

MINUTES LGH-14-02 (mins)

LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND HOUSING COMMITTEE

Date: WEDNESDAY 30TH OCTOBER 2002

Time: 09.30 - 12.50

Venue: COMMITTEE ROOM 2, NATIONAL ASSEMBLY BUILDING

Attendance:

Members

Gwenda Thomas (Chair)	Neath
Peter Black	South Wales West
William Graham	South Wales East
Edwina Hart (Minister) from 10.00am	Gower
Pauline Jarman	South Wales Central
Peter Law	Blaenau Gwent
Dai Lloyd	South Wales West
Tom Middlehurst	Alyn & Deeside
Janet Ryder	North Wales
Dafydd Wigley for Item 5	Caernarfon
Ann Jones for Item 6	Vale of Clwyd

In attendance

John Bader	Director of Housing
Francois Samuel	Housing Directorate
John Rees	Housing Directorate
Maria Messon	Black Voluntary Sector Network Wales
Tony Hendrickson	Black Voluntary Sector Network Wales
Anthony Snow	District Audit
Angela Evans	District Audit
Dr Robert Smith	Cardiff University
Carey Wood-Duffy	NACAB Cymru
Alun Gruffudd	NACAB Cymru

Secretariat

Roger Chaffey	Clerk
Claire Griffiths	Deputy Clerk

9.30am to 9.30am

Item 1: Introduction, apologies, substitutions and declarations of interest

1. The Chair welcomed the Committee and members of the public.
2. The Chair advised that the agenda had been amended to enable Committee to hear evidence from the Black Voluntary Sector Network Wales on the policy review and in recognition that the Minister does not traditionally participate in policy review sessions.
3. The Chair referred to last week's plenary debate on the Committee's review of Community Regeneration.
4. The Chair advised that all arrangements had been finalised for the formal meeting

and visits in North Wales on 7 November. The itinerary will be forwarded to members shortly.

1.5 The Chair asked Members for declarations of interest, in accordance with Standing Order 4.5.

The following declarations were made:

- Peter Black, a Member of Swansea City and County Council and his wife works for a Registered Social Landlord
- William Graham, a Member of Newport City and 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

9.35am to 10.00am

Item 2: Policy Review - Presentation from Black Voluntary Sector Network Wales

2.1 The Chair welcomed Maria Messon and Tony Hendrickson from the Black Voluntary Sector Network Wales and asked them to make their presentation as part of the Committee's policy review.

2. The main aim of the work of the Black Voluntary Sector Network Wales (BVSNW) is to create awareness amongst black and other ethnic communities in Wales and help people from these groups focus on community regeneration and help them to become integrated into the community as a whole rather than as a community within a community. Considerable achievements have been made but there is still a long way to go to achieve this aim and remove the barriers that exist with culture differences, language barriers, combating racial harassment and isolating marginalisation. BVSNW said that the organisation did not have sufficient capacity to reach all black and ethnic communities in Wales and highlighted North Wales as an area they could not get to very often. Funding was also an issue that restricts a Wales wide presence.
3. Members made the following points:

- Generally felt that South Wales Valleys had not encountered too many racial abuse cases although, sadly, there had been an increase in this trend over recent times particularly in isolated areas. Many organisations that work in the race fields tend to be located in large conurbation's and it was suggested that organisations become proactive rather than reactive to issues.
- How do you encourage people to participate in regenerating their own community?
- What networks exist throughout Wales as a whole?

2. The following points were made in response:

- Feel training is a key issue to engage people taking part in regenerating their community. Training is delivered in many ways and one effective way is through the family. Training has also been tailored through women's groups, places of worship and learning points.
- The Commission for Racial Equality exists to support the whole of Wales but there are numerous smaller groups who all form part of the support network. BVSNW appreciate that a lot of work still needs to be done but need financial support to enable them to increase capacity to be able to achieve this.

2.5 The Chair thanked the presenters for their presentation and invited them to write to the Clerk with any other views they may wish to be considered as part of the policy review.

10.00am to 10.30am

Item 3: Minister's Report

1. The Chair welcomed the Minister to the meeting and thanked her for co-operation in agreeing to the departure from normal practice in the agenda. She also thanked the Minister for her positive response to the recommendations contained in the policy review.
2. The Minister presented her report. In doing so she highlighted the following:
 - She advised William Graham that she had not been able to respond to him on Special Grants as she was looking at all envisaged special grants for 2003-04 and would attach a report to her next written report.
 - She reported that following representations to the Home Office on additional funding for the TASC project, confirmation had been received that an additional £125k would be available.
 - She advised that she has made £500k available to the Post Office Deprivation Fund to assist those offices in deprived and isolated areas. She said she was happy to send

details of the Scheme to Members.

- She advised that the Code of Guidance on the review of lettings contained in the Homelessness Act had been redrafted and would be issued for consultation and Committee would be invited to consider in November.
- On the review of rural Homebuy, she said that Gwynedd had been selected as a case study from which conclusions on the need for a wider review would be drawn. Gwynedd had been chosen because it exhibits a wide range of housing supply and demand conditions, has the largest Homebuy programme in Wales and has a significant proportion of Welsh speaking residents. She added that any further investigation/study suggested by the review would include all rural areas and that any changes to existing arrangements would be subject to consultation with all other authorities.
- She advised that she had chaired a meeting of the Partnership Council on 21 October and reported on the issues raised.

1. Peter Black, as Deputy Minister, reported on the steps taken in response to the Stonewall Report on homelessness amongst young lesbian, gay and bisexual people. Following a meeting with the Triangle Housing Association and the Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Forum, Cymru, it was agreed that proposals should be drawn up for a research project to explore the particular problems facing young people in Wales.

2. Members made the following comments on the report:

- William Graham thanked the Minister for her commitment on the special grants.
- Members welcomed the announcement on the additional funding for the TASC project and it was suggested that a press notice be issued.
- Members welcomed the funding for the Post Office Development Fund and felt it was a positive move.
- Members welcomed the study onto the Homebuy scheme and were pleased that Gwynedd had been chosen as a number of housing issues highlighted in the Culture Committee's report on the Welsh language were prevalent in this area. The Minister was asked if Housing Associations would be included in the study, as they would have a large impact on the housing pattern.
- Members thanked the Minister for her update from the Partnership Council and welcomed her agreement to provide a written report at future meetings.
- The Minister was asked whether she had been able to progress simplifying Members Allowances under the Regulations.
- The Minister was asked if the alterations to the formula affecting the rate support grant will be changed in 1 year or phased in over 2 years.
- The Minister was asked to confirm which index would be used to determine the deprivation fund.

1. In response, the Minister stated that:

- She appreciated that the Chair had welcomed her suggestion to invite the Sub-Postmasters and the Communication Workers Union to Committee to give their interpretations of future postal service plans.
- On Homebuy, she said she would look at the evidence presented in the results from the pilot study and then further consider the future development of the Scheme. She added that she felt housing needs must be considered on local basis.
- She said that she had noted the concerns raised over Members Allowances and this had been raised with her from LA's. She said she would welcome an opportunity to review the Regulations to ascertain if anomalies could be dealt with.
- She advised that the WLGA had requested changes to the rate support grant formulas be phased in over 2 years.
- She said that she would probably use the index used when determining the Communities First programme/areas but was continuing to take advice from officials on the matter.

Action Points

- The Minister to attach a report on envisaged special grants for 2003-04 to her next written report.
- The Minister to send details of the Post Office Development Fund to Members.
- The Minister to provide a paper on the Code of Guidance on the review of policy on lettings (resulting from the Homelessness Act)
- The Minister to provide members with a written report from the last meeting of the Partnership Council.
- The Minister to consider with the WLGA a paper on the change in arrangements for libraries, museums and archives.
- The Minister to provide Members with details of the deprivation grant (including the indicators to be used).
- Information previously supplied to William Graham on the Non-Domestic Ratings Regulations as a result of the 16 October Committee meeting to be circulated to all members.

10.30am to 10.50am

**Item 4: Implementing Issues of Rethinking Construction
LGH-14-02(p.1)**

4.1 The Minister presented the paper.

2. Members raised the following points:

- Could the Minister clarify whether the report is a direction or guidance ie was it mandatory or advisory?
- Would capital projects fail to proceed if they failed to adopt the guidance?
- Does the Assembly Construction Forum have any constitutional and resource responsibility?
- Does the guidance promote energy conservation and use of energy initiatives?
- A reference to the lack of regional identity in building design was made, as all new buildings appear to be of the same design.
- Members were concerned about the shortage of skilled labour and lack of apprenticeships in the construction industry.

2. In response, the Minister said:

- She would ensure that any PFI schemes she was asked to consider would follow the guidance.
- She clarified that the report is guidance. Francois Samuel added that the industry is in a process of cultural change that would be a gradual process starting at the procurement cycle.
- The Assembly Construction Forum constitutes a focus group and it has been proposed that it take a more forward role under the auspices of the procurement policy of the Assembly. The Group has no resource implications. It is proposed to increase its profile.
- She said that the Environment Minister was considering the energy aspects of Rethinking Construction.
- The Minister noted concerns over regional identity and building design and agreed to raise with housebuilders.
- She said that the shortage of skilled labour was a serious issue and one in which she had held discussions with the industry. Together with the lack of apprenticeships, she had discussed with the Minister for Education and Lifelong Learning, UCAAT, Elwa the Trade Unions and the industry and suggested that Committee invite UCAAT and the trade unions to give evidence in the New Year.

4.4 The Chair agreed to consider inviting representatives from UCAAT and the trade unions to a future meeting to discuss the aspects raised.

Action Points

- The Minister to raise concerns over regional identity with housebuilders
- The Clerk to invite representatives from UCAAT and the trade unions to a future meeting

10.55am to 11.10am

The Committee agreed to break for 15 minutes.

11.10am to 11.40am

Item 5: Housing Issues raised in Culture Committee's Review of the Welsh Language

LGH-14-02(p.2)

5.1 The Chair welcomed Dafydd Wigley AM to Committee for this item.

5.2 The Minister presented the paper which gave an overview of the housing issues raised in the Culture Committee's policy review of the Welsh language, "Our language: Its future". She said that the Welsh Assembly Government appreciates that the use of Welsh is central to life in many parts of Wales and she agreed with the Culture Committee's view that there should be no distinction between housing applicants on linguistic ability. She reiterated the points made earlier (Paragraph) about the rural Homebuy scheme and noted that in some areas the current limit on the price of houses in the scheme was below the actual cost of the homes.

3. Members welcomed the report and endorsed its findings. They made the following points:

- Whole question of housing is a fundamental issue and all organisations with an interest must work together.

- The merits of the Homebuy scheme were discussed and the Minister was asked to consider the threshold price and include the availability of rented accommodation.
- The welcome packs were acknowledged to be a useful tool to assist people but it was felt that their availability needed to be advertised more widely.
- The Minister was asked to consider increasing the funding available under the Social Housing Grant.
- Reference was made to a recent paper issued to all members of Committee from Cymdeithas yr Iaith Gymraeg on the Culture Committee's report and the request that the Minister meet with them.
- Dafydd Wigley thanked the Chair for allowing him to attend and said that he was pleased with the on-going work in this area. He welcomed the Homebuy scheme and the review and hoped that the findings would enable the threshold to be increased.

3. In response, the Minister said:

- She noted all comments on the Homebuy scheme but reiterated her earlier comments about the study being undertaken in Gwynedd and that she would consider amending the scheme once the results had been evaluated.
- She said that she had retained the commitment to the Social Housing Grant and that Local Authorities had room to manoeuvre on how they allocated the funding.
- She said that it was not possible to meet with all lobbying groups but she was aware that other Ministers had met with Cymdeithas yr Iaith Gymraeg.

11.40am to 11.50am

Item 6: Report of the Community Fire Safety Working Group LGH-14-02(p.3)

6.1 The Chair welcomed Ann Jones AM to Committee for this item.

6.2 The Minister presented the paper which provided an update on the progress of the work of the Community Fire Safety Working Group and its draft report on arson in Wales entitled "Up in Flames". She said that she would welcome the Committee's views on the report, as she would be responding to concerns raised by the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister. She felt that Wales needed an all-Wales strategy to tackle the problem of arson.

6.3 Members raised the following points in discussion:

- The report was welcomed and it was agreed that this increasing problem be best tackled by an all-Wales strategy as recommended.

- It was noted that the Fire Service had been included as a Statutory Partner which was welcomed as a useful development.
- The reference to sexual abuse (paragraph 3.7) was noted and it was suggested that the working group consider a wider consultation to the lay sector. It was also noticed that there were no female members on the working group. It was suggested that the wider social impact be considered as part of the *Supporting Parents and Parents in Wales* Strategy announced by the Minister for Health and Social Services on 23 October.
- Peter Black said that he visited a new building on the Sandfields estate in Port Talbot recently, which was the first of its kind to have incorporated sprinklers in its construction. Members agreed that it was important that sprinklers were incorporated into new buildings.
- Ann Jones said that she commended the reports initiatives and added that she hoped the Fire Service and its partners would consider installing sprinklers in all schools. Schools especially were a target for arson and caused untold damage arising to the pupils, building, community and LA.

6.4 The Minister thanked Members for their support and said she would consider their points when responding to the office of the Deputy Prime Minister.

Action Point

- Officials to examine the prospects of the installation of sprinklers in schools.
- Officials to examine the possibility of the Community Fire Safety Working Group broaden its social impact by linking with the Supporting Parenting Initiative announced by Jane Hutt. The Minister to report back to Committee

11.50am to 12.30pm

Item 7: Presentation into the Management of Rent Arrears by Social Landlords

7.1 The Chair welcomed Anthony Snow and Angela Evans from the District Audit and Dr Robert Smith from Cardiff University.

2. The Minister said that the study had been carried out by the Audit Commission in Wales and Cardiff University and jointly funded by the Audit Commission in Wales and the Welsh Assembly Government. She added that the aim of the study was to show the national picture in Wales of rent arrears and to produce a guide for LA's and Housing Associations to help them manage rent arrears.
3. A copy of the presentation is attached at Annex 1. Members also received a

briefing paper in advance of the meeting and the interim report was circulated on 31 October. The full report and guidance is due to being published at the end of November.

4. The Minister said that some of the recommendations were a matter for the UK Government especially those relating to Housing Benefit. She invited Members views to enable her to lobby Andrew Smith MP at the Department of Work and Pensions. She added that the Welsh Assembly Government would be discussing the report with the WLGA amongst others in the sector before making a decision on the recommendations contained in the report. She acknowledged that current rules and regulations relating to benefits were not helpful.
5. Members raised the following points:

- On multiple means testing, could the Benefits Agency be asked to consider why there is a delay when assessing both Income Support and Housing Benefit claims. Members supported a simplification of the Housing benefit system.
- Members were concerned that arrears be contributed to one person in a relationship and should the relationship break down, the person left in the home be saddled with the arrears which causes problems should that person wish to transfer to a different house.
- It was felt that the earlier problems are tackled the better for all sectors involved. Eviction inevitably leads to homelessness or temporary housing - neither of which is ideal.
- It was noted that people who incur rent arrears needed to be treated compassionately as the whole issue of arrears, eviction, court cases just extends the misery and poverty involved in these cases. It was questioned whether the demise of the traditional rent collectors had contributed to the arrears problem.
- Members agreed that the management of rent arrears required looking at and improving.
- It was noted that there had been an increase in arrears of £5m from 1999 to 2002. The District Audit was asked what effect rent levels had on arrears.

2. In response, the District Audit said that:

- They fully supported the on-going push by LA's to ensure the collection of information was used more than once as this proved to be more cost-effective and placed less pressure on individuals.
- They felt that it was inevitable that one named person was saddled with arrears but that realistic repayment plans should be negotiated and on that basis, people could transfer and/or become tenants again.
- It was acknowledged that flexible methods of rent collection could be employed to maximise rent payment. That was a management issue.
- It was acknowledged that rent levels had an impact on rent arrears with figures showing that generally LA tenants were 4 weeks in arrears compared with Housing Association tenants who were 3 weeks behind.

7.4 The Minister said that she would consider the report and the points raised in discussion before writing to Andrew Smith MP.

Action Point

- The Minister to consider the report following publication at the end of November and the points raised in discussion before writing to Andrew Smith MP.

12.30pm to 12.50pm

Item 8: Presentation by National Association of Citizen Advice Bureaux - Wales

8.1 The Chair welcomed Carey Wood-Duffy and Alun Gruffudd from the National Association of Citizen Advice Bureaux - Wales and invited them to make their presentation.

2. The presentation focused on the role and services provided by the CAB service in Wales and also highlighted the role NACAB - Cymru play in social policy. A copy of the presentation is attached at Annex 2 and Members received an information pack on 31 October.
3. Carey Wood-Duffy wished to formally record NACAB - Cymru's thanks to the Minister for encouraging initial discussion between themselves and the WLGA. She said that considerable headway had been made but there was still a considerable way to go.
4. Members were in agreement that the CAB plays an important role in the Community and provide a first class service. It was noted that the methods of funding differ from LA to LA and that core funding support was required. The important contribution made to social policy was noted and the Minister was asked to note.
5. Dai Lloyd said that a Bureau opened in his GP surgery in Forestfach 10 years ago and in their first year secured benefits worth £71k for local people. He added that this had happened year after year and emphasised the valuable work done by the CAB.
6. The Chair referred to the Outreach service and the branch that had recently opened in Gwaun Cae Gurwen and that it was already making a difference to

people's lives.

7. In conclusion, Alun Gruffudd said that the social policy work was an area NACAB wished to expand into and advised Members of his role as Assembly Liaison Officer for NACAB.

Action Points

- The Secretariat to send a copy of the Policy Review Report to NACAB - Cymru

Item 9: Minutes of previous meeting:

LGH-1302 (mins)

9.1 The Committee ratified the minutes of the previous meeting subject to the following amendments.

- *Members attendance* - Amend Rosemary Butler to read Tom Middlehurst
- *Paragraph 2.5 (final bullet)* - Janet Ryder asked the Minister to copy that correspondence to all members
- *Paragraph 3.3 (opening sentence)* - amend to read The majority of members welcomed...
- *Paragraph 3.3 (bullet 8)* - amend substance misuse to intensive policing
- *Paragraph 3.4 (bullet 8)* - amend substance misuse to intensive policing

9.2 A discussion took place about the minutes. It was pointed out that the Assembly had decided that minutes of Committee meetings are not intended to be verbatim reports. It was therefore suggested that if a Member wished a particular point to be minuted they should inform the meeting of their request.

Closing Remark

The Chair reminded Members that Jamie Netto, Minister for Housing and elected member of the Gibraltar House of the Assembly, was visiting the Assembly on 11 and 12 November and that an invitation to Committee Members had been issued to join Mr Netto for an informal buffet lunch on 11 November.

Committee Secretariat

October 2002