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Leol
Minister for Social Justice and Local Government



Llywodraeth Cynulliad Cymru
Welsh Assembly Government

Eich cyf/Your ref
Ein cyf/Our ref MB/BG/0261/09

Mick Bates AM
Chair
Sustainability Committee
National Assembly for Wales
Cardiff Bay
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CF99 1NA

5 May 2009

Dear Mick

Mainstreaming Sustainability in Social Justice and Local Government Portfolio.

Thank you for your letter of 7 April.

I do not accept the Committee's view that there is a lack of engagement with the sustainability agenda within the Social Justice and Local Government Portfolio. The Assembly Government's new Scheme for Sustainable Development, One Wales: One Planet will be launched in May and demonstrates how our approach to sustainable development embraces all Assembly Government portfolio areas. One of the key actions in the new Scheme refers to the reconfiguration of Communities First, to ensure it will have a sharp focus on sustainable outcomes for local people and communities whilst tackling economic inactivity, child poverty and promoting income maximisation.

I and my officials are fully committed to working to contribute to the One Wales target of a 3 per cent reduction in greenhouse gas emissions. The most effective way of fulfilling this commitment is through collaboration between Ministerial portfolios as many of the ways that the Assembly Government can influence and drive the carbon reduction agenda is through cross-cutting action. One clear example of this is exploring the ways in which the terms and conditions of grant funding can be used to ensure greater energy efficiency on the part of grant recipients.

To this end SJLG together with other portfolio departments are engaged in the work of the cross-cutting climate change committees that the Assembly Government has established. I am a member of the Cabinet Committee on Climate Change.

The best way of driving the carbon reduction agenda, not just within the public sector but across all aspects of Welsh society is through a co-ordinated, holistic Assembly Government approach. Given the very different nature of Ministerial portfolios it would not be possible or desirable to adopt a standard "quota" approach to contributing to the 3 per cent emissions reduction target.

You raise the issue of benchmarking in your letter. The Assembly Government consulted on the approach to our targets at the start of the year and proposed that the baseline emissions against which annual reductions will be compared will be the average from the years 2006 -2010, as reported in the AEA Disaggregated Greenhouse Gas Inventory. We are considering the responses to the consultation and will confirm the approach to measuring the target in the final Climate Change Strategy which will be published later this year.

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The public sector is only responsible for a small proportion of Wales' emissions; however, it is important that we take action within the sector in order to lead by example. It is not possible to fully disaggregate public sector emissions from the inventory but there is considerable "bottom-up" information that enables the NHS, local authorities and others to measure progress on emissions. We are therefore placing the focus on ensuring that public sector bodies recognise the priority we place on reducing emissions in line with our targets and in supporting them to take practical actions that will help achieve this.

The Minister for Environment Sustainability and Housing is also working to ensure consistency of baseline and reporting and specific proposals in relation to this will be contained in the consultation on the second stage of the Climate Change Strategy due for publication in June.

A major development across both the private and public sector (including Local Government) to which I referred to in my Evidence Paper to the Committee is the introduction of the Carbon Reduction Commitment (CRC) from April 2010. Initial analysis indicates that the Scheme will cover over 4,000 organisations within the U.K. Both schools and street lighting will be included in the portfolio of local authorities covered by the Commitment. An important preliminary to the introduction of this "cap and trade" scheme will be the benchmarking by CRC participants of their total energy use and emissions and the forecasting of future emissions. The intention is that from April 2012 an organisation's ability to purchase will be capped.

In 2008 The Local Government Information Unit launched a "virtual" voluntary "cap and trade scheme" designed to give local authorities experience of carbon trading in advance of the CRC. The WLGA are co-ordinating information to local authorities in Wales on the CRC and carbon trading through its Sustainable Development Framework.

The National Performance Measurement Framework administered by the Local Government Policy Division within my Portfolio includes indicators that require information from local authorities on their energy usage. That may form the basis for developing further data collection and benchmarking in the light of the CRC.

Policy development within my portfolio does take account of sustainability and climate change. For instance, the Communities Directorate's Social Enterprise Programme encourages greater Third Sector involvement in social enterprise initiatives in the environment field. Some of the most successful social enterprise schemes are in the area of re-cycling and my officials are in liaison with Environment, Sustainability and Housing colleagues on how environmentally oriented partnerships between the public, private and third sector can be encouraged. In the context of Community Strategies, we have published separate Advice Notes on sustainable development and climate change and the environment in support of our guidance contained in Local Vision.

You ask for information on the extent to which SJLG policies have received a fair to good rating in respect of a sustainable environment through the Policy Gateway Integration Tool. The Tool was developed by WAG in conjunction with Forum for the Future as a means to promote sustainable development through effective joined-up policy making across the Assembly Government. The Gateway assists us in identifying and considering the potential impacts of new policies on the Assembly Government's strategic objectives and other One Wales policy areas, consistent with the SD Strategy. This goes much wider than environmental issues, and includes potential impact on key areas of Assembly Government policy such as tackling social inclusion and reducing poverty, supporting communities, regeneration and the economy, and promoting health and wellbeing for all age groups.

Every new and emerging policy developed by the Assembly Government is required to go through the Policy Gateway. Departments are expected to conduct an "early stage" gateway exercise, at the start of the policy development process, to take a broad view on potential impacts and cross-cutting issues, and are encouraged to include external stakeholders from the outset. This helps departments to connect with other policy areas and interests, and to take account of a wide range of perspectives in developing the new policy. When the policy is in its near final form, a second Gateway is held, also including external stakeholders, which ensures time for reflection and review, prior to formal consultation.

Key SJLG strategies that have benefited from the Gateway Review process relate to Substance Misuse, Alcohol Treatment, Financial Inclusion; Communities First; the Community Facilities and Activities Programme. Proposals for the Post Office Diversification Fund have undergone a first stage Gateway Review. Given the nature of the SJLG portfolio the predominant assessment in respect of the sustainable environment component have been neutral with certain aspects (for instance policies that result in a reduced need for travel) being scored as fair. The Policy Gateway Tool is managed by the Strategic Policy Division within the Department of the First Minister and the process is kept under review.

I propose submitting a separate response to you on the more detailed questions you raised in respect of Communities First during my evidence session.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Brian Gibbons', written in a cursive style.

Brian Gibbons AM/AC