

MINISTER'S REPORT

Consultation on draft Local Government Bill

The Office of the Deputy Prime Minister published a draft Local Government Bill for consultation on 12 June. This consultation is taking place on an England only basis because of timing differences in the publication of the former DTLR's White Paper and the Welsh Assembly Government's 'Freedom and Responsibility in Local Government'.

It would have been impossible to properly reflect all of the Welsh requests for primary legislation in this draft of the bill given that the consultation period on our Policy Statement did not end until 17 May.

It is important that the Welsh Assembly Government has opportunity to properly reflect on the responses before determining the way forward in Wales on a number of important issues. I will therefore continue to seek agreement with the UK Government that any measures that fall within the scope of this Bill will be taken into account in the content of the Bill as regards Wales. This is also explained in the Consultation Paper accompanying the draft Bill in England. However, I have also written to local authorities, fire authorities, the WLGA and the community council associations to further clarify the situation.

Every effort is being made to negotiate a place for the Bill in the next session of Parliament, in order to ensure that this can be achieved it is unlikely that a consultation exercise will be possible on the Bill as it may apply to Wales. I will, however, ensure that this Committee, the Welsh Local Government Association, the Fire Forum and the National Association of Local Councils are kept fully informed of developments.

Order under the Local Authorities (Goods & Services) Act 1970

I mentioned in the last meeting of the Committee my proposal to designate the Assembly and two other bodies as public bodies under this Act, in order to allow local authorities to trade with them.

The two additional public bodies to be designated are the Care Council for Wales and the National Council for Training and Education for Wales, both of which are Assembly Sponsored Public Bodies set up since devolution.

In the last two weeks, my officials and the Office of the Counsel General have been working on this Order, and a draft of the Order is available for you to see today. It is called the Local

Authorities (Goods and Services) (Public Bodies) (Wales) Order 2002. As you will see, it is a short order, which merely states that the Assembly, the Care Council for Wales and the National Council for Training and Education for Wales, will be public bodies for the purposes of the Local Authorities (Goods and Services) Act 1970. The effect of this is that all local authorities in Wales will have the legal capacity to enter into contracts with the three public bodies designated in the Order.

I have given further thought to the question of whether or not I should use the executive procedure to progress this Order quickly. I am concerned about the unintentional delay while we were waiting for the Department of Transport, Local Government and the Regions (as it was then known) to progress its proposals for an Order under section 16 of the Local Government Act 1999. As the section 16 order would have removed the restrictions on local authorities' power to trade with other organisations in both England and Wales, it would have removed the need to designate individual bodies. In the event, DTLR concluded that an order under 16 would not achieve the intended effect, and as a result no order was made under section 16. Further, although the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister has included a general trading clause for local authorities in the draft Local Government Bill which it has recently published for consultation, it is likely to be some time before this legislation is in force.

This leaves us in the position of needing to make an order under the 1970 Act as quickly as possible, to ensure that local authorities in Wales are not unnecessarily constrained in carrying out their business.

As a result, I propose to use the executive procedure to make this Order, with the intention that it will be in effect before the summer recess. I will, however, keep you informed of progress on the making of the order.

I have written to Sir Harry Jones to inform him of the proposed order, and to inform him that I propose to use the executive procedure so that the order can come into force quickly.

Councillors' allowances

A debate is scheduled on 18 July on the regulations governing allowances for members of county, county borough councils and national park authorities. The draft regulations have been posted on the Intranet and are entitled The Local Authorities (Allowances for Members of County and County Borough Councils and National Park Authorities) (Wales) Regulations 2002. The approval of these regulations, together with the statutory guidance which I will make shortly, sets a framework for allowances for councillors which both recognises their worth to their communities and helps to break down financial barriers to participation in local government. All the policy issues raised in these documents have been fully reported and discussed at previous committee meetings.

Joint committees

Following representations from local government, I will be proposing an amendment to the Discharge of Functions regulations governing representation on joint committees. The existing regulations only allow members of executives to serve on joint committees if those committees are dealing with executive functions. In principle, I think that is justifiable. However, it has become clear that the sheer number of such committees makes this impractical. In order for these to continue functioning and developing – a move I wish to encourage – it will be necessary to allow non-executive members, or officers, to serve as members. However, they will be accountable to the executive for their decisions. I intend consulting on a draft amendment very shortly.

Petitions for elected mayors

After a great deal of consideration, I have decided to propose a change to the regulations governing the presentation of petitions to local authorities, obliging them to hold referendums for elected mayors. To date, no petitioners have been successful in presenting a valid petition to any principal council in Wales. There were, however, certainly attempts to obtain the signatures of 10% of the local electorate as required by the current regulations.

My fear is that councils may avoid making difficult and potentially unpopular decisions if they fear a "sword of Damocles" which would be constantly over their head. I intend shortly to consult on changes, which would be made in the autumn, which would limit the time during which petitions could be presented to a 6 month period every four years, in the year prior to local government elections and that signatures should all have been gathered in the 6 months prior to presentation.

I feel this is a reasonable compromise between a democratic opportunity for local people and effective and stable local government.

Llangollen boundary review

Following receipt of the final report of the Local Government Boundary Commission for Wales, I have decided to agree to their proposal that there be no change to the boundary between Denbighshire and Wrexham. This has been a very long and difficult job for the Commission and I would like to place on record my thanks for their diligence in the face of considerable pressure on both sides of the argument.

The Commission feels that any possible advantages of a change are outweighed by the administrative difficulties and costs which would be associated with it. I hope this now draws a line under what has been a matter of considerable controversy in that part of North Wales.

Commission on Local Government Electoral Arrangements

Professor Eric Sunderland, chair of the Commission, has written to me to advise me that the Commission has concluded its work and that their report will be published on 3 July, on which day they will hold a press conference. I will be making a statement to plenary on the 16 July in response to the report and will not be commenting on it prior to that date.

Communities First Support Network

A number of Members have asked about the work of the Communities First Support Network. The note below explains their role in a little more detail.

The Network's principal aims are:

- To offer services to community organisations, partnerships and other bodies involved in the Communities First programme that could not be offered cost effectively in every local area; and
- To provide a "joined-up" service between the different member bodies to reduce duplication and unnecessary competition and ultimately provide a better service to Communities First Partnerships.

Membership of the Network is as follows:

- Black Voluntary Support Network
- Community Action Network
- Community Development Cymru
- Development Trusts Association Wales
- Groundwork Wales
- Menter a Busnes
- Wales Co-Operative Centre
- Wales Council for Voluntary Action

Services provided by the Network

It will offer a range of services to help the development of local groups and organisations in Communities First areas. These will be provided where requested by local groups and partnerships and will not duplicate any local delivery. Services provided by the Network will be delivered by the most appropriate member, or on occasion, by another service provider.

These services include:

Capacity building training and support for community groups, including assistance with

community participation and consultation techniques. The network will also provide advice and guidance to groups and Communities First partnerships on techniques to engage Welsh speakers and ethnic minorities in community regeneration processes. For more advanced partnerships, the Network will provide support for organisational development, including advice on the design of projects and business planning, development of community led environmental projects and training on management issues. Services will include peer support, mentoring and exchange visits where applicable.

Capacity building at a local level will be reinforced by a series of closely co-ordinated national information and advice services. The following are aimed at local groups, partnerships and other bodies involved in the Communities First programme:

- a Web Site on Communities First and other relevant initiatives
- a Communities First Helpline (0800 587 8898)
- a searchable database of specialist services
- a monthly e-bulletin for people involved in the programme
- a conference and seminars programme.

The Network will develop tools on issues affecting community regeneration where resources are available, including:

- training standards
- social audits
- intermediate labour market work
- asset based development
- green tourism

The outcomes of this work will be widely disseminated to Communities First Partnerships.

In addition to providing mainstream support services, the Network manages the Communities First Trust Fund on behalf of Welsh Assembly Government. The Trust Fund is overseen by a panel of representatives drawn from the Network organisations, and administered for the Network by the Wales Council for Voluntary Action.

Development of Partnerships

Members will wish to have an update on the progress being made on Partnership arrangements across Communities First areas.

There are ten local authority areas where the development of Partnerships is well advanced and funding has been approved. All of these appear to be making good progress in the implementation of the programme. These are, Flintshire, Merthyr Tydfil, Newport, Rhondda

Cynon Taff, Torfaen, Swansea, Wrexham, Caerphilly, Neath Port Talbot and Isle of Anglesey.

There are nine local authority areas where organisations have made less progress but have shown a clear commitment to Communities First. They have been awarded preparatory funding applications but, as yet, no Partnerships have been established. These areas are Bridgend, Conwy, Powys, Blaenau Gwent, Monmouthshire, Cardiff, Gwynedd, Carmarthenshire and the Vale of Glamorgan.

There are three local authority areas where slower progress is being made. These areas are Denbighshire, Ceredigion and Pembrokeshire. Assembly officials have been in close contact with relevant organisations in these areas to discuss taking the programme forward.

Council Tax bills

At an earlier meeting I gave a commitment to look at ways to improve and simplify the presentation of council tax bills and the quality of the accompanying information in the interests of greater openness, accessibility and accountability for the council tax.

We have consulted with local authorities on this and the consultation has raised a number of interesting suggestions. We are reviewing these and will bring final proposals to the Committee in the autumn.

Edwina Hart