

LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND HOUSING COMMITTEE

REPORT TO PLENARY UNDER STANDING ORDER 9.9:

MAY 2001 TO APRIL 2002

1 Introduction

1.1 This report summarises our activities from May 2001 to April 2002. Copies of our reports, agendas, papers, minutes and transcripts of meetings can be found on the National Assembly website.

1.2 During the reporting period the Committee met 17 times.

2 Membership

2.1 Our current membership is: Gwenda Thomas (Chair), Peter Black, William Graham, Edwina Hart (Minister for Finance, Local Government and Communities), Pauline Jarman, Peter Law, Dai Lloyd, Tom Middlehurst and Janet Ryder. Janet Davies was replaced by Pauline Jarman on 21 March 2002.

3 Remit and Responsibilities

3.1 Our remit is based on the portfolio of the Minister for Finance, Local Government and Communities, Edwina Hart. It covers local government policy and finance issues, housing, urban regeneration and crime reduction. The remit does not include Edwina Hart's responsibilities as Finance Minister.

2. The responsibilities of subject committees are set out in SO 9.

4. Aims, objectives and priorities

4.1 The Committee's aim is to achieve a better quality of life for the people of Wales and to promote better, simpler government. Our objectives are:

- to help local people, particularly those living in disadvantaged areas, develop confident communities, with decent housing, good local facilities and high quality environment, which is non-threatening and free from crime;
- to deliver value for money for the people of Wales, with better and more efficient

services;

- to streamline the Assembly's work and give far greater weight to the needs and views of our partners and the public, including under-represented groups.

4.2 These aims and objectives correspond with those set out in *betterwales.com*, the National Assembly's strategic plan.

4.3 We attach particular importance to:

- the development of a national housing strategy, with a view to ensuring that everyone has a decent home and homelessness is eliminated;
- the modernisation of local government, including the development of new political management structures, the introduction of policy agreements, the development of the best value regime, the introduction of community strategies and consideration of the community leadership role of local authorities;
- the implementation and development of the revised standard spending assessment formula so that revenue support for local authorities is allocated on the basis of a fairer assessment of need.

5 Work and Achievements to Date

Policy development – Standing Order 9.7(I)

i. Policy review of community regeneration

The Committee agreed to undertake an in-depth review of the policy and programmes aimed at community regeneration which have been adopted by the Welsh Assembly Government and its sponsored bodies. The main aim of the review is to make recommendations for streamlining the existing programmes, improving the arrangements for delivery and funding mechanisms. The review included a written consultation exercise that took place during the summer 2001. A number of oral consultation sessions were undertaken as part of the Committee's fortnightly meetings and two additional meetings were held which were dedicated to informing the review. In addition the Committee visited community groups and organisations throughout Wales. Following consideration of the emerging issues in the summer term, the final report, including recommendations will be published in July 2002.

(ii) *Contribution to policy development*

We have continued to operate an open and participative style of working. We have been keen to hear the views of outside bodies and organisations to inform discussion and assist in our deliberations.

In addition to our own policy review, the Committee contributed to the key policy development being taken forward by the Minister for Finance, Local Government and Communities.

Housing and community regeneration

The Committee has continued to support the development and implementation of a national housing strategy, considering in detail responses to the consultation paper *Better Homes for people in Wales* and the action plan, which is the principal means of measuring future progress of the strategy.

The Committee has considered many aspects of housing policy and was particularly keen to support the work of the Homelessness Commission and the Low Cost Home Ownership agenda.

The Committee has taken a close interest in the development of the *Communities First* programme, considering the responses to the second consultation, the draft framework for the guidance and the final policy framework and guidance.

Local Government Modernisation

The Committee considered the report on the operation of the Local Government Partnership Scheme during the financial year 2000-01. It continued to take a close interest in the programme for modernisation of local government, considering in detail the report from the Institute of Local Government Studies, Birmingham on councillors' allowances and local authorities proposals for the new political management structures.

In November 2001 the Committee received a presentation from representatives of the Wales Local Council Forum and considered the role of town and community councils ahead of the proposed scoping study.

Local Government Finance

The Committee continued to take an interest in the review of the local government finance system and, more recently considered in detail the proposed content of the Local Government Policy Paper, which is the equivalent of the Department of Transport, Local Government and the Regions local government White Paper.

In May 2001, the Committee considered in detail Public Private Partnerships and the Private Finance Initiative. In doing so, representations were received from the Welsh Local Government Association and Wales TUC.

Crime Reduction

The Committee received a progress report on the Crime Reduction Programme for Wales in May 2001 and received presentations from the Fire Service in Wales, the Police Service in Wales and the National Probation Service in England and Wales.

Cross-cutting issues

The Committee considered the effects of policies and programmes within its remit on the Welsh language to inform the Culture Committee's policy review. In doing so, the Committee received representations Cymuned on housing issues and the Welsh language.

Following the Committee's discussion of housing for the elderly and housing research programmes, Members felt that it was vital for the Strategy for Older People in Wales to have sufficient regard for the housing needs of older and elderly people. As a result, in January 2002 the Committee considered the housing issues to be addressed within the Strategy and forwarded its views to the Minister for Health and Social Services.

Review of Expenditure and Administration (SO 9.7 (ii))

The Committee scrutinised the Minister for Finance, Local Government and Communities via her fortnightly report to the Committee. The Minister continued to provide alternative oral and written reports as agreed by the Committee.

Review of Assembly Sponsored Public Bodies (ASPBs) (SO 9.7 (iii))

There are relatively few Assembly Sponsored Public Bodies within the Committee's remit. In

the autumn term, the Committee considered the Local Government Boundary Commission's Annual Report and Accounts for

2000-01.

Legislation (SO 9.8(i))

The Committee was not invited to scrutinise any draft subordinate legislation in accordance with SO 22. However, the Committee is given an opportunity to comment on the timetable of forthcoming legislation within its remit, which is included in the Minister's monthly written report. The Committee has been advised of progress during various stages of the development of secondary legislation within its remit.

The Committee considered the proposed changes to private sector renewal arrangements prior to the plenary debate in April. The changes were being introduced using a Regulatory Reform Order under the Regulatory Reform Act 2000.

In the autumn term the Committee considered, and reported to plenary on, the implications of the Homelessness Bill for Wales.

Budget (SO 9.8 (ii))

In the summer term the Committee considered the commissioning paper for the 2001 budget round, as well as the Minister's issues paper. On the basis of these discussions, the Committee informed the Cabinet of its budget priorities.

Before commenting on the draft budget in the autumn, the Committee received a presentation from the Welsh Local Government Association that set out its views on investment in local government services and assets.

Complaints (SO 9.8(iii))

No complaints were referred to us during the reporting period.

Public Appointments (SO 9.8(iv))

Our public appointments nominees were consulted on the appointments of the Chair and members of the local Government Boundaries Commission.

Forward Programme

6.1 Looking to the future, our strategic work programme for 2002-03 and detailed work programme for May to July 2002 are attached.

Local Government and Housing Committee

May 2002