

**MINUTES LGH-18-02 (mins)**

**LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND HOUSING COMMITTEE**

**Date: WEDNESDAY 11<sup>th</sup> DECEMBER 2002**

**Time: 09.30am - 12.30pm**

**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)   | Gower               |
| Pauline Jarman           | South Wales Central |
| Peter Law (from 10.00am) | Blaenau Gwent       |
| Dai Lloyd                | South Wales West    |
| Tom Middlehurst          | Alyn & Deeside      |
| Janet Ryder              | North Wales         |

*In attendance*

|              |                                |
|--------------|--------------------------------|
| Kate Cassidy | Local Government Modernisation |
| John Bader   | Director of Housing            |

|                  |  |
|------------------|--|
| Norma Barry      | Communities Directorate                |
| Frank Cuthbert   | Local Government Modernisation         |
| David Robinson   | Communities Directorate                |
| Rob Hay          | Local Government Finance               |
| Patricia Jenkins | National Federation of Sub-Postmasters |
| Sian Ambers      | National Federation of Sub-Postmasters |

*Secretariat*

|                  |              |
|------------------|--------------|
| Roger Chaffey    | Clerk        |
| Claire Griffiths | Deputy Clerk |

**9.30am to 9.35am**

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

1. The Chair welcomed the Committee and members of the public.

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

None were made.

1.3 The Chair advised members that she had given oral evidence to the Richard Commission on 6<sup>th</sup> December.

**9.35am to 9.50am**

**Item 2: Minister's Written Report**

**LGH-18-02(p.1)**

2.1 In addition to the items in her written report the Minister gave the following update on the Home Energy Efficiency Scheme (HEES). She said that these issues had and could be dealt with in advance of the full review:

- Modifications to the specification for the routing of pipework and siting of radiators
  - The inclusion of a benefits health check for each applicant who required it
  - The extension of the solid fuel pilot in rural areas
  - Questionnaire to be issued to Scheme participants with the feedback going directly to Housing Directorate.
2. Members appreciated the early action on the above points in the HEES review. The Minister was asked to consider woodchip burning as an alternative fuel source especially in rural areas.
3. Members raised the following points:
- The training for housing professionals was welcomed and the Minister was asked if the bursary would go directly to Cardiff University?
  - The development of the BME Strategy showed that there was a basic underlying need for training and awareness in the BME sector with regard to housing issues.
  - The Minister was commended on her continuing efforts to devolve powers for Building Regulations to the Assembly.
  - The announcement on substance misuse was welcomed but the need throughout Wales was emphasised. The Minister was asked whether the initiative would include alcohol abuse what targets had been determined and how the effectiveness of the scheme would be measured.
  - The Minister's attention was drawn to an English language publication from the Standard Board for England entitled "*Councillors Behaving Badly*" which had been distributed to Members of Ruthin Town Council.
  - Concern was raised over the amount of Supplementary Credit Approval available to local authorities to support renewal areas and strategic housing schemes in 2003-04 as not as much funding had been allocated as had been originally indicated.
  - The Minister was thanked for taking on board previous concerns about vacant local housing stock but it was felt that additional discussions with the WLGA was required to alleviate these situations.
  - Members noted the increasing levels of recorded homelessness, especially amongst young people, in Cardiff. The case of four expectant mothers sleeping on the streets was raised. It was noted that figures were higher due to the expansion of recordable categories.
  - Is Community First funding now available for communities outside the programme?
  - Members said that the Bridgend Housing Stock transfer exercise appeared to have been effectively managed.

2. In response, the Minister said:

- The inclusion of woodchip burning would be included in the HEES review.
- She confirmed the bursary would be paid directly to Cardiff University.
- On building regulations, she was awaiting a reply from Chris Leslie MP but added that she was eager to pursue and follow up.
- On substance misuse, she confirmed that the initiative would include alcohol misuse. She said she would regularly update Committee on the issues and determined targets.
- She asked to see a copy of "*Councillors Behaving Badly*" saying that the title in itself was unfortunate. The Minister agreed to follow up why Standards Board for England leaflet was distributed to Welsh councillors.
- She said the SCA was a generous allocation but would try to ensure a more accurate indication in future.
- She said that officials were meeting with Cardiff County Council to discuss the homelessness issue and that an extra £50k had been allocated to help alleviate the problem. She added that officials would follow up the highlighted case of the expectant mothers.
- She confirmed that the Community Facilities and Activities Programme applied to village halls throughout Wales not just those located within the Community First programme.
- She said she would draw the WLGA's attention to the best practices that emerged from the Bridgend Housing transfer exercise.

### **Action Points**

- The Minister to follow up why Standards Board for England leaflet "*Councillors Behaving Badly*" was distributed to Welsh councillors.
- The Minister to keep the Committee updated on announcements on substance misuse.
- The Minister to determine specific targets on tackling substance misuse and inform Committee.
- The Minister to draw to the attention of the WLGA the "best practices that emerged from the Bridgend Housing Stock transfer exercise.

**10.50am to 10.45am**

**Item 3: Local Government Electoral Arrangements in Wales**

**LGH-18-02(p.2)**

3.1 The Minister presented the paper and asked Members for comments on the proposals.

2. A detailed discussion took place. Members were in agreement to the proposals listed under Sections 8 and 9 of the Sunderland Report being implemented.
3. On Section 13, Members also supported the proposals to reduce the age of entitlement to vote in local government elections to 16 years and the minimum age for candidates to be reduced to 18 years. It was acknowledged that the implementation of both these proposals would require primary legislation from Westminster.
4. Members were divided over the proposal relating to the Single Transferable Vote (STV) under Section 14. A lively debate took place with the main points being:

In favour of the recommendation:

- Evidence shows that the majority of the electorate was in favour of a STV for local government elections.
- The research work of the Electoral Reform Society reported that 77% of respondents were in favour of the STV with 63% saying it would provide a balanced system that would improve council governance.
- Noted that the outcomes of the Sunderland Commission, Electoral Reform Society were in favour of the change where the NAW consultation was against the change.
- Content for the Minister to take further evidence on this issue but wish to see a realistic timetable (preferably before the NAW elections in May 2003).
- Support the change but favour a delay until after the NAW election.
- Cannot keep postponing decisions. Is there a need for further evidence when 2 respected reports show majority want the STV system

Against the recommendation:

- Cannot legislate for outcomes of negotiations between parties on which the electorate would have no say.
- A paralysis has occurred worldwide from this type of system.
- Do not agree that further evidence is required. Majority of respondents on the Sunderland Report wished to maintain the status quo.
- Inherent danger of losing independent members should the system be introduced.

3.5 The Minister advised Committee that it was incumbent for her to look at the Sunderland Report in her role as Minister. She suggested that on the areas the Committee has welcomed across the board, that she prepared a further paper for the second meeting in January, with a timetable indicating how the Assembly would engage on those issues. On the issue of reducing the voting age to 16 years, she said she would prepare a case for discussion across party groups with all the pros and cons for the February meeting. She suggested that

Committee looks in detail at the evidence and reaches a consensus. She added that she was duty bound to advise Plenary on how she intended taking the non-contentious issues forward and if Committee agreed to the proposals on the 16 years issue, she would have to inform Plenary of that decision and allow all Members to discuss and vote on the proposal before any representations were made to the Westminster Government. In terms of the STV issue, she suggested that if individuals felt that enough reports had been undertaken she would propose that this matter was left until after the Assembly elections in May 2003.

3.6 As a result of the discussion, the motion was put that the Committee supports the full implementation of the recommendations of the Sunderland Report. The Chair ruled that in order to ensure proper conduct of business, it was appropriate to postpone the vote to the next meeting.

### **Action Point**

- The Clerk to circulate motion on Sunderland Report for "Vote" at next meeting.

### **10.45am to 10.55am**

#### **Item 4: Proposals for Monitoring and Evaluating Communities First**

##### **LGH-18-02(p.3)**

4.1 The Minister presented the paper that outlined the Welsh Assembly Government's proposals to appoint a contractor to evaluate the Communities First Programme.

4.2 Members made the following comments:

- Members welcomed the proposal and agreed that it was timely in relation to the programme's execution.
- Members asked what timescale was involved.
- Would the results be presented on a ward by ward basis to allow analogies to be made?
- Need to see now how national bodies have linked into local programmes.
- Interested to see where leadership roles have developed along with how capacity has evolved.

3. In response, the Minister said:

- Resources developed under Communities First would be maximised and the evaluation results would assist with that process.
- The evaluation is scheduled to last for 3 years.
- She would try to get the results on a ward basis but if not possible, may follow the Communities First Partnership areas.
- Report will look at leadership and capacity and encompass all partners.

4.4 The Minister agreed to report back on progress on a quarterly basis.

### **Action Point**

- The Minister to provide reports on the Evaluation exercise quarterly and to advise on the levels at which the results of the evaluation exercise into Community First would be reported i.e. ward by ward or Community First Partnership areas.

### **10.55am to 11.10am**

The Committee agreed to break for 15 minutes.

### **11.05am to 11.35am**

### **Item 5: Local Government Revenue Settlement for 2003-04**

#### **LGH-18-02(p.4)**

5.1 The Minister introduced the paper and advised Committee that she would welcome their views by 9th January 2003. She added that overall, the settlement represented a 9% increase for Wales as opposed to an 8% increase in England and demonstrated the commitment the NAW has to local government.

5.2 The Minister said that negotiations were still ongoing with the Home Office regarding the police settlement and that she would write to the Chair with details as soon as she was able.

### 5.3 Members made the following comments:

- The settlement was welcomed but it was noted that all local authorities were under severe pressure with pay increases, inflation increases and the effects of pension schemes on local authority budgets is going to be immense.
- The eventual settlement of the fire fighters pay review will impact upon local authorities and the Minister was asked if allowances had been made in anticipation of the award.
- The 2001 census results recorded a change in the population especially in Cardiff and Swansea where the estimated growth had not occurred. This will have an effect on the grants these cities receive.
- The Minister was asked if she was still committed to reducing the number of special grants and consolidating that revenue in future settlements?
- Concerns were raised over the impact a formula change for police authorities would have on local authorities.
- Acknowledged that there will also be problems with the formula used but it was the most equitable way to calculate grants.
- It seemed primitive to use GP's returns to estimate variations between censuses. Was there a better way to calculate this information?

### 5.4 In response the Minister said:

- Envisaged additional pressures would arise with the outcome of the fire service pay dispute and the Minister will consider the matter as soon as figures are available. She added that the settlement will have an impact on Welsh local authorities and if it were seen that local authorities across the board could not afford the increase, she hoped that Treasury would release funding for local authorities in England and Wales to relieve the pressure.
- Cardiff especially and Swansea to a lesser extent have benefited over the last 10 years on an over estimate of population growth.
- She confirmed that she was committed to reducing the number of special grants but they had a cross cutting effect on her cabinet colleagues.
- She agreed to prepare a note on the historical settlement of the police authorities for information and would include some background to this year's process. However, she couldn't divulge information about the ongoing negotiations.
- She agreed that the formula was not perfect but it was the most equitable way to allocate funding.
- Rob Hay advised that data from GP returns was used along with other associated data in-between censuses to estimate population levels.

### 5.5 The Chair said she would write to the Minister setting out the Committees views on the settlement.

## Action Points

- To provide a background note on the problems encountered last year on the police settlement and provide more information on the current situation.
- The Minister to write to Chair on details of the settlement for Police Authorities in Wales when the information is available.

## 11.35am to 11.45pm

### Item 6: Community Fire Safety Trust

#### LGH-18-02(p.5)

1. The Minister introduced the paper advising that an announcement of the successful candidate for the post of Chief Executive of the Trust was anticipated shortly. She added that if Members thought it would be helpful, she would arrange an informal meeting with the successful person. Members welcomed this.
2. The following points were raised:

- Very positive initiative and remarkable what progress has been achieved since the NAW came into being.
- Representatives from the 3 Fire Authorities in Wales have indicated that they would like to see the NAW have more power for their bodies.
- Educational work undertaken by fire authorities tremendous but wondered if there would be an overlap with the establishment of the Trust.
- Important that the Trust co-ordinates and compliments the work of the fire authorities.

1. In response, the Minister said:

- The 3 Chief Fire Officers are trustees of the Trust and have already discussed a joined up approach to ensure that work is not duplicated and that the authorities and the Trust work together in harmony and compliment each other.
- She added that she recently gave evidence at the Bain enquiry on the Fire Service in Wales and said she spoke about welcoming a greater and stronger involvement for the NAW in the running of the fire authorities.

## Action Point

- The Minister to introduce members to the new Chief Executive of the Community Fire Safety Trust, once the appointment is made.

## 11.45pm to 12.20pm

### **Item 7: Presentation by National Federation of Sub-Postmasters in Wales**

1. The Chair welcomed Patricia Andrews and Sian Ambers from the National Federation of Sub-Postmasters to Committee and invited Ms Andrews to make her presentation.
2. Members received a copy of the PowerPoint slides and a further copy is attached at Annex 1.
3. Members thanked Ms Andrews for her presentation that highlighted concerns that had been raised in Committee recently. The following points were raised:
  - Hoped the Committee would consider making further representations to the DWP after this presentation on the future of pensions and benefits. Patricia Andrews was asked to forward copies of the leaflets advising on the changes to the Secretariat.
  - Post offices are a pivotal social and economic community resource.
  - The definition of a rural post office was sought.
  - Important that people had a choice on how and where they wished to access their pension/benefit. This was especially important for the elderly population who were very wary of banks and often only spoke to people when they visited the post office.
  - How do you attract people to the trade?
  - What banking facilities will post offices be able to offer?
  - Do contracts tie a sub-postmaster to one location or are they able to have a number of outlets?

#### 1. In response, Patricia Andrews said that:

- The definition of a rural post office was less than 10,000 population in the surrounding location. An urban outlet was classified as being in a location with 10,001 and above people.
- Difficult to attract new people to the trade on the retirement of sub-postmasters and will become even more difficult with the cessation of pensions and benefits.
- From April 2003, 7 of the high street banks will have facilities for basic banking at post offices and it is hoped more will join the scheme.
- Sub-postmasters are generally tied to one location with their contract although there are moves for them to offer services at satellite locations in isolated locations. The use of a mobile service has also been discussed.

#### 1. Patricia Andrews thanked the Committee for all their support in highlighting the

problems post offices are facing.

7.6 The Chair said that she would prepare a letter for Member's comments and send it to the DWP outlining the Committee's views on these matters.

### **12.25pm to 12.30pm**

#### **Item 8: Consideration of forward work programme**

##### **LGH-18-02(p.6) Annex**

8.1 The forward work programme was agreed.

#### **Item 9: Minutes of the meeting held on 27<sup>th</sup> November**

##### **LGH-17-02(min)**

1. The minutes of the meeting held on 27<sup>th</sup> November were ratified.

9.2 The Chair wished Members a Happy Christmas.

Committee Secretariat

December 2002