

MINISTER'S REPORT – 22 MAY 2002

Widening Participation in Local Government

On 1 May, I addressed a meeting of voluntary sector groups, and other interested parties in Llandudno, arranged by the Assembly and Welsh Local Government Association, to encourage people from under represented groups to stand for election in local government.

The Welsh Assembly Government is committed to encouraging a wider, more diverse and inclusive representation in local government, so that council chambers are a better reflection of the community they serve.

Another aspect of Widening Participation is providing information to the general public on what a councillor does and the mechanics of standing for local government election. To promote this a leaflet has been drafted, entitled "Becoming a Councillor". I will arrange for the clerk to distribute copies to the committee.

Different Arrangements Regulations

County and County Borough Councils in Wales should all be operating to new political structures, introduced under the provisions of the Local Government Act 2000 by the end of this month.

Sections 30 and 33 of the 2000 Act enable the Assembly to introduce regulations which could allow local authorities to introduce arrangements different to those initially operated under the new political structures. I have recently sent draft regulations on this matter to all local authorities and other interested parties, including all Assembly members, in a consultation exercise due to end in June.

In the interests of stability, I am not proposing to allow councils to change the basic model, executive or alternative, which they have decided to adopt. However, it is quite possible that, in the light of experience, councils will wish to modify the detail of their arrangements in some way and that is what I am intending to allow through these regulations.

In certain cases, it will be necessary for councils to obtain the agreement of the Assembly before changes could be introduced.

I would welcome any comments the committee might have on these draft regulations.

Urgency matters at local authority cabinet meetings

I have had the agreement of my cabinet colleagues to introduce an amendment to the regulations on access to information under the Local Government Act 2000, in order to close a loophole in the existing legislation. I have advised party business managers of this. The effect of the amendment would be to allow meetings of executives to consider matters of genuine urgency without prior notice.

The Assembly introduced regulations on access to information under executive arrangements in the Local Authorities (Executive Arrangements) (Decisions, Documents and Meetings) (Wales) Regulations 2001 which came into force in July last year. The purpose of the regulations was to make provisions with regard to the conduct of executive business to ensure transparency and openness in decision-making.

The regulations included provisions concerning access to agenda and reports for meetings of the executive. In particular, they stipulated that items of business could not be discussed unless they had been included in an agenda published three days before the meeting or, if the meeting had been called at shorter notice, from the time the meeting was called. This requirement largely replicated provisions in section 100B of the Local Government Act 1972, which deals with council, but not executive, committees. However, section 100B of the 1972 Act includes an additional provision enabling chairs to allow consideration of additional items if they are satisfied that they are matters of genuine urgency, the reason for which must be included in the minutes. This provision was not replicated in the Assembly regulations.

Following representations from local government, I have agreed to introduce amending regulations which will allow executives the flexibility to deal with matters of genuine urgency.

The regulations are being made by the urgency 'Executive Procedure' so that they can come into force before most local authorities formally introduce new political management structures at the end of this month.

Looked after children

At the committee meeting on the 24 April, I agreed to report further on how councils should meet their corporate parenting responsibilities towards looked after children within new political

structures.

All social services functions become the responsibility of the executive, or board, under new arrangements. Directors of Social Services are still required but a social services committee is not. Those councils operating the fourth option, however, must make the board, or a board sub-committee, the social services committee. Therefore, the whole question of social services functions is given a very high priority.

There must be clear lines of responsibility, with directors having direct access to the head of paid service and the responsible cabinet member or members. The executive or board must make clear the responsibility for functions, including those functions which have been delegated to officers.

Services for looked after children require a particular commitment from senior officers and elected members in local authorities. Councils should pay particular attention to the *Waterhouse Report* when considering how they will deal with the matter of responsibility for these services. It is particularly important at a time of significant change in the management structures that the roles and duties of officers and of elected members in respect of looked after children are not overlooked. New constitutions must provide robust arrangements for the fulfilment of those roles and duties. The constitution should make it clear what role the individual members, the executive and the overview and scrutiny committees have in dealing with this matter and how reports dealing with looked after children will be handled

Social Housing Management Grant Programme 2002-03 – Project Funding

In December 2001, an "invitation to bid" package for new project funding under the Social Housing Management Grant Programme was issued to local and national housing organisations in Wales (including local authorities, registered social landlords and voluntary housing organisations). Applications were invited against a set of themes designed to firmly link the Programme to the achievement of the social housing vision and broad objectives in the National Housing Strategy, and to housing strategies in place at the local level.

At the time of issuing the "invitation to bid", the amount of project funding available was £860k. This figure represented a significant increase in funding levels, achieved by adding £500k to the 2002-03 Social Housing Management Grant Programme as part of the End Year Flexibility package announced during the last Budget Planning Round.

The response to "the invitation to bid" was very positive with a total of 163 applications being received. In overall terms, the amount of grant requested (£3.68m) was more than four times as large as the amount of funding available. All applications were assessed and prioritised

against a set of general criteria, and for some themes additional criteria were used. These criteria were set out in the "invitation to bid" pack.

During the process of assessing applications and considering what other funding requirements might arise in 2002-03, a group of applications emerged which required notably high levels of resources and might be regarded as "national priorities". These projects are relatively large-scale and have the potential to deliver benefits to social landlords and tenants across all of Wales. To meet these "national priorities", I have agreed that during the course of 2002-2003 up to £0.5m can be vired from the Social Housing Grant Programme. This brings the total amount of new project funding set aside for the Social Housing Management Grant Programme in 2002-2003 to £1.36m.

In April, I gave approval for £878k to be awarded to 49 new projects from 33 organisations across Wales. The funding will support a mix of one, two and three-year projects. By theme, the funding will be allocated as follows:

- £88,000 towards five projects promoting a more customer-centred approach to the letting of social housing;
- £39,000 towards four projects piloting social housing marketing initiatives in "difficult to let" areas;
- £71,000 to two projects promoting Best Value in social housing;
- £110,000 towards seven projects to increase tenant participation and give tenants a greater say in decisions about the management of their homes;
- £80,000 towards five black and minority ethnic (BME) housing projects;
- £69,000 towards two projects for the development of specialist housing information and advice services for people with disabilities;

- £75,000 towards three cross-cutting "health and housing" projects;

- £73,000 towards five projects (including two in rural areas) for the development of high quality, joined-up and inclusive Local Housing Strategies;
- £14,000 to seven local authorities towards training to help develop their Council Housing Stock Business Plans;
- £104,000 towards four feasibility studies to explore the potential benefits and implications of alternative models of social housing management; and
 - £155,000 towards five particularly innovative schemes including a 2-year research programme to investigate the role of community mutual organisations in Wales and their potential to contribute to a range of policy areas; and an initiative by The Royal National Institute for the Blind to give people with serious sight loss better access to social housing.

Following these awards, a £477,000 balance remains to fund:

- some applications from a list of proposals which have been assessed favourably but which require further clarification and assessment (there are 18 such projects); and
- the national priorities of preparing Council Housing Stock Business Plans and Local Housing Strategies.

I will report back to the Committee on further project approvals.

Details of individual projects can be found at <http://www.wales.gov.uk/News/Press Releases>.

National Black, Minority Ethnic Housing Action Plan for Wales

As you will know, at the 7 May plenary session Assembly members unanimously endorsed the National Black, Minority Ethnic (BME) Housing Action Plan. The Plan will now be published and disseminated by July.

In the meantime, my officials will begin implementing the actions that fall to the Assembly Government, and will work in partnership with a range of stakeholders to implement all of the other actions. In the main, this will involve close working with local authorities, registered social landlords and organisations that represent BME communities.

The task of monitoring and evaluating the overall delivery of this Action Plan (including progress on implementation of actions that fall to the Assembly Government) will be the role of the recently established National BME Housing Review Group for Wales. The Group has representatives from the main sectors of Welsh housing and Wales' BME communities. Its terms of reference require it to periodically report its work and deliberations to this committee.

A BME Housing Conference is being organised for the Autumn (in conjunction with the BME Housing Project and AWEMA) to launch and promote the Action Plan to a wide audience.

I will report to the Committee on this Conference and on the wider implementation of the Action Plan.

A key element of the Action Plan is the BME Housing Project (which we are funding through the Social Housing Management Grant Programme). As well as promoting good practice and promoting the involvement of BME people in social housing organisations, this project is investigating the feasibility of establishing a BME-led housing organisation for Wales. The BME Housing Project is making satisfactory progress and is due to produce a feasibility report later this year. I will bring the report to this Committee.

Meeting with representatives from the Voluntary Sector on 29 April 2002

This meeting was held under the Assembly Government's Voluntary Sector Scheme that requires each Assembly Minister meet representatives of relevant voluntary sector networks at least twice in any one calendar year.

This proved to be a very useful meeting where key and current issues were discussed. In addition, a number of key issues were raised which may inform the Assembly as a whole in developing policy. A note of the action points from the meeting is at Annex 3.

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EDWINA HART