

EDWINA HART – REPORT TO LG&H COMMITTEE – 16 October 2002

Amendments to the Local Authority Approved Investment Regulations

In line with the commitment of the Welsh Assembly Government made in 'Freedom and Responsibility' on September 1st further amendments were made to the Local Authority Approved Investment Regulations. The first permits authorities in Wales to invest for treasury management purposes for periods of more than one year but for less than five and the second permits authorities to invest in supranational sterling bonds listed in the European Union. The amendments were accompanied by guiding principles as to the framework within which these new powers should be applied.

These amendments have been widely welcomed by local authorities and provide Welsh authorities with a significant advantage in this area as opposed to their counterparts in England.

Complaints against Registered Social Landlords (RSL)

The performance of RSLs in Wales registered with the Assembly is regulated by the Housing Directorate. Tenants and other individuals may complain about any aspect of a RSLs performance and service if it causes dissatisfaction and which the complainant considers does not reach the standards laid down in our Regulatory Requirements for RSLs in Wales. All RSLs must have a clear and open complaints procedure.

The Directorate considers the way that the RSL handled the original grievance and the subsequent complaint, and whether their policies and procedures were followed in a reasonable and efficient way and were also adequate and meaningful to begin with. The Assembly therefore acts as an appeals body.

During the period April 2000 to March 2001, the Housing Directorate received 50 written complaints. Of these, 11 were accepted and investigated; the remainder had not been dealt with under a RSLs own formal complaints procedure in the first instance and were therefore redirected back to the complainant, advising them to follow the RSLs complaints procedure. During the period April 2001 to March 2002, my officials received 61 written complaints. Of these, 5 were investigated.

In addition, 106 complaints about local authority housing issues were received by the Directorate over the two periods together with approximately 100 telephone complaints about RSLs and Local Authority Housing Departments. Complainants against Local Authorities are referred to the relevant local authority or the Local Government Ombudsman.

The main subjects of complaints are repairs, allocations and neighbour nuisance. The majority

of the complainants are tenants of RSLs.

Social Housing Management Grant Programme 2002-03 – Project Funding

On 22 May I informed this committee that I had given approval for £878k to be awarded to 49 new projects under the 2002-03 Social Housing Management Grant Programme. These projects are aimed at supporting and promoting innovation and good practice that is capable of being copied across the Welsh social housing sector.

Since May I have awarded an additional £205k for a further 23 projects:

- £26k towards 2 one-year projects to test innovative lettings schemes to promote a customer-centred approach to the letting of social housing that maximises choice, creates settled communities, and ensures that a publicly funded resource remains accessible to those who need social housing.
- £15k towards a one-year project to pilot a social housing marketing initiative to make the local community aware of the availability of social housing that lies empty and the process through which these properties can be obtained.
- £46k towards 2 one-year projects supporting the development of good practice in Housing Best Value surveys and market research, and the provision of tenant training based around Best Value themes.
- £23k towards 10 further one-year projects to support staff training to help local authorities develop their Council Housing Stock Business Plan by April 2003.
- £39k towards 3 one-year projects to support: involving under-represented groups in tenant participation schemes; the development of a Tenant Participation E-Communication Strategy; and the provision of training programmes to ensure good quality tenant participation both at Board of Management and Community Board level.
- £8k towards a two-year project supporting innovative and effective methods of communicating with, and consulting, BME tenants.
- £9k towards a one-year project that will analyse the service that disabled people receive when requiring housing adaptations, and produce a good practice information pack.
- £13k towards a three-year project encouraging and supporting the involvement of tenants and residents groups in action to protect and improve people's health. The project is linked to other community development/health promotion activity in the area.

- £12k to develop and deliver a pilot "Introduction to Capacity Building" course for tenants (configured to Community Mutuals) and a framework to evaluate the outcomes.
- £14k towards a project to undertake developmental work in support of the review of regulation of Registered Social Landlords.

Tenant Empowerment Grant Scheme

The National Housing Strategy *Better Homes for People in Wales* includes a commitment to provide grants to groups of council and housing association tenants who want to explore future options around the management and control of their homes and other services.

In July a Scheme was launched to deliver this commitment. Over the next three financial years £360,000 will be allocated to the Scheme.

Tenant Empowerment Grants provide tenant and resident groups with resources to commission agents (approved by the Assembly Government) so as to:

- gain independent advice and support on opportunities for greater involvement in the management of their homes and estates;
- develop the skills and knowledge to get more involved; and
- develop exciting new ways of participating fully in their communities.

The Tenant Empowerment Grant scheme operates in a flexible way, recognising that the needs and circumstances of tenant and resident groups in Wales vary greatly. However, there is a basic requirement that groups receiving funding carry out an Options Study that covers five basic areas: establishing or developing a local group; identifying local issues of concern; exploring options to address those issues; involving the wider community; and producing a local Action Plan.

The Chartered Institute of Housing Cymru has been appointed as the Assembly Government's managing agent for the Scheme.

Launch of the Black, Minority Ethnic Housing Action Plan for Wales

On September 24 I formally launched the BME Housing Action Plan for Wales at the Coal Exchange in Cardiff. A wide range of organisations attended the event including: local authorities, registered social landlords, national housing organisations and national/local BME organisations.

I used the launch to re-iterate to local authorities and registered social landlords that they need to put in place local/regional BME Housing Strategies by April 2004 and ensure that all of their staff, councillors/board members and key tenants receive appropriate levels of race equality training by the end of 2003.

Alongside this I outlined the support that the Assembly Government will be giving to landlords: guidance; research evidence that can be used at the local level; funding for innovative BME housing projects; the production of a "social housing and race" training package; and a

National BME Housing Conference.

Local Government Settlement 2003-04 - Timetable

I have recently finished my consultation with the WLGA on the timing of the Local Government Settlement for 2003-04. The provisional settlement will be announced on the 28th of November, with the final settlement being announced on the 20th of January 2003.

This is later than I would have wished but is in response to a request from the WLGA who requested more time to allow for consideration of all the elements affecting the settlement.

Looked after children

In my report in May 2002, I stated that I was to provide details of specific examples where, in their new constitutions, authorities had provided robust arrangements for the fulfilment of the roles and duties of officers and elected members in respect of looked after children.

I have now received details from all principal councils in Wales, concerning their new council constitutions with regards the Waterhouse Report. After consulting on this issue, I am satisfied that all the councils who responded have constitutional arrangements which include systems that properly reflect the Waterhouse Recommendations. Only two authorities failed to respond to the consultation but the majority of Councils have satisfactory whistle blowing procedures relating to social services and looked after children. I have attached with my report a summary of the responses from Local Authorities (**annex A**).

The National Assembly for Wales (Returning Officers' Charging) Order 2002

During the summer, a consultation took place with returning officers, electoral administrators and the Electoral Commission, over a draft order for the next Assembly elections. This consultation has now been completed and the order is being prepared for consideration by the Assembly. However, I would still welcome any comments from the Committee and, if necessary, the order could be amended prior to its consideration by the Business Committee.

Charges for services, expenses and fees incurred by Returning Officers in association with Assembly elections are recoverable from the National Assembly for Wales. Maximum and minimum recoverable levels were set four years ago by the National Assembly for Wales (Returning Officers' Charges) Order 1999. The new order will be updated in line with the order for the last general election, with amounts uprated to account for inflation and brought up to a level which electoral administrators feel will be sufficient to attract the necessary polling clerks and related staff.

I have agreed that the order would also include provisions enabling returning officers to reclaim

that 50% cost of providing access ramps which is not met by the Lord Chancellor's Department.

I have written to the chair of the committee to inform her of this process.

Petitions for elected mayors

I have recently commenced a consultation exercise on proposals to change the regulations governing the arrangements for presenting valid petitions for elected mayors. All AMs will have been notified of this.

The Local Government Act 2000 introduced executive-style structures for county and county borough councils. This included the possibility of adopting a model involving a directly elected mayor. Such a model can only be introduced after a local referendum has approved it but can be triggered in three ways:

1. A decision of the local authority concerned.
2. A direction from the Assembly.
3. A petition raised amongst local electors.

The consultation addresses the third of these possibilities. Existing regulations allow for such a petition to be presented at any time and I am concerned at the possible effect this may have on effective decision-making in local government.

I am therefore proposing that such an opportunity would only be available in a six-month period every five years. I am also proposing that signatures should be no more than 6 months old at the time of presentation, rather than 12.

It is my belief that the current regulations allow the potential for undue pressure by a small minority.

Review of preserved counties

As members will be aware, earlier this year I directed the Local Government Boundary Commission for Wales to conduct a review of the Preserved County Boundaries of Wales after the Commission identified some anomalies and advocated a tidying up exercise in preparation for the Parliamentary Boundary Commission review.

The Commission is expected to submit their final proposals to the Assembly later this month and a six-week consultation period will then follow. Following this the Assembly will be in a position to give effect to the Commission's proposals.

The (parliamentary) Boundary Commission for Wales is due to start their review of the constituency boundaries for Wales in 2003. It would be beneficial to them if an Order implementing the recommendations for the Preserved County Boundary of Wales were in place prior to the commencement of the review.

Using the standard legislative procedure, including presentation to Business and Legislation Committee, the earliest plenary date would be 5 March 2003. I therefore intend to introduce the order through executive procedures which could enable the order to be made in December.

I have also made arrangements to ensure that all outstanding boundary and electoral orders are made by the end of November, so that these are also settled prior to the parliamentary review.

Town and Community Council Research Study

At its meeting in early November 2001 the Committee endorsed the town & community council research study and its proposed terms of reference. It also asked that the study report before the next National Assembly elections in May 2003 and that it should be given an opportunity to consider and comment on the report's conclusions and recommendations.

The remit of the Research project covers the geographical extent of town & community councils in Wales; their representation; functions; ability to increase democratic involvement; engagement with policy development at strategic levels; bringing decision making closer to the people; and promoting the well-being of their communities.

The research contract was awarded to the Institute of Geography & Earth Sciences, Aberystwyth University earlier this year. A Steering Group drawn from representatives of local government, business, voluntary and other sectors has been set up to oversee and inform the project as it progresses. The Steering Group is being chaired by Prof. Eric Sunderland.

The first meeting of the Steering Group was held on Wednesday 21 August. The meeting discussed work completed to date and next steps. The Researchers presented the Steering Group with the first of five draft reports they have been asked to produce.

In addition to meeting as a Steering Group, Members also hope to arrange a small number of regionally located meetings to seek views and comments from a selection of relevant bodies (such as voluntary organisations) and members of the public. These meetings are likely to take place in the New Year. Proposed locations are Cardiff, Wrexham, Bangor, Swansea, Llandrindod Wells and Cardigan.

Community Strategies

The Assembly has held three seminars in Wrexham, Carmarthen and Barry to explain the community strategy process, encourage networking and the sharing of good practices. A national seminar is currently being planned for the New Year. The Assembly Government also intends to:

- Prepare and continuously update a report on progress made by community strategy partnerships in preparing community strategies.
- Establish a network of training and support for those involved in preparing community strategies and contributing to the process .
- Consider the need for further guidance on aspects of the community strategy process - on issues such as community engagement, consultation, partnership working, capacity building, appraisals of policy options and the monitoring and evaluation of strategies
- Gain the engagement of Assembly Sponsored Public Bodies and the NHS in the development of community strategies.

Establishment of 'One-Voice' All-Wales Association for Town and Community Councils

Following clear messages from the Assembly about the need for town and community councils to have a single focus for communications with the Assembly, the community councils' associations set up the Wales Local Councils Forum to consider issues of mutual interest and co-ordinate approaches to policy development.

The Wales Association and NALC also set up a working group comprising elected members to chart progress towards a single town and community councils' association for Wales. This was later expanded to include the Association of Larger Local Councils and the North Wales Association of Town and Community Councils. It was called the "One Voice" working group. The negotiations between the associations are making good progress.

The working group has prepared a draft protocol which requires the four existing associations to work co-operatively towards the successful establishment of the new association and ensure that the standard of services provided to member councils are at least maintained at existing, or improved, levels.

The intention is to establish the new association in shadow form from April 2003 for one year. The new Association would come into effect on 1 April 2004.

Communities First

Expenditure

To date over £4m has been paid under Communities First to local authorities and partner organisations to assist them in the implementation of the programme at both the local and national level.

In addition, since opening in April 2002, £225,000 has been awarded under the Communities First Trust Fund to voluntary and community groups to support proposals that help regenerate their area. The Fund is administered by the Wales Council for Voluntary Action on behalf of the Communities First Support Network.

Guidance

To ensure that the appropriate Guidance is in place for the successful development of the Communities First programme, the Assembly has published "Guidance for Communities First Co-ordinators" (July 2002) and Guidance for Local Authorities (August 2002). The Generic Communities First Guidance (September 2001) is currently being revised and will be issued shortly. A comprehensive set of guidance is now available for taking Communities First forward.

Help Desk

A bilingual Help Desk has been established, within the Communities Directorate, and is now open to all those involved in the Communities First process. It operates on a Freephone number.

Local Regeneration Fund

I have recently approved funding of almost £2.5 million for a wide range of community and voluntary sector projects under the Local Regeneration Fund. A total of 12 projects have been agreed, a number of which are located in Community First areas. Examples of the projects are as follows:

i An innovative recycling project in Rhyl West which develops

people's skills and provides jobs in Wales's most deprived

ward.

ii A community local enterprise scheme being developed by

Garnyschan Partnership in Torfaen which aims to find work opportunities for the economically inactive.

iii A cultural regeneration project to help sustain the Townhill regeneration scheme.

iv A community energy project in Gwaen Cae Gurwen which provides local people and businesses with reduced energy costs and contributes to environmental sustainability.

v A skills development project for socially and economically excluded women in Cwmafan.

vi A Music and Sound Experience workshop in Old Colwyn to help support the regeneration process.

vii Renovation of Ogmores Residential Centre to improve facilities for socially disadvantaged young people.

Others approved included extensions to existing successful projects such as a community warden scheme in Merthyr Tydfil; a furniture recycling scheme in Castle Ward, Swansea; a community warden scheme in Rhyl and Denbighshire; the county voluntary council information service in Flintshire; and community enterprise advisory services in the Amman Valley.

There were several other potentially good projects submitted which I would have liked to have also supported. My officials are working with applicants to develop these further.

Post Office Development Fund

I am considering proposals to support post offices in deprived and/or isolated communities across Wales. The Fund is aimed at helping to maintain the current network of post offices and develop their role and the services they provide by linking their activity with other community facilities such as credit unions, community shops and the provision of benefits information.

Non-Domestic Rating Contributions (Wales) (Amendment) Regulations 2002

I have agreed to make amendment regulations regarding the rules that councils apply in calculating their provisional contributions to the Assembly's non-domestic rating pool. The amendments are made annually and these regulations will enable councils to calculate correctly their non-domestic rating contributions for 2003-04. Draft regulations are being prepared and we will forward them to local authorities for information in due course.

I have also written to Sir Harry Jones informing of the amendment.