

EDWINA HART – REPORT TO LG&H COMMITTEE – 11 December 2002

Communities First - Expenditure

To date over £19m has been paid under Communities First to local authorities, partnerships and organisations to assist them in the implementation of the programme at both the local and national level.

In addition, since opening in April 2002, over half a million pounds 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.

Communities First - Community Facilities and Activities Programme

I advised Committee of the launch of this programme on 16 October and am now pleased to report that I have approved seven projects in the first bidding round. The total funding for these projects amounts to £1,203,780 over three years. All the projects are due to commence during this financial year.

These projects will provide important facilities in communities across Wales and will significantly contribute to their sustainable regeneration. A wide range of well developed community regeneration initiatives will receive funding ranging from the provision of community buildings to innovative recreation and educational projects.

Review of housing professional education and training

Following advice from Housing Directorate, I have agreed to commission a wide-ranging review of housing professional education and training provided across Wales, including that provided by Cardiff University.

This review will be commissioned as part of the Assembly Government's Housing Research Programme project managed by Housing Directorate staff who will prepare and submit a Review Specification to me for approval. The proposed review would be funded through the Research, Surveys and Evaluation BEL. It is estimated that it will cost £20,000. Sufficient resources have been identified in the 2003/04 budget to meet this commitment

To ensure fairness and to secure value for money there would be merit in assessing different options for the distribution of Assembly Government funding for housing professional education and training. (For example, in the past, housing education bursary schemes

operated in England have involved a group of Universities.)

In particular, the Review will consider whether:

- the Cardiff University bursary scheme is adequately meeting the needs of housing organisations outside South Wales; and
- whether funding might also be used to support housing students and professionals undertaking housing studies courses at Undergraduate, HNC, and Higher Education Diploma levels.

Bursary funding for the Housing Postgraduate Diploma Course at Cardiff University

I have also agreed bursary funding for the September 2003 intake of students to the Housing Postgraduate Diploma Course at the Centre for Housing Management and Development, Cardiff University. Student bursaries are funded under the Social Housing Management Grant Programme for which £1,833,000 has been allocated for 2003-04, 2004-05 and 2005-06 (Housing Management Projects Education and Training BEL).

Trends in the employment of poll clerks

At the meeting of this committee on 16 October 2002, I agreed to examine the trends for employing poll clerks for election day, in response to the proposed uprating of fees in the National Assembly for Wales (Returning Officers' Charges) Order 2002.

After further consultation with representatives of the Association of Electoral Administrators and SOLACE I now believe that the increase to the fees laid out in the draft Charges Order are justified.

Firstly, the proposed fees reflect the rate for previous elections and any perceived reduction would undoubtedly deter prospective volunteers and not motivate those who would normally carry out these duties. I understand that the recruitment of poll clerks has become increasingly difficult in recent years. A large number of sufficiently capable people are required for each election and this pool of potential employees is drying up. If there is any chance of attracting staff to participate in these essential roles the fees should be adequate enough to reflect this necessity.

Secondly, a poll clerk's duties require them to be at the polling station from 6.30am to 10.30pm on election day. Travelling time should be taken into consideration, especially in rural areas where it can be particularly lengthy. Presiding Officers are also encouraged to contact their poll clerks prior to election day to provide basic but essential training. The time commitment for poll clerks, therefore, may be in excess of 20 hours, including time that would normally attract

overtime rates.

Finally, as Returning Officers are independent of local authorities and would not normally volunteer this information to elected members, the assessment of this issue can only be based on the guidance that is given.

Local authority housing stock vacant for more than six months:

During Local Government Questions on 13th November, William Graham raised the issue of local authority housing stock that has been vacant for more than six months. Specifically, he referred to a council property that had been found to be empty for 17 years. I promised that I would report back to Committee on the issues raised.

Firstly to the empty property in question. That it was vacant for 17 years is clearly an aberration; remarkable as much by its uniqueness as its duration. Local authorities are required annually to provide the Assembly Government with information on vacant dwellings, lettings and various other management data. The data is published as a statistical report to give an indication of the performance of local authorities in respect of these different housing management categories. The Audit Commission, under the Wales Programme for Improvement, uses these statistics to inform and guide inspection and regulation of local authorities. Where indicators suggest poor performance, extra scrutiny is afforded the area of management concerned.

It is for each local authority to ensure that it works within the Assembly Government's improvement framework to continuously improve services by subjecting them to fundamental review on a regular basis. Based on examples of good practice identified by audit and inspection, the Audit Commission issued a repairs and maintenance handbook this year. It contains practical examples of how authorities can achieve successful change in their services and emphasises the importance of performance monitoring and the need for accuracy in data collection methodologies.

Secondly on the issue of empty properties generally. As in other parts of the UK, landlords in Wales have been faced with problems of low demand in many areas, for many different reasons. It is often those areas which have experienced the worst economic decline which now have the largest housing surpluses. It is extremely difficult to recreate sustainable communities without the creation of new jobs in these areas and an improvement in the overall economic

prosperity of the poorer parts of Wales. However, there are initiatives that housing organisations can take to tackle the problems presented by unpopular housing and we are helping local authorities to implement these. We are funding a number of pilot projects to look at issues of low demand. These include marketing of social housing, incentivising people to occupy homes in low demand areas and developing choice based lettings schemes. Whilst the primary purpose of choice based lettings is not to address issues of low demand, early indications from pilots in Wales and England show that choice based schemes can lead to increased demand.

Update on the Black, Minority Ethnic Housing Project

The Black, Minority Ethnic (BME) Housing Project is one of the key elements of support that the Assembly Government is offering to landlords to meet their responsibilities under the BME Housing Action Plan for Wales. The Project is funded through the Social Housing Management Grant Programme. As well as promoting good practice and the involvement of BME people in social housing organisations, the project is investigating the feasibility of establishing a BME-led housing organisation for Wales.

The project originated in July 2000 when Cardiff Community Housing Association, Cadwyn Housing Association, Taff Housing Association and BAWSO submitted a joint-application to the Assembly for a BME Housing Project. Approval for the project was granted in August 2000 with a commitment to provide funding for a three-year period. Funding to date and agreed funding is as follows:

2000-01

late start 2001-02 2002-03

SHMG (£) 20,800 50,703 49,073

% of project costs 80% 60%

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The Chair of the Project Steering Group has recently written to my officials clearly indicating that once the Project has submitted its Recommendations Report in February 2003, the intended outputs of the Project's Operational Plan will have been completed.

In response to this letter I have agreed that funding to the project will end in March 2003. In February the Project is due to complete, and submit to the Assembly Government, the findings from its qualitative research and the feasibility report into a BME-led housing organisation for Wales. The Report is scheduled to come before this committee on 4 April by which time my

officials will have assessed potential resource and other implications for the Assembly Government.

In addition to the above, I have recently approved an application from the Chartered Institute of Housing Cymru to run a national BME Housing Conference on behalf of the Assembly, to be held in January. The principal aims of the Conference are:

- to further promote the BME Housing Action Plan for Wales;
- to explain what action social landlords need to take; and
- to share good practice on BME housing policies and projects and provide an opportunity to network.

The Conference is primarily be aimed at:

- BME staff in housing organisations and staff that are involved in producing BME housing strategies and plans; and
- BME community groups and key tenants."

Programmes For Funding Voluntary Sector Schemes to Tackle Homelessness & Rooflessness

This is to inform Members that I have invited local authorities and voluntary organisations working with homeless people in Wales to bid for funding under Section 180 of the Housing Act 1996. Since 1996 funding available under Section 180 has been targeted at schemes to tackle homelessness and rough sleeping, in line with the Welsh Assembly Government's commitment to eliminate the need for anyone in Wales to sleep rough.

Funding will be available from 1 April 2003 for three years. The Assembly Government will provide 100 per cent of the total approved costs for each project subject to continued satisfactory performance and a demonstration of continued need for the scheme.

Bids are also invited for 2003/04 only from local authorities to assist with the development of

their local homelessness strategies. This will help local authorities develop sustainable strategic solutions to homelessness.

The planned budget for these schemes for 2003/04 is £4.7 million compared to £4.6 million in 2002/03. £3.2 million of this budget has already been committed which leaves approximately £1.5 million available for new schemes in 2003/04.

The closing date for submission of bids is 13 January 2003. Successful bids will be announced by the middle of March.

Devolution of Building Regulations

The issue of responsibility for Building Regulations has been the subject much discussion both in the committee and outside amongst members. Members have expressed concern over the Assembly's inability to directly influence construction standards, particularly in the private sector, in support of our sustainability and environmental aspirations.

I have indicated that I support the transfer of this function to the Assembly but there are many issues to consider. These include the likely costs and structures needed in order to take on such a responsibility, the limitations that the current primary legislation imposes on what we might like to achieve and the potential benefits that would flow from a transfer of responsibility.

My officials are looking at these issues. In the meantime I have written to Chris Leslie MP Minister responsible for Building Regulations in order to open up the dialogue. I will keep the committee informed of progress.

Transfers of Resources Between Budget Expenditure Lines (BELs) within the Housing & Local Government Other Services Main Expenditure Group (MEG)

Transfer from Housing Management BEL to Home Improvement BEL

- The Committee is invited to note the transfer of resources between Budget Expenditure Lines (BELs), within the Housing and Local Government Other Services Main Expenditure Group (MEG). A detailed breakdown is at **annex 1**.
- The transfer to the Home Improvement Agencies enables Care & Repair Cymru to make structural and organisational changes in the advance of the enhanced funding of Care & Repair services in 2003-04 by:

- developing and strengthening the management structure;
- improving the support and service development to agencies, particularly in terms of the focus on equality;
- ensuring that the organisation has a firm administrative base to support all its activities and that it reacts to the challenges of enhanced funding effectively.

Transfers of Resources from Housing and Local Government other Services (MEG) to Health and Social Services (MEG)

Transfer from the Supported Housing Revenue Grant (SHRG) BEL to the Drug and Alcohol Initiatives BEL

- The Committee is invited to note the MEG to MEG transfer from the Supported Housing Revenue Grant (SHRG) BEL to the Drug and Alcohol Initiatives BEL. A detailed breakdown is at **annex 2**.
- The transfer to the Drug and Alcohol initiative is in order to supplement Drug and Alcohol Treatment Fund resources for the Bro Taf Drug and Alcohol Action Team (DAAT).
- The transfer will enable the Health Authority to carry on treating the existing caseload for the balance of this financial year.

Transfer of Resources from the Housing and Local Government Other Services MEG to the Statistical Directorate's Central Administration MEG

The committee is invited to note the above transfer of £50k from the Welsh Household and Dwelling Survey account within the Research/Surveys/Evaluation/Publicity/Fees & Charges BEL to the Statistical Directorate's Staff Costs BEL. A detailed breakdown is provided at **annex 3**.

Following the decision to undertake the Welsh Household and Dwelling Survey, it became necessary to appoint a project manager based at the Local Government Data Unit.

To fill this vacancy, a project manager has been seconded from the Statistical Directorate.

As a consequence, the Housing Directorate is required to transfer £50,000 from the Research and Surveys BEL to the Staff Costs BEL within the Statistical Directorate.

Meeting with representatives from the Voluntary Sector on 31 October 2002

The Committee is invited to note the action points, at **Annex 4**, arising from my meeting with representatives of the Voluntary Sector on 31 October. These action points will be progressed by either myself, officials, or the Voluntary Sector.

This meeting was held under the Welsh Assembly Government's Voluntary Sector Scheme - that requires each Assembly Minister meet representatives of relevant voluntary sector networks at least twice in any one calendar year.

This proved to be a very useful meeting where key and current issues were discussed.

Bridgend Housing Stock Transfer

At the meeting on the 13th November I reported the result of the tenants' ballot on the proposal by Bridgend to transfer its housing stock to the Valleys to Coast Housing. I agreed to ask Bridgend Council to provide a report on the process that had been undertaken leading up to the vote (16.2). The report compiled by the Council's housing transfer team is appended to my report (**Annex 5**).

Benefits from the Home Energy Efficiency Scheme in Wales

The Welsh Assembly Government's Home Energy Efficiency Scheme (HEES) was introduced during November 2000, since then the scheme has proved enormously popular and we are well on target to achieve our Plan for Wales target of ensuring that 38,000 people benefit from the scheme by March 2004.

HEES does not just tackle fuel poverty. It brings practical health benefits, ensuring vulnerable people have warm and well insulated homes, thus reducing health problems, and increases sustainability benefits by ensuring households are more energy efficient. This report shows

that in a relatively short space of time, the scheme has evolved and changed in response to the priorities and needs in Wales. Review and evaluation is a critical aspect of policy implementation to ensure effectiveness and provide confidence that all the objectives will be met. Therefore, a comprehensive review of the scheme will be undertaken during 2003.

A copy of the report can be found at **Annex 6**.

Community Councillors Allowances

I have also consulted with Community Councils on draft regulations to introduce a scheme to provide for an annual inflationary increase in allowances payable to members for duty undertaken outside their area. This consultation period ended recently and I will shortly be considering the representations made.

Petitions for Elected Mayors

I have recently agreed that the policy proposed in the recent consultation paper should be changed to bring forward the first period during which a petition may be presented to 2003 and that the cycle between petition periods be reduced from five years to four (excepting that, in the event of a referendum taking place, forcing a five year moratorium to take place, the authority concerned return to the normal four yearly cycle as soon as possible after the moratorium).

My officials are drafting altered amending regulations (so as to amend the Local Authorities (Referendums) (Petitions and Directions) (Wales) Regulations 2001) for presentation to the Assembly.

Substance Misuse

I presented a paper to the Committee on 13 November that set out how I propose to tackle the problems of substance misuse in Wales. Over the next few months new delivery structures and new funding will come on stream that will help to tackle this enormous problem in Wales.

I am already aware from the initial findings of the Treatment Review that there is a particular need to invest in the Rhondda area in treatment facilities. I have also received numerous representations about the seriousness of the situation facing the people in this area. I fully accept that there is an urgent need to increase capacity by quickly establishing enhanced treatment facilities. I am aware that there are some excellent service providers already working in the Rhondda. I have asked my officials to work with these organisations to bring forward proposals to put new services on the ground quickly. I will let the Committee have further details as soon as possible.