

LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND HOUSING COMMITTEE

MINUTES OF COMMITTEE MEETING

Date: Wednesday 24 April 2002

Time: 2.00pm to 5.00pm

Venue: Committee Room 2, National Assembly Building

Attendance: Members

Gwenda Thomas (Chair)	Neath
Peter Black (Deputy Minister)	South Wales West
William Graham	South Wales East
Edwina Hart (Minister)	Gower
Pauline Jarman	South Wales Central
Peter Law	Blaenau Gwent
Dai Lloyd	South Wales West
Tom Middlehurst	Alyn and Deeside
Janet Ryder	North Wales

In attendance:

John Bader	Housing Directorate
Geoff Marlow	Housing Directorate
Kerry Charles	Housing Directorate
Kate Cassidy	Local Government Modernisation
Keith Ingram	Local Government Modernisation
Douglas Mackay	Deputy Chief Fire Officer, Mid & West Wales Fire Authority
Brian Fraser	Chief Fire Officer, South Wales Fire Authority
Simon Smith	Chief Fire Officer, North Wales Fire Authority
Councillor Gareth Sullivan	Acting Chairman, Mid & West Wales Fire Authority
Councillor David Waring	Vice-Chairman, South Wales Fire Authority
Councillor Trefor Roberts	Vice-Chairman, North Wales Fire Authority
Nick Webley	Divisional Officer Mid & West Fire Authority
John Fitzjohn	Assistant Divisional Officer, Mid & West Fire Authority
Meinir Jones	Brigade Educational Officer
Professor David Adamson	Expert Advisor

Secretariat:
Roger Chaffey
Claire Griffiths

Clerk
Deputy Clerk

Introductory Remarks

The Chair asked if Members were content with the revised agenda that reflected the request by the Fire Authority to take their presentation before the break. The Committee was content.

Item 1: Apologies and Substitutions

1.1 There were no apologies for absence or substitutions.

Item 2: Declaration of Interests

2.1 The following declarations were made:

Peter Black: a Member of Swansea City and County Council.

William Graham: a Member of Newport County Borough Council.

Pauline Jarman: Leader of Rhondda Cynon Taff County Borough Council and a member of the Welsh Local Government Association.

Dai Lloyd: a Member of Swansea City and County Council.

Janet Ryder: a member of Ruthin Town Council.

Item 3: Minister's Report LGH-07-02 (p1, Annex 1, Annex 2)

3.1 The Minister presented her report. In doing so she drew attention to the following points:

- Mapping of child poverty. The Assembly Government's Statistical Directorate plan to publish some initial findings shortly. The Minister said she was content for a presentation by the Directorate at a future meeting subject to the Committee's approval.
- Announcement of Local Regeneration Fund (LRF) 2002-03 - Community and Voluntary Sectors.
- Support for community/sports clubs following the Chancellor's budget statement.
- The Partnership Council met on 22 April. A number of issues had been raised.

- The Community Fire Safety Working Group report "Wired for Safety" had been received. The Minister had approved a number of the recommendations.

3.2 In discussion, Members raised the following points:

- Welcomed progress on the Local Government Boundary Review at Llangollen
- Requested a further report on tracking child poverty.
- Welcomed the offer of a written report following The Partnership Council meeting.
- Welcomed clarification on Communities First Trust Fund Scheme.
- Welcomed further information on Mediation Wales service.
- Requested details on the decision by Torfaen CBC not to accept the public consultation on political structures.
- Requested a timescale for Council tax re-valuation
- Requested that the Minister continue to keep the Committee informed of the number of Councillors debarred as a result of not signing the code of conduct
- Noted that there appeared to be an increase in the numbers of homeless people in Wales

3.3 The Minister made the following responses and offered to take the following actions:

- The increase in the numbers of homeless people was probably the result of changes in the definitions and more accurate statistical data. The Minister agreed to investigate further and report back
- The Minister to provide a note on the work of the "Mediation Wales" service.
- The Minister to look into and write to William Graham on any complaints received as a result of the decision by Torfaen CBC not to accept the result of the public consultation exercise on political structures.
- The Minister to provide members with details of the rules and regulations for Community Trust Fund applications and proposals for publicity.
- The Minister to provide a note of the discussions held at the Partnership Council meeting on 22 April.
- The Minister to discuss with the Minister for Health and Social Services the possibility of issuing further guidance on "exclusions " that may have resulted as an effect of domestic violence.

- The Minister to circulate the guidance produced on Children First to the Committee.
- The Minister to provide an update of the number of disqualified councillors.
- The Minister to provide a note on the implications of the Chancellor's budget statement on support to community and amateur sport clubs.
- The Minister to provide details of LA regeneration non-match funding programme for 2002-03.

3.4 The Chair drew Members' attention to Annex 2 of the Minister's report which detailed the Subordinate legislation programme for 2001-02. She invited Members to examine this programme and, if they wished to consider any of the SIs in greater detail, to inform the Clerk in order for the item to be included on a future agenda.

Item 4: Policy review of community regeneration

4.1 The Chair welcomed Councillor Gareth Sullivan, acting Chairman of the Mid and West Fire Authority to introduce the presentation, Douglas Mackay - Deputy Chief Fire Officer, Mid and West Fire Authority, Simon Smith - Chief Fire Officer, North Wales Brigade and Brian Fraser - Chief Fire Officer, South Wales Brigade.

The presentation focused on three areas:

- The fire service and young people
 - The fire service's involvement with The Prince's Trust
 - An update on next steps.
- 4.2 Deputy Chief Officer Mackay introduced the presentation and outlined the work the Service undertook with young people. This included the Crucial Crew, where young people were educated on the whole range of risks they were likely to face, the Young Fire Fighter groups and the Fire Service Princes Trust Volunteer programme.
- 4.3 He explained that through working with young people, the service hoped to reduce risks both to the children themselves and through their influence on others, friends and family. They hoped to create good role models for the community and eventually benefit by a reduction in arson and hoax calls. He emphasised that all the initiatives depended on volunteers in order to progress.
- 4.4 Chief Fire Officer Simon Smith outlined the work of the service in connection with the Princes Trust Volunteer programme. The Trust enabled young people to develop their confidence motivation and skills, but also provided benefit to the local community. In taking part in the programme, the service increased its profile in the community and provided development opportunities for participants. It also gave the service another route to achieving its training and

development objectives. The flexibility of the fire service made it one of the Trust's most valuable partners.

- 4.5 Chief Fire Officer Fraser warned that although the voluntary work undertaken by the service should not be underestimated, there were limiting factors that prevented it doing more. He re-emphasised that most of the work carried out was done on a voluntary basis. Although the service carried out an education programme that visited every school in Wales, he felt more could be done to take advantage of the facilities nowadays available in Welsh classrooms. He detailed the importance of fire prevention by quoting research figures that suggested each car fire cost society £4000. He believed even this figure was understated. The fire service was keen to expand its community role, both for its own and societies benefit. To do so however will have an effect on budgets.
- 4.6 The Minister said that she has a very positive working relationship with the fire service who share the same values as the National Assembly on social issues. She added that she hoped the Committee would agree that this valuable area should be given priority when her budget comes forward to Committee.
- 4.7 The following points were raised in discussion:
- The Committee agreed that it was essential to fund the important work the fire service was undertaking on community regeneration without reducing the fire-fighting element of their budget.
 - It was crucial that the educational work the service was providing, primarily with young people, be continued and should budgets suffice, dedicated Community Regeneration Officers be appointed to each authority. Presently, there were no statutory requirements for these posts to be created but the Service undertook this work as a moral duty. The consensus of opinion was that the number of arsons, vehicle fires etc could be further reduced with increased networking with vulnerable groups in the community.
 - There was some discussion on malicious calls and their effects. This is a huge issue that the Service is addressing by visiting as many schools as possible and talking to pupils about the seriousness of these calls in conjunction with their fire safety talks. If a young malicious caller is identified, they are visited at home and the implications of their actions explained. The programme also allows for visits to fire stations.
 - The Committee expressed their concerns on the ever-increasing area of arson on abandoned vehicles. The present regulations do not allow for the Service to remove abandoned vehicles. The Arson Control Forum Group is currently looking at the legislation with a view to updating the remit on arson. This is not a devolved area but the Minister agreed to make representations to Westminster.
- 4.8 The Chair thanked the fire authorities for making their presentations and for answering Member's questions. She added that the service does very valuable work for the community other than fight fires.

4.9 The Chair advised the Committee that Professor Dave Adamson's reports on the visits to West and North Wales have now been circulated to Members. She added that positive feedback had been given to Members, particularly in North Wales, and invited the Committee to consider holding the meeting scheduled for 12 June in North Wales. The Committee agreed to this request. The Chair asked the Committee Clerk to make the arrangements.

Item 5: Update on actions being taken by the Welsh Assembly Government following the report of the Homelessness Commission and consideration of the draft Homelessness strategy LGH-07-02 (p2, Annex 1, Annex 2)

5.1 The Committee had welcomed the cross-cutting report of the Homelessness Commission in October 2001, which the Deputy Minister had chaired. He introduced this paper which provides the Assembly's response to the Commission's report. The first part of the report comprises a schedule containing specific responses to each of the recommendations. This is followed by a draft homelessness strategy, which will form part of the National Housing Strategy. It is proposed to publish the schedule of responses and issue the draft strategy for consultation shortly.

5.2 The Committee agreed that a tremendous amount of work had been undertaken and were positive about the way forward. They particularly welcomed the definition of homelessness. The following points were raised in discussion:

- Important that local discretion is allowed.
- Front-line officers require training and guidance and essential that equitably applied throughout Wales.
- What mechanism is in place for monitoring the strategy? The Minister agreed to establish an advisory group of officers and practitioners who will report here and to the National Housing Forum.
- The Custodial Bond Scheme highlighted important issues. This scheme is scheduled for discussion on the 8 May meeting.
- Homelessness in rural areas is difficult to measure.
- Important that homeless have access to health services. [This is a Health matter.]
- Consideration of a television campaign to promote the initiative. It was felt that this would be very costly.
- It was noted that prison policy is not a devolved matter, but the key is to ensure accommodation and employment is secure before release.

Item 6: Review into Exclusion from Social Housing - report on the consultation responses LGH-07-02 (p3)

- 6.1 The Minister said that the review was undertaken in response to a recommendation made by one of the Task Groups involved in developing the National Housing Strategy for Wales which suggested that further research was needed into the extent, nature and effect of restrictive practices in the allocation of social housing. The Welsh Assembly Government is now proposing to revise and update Regulatory Requirements for Registered Social landlords and revise and reissue a Code of Guidance for local authorities on allocations and homelessness.
- 6.2 The Committee welcomed the report although they were concerned for groups with limited access and minority groups such as travellers.
- 6.3 The Committee received an assurance that the policies on exclusion from social housing were compatible with those for tackling rent arrears
- 6.4 The Committee discussed the area of domestic violence and rent arrears as they were of the opinion that generally victims of violence cannot relocate as they are left with rent arrears on the breakdown of relationships. The Minister agreed to advise the Minister for Health and Social Services of these concerns.

Item 7: Waterhouse Report - implications for the implementation of the recommendations of the Waterhouse report LGH-07-02 (p4)

- 7.1 The Minister introduced this paper which set out action taken to implement the recommendations of the Waterhouse report which fell within her remit.
- 7.2 The Chair asked whether 15-17 year olds at Parc Prison, Bridgend were covered by the Children Act. The Minister advised that she believed that this was a matter for the Home Office and therefore not covered by the Waterhouse recommendations. She agreed to raise the matter with Jane Hutt and to report back to Committee.
- 7.3 The Committee felt that on the whole the new political management structures were having a positive impact in terms of establishing clear accountability for children's services and a more corporate overview but it was important that all members should be aware of their responsibilities. The Minister drew attention to work which the WLGA, Syniad and authorities had done on corporate parenting. The Minister agreed to provide the Committee with copies of the guidance on new political structures and the ethical framework as it related to the Waterhouse recommendations and to circulate Children First guidance on the role of members.
- 7.4 The Committee raised some concerns over the whistleblowing recommendation and stressed that this must be monitored correctly and that whistleblowers should be protected at all times.

Item 8: Annual report to Plenary LGH-07-02 (p5)

- 8.1 The Committee agreed that the report provided a fair representation of the Committee's work.

Item 9: Forward Work programme - Consideration of the final strategic forward work programme LGH-07-02 (p6)

9.1 It was agreed that it would be sensible to consider the review on Community Regeneration before committing to any further reviews at present. Members were also mindful that this Assembly term will end in 12 months time and that they would not wish to be in a position where areas of work would be unfinished.

Item 10: Minutes of the 20 March meeting LGH-06-02 (min)

10.1 The minutes were agreed.

Committee Secretariat

April 2002

Summary of action points:

1. The Minister to provide a note on the work of the "Mediation Wales" service.
2. The Minister to look into and write to William Graham on any complaints received as a result of the decision by Torfaen CBC not to accept the result of the public consultation exercise on political structures.
3. The Minister to provide members with details of the rules and regulations for Community Trust Fund applications and proposals for publicity.
4. The Minister to circulate a note of the points arising from the Partnership Council meeting on 22 April.
5. The Minister to discuss with Jane Hutt the possibility of issuing further guidance on "exclusions " that may have resulted as an effect of domestic violence.
6. The Minister to circulate the guidance produced on Children First to the Committee.
7. The Minister to write to the Chair advising as to whether 15 - 17 olds in Parc Prison are covered by the Waterhouse recommendations or whether they are excluded, being the responsibility of the Home Secretary.
8. The Minister to report further to the Committee on how councils are expected to meet their corporate parenting responsibilities towards looked after children within the new political structures and to circulate Children First guidance on the role of members.
9. The Minister to provide an update of the number of disqualified councillors.
10. The Minister to provide a note on the implications of the Chancellor's budget statement on support to community and amateur sport clubs.
11. The Minister to provide details of LA regeneration non-match funding programme for 2002-03.
12. The Minister to circulate the content of the draft guidance on the code of conduct relating to "Whistleblowers".
13. The Clerk to arrange for Mapping Child Poverty to be included as a future Agenda item.