

Nicholas Bennett BSc Econ MBA

Personal Statement for the post of Public Services Ombudsman for Wales

Introduction

I have spent the past 22 years in public policy roles spanning the public, private and third sectors in North West Wales, Cardiff, London and Brussels. I wish to submit the following personal statement as part of my application for the post:

i. A strong commitment towards upholding the rights of the ordinary citizen and an understanding and commitment to equality of opportunity

My current role as Chief Executive of Community Housing Cymru is to advocate greater investment in social and affordable housing. However, I have always tried to undertake that role through advocating on behalf of the citizen – be it the tenant or individual facing housing need rather than a narrow “producer interest”.

For this purpose we have long advocated the Essex Review and subsequent commitment to “co-regulation” which empowers local boards- and local tenants – who make up, on average, 35% of housing association boards.

With the onset of Welfare Reform, CHC has led work on the award winning “your benefits are changing campaign”- to ensure that tenants are fully aware of their welfare rights. This campaign has received broad support from Housing Associations but also local authorities.

This commitment to the citizen has gone beyond simply housing need - to broader community campaigns supporting financial inclusion including the “Don’t get bitten by loan sharks” campaign and the establishment of Moneyline Cymru as an affordable credit vehicle which has saved 8000 people from the clutches of the loan shark or doorstep lenders.

My interest in citizens’ rights also includes bi-lingualism (as a former member of the Welsh Language Board), digital exclusion (Ofcom Advisory Committee for Wales), constitutional “equality” (the All Wales Convention) as well as citizen centred co-production (Co-operatives and Mutuals Commission/ Williams Commission).

I have an understanding of, and commitment to upholding the equality of opportunity – as an employer- and as a representative of service providers.

ii. A demonstrable track record of influencing and negotiating at a senior level

I have, throughout my career demonstrated an ability to influence and negotiate: reaching out beyond narrow silos and to work across different communities of geography or of interest where necessary.

As a Regional Policy Advisor in Brussels I organised a Wales wide lobby of the EU institutions which encompassed local government, the CBI, Wales TUC, Higher and

Further Education, the then WDA, TECs, Wales Tourist Board and the Voluntary sector so that Wales could press the case for Objective 1 funding with one voice.

As a Cabinet Special Adviser I was also able to work well with coalition partners and also opposition parties as well as officials in order to deliver the Partnership Agreement but also in order to create broader support for specific Wales-wide initiatives – such as greater support for the Welsh Language at a time of great political sensitivity.

As Chief Executive of CHC I have helped shape a “coalition of the willing” to support greater investment in social housing, greater private borrowing from Housing Associations (borrowing has increased by £400m over the past 4 years) and a new fit for purpose regulatory system which support local autonomy and accountability. This has required stakeholder management with members, civil servants, ministers, opposition spokespeople, private lenders, tenants groups and local government.

I have also worked well with politicians from across the political spectrum at Wales and local level in order to increase the support for social housing and the investment needed to meet greater housing need and also to promote regeneration and anti-poverty measures.

This approach was critical in getting ministerial support for change – and in achieving a key outcome - the One Wales Coalition target of 6500 additional homes over 4 years.

Public policy outcomes that I have been directly involved in include:

- Establishing Menter Mon Rural development agency
- Advising on the new Structural Fund map which ensured Wales got Objective 1 funding
- Establishing Assembly Learning Grants
- Cabinet agreement for Iaith Pawb and increased funding for the Welsh Language
- Better regulation and funding for housing- leading to the achievement of the 6500 One Wales target
- Developing the Housing Revenue Grant - or Welsh Housing Bond which has borrowed over £100m from the bond market and will deliver over 1000 affordable homes.

I currently represent the housing sector of the UK on the European Housing network.

iii. Excellent intellect and independence of judgement

I am a double graduate who has also benefited from leadership training at JFK School of Governance Harvard. I have exercised independent judgement in a number of areas, most recently in participating in the recent Williams Review. I have always sought to make decisions that are based upon evidence and merit.

As a consultant I have experience of applying methodologies such as “Delphi” techniques in order to avoid band wagon effects when considering public policy conundrums.

iv. Strong interpersonal, analytical and communication skills

I have strong interpersonal skills for a whole variety of different settings: with staff, clients and stakeholders. My analytical abilities include qualitative and quantitative analysis of economic data and broader stakeholder analysis as a successful economic development and public affairs consultancy director. I have well-honed communication skills- written and oral – and am able to communicate confidently in committee, in the media and from the public stage in either English or Welsh.

As part of my current role I have given evidence to House of Commons Select Committees as well as National Assembly Subject Committees. I regularly give interview on BBC Wales radio and TV, ITV and appear as a guest on “Y Sgwrs” as well as content for the Daily Post, Western Mail and social media.

v. Strong strategic leadership and managerial skills

My MBA and more recently my experience at Harvard have assisted my ability to provide strategic leadership. This has been demonstrated in my management of staff and resources. During my tenure CHC has been transformed from a failing organisation to an influential one. Poor staff morale has been transformed in Gold Investors in People status. Four years of deficit have been replaced with seven consecutive years of financial surplus. As well as improving staff morale - the staff complement has increased from 12 to 49.

vi. An ability to inspire confidence with senior figures in public life in Wales, including the Welsh Government, local government and the health sector

My experience of the political and stakeholder context has been developed at local, Welsh, UK and EU level. I currently represent the UK on the European Housing Network and also represent the social housing sector on the Housing Regulatory Board for Wales.

I believe my ability to inspire the confidence of senior figures can be demonstrated by the range of my public appointments: I was appointed to the All Wales Convention by the First Minister and then Deputy First Minister; to the Williams Commission by the First Minister; to the Co-operatives and Mutuals Commission by the Business and Economy Minister; to the Welsh Language Board by the then Culture Minister and to the Welsh Government’s Efficiency and Innovation Board by the Finance Minister.

I have briefed the whole of the senior civil service on partnership good practice.

At Chief Executive level I exercise “leadership beyond authority” to the 40 chief executives and the many board members who run Housing Associations in Wales and pay membership fees to CHC. This role also requires me to sustain the confidence of senior figures in both local government and the health sector.

vii. Knowledge of local government and /or the NHS

The whole of my career has demanded some form of relationship with local government. I worked in local government for three years and in the Wales European Centre I also held the local government “contract” for relationship management. My clients in the private sector included a range of local authorities. More recently my experience of the Williams Commission updated my knowledge of both local government and health performance. Local authorities and Health Boards are key

Housing Association stakeholders. I have put resources into breaking down barriers between social housing and the NHS. This has included commissioning research by the Kafka Brigade to look at new opportunities for collaboration between Housing and Health as we face the challenge of an ageing population. The initiative has had ministerial support with both Housing and Health Ministers attending the launch of the report and has led to the Aneurin Bevan Health Board forming a new initiative with local housing agencies. More recently CHC has seconded policy staff to the NHS confederation to further break down barriers. .

viii. An understanding of and commitment to Nolan’s Seven “Principles of Public Life” and experience of meeting these standards

I have always insisted that CHC as a charity complies with the Nolan principles of public life – and I have also understood and complied fully with them in the context of all public appointments I have undertaken.

ix. Commitment to improving performance while managing within constrained resources

I have initiated, operated and grown businesses - both micro enterprises and small firms in the private and social enterprise sectors often in very constrained circumstances.

In a public policy context I am tenacious in ensuring that public value is achieved. I have always ensured that clarity of accountability and expectation has been a key aspect of my behaviours to staff and also my own authorising environment and this has been a key aspect of performance improvement.

Desirable

- i. I am a fluent Welsh speaker
- ii. My knowledge of the system of devolved government administrative law began with the constitutional and business law aspects of my politics degree and MBA and have been enhanced by my career in Brussels and as a Cabinet Special Adviser – I was privileged in having a “ring side seat” to decision making and public policy contexts at EU level and also in the emerging devolved context.

Nick Bennett
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