

LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND HOUSING COMMITTEE

REPORT ON THE FIRST FOUR YEARS: 1999 – 2003

INTRODUCTION

1. Prior to the changes to the Assembly Cabinet announced by the First Secretary in March 2000, Local Government and Housing matters came under the remit of the Local Government and Environment Committee. The work of that committee will be briefly covered in this report followed by that of the Local Government and Housing Committee.

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2. That Committee's remit was based on the portfolio held by Peter Law as Assembly Secretary for the Environment & Local Government. This covered transport & highways; planning; environmental policy, except countryside issues; local government policy and finance; housing; and CADW (ancient monuments and listed and historic buildings).
3. Within its wide ranging responsibilities, the Committee had been working to establish a firm set of priorities. Those priorities, were as follows:
 - To improve the quality and availability of housing in Wales, particularly social housing to help combat social exclusion;
 - The protection and improvement of the Welsh environment, including the development of a waste strategy;
 - To promote the delivery of high quality and cost-effective local government services within a framework of greater local accountability;
 - The development and implementation of an integrated transport policy;
 - The operation of a fair and efficient land use planning system.
4. Those priorities underpinned the Committee's contribution to achieving the Assembly's goals of sustainable development and an improved quality of life for the people of Wales. They were fully consistent with the guiding values and principles that had been endorsed by plenary and reiterated in the Assembly's draft strategic plan.

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Commencement

5. The Committee was established in March 2000, following changes to the Assembly's Cabinet announced by the First Secretary. It inherited a broad remit based on the portfolio of Edwina Hart, the Assembly Minister for Finance, Local Government and

Communities. It does not cover her responsibilities as Finance Minister.

6. This report summarises the Committee's activities from March 2000 to the present. Copies of our reports, agendas, papers, minutes and transcripts of meetings can be found on the National Assembly website ¹. During the reporting period the Committee met 54 times.

Membership

7. Our current membership is: Gwenda Thomas (Chair), Peter Black, William Graham, Edwina Hart (Minister for Finance, Local Government and Communities), Pauline Jarman, Peter Law, Dai Lloyd, Tom Middlehurst and Janet Ryder.
8. There have been some changes to the membership during this period:

March 2000

Member	Replaced By	Replaced By
Gwenda Thomas (Chair)		
Peter Law (Minister)	Edwina Hart (Minister) (16.10.00)	
Alison Halford	Tom Middlehurst (09.11.00)	
Janice Gregory	Peter Law (09.11.00)	
Peter Black		
David Davies	William Graham (09.11.00)	
Janet Ryder		
Owen John Thomas	Dai Lloyd (10.10.00)	
Brian Hancock	Janet Davies (12.09.00)	Pauline Jarman (21.03.02)

Remit and Responsibilities

9. Our remit It covers local government policy and finance issues; housing; Social Inclusion and Community regeneration; Community Safety and crime reduction (including drug and alcohol misuse).
10. The responsibilities of subject committees are set out in SO 9 (attached at Annex 1).

Aims, objectives and priorities

11. The Committee's aim is to achieve a better quality of life for the people of Wales and to promote better, simpler government. Our objectives are:

- to help local people, particularly those living in disadvantaged areas, develop confident communities, with decent housing, good local facilities and high quality environment, which is non-threatening and free from crime;
- to deliver value for money for the people of Wales, with better and more efficient services;
- to streamline the Assembly's work and give far greater weight to the needs and views of our partners and the public, including under-represented groups.

12. These aims and objectives correspond with those set out in *betterwales.com*, the National Assembly's strategic plan.

13. We attach particular importance to:

- the development of a national housing strategy, with a view to ensuring that everyone has a decent home and homelessness is eliminated;
- the modernisation of local government, including the development of new political management structures, the introduction of policy agreements, the development of the best value regime, the introduction of community strategies and consideration of the community leadership role of local authorities;
- the implementation and development of the revised standard spending assessment formula so that revenue support for local authorities is allocated on the basis of a fairer assessment of need.

Work and Achievements to Date

14. *Policy development – Standing Order 9.7(I)*

i. Policy Review of Housing Stock Transfer

The Committee was particularly concerned about the poor condition of much of Wales' council housing stock, and how to secure the investment necessary to overcome the massive backlog of repair and modernisation work. In the light of this, the Committee carried out a review of the Cabinet's policy on housing stock transfer. This was a major piece of work, involving written and oral consultation sessions, informal briefing sessions and a number of visits to stock transfer organisations in England.

The conclusion of the policy review was that the most straightforward option for securing the necessary investment would be a change to the local government finance system to allow councils to borrow on the same terms as housing associations. The Committee recommended that the Cabinet should continue to press H M Treasury on this point. Otherwise, the Committee felt that the transfer of the stock to a registered social landlord, with appropriate safeguards for tenants, should continue to be an option available to local authorities for modernising their housing stock. The report was published in May 2001.

The Minister's response to the Housing Stock Transfer report was fairly positive. She accepted many of the recommendations made. There were however three recommendations which she could not implement:

- to change the rules governing local government borrowing;
- to allow for the suspension of the transfer levy beyond 2005;and
- to make financial provision available for one-off payments to allow authorities to redeem any overhanging debt

The Minister could only make representations to Whitehall on these issues.

ii. Policy review of community regeneration

The Committee agreed to undertake an in-depth review of the policy and programmes aimed at community regeneration which have been adopted by the Welsh Assembly Government and its sponsored bodies. The main aim of the review was to make recommendations for streamlining the existing programmes, improving the arrangements for delivery and funding mechanisms. The review included a written consultation exercise that took place during the summer 2001. A number of oral consultation sessions were undertaken as part of the Committee's fortnightly meetings and two additional meetings were held which were dedicated to informing the review. In addition the Committee visited community groups and organisations throughout Wales. Following consideration of the emerging issues in the summer term, the final report, including recommendations was published in July 2002.

The Minister was able to accept all the recommendations in the report of Community regeneration.

iii. Policy review of community regeneration – Capacity Development and Training

Following the publication of the policy review report on Community Regeneration in July 2002, the Committee agreed to continue looking at community regeneration and in particular, capacity development and training, two areas which had been highlighted in the initial report. The review included a written consultation exercise, which commenced during the summer of 2002. A number of oral consultations sessions were included as part of the Committee's fortnightly meetings and an additional meeting combined with visits to organisations was held in North Wales. The Committee also undertook a fact-finding visit to the Ballyfermot Partnership in Dublin ². Following consideration of the emerging issues in January, the final report is scheduled to be published at the end of March.

15. Contribution to policy development

We have continued to operate an open and participative style of working. We have been keen to hear the views of outside bodies and organisations to inform discussion and assist in our deliberations ³.

In addition to our own policy review, the Committee contributed to the key policy development being taken forward by the Minister for Finance, Local Government and Communities.

16. Housing and community regeneration

The Committee has continued to support the development and implementation of a

national housing strategy, considering in detail responses to the consultation paper *Better Homes for people in Wales* and the action plan, which is the principal means of measuring future progress of the strategy.

The Committee has considered many aspects of housing policy including homelessness and rough sleeping, the Supporting People programme, the housing fitness standard, Houses in Multiple Occupation, the Housing Revenue Account Subsidy, rent policy for social housing, the Black and Minority Ethnic Housing Strategy, 'Rethinking Construction', home energy efficiency, 'Lifetime Homes' design standards, custodial bond scheme and the review of HEES in connection with fuel poverty.

The Committee has maintained its close interest in the continuing development of the *Communities First* programme and receives regular updates on progress on this initiative. The Committee has kept a close watch on issues concerning Post Offices.

17. Local Government Modernisation

The Committee has taken a close interest in the programme for modernisation of local government and contributed to the development of the Local Government Partnership Scheme that was endorsed by plenary in July 2001. It has considered the main strands of the Cabinet's programme for the modernisation of local government, including the new ethical framework for councillors and officers, the introduction of policy agreements between the National Assembly and local authorities and the development of the best value regime. The Committee has taken a particularly close interest in the new political management structures, including the so-called 'fourth option' allowing local authorities to adopt a modernised committee structure with enhanced scrutiny powers in place of the cabinet system. A watching brief has been maintained on councillors' allowances and the issue of pensions.

18. Local Government Finance

The Committee took a close interest in the review of the standard spending assessment formula, which underpins the distribution of revenue support to local authorities. The review recommended an increased weighting for indicators of social deprivation, together with more refined measures of population dispersion and settlement patterns. The Committee broadly supported the introduction of the new formula for 2001-02, although it expressed concern about the absence of local area data and feels that the formula should be strengthened whenever new data or methodological refinements can be introduced. The Committee considered the formulas for 2002-03 and 2003-04

The Committee has supported the move away from the hypothecation of local government funding and the development of the new system of policy agreements focused on policy outcomes.

19. Crime Reduction

The Committee has been very concerned about crime and has received regular progress reports on the Crime Reduction Programme for Wales. Presentations have also been received from authorities such as the Police Service in Wales, the British Transport Police and the National Probation Service in Wales. Close interest was maintained on the work of the Community Fire Safety Trust and its reports.

The Committee was most concerned about the increase in drug and alcohol misuse and welcomed the regular updates received. In March 2003, six drug agencies gave presentations to Committee on the approaches adopted to counter substance misuse in Wales.

20. *Statutory Responsibilities*

In June 2000, the Committee considered the responses to the consultation paper *A Sustainable Wales – Learning to Live Differently* and considered the National Assembly's first annual report on social disadvantage.

21. *Cross-cutting issues*

The Committee has been keen to take account of cross-cutting issues in its work. This is particularly true in relation to housing, with consideration of the 'Lifetime Homes' design standards, the Black and Minority Ethnic Housing Strategy and home energy efficiency.

The Committee has also taken a close interest in children's issues. In June 2000 it considered the Play 2000 grant scheme, and in February 2001 it discussed the report *The State of Play*. The Committee also considered the Welsh Affairs Committee report on childcare in Wales.

The Committee considered the effects of policies and programmes within its remit on the Welsh language to inform the Culture Committee's policy review. In doing so, the Committee received representations from Cymuned on housing issues and the Welsh language. The Committee considered the effects of policies and recommendations within its remit from the Culture Committee's policy review on the Welsh language in relation to housing issues.

Following the Committee's discussion of housing for the elderly and housing research programmes, Members felt that it was vital for the Strategy for Older People in Wales to have sufficient regard for the housing needs of older and elderly people. As a result, in January 2002 the Committee considered the housing issues to be addressed within the Strategy and forwarded its views to the Minister for Health and Social Services.

Following the Committee's discussion on corporate parenting resulting from the Waterhouse Report, the Committee invited the Minister for Health and Social Services to debate these issues and in January 2003 received a presentation from the WLGA on their role in Corporate Parenting.

22. *Review of Expenditure and Administration (SO 9.7 (ii))*

The Committee scrutinised the Minister for Finance, Local Government and Communities via her fortnightly report to the Committee. The Minister continued to provide alternative oral and written reports as agreed by the Committee. This kept Members informed of current issues and enabled the Committee to review developments within the portfolio.

23. *Review of Assembly Sponsored Public Bodies (ASPBs) (SO 9.7 (iii))*

There are relatively few Assembly Sponsored Public Bodies within the Committee's remit. In the autumn term, the Committee considered the Local Government Boundary

Commission's Annual Report and Accounts for 1999-00, 2000-01 and 2001-02.

24. *Legislation (SO 9.8(i))*

The Committee was not invited to scrutinise any draft subordinate legislation in accordance with SO 22. However, the Committee is given an opportunity to comment on the timetable of forthcoming legislation within its remit, which is included in the Minister's monthly written report. The Committee has been advised of progress during various stages of the development of secondary legislation within its remit.

The Committee has taken a keen interest in the progress of the Local Government Bill and the Minister has made representations to her Whitehall colleagues following Committee concerns. The Committee considered the Criminal Justice Bill and the Community Care (Delayed Discharges) Bill in the spring term.

25. *Budget (SO 9.8 (ii))*

In the summer terms the Committee considered the commissioning paper for the relevant budget rounds, as well as the Minister's issues paper. On the basis of these discussions, the Committee informed the Cabinet of its budget priorities.

26. *Complaints (SO 9.8(iii))*

No complaints were referred to us during the reporting period.

27. *Public Appointments (SO 9.8(iv))*

Our public appointment nominees were consulted on the appointments of the Chair and members of the local Government Boundaries Commission.⁴

SUCCESSOR COMMITTEE

28. The number and portfolio of subject committees after the May 2003 Assembly elections will depend on the First Minister's allocation of subject responsibilities to members of the Assembly Cabinet. The work programmes and priorities of incoming committees will be a matter for them to determine.

To assist our successor committee in its deliberations we have drawn up a list of possible topics at **Annex 2**.

Local Government and Housing Committee

March 2003

Footnotes

¹ see www.wales.gov.uk pages for Local Government and Housing Committee at the following address: <http://www.wales.gov.uk/keypubassemlocalgov/index.htm>

² The following organisations attended oral consultation sessions: Black Voluntary

Sector Network Wales, Coed Bryn Meurig, Conwy Council – Communities First, Gwynedd County Council, University of Wales, Bangor, Cofis Cwl Cadnant, Community Development Training Consortium

³ The following organisations made presentations to the Committee: British Transport Police, CAIS, Cardiff Addictions Unit, Cardiff Community Housing Association Ltd, Cardiff University, Chartered Institute of Housing Cymru, Consignia Advisory Board for Wales, District Audit, Drug Abuse Resistance Education, National Association of Citizens Advice Bureau Wales, National Federation of Sub-Postmasters, National Probation Service – South Wales Area, Probation Service Directorate, Rethinking Construction Centre for Wales, South Wales Police, Sunpipe, Swansea Drugs Project, Syniad, Tenants Participation Advisory Service, Tower Colliery, Transco, University of Manchester, Welsh Federation of Housing Associations, Welsh Local Government Association, West Glamorgan Council on Alcohol and Drug Abuse, Yates Brewery

⁴ Current nominees are Gwenda Thomas and Janet Ryder.

RESPONSIBILITIES OF SUBJECT COMMITTEES

Standing orders 9.7 and 9.8 set out the responsibilities of subject committees.

Responsibilities

9.7 Each subject committee shall

(i) contribute to the development of the Assembly's policies within the fields for which the relevant Minister is accountable to the Assembly;

(ii) keep under review the expenditure and administration connected with their implementation; and

(iii) keep under review the discharge of public functions in those fields by public, voluntary and private bodies.

9.8 Each subject committee shall also, within the relevant fields,

(i) advise on proposed primary, secondary and European legislation affecting Wales, including performing its functions under standing order 22;

(ii) provide advice to the Assembly Cabinet on matters relating to the allocation of the Assembly's budget in accordance with standing order 19;

(iii) perform its functions under standing order 21 (complaints);

(iv) perform any functions assigned to it under the Code of Practice on Public Appointments Procedure made by the Assembly under standing order 20; and

(v) consider matters referred to it by the Assembly within its fields.

LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND HOUSING COMMITTEE

SUGGESTED LISTS OF ISSUES ARISING FOR THE NEW COMMITTEE TO CONSIDER

Policy Review: Guidance on good practice for drug and alcohol agencies

Topics:

Communities First

Crime and Disorder

Drug and alcohol misuse

Homelessness

BME Housing Strategy

Sustainable Development

Legislation

Budget planning round

Local government finance

Local government modernisation

Scrutiny of the Minister

WLGA

Distribution of Special Grants

Consideration of how deprivation is taken account of in the formula for distributing the revenue support grant and how that has changed over time

Home Energy Conservation (possible presentation from Neath/ Port Talbot CBC)

Partnership between Local Authorities and Housing Associations

Possible Presentations:

Communications Workers Union

One Voice Working Group

LGBC