

LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND HOUSING COMMITTEE

Date: Wednesday 30 October 2002

Venue: Committee Room 2, National Assembly for Wales

Title: **Housing Issues raised in Culture Committee's review of the Welsh language**

Purpose

1. To provide the Committee with details of the housing issues raised in the Culture Committee's policy review of the Welsh language, "Our language: Its future".

Summary/Recommendations

2. The paper gives an overview of the housing issues raised in the Culture Committee's report. The Committee is invited to endorse the actions being taken to develop the various housing initiatives listed in the paper.

Timing

3. This paper is to be considered on 30 October 2002.

Background

4. At its meeting on 10 July 2002 the Committee requested a paper to cover the housing issues raised in the Culture Committee's policy review of the Welsh language, published earlier this year.

5. Along with many other bodies, representatives of LGH Committee provided evidence to the Culture Committee as part of their review. The Chair and Deputy Local Government and Housing Minister presented evidence to the Culture Committee on 17 January about housing and the Welsh language.

6. Following publication of the Culture Committee's report, the Assembly Government issued "A Bilingual Future: Dyfodol Dwyieithog" in July 2002. The document set out the Welsh Assembly Government's broad intentions for supporting and promoting the language. Following on from "Dyfodol Dwyieithog" the Culture Minister will make a statement to the Assembly on 13 November about the Action Plan for a bilingual Wales. The Action Plan will describe the range of measures being taken by the Assembly Government across all policy areas - reflecting the holistic approach being taken by the Assembly Government to Welsh language issues.

7. The recommendations put forward by the Culture Committee on housing and the Welsh language are set out below:

- a. That the Welsh Assembly Government should facilitate access to housing and employment to ensure the sustainability of communities, particularly in Welsh-speaking heartland areas.
- b. That the [Finance and Local Government] Minister be asked to find ways of strengthening the Homebuy scheme, particularly in rural areas. This should include consideration of a substantial raising of the current limit on the price of houses for which the scheme is applicable and an increase in the funding made available for the scheme.
- c. Whilst the Committee welcomes the fact that statistical data on housing stock is being collected, it wishes to stress that such data is particularly necessary for areas where there is a perceived lack of affordable housing.
- d. The Committee supports the introduction of "Welcome Packs" to potential in-comers to Wales, but ask that such packs be properly scrutinised by the Welsh Language Board before being made widely available through a range of organisations including local authorities, solicitors and schools. The Welsh Assembly Government should seek to establish a concordat with organisations representing Estate Agents to facilitate the distribution of such packs.
- e. Local Authorities should be encouraged to use all the powers available to them, including housing and planning powers, to enable local people to secure homes, either by purchase or rent, within their own community; but that in the exercise of these powers, there shall be no discrimination on the basis of language.

Consideration

8. The Welsh Assembly Government fully appreciates that in many parts of Wales, the Welsh language is an essential part of community life. It also recognises that the wellbeing of the language depends on many factors, including education and the availability of employment. The Assembly's housing policies also have the potential to help sustain and support the language, particularly in rural areas where many Welsh speakers live. However, it should be recognised that the chief function of the Assembly's housing policies is the provision of

accommodation for people in housing need.

9. The Assembly guides its partners to take account of language issues in developing housing strategies and planning new housing provision and services. However, in assessing housing need the Assembly Government agrees with the Culture Committee that there should be no discrimination between applicants on the basis of linguistic ability.

10. A detailed consideration of each recommendation, and the action being taken by the Welsh Assembly Government upon it, is as follows:

Recommendation (a)

That the Welsh Assembly Government should facilitate access to housing and employment to ensure the sustainability of communities, particularly in Welsh-speaking heartland areas.

Assembly Government response

10(a)(i) The Welsh Assembly Government is making available £56.4 million in Social Housing Grant to assist the provision of affordable housing this year (2002-03). In addition, the £1.5 million provided last year as "top up" funding specifically to support the Homebuy scheme in rural areas will continue to be available this year.

10(a)(ii) Responsibility for assessing priorities for using the Social Housing Grant provided by the Assembly Government, rests with local authorities as strategic housing providers. This accords with the Assembly's policy of delegating responsibility to organisations best placed to address local needs and priorities.

10(a)(iii) Last financial year, Local Authorities determined that just under £3 million of the Social Housing Grant, provided by the Assembly Government, should be used for Homebuy in rural areas. This year's allocation is £4.3million, which is expected to produce around 230 Homebuy loans in rural areas.

10(a)(iv) During the autumn of 2002 the Government intends to introduce an Assembly Order to extend the number of rural areas where restrictions apply to the Right to Acquire and the Right to Buy in order to safeguard access to low cost housing for local people. If approved, the Order would come into force in early 2003.

Recommendation (b)

That the [Finance and Local Government] Minister be asked to find ways of strengthening the Homebuy scheme, particularly in rural areas. This should include

consideration of a substantial raising of the current limit on the price of houses for which the scheme is applicable and an increase in the funding made available for the scheme.

Assembly Government response

10(b)(i) In July (2002), the Assembly Government raised by around 10% the maximum purchase price limits for properties acquired under the Homebuy scheme. The Assembly is prepared to consider applications above the published limits on their merits. The Assembly may also waive the limits where it can be demonstrated that no suitable properties are available within the limits in locations where the applicant could reasonably be expected to purchase.

10(b)(ii) The Assembly Government is currently undertaking a review to assess the effectiveness of the Homebuy scheme in rural areas. The review is expected to be completed by the end of the current financial year.

10(b)(iii) Issues of funding have already been covered in the response to recommendation (a) above.

Recommendation (c)

Whilst the Committee welcomes the fact that statistical data on housing stock is being collected, it wishes to stress that such data is particularly necessary for areas where there is a perceived lack of affordable housing.

Assembly Government response

10(c)(i) The Assembly Government is encouraging local authorities to undertake Housing Needs Assessments by providing 50% funding towards the costs. The assessments should help significantly in gauging local demand for affordable housing for Homebuy and for rent.

Recommendation (d)

The Committee supports the introduction of "Welcome Packs" to potential in-comers to Wales, but ask that such packs be properly scrutinised by the Welsh Language Board before being made widely available through a range of organisations including local authorities, solicitors and schools. The Welsh Assembly Government should seek to establish a concordat with organisations representing Estate Agents to facilitate the distribution of such packs.

Assembly Government response

10(d)(i) The Assembly Government provided one-off grant assistance (from slippage moneys in the Housing budget last financial year) to the Welsh Language Board for the establishment of a website and associated publicity material for the Welcome Packs. I understand that the website is not yet fully functional. The Assembly Government and the Language Board will be able to evaluate the success of both projects once the website becomes fully operational.

Recommendation (e)

Local Authorities should be encouraged to use all the powers available to them, including housing and planning powers, to enable local people to secure homes, either by purchase or rent, within their own community; but that in the exercise of these powers, there shall be no discrimination on the basis of language.

Assembly Government response

10(e)(i) The Assembly Government will continue to provide advice and guidance to assist local people to secure homes (through purchase or rent) and we will encourage and advise local authorities to use all the tools currently available to them to achieve this. The Assembly Government agrees that in exercising such powers there should be no discrimination on the basis of language.

10(e)(ii) The Assembly Government has also introduced greater flexibility on development standards and the possibility of more generous grants to assist RSLs in undertaking abnormally expensive schemes, eg in rural areas where land costs are high.

10(e)(iii) The Welsh Assembly Government is currently preparing an explanatory booklet on Homebuy which will be available bilingually for potential applicants. The booklet is expected to be published before the end of 2002. Copies will be sent to all Local Authorities for distribution to all Registered Social Landlords which operate the scheme.

Compliance

11. The schemes to assist affordable housing can be supported under a range of Housing functions which have been transferred to the Assembly. These have been delegated to the Minister for Finance and Communities. There are no issues of regulatory or propriety. The financial resources to support the schemes are contained within existing expenditure plans.

Cross-cutting themes

12. Supporting affordable housing and community sustainability in both rural and urban areas demonstrates the link between the Assembly Government's policies for housing, people and

their culture.

Action for subject committee

13. To note and endorse the actions being taken by the Assembly Government on housing which offer support to the Welsh language.

Contact point

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