

Social Justice and Regeneration Committee

SJR(2) –12-06(p1)

Date: Thursday 21 September 2006

Time: 9.30am – 12.30pm

Venue: Senedd, National Assembly for Wales

Title: Edwina Hart- Report to SJ&R Committee – 21 September 2006

1. Rural Homelessness Research

In November 2005, I advised Committee of research commissioned by the Rural Observatory into rural homelessness and promised to report back on progress.

I can now advise you that this research has been completed. The report will be published shortly, and discussed at a conference on rural homelessness on the 24 October, organised by the Chartered Institute of Housing Cymru. This conference will debate the research and practice across Wales, and lead to a good practice advice note to be published next year.

The research was carried out by a team from Cardiff University, in consultation with local authorities and voluntary organisations in rural areas, including the completion of 6 case studies. Homelessness statistics were analysed, and the researchers found that the rate of homelessness acceptances in 2005 was level with urban areas, at 7.3 per thousand households.

The report's findings highlight the often hidden nature of rural homelessness, as people find difficulty in accessing services and face the stigma of homelessness, which is often falsely associated with outsiders bringing problems into rural areas.

Logistical problems create difficulties for service providers in delivering accessible services. The researchers found that increasing house prices had increased the dependency on rented housing for people on low incomes, whilst the dispersed nature of housing in these areas meant that people often have to move some distance to find temporary or permanent housing solutions.

The report refers to a number of examples of good practice, such as the bond scheme and related services offered by Ceredigion Care Society, hostel and resettlement services managed by Digartref Ynys Môn, and the advice and advocacy services provided by Pembrokeshire Care Society. This will be built upon in the good practice advice note. I will share the report with Committee via a letter to the Chair, once it has been published.

2. Social Housing Cycle Research

In November 2005, I agreed to report back to Committee on research into the links between the housing market and homelessness. This research was carried out by Michael Jones of Cambridge University and is now complete.

The report makes a valuable contribution to our understanding of the relationship between the home ownership market and the demand for social housing. In particular it provides vital data which show interlinked trends in both sectors.

The research examined trends in house prices, lettings and homelessness data over 25 years up to 2005. It shows that in the downswing of the home ownership market cycle, as real prices decline, the availability of social housing improves. People are more able to move into owner occupation, and do, leaving vacancies for new lettings. Turnover of properties rises, leading to an increase in the number of new lettings, both in transfers and to new tenants. The numbers of applicants on waiting lists fall, and in these circumstances the numbers of households presenting as homelessness falls.

Conversely, when there is an upturn in real house prices, fewer households leave the social housing sector, as people are less able to buy, and the number of new lettings falls, thus seizing up the flow from and within the social housing sector. Those households not in either social housing or home ownership are more likely to register on waiting lists, boosting demand whilst lettings shrink. This process may be exacerbated by private landlords selling up in a rising market, thus further constricting supply in the private rented market. In these conditions mobility reduces, and demand for social housing increases. The number of applicants on waiting lists rises, as does the number of homelessness presentations.

The report speculates on the connecting factors between the private home ownership market and the social housing market. The report is inconclusive about how these factors operate, although the evidence suggests that rises in house prices affects affordability and access to the lower quartile of the home ownership sector for people on lower incomes. This would lead to greater pressure on affordable rented housing, which is reinforced by the reduced mobility in the rented sector as prices rise.

The report also establishes that the Priority Need Order 2001, which introduced the new priority need categories, only made a relatively small contribution to the increase in the numbers of households to whom local authorities owed a full homelessness duty.

We can conclude from the research and other evidence that there is a continuing level of homelessness amongst people who even in favourable market conditions experience housing problems and crises, often linked to personal problems which require support. There is another section of people who can cope with their housing needs in better times, but find themselves vulnerable to homelessness when the market becomes tighter.

The findings confirm the need for a continuing programme of social housing development. I will share this report with Committee via a letter to the Chair.

3. Pat Niner's Report on Accommodation Needs of Gypsy-Travellers in Wales

I would like to inform members that the report undertaken by Pat Niner of Birmingham University on Accommodation Needs of Gypsies and Travellers in Wales has now been completed. I have written to Jane Hutt AM making her aware of the recommendations which would have implications on my portfolio which will be taken forward by the Housing Directorate. All the recommendations in the report are currently being addressed by the Welsh Assembly Government and a full response will be issued shortly. A copy of this paper is available at an Annex A.

4. Discussions between Forestry Commission and Local Authorities on Release of Land

In February 2006, I agreed to update Committee on discussions with those Local Authorities who are actively supporting the Forestry Commission Affordable Housing project.

With the assistance of Powys County Council, agreement has been reached in principle in respect of a mechanism for the transfer of Assembly Government owned land, managed by Forestry Commission Wales at Ceinws to a Community Land Trust established by the local community. Subject to Ministerial approval, this will enable the partners to develop a detailed proposal for the site that can be issued to potential developers.

Officials are also working with Gwynedd and Carmarthenshire County Councils to identify the most suitable location for potential developments at Dinas Mawddwy in Gwynedd and Abergorlech in Carmarthenshire. There are two possible sites in each of these locations.

5. Equity Sharing with Mortgage Lenders

This was raised by Mark Isherwood AM at Committee in February 2006. It relates to the 'Open Market Homebuy' scheme which is due to be rolled out in England on 2 October as a pilot programme running until March 2008. Four lenders have agreed to jointly fund a 25% equity loan with the UK Government. Approximately £230 million has been earmarked for the scheme.

Lenders will also provide a conventional loan of up to 75% of market value and will have first charge over a property. Upon sale, if the value of the property has risen, the buyer, lender and the Government receive a share of proceeds equivalent to their share of equity upon purchase. However if the value has fallen, whilst the Government will share proportionately in any loss, it accepts that lenders may choose not to. This would mean that the outstanding equity loan to be repaid to the lender would be fixed at the original cash amount loaned, thus leaving lenders with hardly any exposure to risk, given that they will have first charge on the property.

Despite this, it has also been agreed that lenders will be able to charge for their share of the equity loan provided this does not exceed 3% after five years. All four currently involved have indicated their intention to impose this charge after five years have elapsed. Indicative pricing details for the conventional mortgage loan also suggest that borrowers under this scheme will be paying on average around 0.5% more than other first time buyers.

Notwithstanding these disadvantages compared to our Homebuy scheme, officials have been in discussion with the Council of Mortgage Lenders as to the level of interest in developing a scheme for Wales, were funding to be made available. The general reaction amongst participating lenders has been that they probably would be interested at some point in the future, but not until the pilot is up and running. However one of the lenders has said it would be happy to start discussions, as has the Principality Building Society. I therefore propose that we consider the issue further when we discuss the findings of the Review of Low Cost Home Ownership at Committee in November.

6. Pontypridd Example of Self-build Homes

At the meeting in June 2006, I agreed to provide the Committee with information about the former Taff Ely Self Build scheme in Pontypridd. This scheme involved the building of six two bedrooled houses by vulnerable young people on a site near the town centre. It was designed for 12 young builders but there was generally a core of only 6-7 regular attendees which dropped to around four in the final months.

The scheme was developed by Barnardos and Pontypridd District Housing Association under the direction of a steering group which was set up in late 1994, and construction work started on site in June 1997. The construction period was expected to last 9 months but it took 22 months to complete with professional contractors, secondees from the local authority contracts department and Army volunteers ultimately being called in to assist with completion of the project. Only four self builders moved into the finished properties.

The project was jointly funded by Social Housing Grant, Barnardos, Mid Glamorgan TEC, Pontypridd and District Housing Association and charitable donations. At the outset, its estimated cost, including support provision, was £363,676 but the final cost was £492,470 of which £150,000 was attributed to support provided to the self builders.

An evaluation carried out by the University of Glamorgan found that:

Self build is not a cheap way of providing housing. Additional costs for supporting the self builders, buying in professional contractors to speed up delays and providing materials suitable for use by non-professionals increase costs over conventionally procured schemes.

Self build does allow for innovative design and can provide useful training but none of the self builders went on to obtain any formal qualification.

The UK housing market is not attuned to self build and because of the multi agency nature of developments there are likely to be continuous problems and delays. To succeed, sustained commitment from the self builders and the other agencies involved in the project is essential.

In schemes for rent, continued support may be required to ensure that tenancies are maintained once properties are occupied.

Despite these concerns, in principle, there are no reasons why further self build schemes could not be

developed in Wales and should an authority bring forward a realistic proposal it would be given due consideration for SHG funding. However any proposal would need to be viewed within the context of the recently implemented changes to the SHG programme which emphasise better programme planning, efficiency gains through joint procurement and firm delivery timescales.

7. Literature to Increase Awareness of Community Land Trusts

This was raised by Leanne Wood AM at Committee in June 2006. Since then we have started to raise awareness of the potential role of Community Land Trusts within the Affordable Housing Toolkit and the various presentations which take place around that. However, as I indicated in responding to Leanne at the time, I think the production of more detailed literature is premature pending the implementation of the Welsh pilot schemes we are supporting through our funding of Land for People. Once we reach the operational stage I think that we should be thinking about promulgating the benefits more widely.

8. Home Information Packs

Members will have seen the announcement by the UK Government that Home Condition Reports will not be a compulsory element of Home Information Packs when they are introduced in June 2007.

Although this is a non-devolved matter, the UK Government has a duty to consult with the National Assembly for Wales concerning any regulations which relate to residential properties in Wales. I was disappointed, therefore, that I was not given any advance notification of the announcement. Neither have I received a response from the UK Government to my letter on the Home Information Pack Regulations, about which the Chair wrote to me on 24 May.

I have, therefore, written again to the UK Government about these issues and will inform the Committee when I receive a response.

9. Disabled Facilities Grant - Draft Guidance

Following my update on 8 June 2006, I promised to let Committee have sight of the draft proposed Disabled Facilities Grant Guidance (Annex B). A focus group including local authority practitioners, occupational therapists, Care & Repair Cymru and the WLGA has been set up to consider the initial draft of the guidance. This draft may change as a result of the Group's comments. It is important to stress that this is the first draft and comments from Committee Members would be welcomed.

10. Home Energy Efficiency Scheme and Climate Change

As the Committee will know, the Home Energy Efficiency Scheme (HEES) installs heating and insulation measures in the homes of vulnerable households. Each insulation measure has an associated and accredited energy saving, and a carbon saving can be calculated for each home if the fuel used is known. The energy and carbon savings from heating measures can be calculated in a similar way, using information on the type of heating present and fuel used before and after the grant work has been carried out.

However, HEES is primarily a fuel poverty rather than carbon saving programme. Households receiving improvements in energy efficiency through HEES can benefit from lower fuel bills (resulting in lower emissions of pollutants such as CO₂) or they may choose to take some of this as a higher level of comfort. Often the end result is a combination of the two. Households taking savings to achieve increased comfort may choose to heat their home to a higher temperature, or to heat more rooms in their home than previously.

Where insulation has been installed, or a change of heating fuel has taken place when heating is upgraded, the associated energy and carbon savings need to be reduced by a 'comfort factor' to accommodate this effect.

As part of the recent review of the UK Climate Change Programme, carbon savings for fuel poverty programmes were calculated. In this analysis, a comfort factor of 50-75% was applied to reduce the resulting carbon savings from these programmes. Defra estimate that UK programmes will contribute carbon savings of 400,000 tonnes of carbon in 2010. Under the Energy Efficiency Commitment, where suppliers install energy efficiency measures in the homes of domestic customers, a comfort factor of 30% is applied to savings by the energy regulator, Ofgem.

HEES makes long lasting improvements to the properties of eligible households. Should the recipient of the grant move from the property these improvements continue to benefit future occupants, regardless of their status.

Eaga Partnership who manages HEES on behalf of the Welsh Assembly Government has used the methodology for the Energy Efficiency Commitment to assess the carbon savings from HEES in Wales for the period 2000 to April 2006. This assessment suggests that the carbon savings from HEES might be 21,307 tonnes of carbon per year, or a total of 511,727,625 tonnes of carbon across the lifetime of the measures installed under HEES thus far.

The Environment Strategy Action Plan contains a commitment to try to establish the carbon savings likely to be generated by Assembly Government policies. As part of this a more detailed analysis of carbon savings from HEES will be carried out. Work is expected to start on this exercise later this year.

11. Home Energy Efficiency Scheme – Future Developments

I wrote to Committee on 27 July concerning my proposal to introduce the Home Energy Efficiency Scheme (Wales) (No.3) Determination 2006. Committee members will wish to be aware that the Determination will be debated in plenary on Tuesday 3 October and this will allow the Determination to come into force on 5 October if approved by the National Assembly for Wales.

I have also provided at Annex C, a short report covering the first five years of the Scheme operating in Wales. The report sets out the achievements of the Scheme and highlights how it has been able to assist over 60,000 households from across Wales by providing heating and energy efficiency measures at a cost of some £54m. It demonstrates the Assembly Government's continued

commitment to eradicating fuel poverty as far as practicable across Wales.

Our interim fuel poverty target of assisting 95,000 households by 2007 looks to be extremely challenging even with the success of the Scheme to date and the extra £10m allocated to the Scheme over the next 2 years. I remain fully committed, building on the progress already made, to stepping up our efforts to identify, reach and assist those most in need.

Increased costs of insulation and heating measures, as reflected in the proposed new grant levels contained in the Determination, along with the higher costs of boiler replacement and the introduction of more expensive solutions, such as oil, into the Scheme mean that our ability to reach the target number of households in 2007 will be limited. I have previously stated that the emphasis of HEES will have to change if we are to assist those homes that are 'hard to heat', even if solutions are more expensive. This will inevitably make meeting the targets set for eradicating fuel poverty in Wales even more challenging.

I am also considering proposals as to how renewable energy solutions can be best introduced into the Scheme so that we are able to provide alternative measures that might assist those households that are 'hard to heat'.

Households assisted previously under the Scheme might have been unable to receive all of the energy efficiency measures to which they were entitled as costs may well have exceeded the grant that was available to them. However, it should be recognised that with the increases in grant levels the Scheme will now be able to provide the full range of measures to qualifying households, at little or no cost, and it is probable that those assisted under the Scheme are much more likely to stay out of fuel poverty than has been the case. I remain concerned about the impact of continued energy price rises on the fuel poor.

12. Excess Winter Deaths

At the last Committee meeting, I agreed to check if further information was available on winter deaths. Apart from statistical data from the Office for National Statistics, the Committee might find the following two articles of interest, particularly the research report from the Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health 2003, which provides a cross country analysis of excess winter mortality in Europe, identifying key risk factors

http://www.nea.org.uk/Policy_&_Research/Fuel_poverty_facts/Excess_winter_mortality

<http://jech.bmjournals.com/cgi/content/full/57/10/784>

The factors responsible for the United Kingdom having a relatively high number of excess winter deaths, compared to many other European countries with similar climates and living standards, are not well understood. Hence it is currently not possible to state with certainty what role is played by low indoor and external temperatures or by other possible factors such as the behaviour of people most at risk. A series of papers from a major research study into the health impacts of the English Home Energy Efficiency scheme, which I contributed towards financially in view of the relevance of

the findings to our own scheme, is starting to be published and will help to quantify the role that fuel poverty and other factors play

I take the issue of excess winter deaths in Wales extremely seriously, and we are looking at other research and evidence that may explain how they come about.

13. Fire and Rescue Service Risk Reduction Plan

The Fire and Rescue National Framework for Wales commits the Welsh Assembly Government to introduce guidance on risk reduction planning during 2006 for implementation in 2007-08. The development of Risk Reduction Planning guidance (RRP) is intrinsically linked to the development of Service Standards and thus issued the standard to attendance to fires in the home in March 2006. The Welsh Assembly Government is committed to develop further Service Standards.

The primary purpose of an Authority's RRP is to reduce risk. The RRP allows FRAs to assess their whole operating environment, both community and corporate. It is the fundamental assessment on how each Authority intends to manage risk, whilst integrating their service within the wider social justice agenda.

The three Fire and Rescue Services in Wales are currently consulting on their draft Risk Reduction Plans for 2007-2008. I shall include an update of the outcome of the consultations in my written report in November.

14. Refugee and Asylum Seeker Issues

Draft Refugee Inclusion Strategy

One of the key tasks of the All Wales Refugee Policy Forum was the development of a stand-alone Refugee Inclusion Strategy for Wales. The aim of the strategy is to support the successful inclusion of refugees into Welsh society at all levels through the strategic, co-ordinated and effective action of the public, voluntary and private sectors as well as refugee communities. In particular, it aims to ensure each Welsh Assembly Government division takes full responsibility for inclusion of refugees within its policy and service delivery remit.

Cabinet agreed the Draft Refugee Inclusion Strategy on 19 June 2006 and agreed to go out to consultation. I shared with you a draft of the Strategy in my last written report. The consultation period will commence in early September and will engage via 3 mechanisms:

An invitation to all interested parties to provide written feedback on the draft strategy. This will be done via the Assembly Government website, email and hard copy letters and it is hoped it will be distributed widely through relevant networks across civil society, the statutory and private sectors. Responses will be sent directly to Assembly officials.

Two consultation events targeted at all partners, stakeholders and interested parties. One will be held in south Wales (to capture dispersal areas Swansea, Newport and Cardiff) and a smaller event in

north Wales to enable input from Wrexham.

Targeted consultation sessions with asylum seekers, refugees and Refugee Community Organisations which will be facilitated by Refugee Voice Wales and The Welsh Refugee Council.

In addition, a group of senior officials to oversee the consultation process, the costing and continued development of the strategy and action plan has been established. This group will report to me.

Voluntary Code of Practice for Employers

The Voluntary Code of Practice was developed by the Migrant Workers Sub-Group. I established this sub-group of the All Wales Refugee Policy Forum to look into issues around migrant workers in Wales.

The draft Code of Practice is aimed at imparting to the business community the benefits of employing migrant workers and adhering to best practice principles. The draft Code was submitted to officials across the Welsh Assembly Government and external organizations for comments in July; in addition I shared a copy of the draft Code with you in my last written report. These comments have now been incorporated and the draft will go out to consultation in early September.

Migrant Workers Welcome to Wales Pack

The Welcome to Wales Pack for Migrant Workers was developed by the Migrant Workers Sub-Group. It is designed to provide specialist information on worker rights, housing, education, health, economic development and ESOL for migrant workers who come to Wales to work.

Although not a devolved issue, there are huge implications for service providers in Wales as the recent influx of migrant workers puts an added strain on already oversubscribed services in Wales.

I shared a copy of the draft Welcome Pack via my last written report. Also, the draft Welcome Pack was submitted to officials across the Welsh Assembly Government and external organizations for comment in July. These comments have now been incorporated into a final version which will be translated into priority European languages, ethnic minority community languages, English/Welsh and distributed to CABx, Advice agencies, local authorities, local health boards, Libraries, Trade Unions Welsh and Embassies. It will be formatted to allow regular updating. It will also be available in all these languages on the Welsh Assembly Government Website.

In addition, officials will produce a 'Ten Important Things to Know' leaflet to be distributed at a local level, through community organizations and groups, including Communities First Partnerships, Voluntary Sector organizations.

New Asylum Model

Details of the proposed New Asylum Model (NAM) were first published in the government's Five Year Immigration Strategy in February 2005. The NAM is fundamentally a new tighter, faster

procedure for processing claims with three key elements:

Segmentation; new screening process changes the standardised processing principle and instead allocates claims to a processing route tailored to their characteristics, known as "segmentation".

Fast Track Processing; non-detained cases will be dealt with more quickly and be closely

Case Ownership. Asylum cases will be managed by a case owner through regular visits and reporting.

The Home Office began NAM implementation in May 2005 (with a pilot in Liverpool), and expects to process all new claims in Wales under the NAM by September 2006. On 28 July 2006, Freda Challeron, the Home Office's NAM Programme Director came to Cardiff Bay and made a presentation to officials from across the Welsh Assembly Government on how the NAM will be implemented in Wales.

We have been informed that there will be two NAM teams based in South Wales, each with about 25 staff. The Home Office has started recruiting for these posts, and the expectation is that those appointed will receive 50 days training before they start operating. The Home Office expects the service to start in January 2007.

In essence the segmentation process has been devised to assess the risk of an applicant's initial claim and the risk of them absconding. This initial assessment will also determine if an applicant will be dispersed to a predetermined area. Those without any foundation for a claim, the Home Office, suggest will under this scheme be liable to a quick removal, and before they have any opportunity to set any roots.

Those dispersed will be allocated a caseworker, who will manage the applicants claim for asylum, their arrangements for accommodation and other support, including health, education and subsistence support. Access to Legal support, the Home Office states will be made available, and the Legal Services Commission has been charged with ensuring that there is adequate provision of legal support at a local level. If an applicant is refused, that caseworker will also be responsible for presenting the decision in a tribunal.

The Home Office believes that an applicant's case can be managed within a 28 day period from start to finish. The new offices in Wales, based in Cardiff, will host the caseworkers, who will be expected to undertake outreach support. We are impressing on the Home Office the need to ensure that those placed in North Wales are part of the administration from the Cardiff Office. This issue has yet to be resolved.

Welsh Assembly Government officials will continue this dialogue with the Home Office.

Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children

The number of unaccompanied asylum seeker children (UASC) in Wales is unclear and no central record as to their location across Wales is kept, however the Welsh Consortium for Asylum Seekers

and Refugees estimate there are approximately 90 UASC across Wales. UASC are looked after by local authorities who are responsible for their care and welfare and are dispersed across Welsh authorities, not only within the four cluster areas (Cardiff, Newport Swansea and Wrexham), making wider community links with people from the same ethnic and religious background more difficult.

The Home Office was proposing to go out to consultation on their Unaccompanied Asylum Seeking Children (UASC) Reform Programme in late August. Following discussion with Welsh Assembly Government officials, the Home Office has decided to delay the consultation until the autumn, when they will have met with Welsh Assembly Government officials to discuss the implications for Welsh local authorities and the health service to ensure sufficient capacity to accommodate and support any relocation of large numbers of UASC to Wales.

Welsh Assembly Government officials are also arranging a meeting with key stakeholders (in local authorities and local health boards) in the four local authority dispersal areas to discuss the Home Office consultation and to look positively at the options for building capacity in Wales.

Passport Agency: Authentication by Interview

Welsh Assembly Government officials have recently been made aware of a new application process being implemented by the Identity & Passport Service (IPS) for first-time adult applicants for a passport. This will require applicants to attend a face-to-face interview to deter fraudulent applications. Four offices are planned for Wales - in Newport, Swansea, Aberystwyth and Wrexham.

The IPS's target is that no-one should have to travel for more than one hour each way to attend their passport interview. There are some areas of Wales where passport applicants' travel to attend one of the four offices would exceed this. For these locations in 'Remote Communities' IPS is intending to implement a local solution to allow applicants to undertake their interview remotely via secure webcam.

Officials from across the Welsh Assembly Government met with Fiona Burn from IPS on 17 August 2006 to discuss these remote services locations in Wales and will continue to contribute to proposals.

15. Disadvantaged Groups Development Fund

The Assembly Government has launched a consultation on a proposed new fund aimed at small voluntary and community organisations working with disadvantaged groups. These include ethnic minorities, disabled people, people who are lesbian, gay or bisexual, women, gypsies and travellers, language issues, refugees, asylum seekers and migrant workers, homeless people, people with low levels of literacy or numeracy, and speakers of minority languages. The fund would operate at two levels:

Level 1 – grants of up to £500 at a local level, and up to £2,000 at a regional level. These grants are aimed at building confidence and esteem and at supporting socially excluded groups

Level 2 – grants of up to £25,000. These grants are for developmental work, to strengthen an

organisation's governance and/or financial systems.

The consultation is being administered by the Voluntary Sector Unit. The closing date for responses is 31 October 2006.

16. Charities Bill

Members will recall that the Committee considered reports on the implications of the Charities Bill in September 2004 and September 2005. The key provisions of the Bill include:

a new statutory definition of charity

reforms to the Charity Commission, including provision for at least one Commissioner to 'have knowledge of Welsh interests', and to be appointed following consultation with the National Assembly

an independent tribunal to hear appeals against the Charity Commission

A new legal form for charities, the Charitable Incorporated Company.

measures to make merger, evolution and administration easier for charities

measures relating to fundraising, including a new licensing scheme for public collections and powers to introduce statutory regulation if needed

A new general power for the Assembly Government (and in England, the Secretary of State), to give financial assistance to charities.

The Bill was delayed by the general election and by difficulties in securing parliamentary time but has now completed its stages in the House of Lords, as well as Second Reading and Standing Committee in the House of Commons. The remaining stages are Report and Third Reading in the Commons, followed by consideration of Commons amendments in the House of Lords. These will take place after Parliament's summer break.

The Bill is now expected to receive Royal Assent in early November. The new Act will not come into effect immediately; various parts will be brought into force in sequence, starting about two months after the legislation has been enacted. The whole process is likely to take 18-24 months.

The provision for the 'Welsh Charity Commissioner' will be a candidate for early commencement, although this has yet to be formally agreed. The recruitment process and the final appointment will be made in close consultation with the Welsh Assembly Government, although the process cannot be started until after Royal Assent.

17. Russell Commission

Since my last update in July, I have approved an implementation plan for addressing the recommendations of the Russell Commission on youth volunteering. The programme will be based around the following principles:

it will be targeted towards areas less likely to be associated with traditional forms of volunteering

diversity will be reflected in all stages, from planning through to delivery

priority will be given to ensuring that the initiative is genuinely youth-led

there will be recognition of the value of engaging young people in Sport, Music and the Arts

use of resources will be closely monitored, to measure achievement of the recommendations in terms of numbers, quality, and diversity.

For the current year, I have agreed the following priorities for allocating the £1million available:

(i) Infrastructure: a one-stop IT and telephone portal (£200,000) and the employment through the County Voluntary Councils of a network of part time youth volunteer advisors (£150,000).

(ii) Grants to create new volunteering opportunities and to improve the quality and diversity of existing ones: grants will be directed through several existing schemes which already support youth volunteering (£510,000).

(iii) Quality framework: existing quality frameworks for volunteering will be looked at specifically for young people. Resources will be reviewed, and best practice promoted to all organisations that could be potential sources of volunteering opportunities (£40,000).

(v) Hardship Fund and Promotion: £10,000 will be made available for hardship grants, should any young person be financially disadvantaged through volunteering. A further £30,000 will be available for marketing and promotion.

Spending priorities for 2007/8 are likely to be similar, but will be reviewed later this year as the initiative progresses. The proposed implementation structure will take the form of Task and Finish Groups, addressing such issues as quality, access, engaging the hardest to reach etc. There will be a parallel youth structure feeding in the young persons' perspective on all aspects of delivery.

18. Strategic Action Plan for the Voluntary Sector Scheme

Work continues on preparing a new strategic Action Plan for the Voluntary Sector Scheme.

To aid the drafting of the Plan, which will go out for consultation in early 2007, two 'facilitated workshops' involving a cross section of voluntary and community sector representatives were held on 6 and 14 September. The purpose was to work with senior officials to test emerging ideas, and to

contribute creative thinking on what the Plan should contain.

Work remains on course for the new Plan to be launched in early summer 2007, following the elections to the National Assembly.

19. Ministerial Meetings with the Voluntary Sector

The Committee will recall from the July 2006 meeting that I agreed to provide an update on the impact of my Ministerial meetings with the Voluntary Sector - and to write to Cabinet colleagues asking them to do the same. I have requested Cabinet colleagues to do this.

My six monthly meetings with the Sector continue to provide a useful opportunity for representatives of voluntary and community organisations working in my portfolio areas to communicate with me directly, and to raise the Sector's views, concerns and ideas. The main issues discussed at my two latest meetings with the voluntary sector have been:

Play policy / insurance cover

Social Inclusion

Long term funding of the sector

The Assembly Government's Refugee Inclusion Strategy

(May 2006)

Disadvantaged Groups Development Fund

Children, Young People and Communities 1st

Participatory Budgeting re: Housing

Housing Stock Transfer

Carers and employment

(Nov 2005)

My next biannual meeting with the voluntary sector is due to be held on 6 November.

The impact of these meetings, across all portfolios, including their potential for improvement is currently being examined by Dr Neil Caldwell; as part of his work to draft a new Strategic Action Plan for the Voluntary Sector Scheme, ready for public consultation later this year.

20. "Walking the Talk" Report

The Anti Poverty Network Cymru (APNC) has distributed its "Walking the Talk" report which seeks to contribute positive recommendations on how best the Communities First programme can engage and empower communities. My officials have been aware of this report and have been in touch with the APNC throughout the process. I welcome the recommendations from this particular perspective and am pleased that many of the generic recommendations chime with our own Action Research findings which have emerged from the evaluation of Communities First.

In research terms, the review conducted by the APNC is small in scale, particularly on in-depth matters. It samples three areas from the Communities First programme, Splott, Caia Park and Duffryn. Therefore it draws on a very small part of the programme and attempts to generalise issues from just over 2% of the programme.

The broad findings of "Walking the Talk" demonstrate that Communities First has support amongst the populations it serves. Many of the issues raised in this research have already been highlighted through the Action Research sessions with Cambridge Policy Consultants and as such have already been addressed in the new draft Guidance on Communities First which has recently been put out to consultation. The research by APNC highlights several generic issues including: the need to involve all members of the community in Partnership activities - especially young people; clarity on the role of the Co-ordinator; and of achieving a common understanding of key themes and of the programme itself. The new draft Communities First Guidance offers additional help to Communities First Partnerships and Co-ordinators on many of these issues including: the membership of the Partnership; the role of the Co-ordinator; and on involving all members of the community. In particular, a section on children and young people offers detailed guidance on how best the Partnership can tailor its activities to encourage young people to take part.

In addition to help offered in the draft Guidance, Communities First also provides a national support structure where a variety of organisations are funded to offer help and advice for Partnerships on specialist areas. The support structure is currently being reviewed (excluding the Communities First Support Network) to learn whether Partnerships themselves feel that the current arrangements dovetail with their developing needs. "Walking the Talk" raises generic support issues from the three areas researched such as training to achieve a common understanding of key themes. Should this be common to all the Partnerships consulted in the review of support arrangements they will be taken into account in any future support arrangements.

In the course of their contact with Communities First Partnerships, my officials have been made aware that there are a range of views emerging which suggest that the Communities First Partnerships who were the subjects of "Walking the Talk" are not entirely in agreement with the picture presented by the report. Whilst this does not reflect all the Partnerships views, in general, they feel that the research does not reflect an accurate picture of the Partnerships efforts to secure real participation by residents. Two Partnerships in particular felt that the report contained factual inaccuracies.

Further evidence of the Communities First programme will emerge from the Interim Evaluation of Communities First due to be published in the Autumn and which is based on more extensive evidence

such as a 3000 person MORI survey, statistics, qualitative case studies based on fieldwork in 30 Communities First areas and comparative research with similar programmes across Europe.

In addition to the evaluation, a baseline report is also currently being prepared which provides demographic and income data for each Communities First area for 2001. The report will also include accurate maps of each area based on the new Lower Super Output Areas being used by the Office for National Statistics.

The evaluation of Communities First will be discussed by this Committee.

21. Statistics for Communities First Programme

Following on from my undertaking to the Committee back in June 2006 and in conjunction with the Interim Evaluation of Communities First, the publication of statistics for the Communities First programme will be published in September 2006. The statistics for each Communities First area will be presented in a compendium report called "Communities First: A 2001 Baseline". The report will provide statistics and maps from the beginning of the programme in 2001 from Census and Department for Work and Pensions data. This will be launched with the Interim Evaluation of Communities First at events in North Wales on the 20 September and in South Wales on the 21 September.

The links below will take you to 'Communities First: A 2001 Baseline'.

www.wales.gov.uk/statistics

www.cymru.gov.uk/ystadegau

22. Update - Communities @One

The Welsh Assembly Government's Communities @One initiative is now operational and a team of Community Brokers are in place who work with local community groups, including Communities First Partnerships, to develop a flexible programme of work to meet the needs of local people.

The Initiative has started off very well with positive feedback from community groups and voluntary sector organisations, who are interacting with the Initiative on the ground. The system being operated has been welcomed as groups always know the status of their application, receive constructive comment on how it can be improved and know when their application is being considered. Such comments provide early evidence that the structure and methodology chosen to deliver Communities @One are apt for the circumstances.

To date, 23 grants totalling £644,551, have been approved and there is a forward work programme of around 70 projects scheduled to be presented for consideration to the grant panel over the next three to six months.

The initiative is currently only focused on the 132 geographic Communities First areas (100 most

deprived electoral divisions and 32 sub ward pockets of deprivation). The Communities @One Guidance re-affirms the point that Communities of Interest will be considered once the Initiative is up and running - this will involve consideration of whether the existing Communities First Communities of Interest should be eligible. A paper detailing proposals for Communities of Interest will be submitted to me for consideration.

The paper, together with my recent decision on the basis upon which national voluntary organisations can apply, will provide a framework within which applications for support can be made by groups and organisations outside of the 132 geographical Communities First areas.

23. Update - Post Office Issues

Post Office Development Fund

I presented emerging findings of the evaluation in my written report to Committee in March 2006.

The evaluation report of the Post Office Development Fund has been published and the link below will take you to the report, including the Welsh language version.

<http://new.wales.gov.uk/topics/housingandcommunity/research/sjrrr0206?lang=en>.

Franchising of Directly Managed Branches (Crown) Post Offices

On 27 June 2006, Post Office Limited announced their intention to franchise the Kingsway Post Office in Swansea and the John Street Post Office in Llanelli. The Swansea franchise arrangement with WHSmith has caused much concern locally and I have written to the Director for Welsh Affairs and to the Programme Director at Post Office Limited outlining these concerns and expressing my disappointment with the decision to close the Directly Managed Post Office in Swansea City centre.

I have also written to Nick Ainger, MP and Jim Fitzpatrick MP, Under Secretary of State at the Department of Trade and Industry and the Leader of Swansea City Council calling on them to join me in raising these concerns with senior management of Post Office Limited at UK level.

A Directly Managed Post Office conveys status and gives a clear message to local people of Post Office Limited's commitment to maintaining standards of service and products to people living in Wales's second city. The people of Swansea have expressed their anger and concern very clearly. I hope Post Office Ltd listen to the views of their customers and retain the directly managed branch at its location on the Kingsway.

Future of the Post Office Network

We await the decision of the UK Government on its future funding of the post office network but we are continuing to work with them directly and through the Wales Office to inform them of the situation in Wales.

24. Child Poverty

My Deputy Minister held meetings in July with the Wales Council for Voluntary Action and the End Child Poverty Network, including the WLGA, about the Child Poverty Implementation Plan and the collaborative roles of those involved in its delivery. Local authorities and other voluntary sector agencies have a clear part to play as a provider of services, in ensuring children and young people in poverty are able to participate fully in a range of activities and that their voices are heard.

Alongside the general and specific policy proposals contained in the Child Poverty Implementation Plan, Cabinet agreed that my Deputy Minister should seek to pull together a range of cross-cutting 2010 milestones and 2020 targets to measure progress towards the Assembly Government's stated goal of eradicating child poverty by 2020. The proposed milestones and targets cover four main policy areas of Income and Work; Education; Health and Housing.

During the summer my Deputy Minister also held a series of bi-lateral meetings with the Ministers for Education and Lifelong Learning; Environment Planning and Countryside; Health and Social Services; Enterprise, Innovation and Networks and with the First Minister to agree the milestones and targets that the Assembly Government will adopt to measure progress in reducing child poverty. The draft milestones and targets paper is currently being finalised by officials and I intend to submit it for consideration by my Cabinet colleagues towards the end of September. Committee members will, of course, have sight of the paper once agreed by the Welsh Assembly Government.

My Deputy Minister will be updating Committee on the progress of the Child Poverty Implementation Plan in the November Committee meeting.

25. British Irish Council Social Inclusion Theme

The Welsh Assembly Government is responsible for jointly chairing (with the Scottish Executive) the British Irish Council's group on Social Inclusion.

On 3 March 2006, British Irish Council Social Inclusion Ministers agreed that the work to be undertaken by officials during 2006-07 should focus on Child Poverty and Lone Parents. Officials will look at institutional factors such as benefits systems, which play a critical role in supporting many lone parent households and in promoting access to employment. Work will also focus on transition points in people's lives and how they are supported through these, bearing in mind how people move in and out of lone parenthood. Consideration will be given to the ways in which administrations take the views of lone parents, children and young people into account in formulating policy and how administrations target and provide information to these groups. And officials will study the impact of partnership arrangements on service delivery and identify good practice in multi-agency working.

The next officials meeting on 3 October is hosted by the Welsh Assembly Government.

26. All Wales Inquiry into Domestic Abuse

Appointment of Nurse Seconded for A&E Services

Following the successful roll out of the ante natal Care Pathway across Wales, I have agreed that this work can be extended into Accident and Emergency Services. I will, therefore, provide funding for a nurse seconded for 15 months to introduce an all Wales routine enquiry (to include referrals) into domestic abuse in A&E services. The seconded will work with a health professional within the Welsh Assembly Government and the Community Safety Division.

New Specialist Domestic Violence Courts (SDVC)

Applications for the second tranche of SDVCs were received by the Home Office on 12 May 2006. Four court areas in Wales applied and all were successful. The new courts will be based in Wrexham, Bridgend, Swansea and Pembrokeshire.

Forced Marriage Seconded

I have recently agreed that more work needs to be done in Wales to examine the extent of the problem regarding forced marriages. To take this forward we are intending to recruit a seconded with the necessary specialist knowledge to map the extent of the problem in Wales and to liaise with the Whitehall Forced Marriage Unit about future action. I will keep the Committee updated on this.

27. Extra Prison Places in England and Wales

I wrote to the Home Secretary on the 27 July 2006 following the announcement of an additional 8,000 extra prison places for England and Wales. In particular, I expressed concerns over the fact that Welsh domiciled women still have to serve their sentences outside Wales and asked that additional resources be provided to support prisoners suffering from mental health and drug related illnesses.

I received a response from Gerry Sutcliffe, Secretary of State for Criminal Justice and Offender Management, on the 22 August in which he explained that the Home Office will be looking to build prisons in areas of greatest strategic need, including Wales, but that specific sites will be subject to acquisition and planning consent – no decisions have yet been made. He also explained that the Home Office are exploring ways of diverting offenders with low level psychiatric disorders into community based treatments at an earlier stage in the criminal justice process, and that NHS "in reach" teams have been placed in 102 establishments throughout England and Wales for this purpose.

28. Housing Sex Offenders at H.M. Prison Prescoed

As Committee members will know, two convicted sex offenders serving life sentences absconded from H.M. Open Prison Prescoed on Friday 28 July and were recaptured shortly afterwards.

I wrote to Gerry Sutcliffe on the 8 August asking him to review the Home Office policy to house sex offenders at Open Prisons. In his response he assured me that staff at the prison take their responsibility very seriously and that life sentenced prisoners would only be transferred to Prescoed

after careful scrutiny and on the specific recommendation of the Parole Board. The Prison Service Operational Manager for Wales and the Governor of Prescoed have met with local people and have agreed to meet regularly to keep them updated. Disappointingly, he informed me that the Home Office will not be holding a formal review of this policy but there will be an official inquiry into the escape at Prescoed. I have written to express my disappointment that there will be no formal policy review and have asked to be kept informed of the inquiry into the escape.

29. All Wales Schools Programme

At the 8 June 2006 Committee meeting, I agreed to consider whether the expenditure of additional funding from the March 2006 budget announcement for the All Wales Schools Programme, might be premature in light of the fact that the Committee would be undertaking a report into treatment and preventative services.

Committee might recall that I wrote to the Chair back in April 2006, following the March budget announcement. From the additional funding I secured, I informed the Committee that £300,000 would be invested in the All Wales School's Programme, divided between extensions to the existing core programme and the development of a new disengaged element to the programme. The intention is to pilot the new disengaged element of the programme for this academic year (beginning in September 2006). In light of the fact that the report of the next phase of the policy review is not due to be laid and published until January 2007, and the need to utilise the additional funding in the 2006-2007 financial year, the pilot will proceed as planned. I will take up these issues with the All Wales Schools Programme Co-ordinator at official level and of course give careful consideration to the Committee's report once published.

30. Personal Support in Custody Project

At the meeting of 16 March 2005, I undertook to inform the Committee about when the results of the evaluation of the Personal Support Project for 11-18 year olds in custody, in Stoke Heath YOI and Ashfield YOI would be available.

The Project began in September 2005, and was originally programmed to last for twelve months. In order for the fullest possible outcomes to be available however, the project has now been extended to December 2006.

An interim document (issued by People and Work Unit in March this year) entitled "Reflections on the Work of Personal Support Workers in Custody" has provided some interesting insight into the challenges facing the Project, from the perspective of the two workers themselves. I am attaching this document as Annex D for your information.

There have been some preliminary indications of the success of the project. We understand that one persistent youth offender with a drug problem is at the present time clean and has gained an apprenticeship with a firm as a direct result of the support provided.

I will inform the Committee when the results of the evaluation of this project are known.

31. Consultation Proposals by the Department of Constitutional Affairs– Confidence and Confidentiality: Improving transparency and privacy in family courts

Following a number of high profile cases reported in the press over the last few years there has been growing concern over the public's confidence in the family court system.

Family courts sit in private, and this contributes to the fact that their work is not widely understood or trusted and perhaps not valued for the important work it does.

In order to ensure that the public has confidence in the work of the family courts, the DCA (Department for Constitutional Affairs) has set out proposals in the above consultation document to try and open up the family courts, while ensuring that they protect the privacy of the personal lives of those involved in family proceedings – particularly children.

The document presents a number of proposals which include:

Making changes to attendance and reporting restrictions consistent across all family proceedings.

Allowing the media, on behalf of and for the benefit of the public, to attend proceedings as of right, though allowing the court to exclude them where appropriate to do so.

Allowing attendance by others on application to the court, or on the court's own motion.

Ensuring reporting restrictions provide for anonymity of those involved in family proceedings (adults and children), while allowing for restrictions to be increased or relaxed.

The introduction of a new criminal offence for breaches of reporting restrictions.

Making adoption proceedings a special case, so that there is transparency in the process up until the placement order is made, but beyond that proceedings remain private.

In addition to proposals, the DCA want to consider:

Whether they should make special provisions for inspectorates and specified other groups such as AM's, MP's and also LA elected members

Options on the further provision of information

Following agreement by the Minister, CAF/CASS CYMRU will lead on providing the Welsh Assembly Government response to the consultation. CAF/CASS CYMRU has already begun on the process of consulting with other policy colleagues across the Welsh Assembly Government, with staff within the organisation and will also ascertain the views of the CAF/CASS CYMRU Advisory Committee on the proposals.

32. Role, Responsibilities and Composition of the CAF/CASS CYMRU Advisory Committee

At the July 2006 Committee meeting, I agreed to report back on the role, responsibilities and composition of the CAF/CASS CYMRU Advisory Committee.

The CAF/CASS CYMRU Advisory Committee was established to support the CAF/CASS CYMRU management team in the development of the service and to advise them on relevant stakeholder issues. Members of the Advisory Committee are representatives of, and nominated by, the following stakeholder organisations:

Association of Directors of Social Services Wales – A Director of Social Services or Head of Children and Family Services

Children in Wales

BAAF Cymru

Welsh Women's Aid Groups

Fathers' Groups

Judiciary – A Care Centre Judge

Law Society – A member of the Children Panel

Mewn CYMRU (Minority Ethnic Women's Network Wales)

Save the Children

SNAP CYMRU

Tros Gynnal (Wales-wide advocacy and children's rights scheme for young people looked after by Social Services)

Law Academic Institution

Social Work Academic Institution

Meetings of the Committee will take place at least four times a year and secretariat support will be provided by CAF/CASS CYMRU. The Committee has no executive powers and is advisory in its purpose, which is to:

represent stakeholders' interests and provide suggestions to CAF/CASS CYMRU on a range of

practice issues,

act as an external consultative reference point in relation to the development of policies,

consider the recommendations and views of the CAFCASS CYMRU Children and Young People Participation Group,

consider the impact of new legislation and developments in the Family Justice system in relation to the development of the service in Wales,

Provide members for the Review Panels at Stage 3 of the CAFCASS CYMRU Complaints Policy.

The Committee held its first meeting on the 13th of June 2006 which took the form of an Induction event. The purpose of this was to provide all committee members with an introduction to CAFCASS CYMRU. The members found this very helpful and informative. Catriona Williams from Children in Wales acted as an interim chair pending a formal process of appointing a chair to the Committee. Members of the Committee were informed that further information would be provided to them regarding the process of selection of the chair. Arrangements are now in hand to appoint a chair following due process.

As the Committee is an Advisory body, there is no requirement to apply the terms of the Commissioner's Code of Practice or the Assembly's Code of Practice on Ministerial Appointments to Public Bodies. However, in line with the Nolan Principles, the appointment process will be undertaken in accordance with the Codes, and as such will follow the lower tier procedure. The Social Justice and Regeneration Subject Committee nominees have been informed of the process and proposed timetable.