. He is now a consultant with particular interest and experience in economic regeneration issues and lottery issues, and was recently involved with the successful World Heritage Site bid for Blaenavon. He is a non-executive director of Tower Colliery.

Visit to Northern Ireland

40. On 24 and 25 April I visited the Northern Ireland Executive in Belfast and met Environment Minister, Sam Foster, and the Social Development Minister, Maurice Morrow. We had some very informative discussions on a range of local government, housing and community regeneration issues.

Deputy Minister – Mr Peter Black AM

41. Addressed the LGA Fire Conference on Tuesday 27 March. Also chaired the National Consultative Forum on Housing on Thursday 22 March.

Edwina Hart

April 2001