

Cynulliad Cenedlaethol Cymru
Y Pwyllgor Cyfiawnder Cymdeithasol ac Adfywio

The National Assembly for Wales
The Social Justice and Regeneration Committee

Dydd Iau, 6 Gorffennaf 2006
Thursday, 6 July 2006

Cynnwys
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Cofnodir y trafodion hyn yn yr iaith y llefarwyd hwy ynddi yn y pwyllgor. Yn ogystal, cynhwysir cyfieithiad Saesneg o gyfraniadau yn y Gymraeg.

These proceedings are reported in the language in which they were spoken in the committee. In addition, an English translation of Welsh speeches is included.

Aelodau o'r Cynulliad yn bresennol: Janice Gregory (Cadeirydd), Mick Bates, Edwina Hart (y Gweinidog dros Gyfiawnder Cymdeithasol ac Adfywio), Mark Isherwood, Huw Lewis, Sandy Mewies, Leanne Wood.

Swyddogion yn bresennol: Alison Davies, CAF/CASS Cymru; Paul Dear, y Gyfarwyddiaeth Gymunedau; Dafydd Ifans, Prif Weithredwr, CAF/CASS Cymru; Joanne Jordan, Cyfarwyddwr, Uned Diogelwch Cymdeithasol; Dr Emyr Roberts, Cyfarwyddwr yr Adran Cyfiawnder Cymdeithasol ac Adfywio; Anne Stephenson, Cyfarwyddwr, y Gyfarwyddiaeth Gymunedau; Sanjiv Vedi, Uned y Sector Gwirfoddol; Linda Whittaker, Cyfarwyddwr Tai.

Gwasanaeth Pwyllgor: Dr Virginia Hawkins, Clerc; Claire Griffiths, Dirprwy Glerc.

Assembly Members in attendance: Janice Gregory (Chair), Mick Bates, Edwina Hart (the Minister for Social Justice and Regeneration), Mark Isherwood, Huw Lewis, Sandy Mewies, Leanne Wood.

Officials in attendance: Alison Davies, CAF/CASS Cymru; Paul Dear, Communities Directorate; Dafydd Ifans, Chief Executive, CAF/CASS Cymru; Joanne Jordan, Director, Community Safety Unit; Dr Emyr Roberts, Director, Social Justice & Regeneration Department; Anne Stephenson, Director, Communities Directorate; Sanjiv Vedi, Voluntary Sector Unit; Linda Whittaker, Director of Housing.

Committee Service: Dr Virginia Hawkins, Clerk; Claire Griffiths, Deputy Clerk.

*Cynhaliwyd y cyfarfod yng Nghanolfan Gwybodaeth ac Adnoddau White Rose, Tredegar Newydd
The meeting was held in the White Rose Information and Resource Centre, New Tredegar*

Dechreuodd y cyfarfod am 9.35 a.m.

The meeting began at 9.35 a.m.

**Cyflwyniad, Ymddiheuriadau, Dirprwyon a Datgan Buddiannau
Introduction, Apologies, Substitutions and Declarations of Interest**

[1] **Janice Gregory:** Good morning, everyone, and welcome to the Social Justice and Regeneration Committee, which is in this lovely facility this morning in New Tredegar. Before we start, I thank everyone involved in the organisation of the meeting this morning, especially the staff here for allowing us to come. We have long wanted to come to New Tredegar to see the wonderful work that is being done here with the Communities First partnership and the regeneration, which is probably the envy of most of the communities in Wales; I would certainly like my Communities First partnerships to come up and have a look at what can be achieved.

[2] I will go through some housekeeping tips, before we go any further into the meeting. There is no fire drill scheduled for today, so, if the fire alarm sounds, please be guided by the ushers, who will see us safely out of the building. Please ensure that you switch off any electronic equipment, such as mobile phones, BlackBerrys and pagers or anything of that nature. I extend a welcome to our visitors and to members of the public who have attended this morning. The National Assembly for Wales operates through the media of Welsh and English. Therefore, if a Member speaks in Welsh, you will have been supplied with headphones that will afford you with a simultaneous translation. You can also use them to amplify sound. However, this is a smashing room, so I do not think that there will be any problem with the amplification of sound.

[3] I also welcome to the committee this morning Malephallo Mohasoa—I hope I have pronounced that correctly—who is a visitor from Lesotho shadowing our committee clerks this week. Good morning and welcome to you; I hope that you enjoy your time with the Social Justice and Regeneration Committee and that you will see what a good committee we are—but I have already told you that.

[4] I will take Members through some issues. You will have seen the correspondence; I am not going to list all of it, but we have had some substantial correspondence of late. You will know that we debated the police report yesterday, and that was laid in the Table Office on 27 June. I have received no apologies for absence. Does anyone around the table have any declarations of interest? I see that they do not. We move on to the agenda proper therefore.

9.37 a.m.

Cofnodion y Cyfarfod Blaenorol Minutes of the Previous Meeting

[5] **Janice Gregory:** Item 2 relates to the short minutes of 21 June. Is everyone happy with them? I see that they are. We will move on to item 3, which is the Minister's report.

*Cadarnhawyd cofnodion y cyfarfod blaenorol.
The minutes of the previous meeting were ratified.*

9.38 a.m.

Adroddiad y Gweinidog Minister's Report

[6] **Janice Gregory:** I thank the Minister for her substantial and important report, and I ask her to introduce it.

[7] **The Minister for Social Justice and Regeneration (Edwina Hart):** I will give a couple of oral updates. I refer you to the new-build statistics that were released on 21 June. They presented information on the number of new dwellings started and completed in Wales, as reported by local authorities and the National House-Building Council. The release presented figures for the July to September 2005 quarter, in addition to information on earlier periods. The key results from that quarter showed that around 2,400 new dwellings were started during the quarter, which is around 70 more than for the previous quarter, but nearly 260 fewer than the same quarter the previous year. Just fewer than 2,000 dwellings were completed during the quarter, which was around 120 fewer than the previous quarter and nearly 160 fewer than the same quarter the previous year. I would be happy to circulate a note on that to committee members, for ease of reference.

[8] I will now make an announcement on the fifth round of bids from the Home Office's Connected fund. The Home Office has announced a fifth round of bids for its Connected fund, which provides grants to help communities to tackle gun and knife crime. Projects funded under the previous round in Wales included the Cardiff youth inclusion project, based in Llanrumney, which used the grant to deliver a variety of interventions aimed at raising awareness of knife crime and related issues, and reducing the numbers of knives carried by young people. Colleagues in the Home Office crime team encourage applications to the fund from Welsh community safety partnerships and youth offending teams, where there are particular issues around violent crime. I will also give Members a detailed background note on that.

9.40 a.m.

[9] You will also be aware of housing benefit reforms. We are now aware that the Bill is already published. If it is helpful to Members, there are matters of concern for us in Wales in terms of the reforms that are proposed, particularly in terms of how issues will be dealt with, so I could do a note outlining some of the concerns that I have already raised.

[10] It is important that I update the committee on a policing matter. I have previously indicated to the Assembly that I held a meeting with the new Home Office Minister with responsibility for policing, Tony McNulty, on 2 June. He indicated then that he would be happy to come to a meeting in Wales at the Assembly, involving myself and the chairs of the four police authorities. That meeting was scheduled for 13 July. I need to bring Members up to date by letting you know that those arrangements have since been overtaken. A meeting will go ahead that day, but it will be held between the Secretary of State for Wales and Mr McNulty, as the Secretary of State regards this as a reserved matter. I assume that the meeting will not now seek to deal with the matters of council tax and precepts, which are wholly devolved, and a separate meeting, which I am due to hold with the chairs of the police authorities in Wales, will go ahead tomorrow as planned.

[11] That is my update.

[12] **Janice Gregory:** Does anyone have any comments?

[13] **Sandy Mewies:** It is interesting to hear the Minister's comments on that—we can draw our own conclusions. I thank the Minister very much for the work that she has done. We have played a major part in having the real concerns of the people of Wales brought forward in this matter.

[14] As ever, this is an interesting report. It shows that we are making progress in some important areas, particularly homelessness. I said the other day that, while we have homeless people, it is a major problem, but at least we are making progress. What we have done here, and what the committee and the Minister have done, is recognise that there is not one simple answer to homelessness—there are many answers, and we are pursuing the right way forward.

[15] On housing benefit reform, there was a report on what had been done already, and I would be interested to see what is happening next with this, because there are some concerns for us there. I am pleased to see the prefabricated and modular housing scheme go ahead. I am extremely pleased to see that we are keeping the safety of public sector staff, particularly fire and rescue staff, high on our agenda. I would appreciate any update that would be forthcoming in future, because this is a serious problem. The Minister has identified here that one of the possible reasons why we do not know what is going on is the underreporting of incidents; we need to encourage fire-fighters and so on, to report this. This is extremely important; they do a wonderful job for the public, and it is wrong that they should be abused—verbally or physically—while that goes on. Therefore, I would appreciate a further update on that.

[16] **Edwina Hart:** On public sector safety, there is a high level of underreporting, and I have also discussed this with my colleague, Brian Gibbons. Things happen all the time in the health service, and people just take it as the norm and do not report it. They should report it, however, because we can then do some preventative work on these issues.

[17] I am pleased that we are moving ahead with prefabricated housing. Thank you for your comments on homelessness. On housing benefit, we are concerned that payments will be made directly to people. I am particularly concerned that, in many ways, that will compound the issue of poor landlords. There are some issues that we have raised centrally on this, and I would be happy to put all that in writing for the committee, as Members might want to pursue it individually.

[18] **Mick Bates:** Thank you for a comprehensive Minister's report, in particular, the statement about the police meeting. Will there be a further opportunity for us to meet a Home Office representative to discuss the issues that directly relate to the Assembly, such as council tax and how the precept would be affected? Many people would like the anxiety removed, and to understand what will happen with regard to the council tax.

[19] I welcome your suggestion that we have an update on benefits, Minister. The Minister visited the Montgomeryshire Family Crisis Centre last week, and it was an issue of great concern to people there that it may impact on people's ability to run their budgets properly and ensure that the housing benefit is used for what it is intended. Could the Minister comment at this stage on how we may feed into that piece of work? The legislation is already passed. It may be useful to take some evidence from people about the impact of the way in which the new rules on housing benefit will work.

[20] On the home energy efficiency scheme, I am keen to see the range of grant expanded to include renewable energy sources. Is there any news on that? I know that we have talked about giving greater resources to that, but it also links with the microgeneration strategy. I think that the consultation on that has just finished and I wonder if the Minister has looked at work with the Minister for Enterprise, Innovation and Networks to see if it is possible to take more people out of fuel poverty and, at the same time, improve the local economy by using the energy that is there—biomass and wood burning would be obvious ways in which we could improve that situation.

[21] I would just like to endorse Sandy's remarks about public sector safety issues. There is no excuse for these attacks. The more work on this that the Minister can promote the better. We all find it sad that public servants, particularly firefighters, are attacked while going about their daily duties.

[22] **Edwina Hart:** I will deal with police issue first. My office was trying to arrange for Mr McNulty to come to the Assembly, as he agreed at a meeting with the four chairs that he would meet me, because the major issues are the financial ones, which, of course, are devolved matters. I also asked whether it would be possible for a meeting to take place with the chair of the Welsh Local Government Association and the chair of the Social Justice and Regeneration Committee, as the committee has produced a report, so that that report could be discussed. We have not had anything back on those issues. We have spoken to the Wales Office and it said that it will now be arranging the visit because these are reserved matters. When I spoke to the leader of the Welsh Local Government Association—I was with the chair of the WLGA earlier this week—he had not received an invitation to any meeting and I am not aware that the Chair of the committee has received an invitation either. I will, of course, in the light of Mick's comments, be more than prepared to write to Tony McNulty, because I have not been invited to the meeting with the four chairs either.

[23] **Sandy Mewies:** Is there any way that we could strengthen that, Chair? Could we, for example, write as a committee? We have done an awful lot of work on this and I think that it has been representative of the Welsh community. It seems strange to be cut out of the loop at this late stage.

[24] **Janice Gregory:** Absolutely. I agree with that. I would be more than happy to pen a suitably outraged letter to the Wales Office because I feel, on your behalf, that the committee has been slighted by the fact that the Wales Office is now talking about this as a reserved matter. I am more than happy to do that. Does anyone dissent from that?

[25] **Mick Bates:** I do not dissent; in fact, I give it 110 per cent support. You used the word 'slighted' and I think that having been overlooked in this way, after so much important work has been undertaken by the Minister and the committee, which has moved the agenda in important directions, particularly in terms of retaining neighbourhood policing and all the issues that will flow from that, I would welcome a strong letter from the Chair expressing our deep concern that neither the WLGA nor the Minister were invited to the meeting. To me, it spells bad news. Despite the fact that the whole process has been cancelled, we seem to be setting off on the wrong foot. I just hope that you, Minister, will be involved in future discussions.

[26] **Edwina Hart:** I have to be involved in future discussions, because these are devolved matters. Some of these matters are not the responsibility of either the Wales Office or the Home Office; they firmly rest within the devolution settlement.

[27] **Janice Gregory:** The reality of the situation is that, given that we have produced two reports, for which we took evidence, our Minister, through those reports, will be best placed to take forward the opinions, not only of the National Assembly, but of the people of Wales from whom we took evidence.

[28] **Edwina Hart:** Charles Clarke made it quite clear to us in correspondence and in discussions—I am looking at Jo—that when he was Home Secretary he would have welcomed the involvement of the committee in these wider discussions on police issues to take place across Wales.

[29] I will now deal with Mick's other points. On the benefits issue, I think that it will be quite clear, when I do a little note on what is happening with what I believe is a Green Paper, in terms of the issues on which I have concerns on behalf of the devolved administration. In terms of HEES, I have just had a little project suggested to me on microgeneration and all these other issues. If I can, I will do a little note on that for my ministerial report when we come back after the recess, because I can then perhaps link it into what Andrew has done in terms of that consultation document, if that will help.

9.50 a.m.

[30] The other area that I am looking at is the grant levels that will come to me next on HEES and HEES plus. At the moment, in terms of the grant levels, we are only scratching the surface. We will have to look at a substantial increase if we are to tackle fuel poverty, rather than just giving someone a new boiler and some radiators in the house. I am waiting for that submission to come to me very shortly, and I will, hopefully, be able to report back to the committee after the recess.

[31] On the public sector safety issues, I think that we are fairly united on this. We live in a society in which people think that it is right to attack police officers, firefighters, nurses, and so on. I know that some of it is drug and alcohol-fuelled, and, as I said in addressing questions in Plenary yesterday, we must make our views known about some of the stuff on alcohol, in terms of, perhaps, a ban on advertising happy hours. We must start to tackle some of these issues in terms of the central Government's position. We are tackling the whole issue of tobacco advertising and so on, but if you are smoking a cigarette you are not likely to attack someone. If you have a few drinks you might well do so, so we must look at these issues very seriously.

[32] **Leanne Wood:** My apologies for being late—there was dreadful traffic. There are quite a few things that I want to pick out of your report, Minister, and I apologise if I repeat anything that may have already been said.

[33] On the progress of the national homeless strategy, it is good to see an improvement, but I am concerned that 26 per cent of people housed in bed-and-breakfast accommodation are families with children. We need to look at that; it is a big concern. The commitments in the plan will play their part, but we must accept that, because of the shortage of social housing, homelessness will still be a big problem. We need to build more housing. Do you accept that point, Minister?

[34] I will pick up a few points from item 4, funding for Women's Aid groups, and the justifications for the clawback. On the evictions, I accept that 21 people is a high number of people evicted, but we need to accept that there are very good reasons for evictions from Women's Aid refuges. There must be bottom lines, and there are two main rules. If people are violent or threaten violence within a refuge, or they disclose the address of the refuge, you cannot compromise on that because basic safety rules have been broken, and evictions must take place. It is those types of circumstances that we are talking about here. Every time an eviction takes place, cases are fully investigated and can also be appealed against. I accept the point that was made, but you need to be aware of the reality on the ground with regard to some of these issues, Minister.

[35] On the void levels, a 10 per cent void level is quite difficult to achieve, and I would be interested to know the void levels within other Women's Aid groups. In the past, there has been flexibility within the system, and that has been welcomed, but it seems that things are perhaps tightening up a bit. If that is the case, perhaps people should be made more aware that flexibility is being reduced. I fully accept the section that mentions that the refuge was closed for eight weeks, because that was a big problem.

[36] With regard to staffing issues, there are many ongoing staffing problems. They are being dealt with, but, as you will appreciate, Minister, these things take quite a lot of time. We must also recognise that it is very difficult in this sector to get cover at short notice from experienced refuge or community workers at certain hours. Also, the benefits system militates against people taking on extra hours because, if they are on working family tax credits and so on, they cannot work more than a certain number of hours. Bearing all these things in mind, I think that the problem in this case is that all these problems came together in one go. There may be problems again in future, but I hope that we are not facing another clawback, because that situation is not sustainable. Are there any further avenues for appeal on this particular issue?

[37] If I can go on, on housing benefit reform, your report says that it is proposed that gains by tenants will now be capped. I do not really understand what that means. Can you explain that? I have quite a few concerns about these proposals. We know that one of the reasons for persistent homelessness is difficulties that people have in maintaining their tenancies, and the need for support work with them. Are there any plans to increase supported tenancies or extra funds for support workers? My fear is that this could result in more people being unable to manage their tenancies and pay their rent, and that they will be evicted.

[38] On prefabricated and modular housing, I went on the committee visit to north Wales, and it was quite impressive, but I would just like to make the point—I know that this is completely subjective—that much social housing is ugly, and there is no reason for that to be the case. When looking at this issue, can we consider architectural aesthetics? My only other point in that regard is that this is quite a new way of providing housing, so we do not know what these houses will be like in 10 or 20 years' time, because we have not seen them in action over a period of time. I think that we need to be aware of that, and keep an eye on it, because they might start falling down in 15 years' time, and so they would not be much use.

[39] **Janice Gregory:** Not if they are built like post-war prefabs—we still have those in my village, and people still live in them.

[40] **Leanne Wood:** On Youthlink Wales, you point out that it says that it was specifically excluded from the last committee review. It was working on the basis that that committee review set out, in its original aims, that prevention would be part of the review. We did not have time, if you recall, Chair, to undertake the prevention review then, and we agreed to defer it to a later date. I understand that we will start to do that work in the autumn. I think that it would be a good idea if we were to ensure that representatives from Youthlink Wales were able to give evidence to us at that stage in the review.

[41] **Janice Gregory:** As always, Members will be asked for suggestions, so we will take it in that round.

[42] **Leanne Wood:** Thank you, Chair. I am aware, Minister, that we were due to have a meeting to discuss Youthlink Wales; can we set up a meeting with representatives of the organisation?

[43] The situation with regard to the reconfiguration of the Gwent probation service is worrying, as it is more centralisation of services. People will have to travel greater distances to see their probation officer. At a time when the Government is keen to reduce breach rates, this makes it much more difficult for people to meet the requirements of their orders. It is interesting that the chief probation officer felt the need to point out that care was taken to ensure that neither of the new sites was located in residential premises. When I trained as a probation officer, the service was meant to be in the community—that was the whole point—so I do not understand why there is this need to try to keep them out of residential areas.

[44] I think that the draft refugee inclusion strategy for Wales is, overall, an excellent document. It is great to see that the stakeholders had such a good input. However, we cannot really get away from the fact that the UK policy context is causing many of these problems. I know that we cannot do anything about that, because we do not have the powers here in the Assembly, but I was slightly disappointed that this was just accepted. I think that perhaps we should be talking about challenging the UK Government on some of its policy initiatives.

10.00 a.m.

[45] In terms of issues around things such as the limited leave to remain, we are talking about trying to settle refugees and asylum seekers in Wales, but they are not allowed to stay after a certain amount of time, so how can they become settled? How can they properly be part of a community when they know that there is a chance that they will leave? The Government's own policies are causing poverty and destitution among this group. These people need to work and they should be able to work as asylum seekers. As refugees, institutional racism is clearly preventing people from getting jobs. The Government has responded to a tabloid agenda and we should be challenging that much more strongly.

[46] With regard to the mental health field, counselling, and issues around trauma after persecution and rape, there are huge problems in terms of big gaps in meeting need and trying to engage with people, for obvious reasons.

[47] Finally, the information about winter deaths is interesting but worrying. Could we have some more information directly around the questions? Are these excess deaths linked to changes in temperature? Is affordability of fuel an issue? If that is a problem it will get worse as prices increase. Could we have a further paper on that at some point?

[48] **Edwina Hart:** I will first deal with the winter deaths issue. We will check what work is available around that. We are not sure that those statistics are easily accessible, but I will come back to the committee on that.

[49] In terms of what you said about the refugee inclusion strategy, I am where I am in Wales, and I have to try to make the best of what policies are brought out by central Government on it. We have taken a very pragmatic approach to the inclusion strategy for Wales. We try to do what we can across all departments in the Assembly, and with all our partners, to try to get the right strategy in place in terms of where the current legislation is. You mentioned your concerns about UK Government policy; we have lobbied over the years on a number of issues, including on the right for asylum seekers to work. I continue to lobby. As Members know, my door is always open in terms of any problems that they have with cases, on which I will continue to lobby. I am also making quite a large bid to the Finance Minister so that we can also have this strategy properly funded. So, in very real terms, I can understand all of your comments and probably concur with them—I would have thought that the majority of the committee also concurs. It is quite important to recognise that we actually have to work within that and do the best that we can in Wales. Like our partners, I am very pleased about how the draft inclusion strategy is working.

[50] In terms of probation, I am a bit like you; I feel that the probation service should be seen in various areas and that it should be in residential areas. I feel that a lot of things should be in the heart of housing estates where people can be seen—even on the high street. Obviously, the probation service is not a devolved matter, but we have had the probation service here previously to talk about issues. It might be an option to have the probation service in again, especially as we see the development of the service in terms of the National Offender Management Service. It might be quite a useful discussion to have in other areas.

[51] On Youthlink Wales, I think that we are talking about different reviews. Obviously, it is a matter for the Chair and the committee as to who is invited to the next review. Youthlink Wales has met officials on a number of occasions; Jo might have an update on that.

[52] **Ms Jordan:** Yes; we had a meeting—probably 12 months ago—with Youthlink Wales, when we fully explained the position to it and offered it further help to make contact with community safety partnerships, which hold the budget for prevention work. These meetings are now taking place but the community safety partnerships, in looking at the services that Youthlink Wales offers, have not yet been able to see how that would fit into what it is offering locally. However, it is still considering it. That is where we have been encouraging Youthlink Wales to look. We are saying, ‘The funding is with community safety partnerships; they are developing their local strategies; you offer services at a very local level, particularly in some areas’. That is where they should be making the links, so that they are not putting in place a programme that is out of kilter with what is going on at a local level. Those discussions are currently taking place.

[53] **Edwina Hart:** On Youthlink, when it finishes its discussions with the community safety partnerships, I am more than happy for it to meet with my officials again.

[54] On modular housing, I agree that there is an aesthetics and style issue and we will have to look at its long-term sustainability—although the manufacturers will tell you that, rather like the prefabs, such housing goes on and on forever.

[55] You made a valid point on affordable housing. Last week, I launched the affordable housing toolkit in a village in the Vale of Glamorgan. The affordable houses there were lovely and you could not distinguish between the different houses. The problem is that you can tell the difference between old-style social housing and other housing and we should not be able to tell the difference—there should be a mixture of both. That is why it is important, in terms of the affordable housing toolkit, that planners get their acts together on section 106. When you see nice estates, let us ensure that they include social housing and that you cannot tell which house is which. That is important, and we will have to see how that affordable housing toolkit starts to work.

[56] Before you arrived, Leanne, I raised my concerns about the housing benefit issues. I will draft a further note to committee, if that is helpful, because that is a Bill now, is it not?

[57] **Dr Roberts:** It is a draft Bill.

[58] **Edwina Hart:** Individuals might want to look at that in the context of their Members of Parliament in terms of the points that I would like to place on record on that.

[59] On Women's Aid, I note your point about void levels and so on. There is no further stage of appeal, but I heard what you said and I will discuss further issues on that with officials. Several issues arose on Women's Aid following discussions that I had in Mick Bates's patch last Friday. I want to take some issues forward in discussion with officials and I will try to do the same in this context.

[60] There are changes in homelessness and we are undertaking much work in terms of mediation and other issues before the homelessness strategy starts to impact. I agree that we need to look at the housing market and we have made a bid to the Finance Minister for more money for the social housing grant. We must also look at what we can do better in the private sector in terms of landlords and the provision of good-quality accommodation. So, we have the right number of measures in place, but children are our priority. I saw the Shelter report, 'Hidden', at its conference last week; it talked about the impact of homelessness and related issues on children, which brought that matter to the fore. Children go from school to school and you realise that they have lost their childhood by being homeless and in and out of housing. They do not have the stability that we had as children. That brought it home to me. I concur with your points that more needs to be done on that agenda and more quickly. However, we have made some improvements, as Sandy said earlier.

[61] **Janice Gregory:** Thank you, Minister.

10.08 a.m.

**Cylch Cynllunio'r Gyllideb 2006
Budget Planning Round 2006**

[62] **Janice Gregory:** Before I ask the Minister to introduce the paper, I inform committee that, following the meeting and taking on board the comments that have been made this morning, I will write to the Finance Minister, who has given us a short extension—she should have received our comments by now—until Monday, which is what I asked for. So, once my letter is circulated to you, please ensure that you look at it as a matter of urgency and, if you have any comments, get back to me immediately or the letter will go to her as composed.

[63] **Edwina Hart:** This paper outlines my priorities under the budget planning round. It seeks to get your views on this. In it, I prioritise some of the issues in which the committee is interested. There were many inescapable pressures for me in terms of revenue, which are reflected in the paper. As the Finance Minister made clear when she presented last year's budget, there is very little room for manoeuvre in these areas, but the committee has indicated, through discussion this morning, its interest in the social housing grant and various issues that we might be able to tackle, so I would be interested to hear your comments.

[64] **Sandy Mewies:** Quickly, I support all of the pressures outlined here. Some are totally unavoidable, such as the disabled facilities grant and so on. The others are necessary to continue the work that has already gone on.

10.10 a.m.

[65] We would also like to do our best on Supporting People, as we have in the past. I think that we have enough there. I am keen that we do not spread things too thinly. The community facilities and activities programme is a very deep pool, but I am glad to see that it is still being well supported. It is very popular. We sometimes have to think outside the box regarding what to put in for CFAP. I support all of these measures, but I am particularly pleased to see CFAP, the supervised contact centres for the care and repair services, and Supporting People. We also have to continue the work on substance misuse.

[66] **Mick Bates:** There are two main items for me. The first, as always, is housing, which is the most crucial issue of all. I make a special plea, as we now have the affordable housing toolkit, that more resources are allocated to this area, and that a budget line for homebuy is put in to assist local authorities, as it appears that we are unlikely to get a suspension of the right to buy. I think that local authorities need more freedom to spend money on things such as homebuy. It is a small impact, but I would love to see that increased.

[67] The other issue is social housing investment. The Wanless report mentioned support for extra care schemes. I think that the expansion of care and repair resources is particularly important. You mentioned the communities and facilities grant, and we are all aware of the pressures on those resources. However, I believe that that type of funding is very effective, and I urge the Minister to take on those two priorities.

[68] In light of the Joseph Rowntree Foundation report on child poverty published this morning, I applaud all measures taken by the Government to try to alleviate child poverty everywhere. There were some interesting comments in this report about the effective spend on things beyond our power, with regard to tax credit. However, will the Minister take such research into account when looking at the way in which funds may be used, particularly in terms of education, and, through Communities First, place a greater focus on young people and projects to give them employment, for example, which are so important?

[69] **Leanne Wood:** I think that so many issues in this portfolio are important, and that it is therefore very difficult to work out priorities. However, social housing has to be the top priority, so whatever you can get in terms of increased funding for that would be good. We need to increase support for the homebuy scheme and mortgage rescue schemes. There is a need for more supported housing, and more houses need to be built. There are many things on which I would like to see increased spending, but housing is the top priority.

[70] **Mark Isherwood:** I particularly endorse the comment about social housing. I am sure that we have all received representations on that; I have, from a number of stakeholders, who tell me that they believe that the best way to meet most of our shared goals is by ensuring increased investment in affordable social housing. As I said yesterday, they have said that for every £1 invested by the Assembly Government, the sector can ensure a corresponding leverage of private sector investment. They have raised issues such as the fact that a possible requirement for local authorities to meet targets for new, affordable housing means that more resources will be needed for homebuy and mortgage rescue schemes, particularly in rural areas and areas where there are sometimes large-scale redundancies. We also need to support Wanless, extra care, the expansion of care and repair services and the rapid response adaptations programme, and so on. I fully endorse that that needs to be a high priority, and we need to restore its true purchasing power and capacity to generate wider regeneration.

[71] I endorse the comments made about substance misuse. We should work on that in the wider sense and tie it in with support for the voluntary sector; there are excellent collaborative schemes between the voluntary sector and the statutory sector in many parts of Wales, and many organisations are often born from the bottom up, through vulnerable groups such as substance misusers, ex-offenders and people within prison. By working together we can create some real synergies and get a lot more bang for our buck.

[72] On issues of funding for Women's Aid, the Minister wrote to me earlier this year, and I wrote to her about a number of issues that were raised with me about Women's Aid. She then stated that she would be making an announcement about a tariff rate for Supporting People, so that the employment of workers in areas such as counselling could be sustained in local resource centres. I will stop there, but I think that we could all go on, because we would all like to see most of these areas having adequate resources to tackle the goals that we share.

[73] **Edwina Hart:** I thank the committee for its support on the housing agenda, because if that is the No. 1 priority for the committee, I am more than to happy to bid for that, as it were, from the Finance Minister.

[74] Mick, in terms of homebuy, we have funded everything that we have been asked to fund. My review of homebuy is in its first draft, so I will attach it to my ministerial report for the next meeting, if that is okay, and we can then have a discussion on it, in which Mick can once again raise the issue of the budget line, in the context of the discussion on how we might want to take that forward. I also think that the points on the extra care schemes are particularly valid, because we are saving health a lot of money through the things that we do in my portfolio. We are only spending around £1.5 million on the rapid response adaptations programme, and I am saving health £41 million. That is a substantial saving that should perhaps be acknowledged in terms of how money can be exceptionally well spent and lead to savings in other budgets.

[75] Supporting People is an area of concern that I have flagged up. It is still a concern for local government and other providers, so I have already flagged this up with Sue Essex as being one of the key areas for me, if there are extra funds available. Mark raised the whole issue of Women's Aid, which we have already discussed in light of Mick and Leanne's earlier points about how we try to deal with the issues of that particular sector. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation study was interesting, because it looked at the whole issue of benefits, which is an issue that the Deputy Minister will raise centrally, because we are not certain whether the benefits system helps. I do not know whether you want to comment on that, Huw.

[76] **Huw Lewis:** Just to say, Minister, that these are early days, and that, as you said, talks will be kicking off next week on taking a long and hard look at this, particularly in connection with the administrative revamp that is going on in relation to child poverty issues up in Westminster. We will want to be fully aware of the ways in which those changes will impact upon the kind of communities that we are talking about, and also individuals and families. We are at the starting gate here.

[77] **Edwina Hart:** One of the child poverty task group's recommendations to us, which we took up with the UK Government, was a call for a universal increase in the level of child benefit, in addition to targeted support as a means of lifting all children out of poverty. That is the view that we expressed to the UK Government, and we stand by it, because there are issues around child poverty that we really need to get to grips with, in the context of the benefits that families receive. Huw will be taking those discussions forward over the summer in view of his report.

[78] **Janice Gregory:** I will just reiterate that I will need to write to the Minister as soon as possible, so please look at the content of the letter and come back to me as soon as possible if you have any amendments to make to it. It goes off on Monday, come hell or high water. Thank you all for that.

10.19 a.m.

Adroddiad Blynyddol Cynllun y Sector Gwirfoddol 2006 Voluntary Sector Scheme Annual Report 2006

[79] **Janice Gregory:** There is no need for a preamble to this item. I call on the Minister.

[80] **Edwina Hart:** The report is as it is. We have an excellent relationship with the voluntary sector in Wales; it is also pleased with this report, which has been through the partnership council and everything. We are making good progress in terms of what we are doing with the voluntary sector. It is a diverse sector, so, getting everyone on board and working in the same direction can sometimes be difficult, but the relationships that have emerged over the last few years are good. The sector is also content with the relationships that will exist post the legislation, because that will be an interesting development for it. We need to keep this partnership at the forefront of discussions and policy, even when there might be changes in arrangement due to the new government of Wales Act, because we do not want to lose that valuable area.

10.20 a.m.

[81] I will digress a little on this because I know that Members have been very concerned about what has been happening with voluntary sector arrangements for local government. I took the opportunity when I met with the Welsh Local Government Association this week to raise the whole issue of what is happening in terms of funding between some Welsh local authorities and the voluntary sector. Councillor Derek Vaughan, the leader of the WLGA, has offered to come to the next voluntary sector partnership meeting to discuss the issues concerning funding. It is quite nice to see that he is coming, because he is the only one that has a four-way compact in terms of the voluntary sector in Neath Port Talbot County Borough Council, where they have excellent relationships. So, when he speaks, he can speak not only from the WLGA perspective, but from his perspective as council leader, about the excellent relationships that his council has. So, I think that might help to facilitate a discussion in the voluntary sector partnerships, because they have been very worried about the way in which they have been treated, in terms of the three months' notice and money disappearing, which was totally against the spirit of the agreements that we have entered into.

[82] **Sandy Mewies:** I welcome that latter point. I have held discussions with the Minister about this issue quite recently, so I am pleased that that is going ahead. It is a good scheme, and we can be very proud of the relationship that has developed with the voluntary sector during the time that I have been here. I am particularly pleased to see how we are encouraging volunteering. In future, can we continue to have reports on how business in the community volunteering is going on, because I would be interested to hear about it?

[83] **Edwina Hart:** On volunteering, I have been discussing internally whether we should be doing more advertising in the in-house magazine for our staff to volunteer, as they now have five days per year to utilise. I know that St John's Ambulance and such groups are also interested. It was your correspondence about Flintshire that generated the discussion with the Welsh Local Government Association, Sandy, because there have been particular concerns expressed by the voluntary sector in Flintshire about its relationships with the local authority. Derek Vaughan fully understood the problems that some of this was causing.

[84] **Mick Bates:** I will just comment on the biannual ministerial meetings. Since I have been a member of the voluntary sector partnership council, this has been considered to be a very important part of engaging the voluntary sector in terms of having an impact on budgets. You have discussed the WLGA and the way in which it uses its finances to provide support. Can we have more detail about how useful they are, and examples of how those discussions lead to changes in the budgets?

[85] **Edwina Hart:** I can talk about the usefulness of my discussions on my side of the house. If you like, I could write to Cabinet colleagues to suggest that they include this as part of their ministerial reports in other committees. We could then have a look at the overviews that come through in a discussion later in the year. Would that be of any help?

[86] **Mick Bates:** It would.

[87] **Mr Vedi:** I attend most of the ministerial meetings, and I have been doing so over the last year, particularly because we are interested to see how the agendas for ministerial meetings work. I must be honest and say that some of the voluntary sector organisations are weak in some areas, for example, where they do not take advantage of the opportunities to raise issues about budget planning in the April-May rounds. In other areas, they are raising issues with Ministers about the budget input that they can have into those systems. We have also taken a relatively new decision to make the papers for the ministerial meetings available at the voluntary sector partnership council meetings, which gives the wider sector an opportunity to see how the ministerial meetings are working. We have no plans to review the ministerial meetings at the moment, other than to say that there will be a possible impact as a result of the Government of Wales Bill and its implications. In terms of the way in which the sector currently works, it sees a big benefit in having the ministerial meetings, because it gives an opportunity to raise with the Minister specific issues that that particular sector has. We are also reviewing the way in which the sector engages with Ministers to ensure that it has the widest possible impact on the whole range of ministerial portfolios.

[88] **Edwina Hart:** On Mick's point specifically, on whether it has had to change policy or put in money, we would have to ask that specifically, and I will ask my colleagues to look at it. I know that it changes things in my portfolio, because in terms of the substance misuse aspect where we deal with the voluntary sector, it definitely influences the discussions and the way in which money is allocated. So, I can do my first report and encourage my ministerial colleagues to do the same. There is no point in having these nice meetings if they do not focus policy in a certain direction, because the financial support that comes from the Assembly Government, as is outlined in this report, is very good but we need to ensure that it effects the changes that occur. The voluntary sector is far more adaptable to change than we are in Government in terms of how it runs a policy agenda, so we have to see whether we can adapt to its needs too.

[89] **Mark Isherwood:** My understanding of both sides of the equation was that it was a communication issue that, I am sure you will agree, could have been resolved. It is a question of trying to strengthen the glue that makes partnership work on a basis of equality. Of course, this is not the only council where there have been effective cuts in voluntary sector budgets; some councils have assumed that the efficiency savings that they are endeavouring to make should include the voluntary sector. There are questions around that and the guidance that they have received as to whether the Assembly Government believes that the voluntary sector should or should not be included in those considerations.

[90] Beyond that, in terms of partnership working between either two or three sectors, there is confusion within some councils over the extent to which they can release assets at below-market prices, or even freely, for the use of voluntary organisations' social enterprises. I know that the flexibility is there—they have the discretionary power to do that—but there is still further need for clarification in certain quarters so that they understand that in practice. There are some good practice schemes that we can build on. I learned recently about the compact that has been developed between the Welsh Federation of Housing Associations and the Welsh Local Government Association. I believe that, initially, it was an initiative from the housing association side but it has been warmly welcome by the WLGA and so, hopefully, all will be signed up to it shortly. So, there are models that we can build upon there. We could also look at areas where the voluntary sector could perhaps be the key provider working in partnership—particularly, as I referred to earlier, in matters around the rehabilitation of offenders and substance misuse. There are many excellent schemes, and I have referred recently to the DAWN partnership in north Wales, where the voluntary and statutory sectors are working very effectively together. We need to prioritise and focus on this good practice. Equally so with homelessness. I know, Minister, that you recently visited Save the Family and, again, that is a good-practice model that could be developed.

[91] Issues are still raised with me regularly—and I am sure with others—on the concerns over the short-term funding. That touches on some of the issues that we have already raised. Where key services are being provided effectively, with measurable outcomes, how can we ensure sustainability rather than lose that valuable service?

[92] **Edwina Hart:** The issues on funding are raised with me at the voluntary sector partnership regularly. We have to put in practice and keep to our arrangements with the voluntary sector and encourage all our partners to do the same but, of course, partners are not necessarily doing the same, so we have to keep a watching brief on that.

[93] I am aware of the partnership between the WLGA and the housing associations; in fact, I discuss it in my regular meetings with the WLGA. I also discuss the issue of assets, as it is quite clear that it can do that, by transferring it to the voluntary sector. We are also discussing what more work we can do on that to make local authorities understand that they can do it and that they do not have to worry about auditors and everything, which is important.

[94] You talked about valuable voluntary sector partnerships; there are a lot out there. I was very pleased to meet representatives of St John's Ambulance when they came in, which I think was following a request from William Graham, actually. They were talking about how they deal with patient transport in the health service, and the valuable service that they provide. Perhaps it could be better utilised by the trusts in terms of transport, bearing in mind that, at one stage, we gave it some £300,000 in ambulances from the health budget. They were saying how they do it: they have sufficient helpers and assistants to take people on and off the bus to ensure that people are in safely and so on. It seems to me to be a very sensible use of what volunteers and the voluntary sector can do to help us in the public sector.

[95] In terms of efficiency savings, these are matters primarily for local government. I would hope that the cut would not go to the voluntary sector, although, in some areas, it has gone to the education sector. I look at my own authority and see that it has effectively had a double Gershon, as it were. The Assembly Government is putting a lot of money in, but then local authorities are cutting away. However, the money is for their local priorities and so they will have to face up to their electorate in 2008, will they not?

[96] **Janice Gregory:** I will just let Members know that the report will be debated in Plenary following the summer recess.

10.30 a.m.

Rhaglen Waith yr Hydref a'r Sefyllfa Ddiweddaraf o ran yr Adolygiad Polisi Autumn Work Programme and Policy Review Update

[97] **Janice Gregory:** As Members will know, the committee has undertaken two substantial reviews on restructuring the constabulary. We did not have to cut our substance misuse review short, but we did have to prioritise what we would do on it. I know that we said that we would carry on with the prevention review—and I am not saying for a second that we will not—but my concern, as Chair, is youth homelessness, and I would welcome the committee's comments on that. I know that that will sound some alarm bells around the table, but, as with all our reviews, we have always endeavoured to undertake good reviews and I think that we have been very successful in achieving that. However, I am concerned that we may not be able to do the in-depth review that we had hoped to do into youth homelessness. I have thought about our doing a scoping paper but, again, we have to think that we do not even have a year left now. We could do one and leave it as a legacy paper, I understand, so that it would go into the next Assembly. I am happy for Members to tell me what they think on this, but I have some concerns about it.

[98] **Edwina Hart:** I will become a member of the committee for a minute, because I want to say that youth homelessness is a key area to look at. If it would help at all, because the committee has also to look at substance misuse issues, my officials and I could do some work for you on key areas of concern for us, as a basis on which the committee can kick off. If we do that ready for the next meeting, that might enable you to have a discussion of how you could take it forward, in the areas and strands that I have drawn out for you. You may then be able to get the necessary balance. If that is helpful, I am more than happy to ask my officials to do it. I have not asked them to do so yet, but I would be more than happy to do so.

[99] **Janice Gregory:** That would be very helpful.

[100] **Leanne Wood:** I think that that would be helpful, but I am concerned that if we are to do these reviews properly and take the evidence that we need to take, particularly if we talk to service users and young homeless people, that will all take more time than usual. So, I am just concerned that we should still do it properly, whichever way it ends up going.

[101] **Janice Gregory:** I know that you felt the need to voice that, but I am sure that you know that you did not need to, as that has also caused me some concern. If we are extremely creative, especially with the Minister's offer, I will be less concerned now.

[102] **Edwina Hart:** To make another suggestion, we will explore for you what groupings of young homeless people can be put together for you to meet them—as a package, as it were. We are fully aware of all the groups and the people who work with them, and so we could put all of that in a list of where you would need to go. We would then need to look at our financial wherewithal to bring these people in to the Assembly to get the full discussion. I also think that you will have to look at people who can facilitate the discussion with some of these groups, if we are having young people in. There will be no point in our facilitating the discussion, because it will not work; we will not get anything out of that. I will put that as something to be commented on.

[103] There might also be a view for others to undertake that. You know what I mean—you do not necessarily have to be there as long as you have a good facilitator to pick out the key questions and issues. Perhaps that is also an option for the committee. You could take a mixed approach to it: you could have them in, some could be facilitated via various people whom we could trust to ask about key questions, and the results could then flood in as a paper. I will put some suggestions down for discussion with my officials to see whether that would help you in taking this forward.

[104] **Mark Isherwood:** It would be useful if the Government could provide the factual information data evidence. I endorse the view that we need to listen to the client group itself, but we also need to listen to service providers and, hopefully, hear about good practice that we can share. Given the pressure of time and the volume of work, one suggestion—and perhaps you will disagree—is that we could look at this on a sub-committee basis, so that the whole committee does not have to meet those giving evidence, but a report would go back to the whole committee.

[105] **Janice Gregory:** Yes, that is another option.

[106] **Sandy Mewies:** I support the Minister's view that it would be good for us to have a paper before us. We must be disciplined then and say what we want the outcome to be. We must know what outcomes we are expecting and focus on what we are doing, and that is as much for committee members as anyone else. It is an excellent idea to accept that we do not have to meet all the groups, because some groups would not welcome our being there, I am sure—and I can quite understand that. They would want people with whom they were comfortable and with whom they felt they could communicate. So, if we are focused and decide on our outcomes and questions, to find out how we achieve that, we could go ahead with it and fit it into the programme.

[107] **Janice Gregory:** Thank you all for those comments. I feel a bit better now about how I will phrase it this morning. We must not lose sight of the fact that we still have the substance misuse prevention review as well as all this, so we need to be incredibly disciplined. I know that perhaps we have proven that we can do it in terms of running reviews—I am sure that we are all up for it—but the suggestions from the Minister are incredibly helpful, and they will lessen the amount of information that we will need to gather.

[108] I suggest, therefore, that we look at this—and I know that we have a full agenda for 21 September—but that we somehow squeeze in an agenda item for that meeting; sorry about that, Virginia. We will need to take some hard-nosed decisions on this then, but we will have had the summer to think about it. If we can get something out to you over the summer, with today's discussions, you can then focus on that.

[109] **Sandy Mewies:** I have a small point, which may not be terribly popular. We have the substance misuse prevention review, and we have done an awful lot of work, so can we ensure that we are not overlapping anything that we have done before? I know that we all suggest people to come forward, but there is no point in having three people telling us the same thing, which we have had on occasion. It might be a matter for the sector that these people represent to decide who should be the focus, but sometimes we do not need three or four people, because they are giving us the same information. Therefore, can we be focused? That will help us. We have done a lot of the work, and we have heard about problems in the past. If we can be focused in what we are doing, that would really help.

[110] **Leanne Wood:** We also need to try to do more to avoid having presenters turn up with a paper and just reading it; that is such a waste of time, and it happens too often for my liking.

[111] **Janice Gregory:** I take your point; we have been working on that, believe me—we beaver away at it. However, short of cutting their microphone off, I am rather hamstrung in that.

[112] **Leanne Wood:** Professionals in the field can often articulate themselves well enough on paper for us to understand them, so we do not need to have presentations from all those people. The key people in all this are the service users. Those are the ones who we need to speak to face to face. I accept the Minister's points that people may feel more comfortable in smaller groups with expert facilitators and all the rest of it, but, as an Assembly Member, I am keen to hear those people's voices directly, if possible. I accept that perhaps we will not be able to hear them all, but when we put aside this time, that is how we should prioritise it.

[113] **Janice Gregory:** Yes, of course, but we need to understand that there are people out there who will not be comfortable talking to a politician at all, especially in a public arena.

[114] **Leanne Wood:** I accept that.

[115] **Janice Gregory:** I am sure that we will be sensitive to them.

[116] **Leanne Wood:** I can bring people here who would be quite happy to tell us what they think of things.

[117] **Janice Gregory:** Fine. You will all be asked for a list.

[118] **Edwina Hart:** There is also the facility to have informal committee meetings, outside the public arena, for these people, which is the best way forward—unless they want to articulate in front of the camera. We must be fair in this review, and they will not necessarily want an audience in there. They will want to tell you things that they would not want other people to know about on these issues. The informality of sitting down and having a cup of coffee and a chat with a few questions, even if it is for an hour, with a small group of the committee, would probably be far more beneficial to this report than their worrying about doing presentations. I get frustrated by some of the presentations here that are all done on paper. People work on the basis that we have not read anything, which is deeply insulting to Assembly Members; we have read the paperwork, and it is sometimes only a matter of asking them questions. Leanne is right—the written work is good, but sometimes the answers to the questions are not.

10.40 a.m.

[119] **Janice Gregory:** Perhaps I am just too nice. I am beavering away at it, believe me. We have tried all ways now and, as I said, short of cutting off their microphone, I am not sure what else we can do. We must realise that they appear in front of a committee of the National Assembly and they have a captive audience for 10 minutes, or whatever it is. I do understand, and no-one is more frustrated than I am, believe me. You have just raised an interesting point, Minister. When you are asked for the names of the organisations or service users that are prepared to come in, I would be grateful if you would also put on there, when you send the names back, whether they are prepared to appear in front of a formal or an informal committee meeting. There is no point in inviting three organisations if the representatives turn up and say, ‘Oh, I did not know that there would be cameras; I am going home’.

[120] Thank you all very much. I think that we now have enough to go on; we know what everyone’s feelings are, and I am grateful for those comments.

10.40 a.m.

Is-ddeddfwriaeth Secondary Legislation

[121] **Janice Gregory:** You have, as usual, the schedule of statutory instruments before you, especially those relating to the Housing Act 2004. Does anyone have any comments? I would be most surprised if any of you did, to be perfectly honest. I do not have any comments. I think that it is useful to have the document in this format. Is everyone happy to have it in this format? I see that you are.

[122] This may be a good opportunity for me to mention something that I have raised in committee previously about the Business Committee having had some information and then having insisted that we scrutinise a piece of legislation—it was the Fire and Rescue Services (Charging) (Wales) Order. For you to note, I raised that matter in the Panel of Chairs meeting because I felt quite insulted, on your behalf. Having spoken to Members, I know that you were unhappy that it was suggested in the Business Committee that we were not capable of scrutinising secondary legislation. The Chair of the Business Committee is to appear before the Panel of Chairs to explain why that occurred. I am just saying this for you to know that if you do not pick something up, someone else may do so in the future.

[123] If you have nothing to raise, I am happy that you have read the schedule and have nothing to raise—end of story. We are going to break now, 20 minutes early, for coffee.

*Gohiriwyd y cyfarfod rhwng 10.42 a.m. a 11.03 a.m.
The meeting adjourned between 10.42 a.m. and 11.03 a.m.*

[124] **Janice Gregory:** Thank you all for coming back on time. The second part of the agenda is quite heavy, so I beg your indulgence and ask you to be succinct, if possible, because people need to get away to other meetings or to travel north, and severe weather warnings have been issued. As it is an important part of the agenda, I ask you all to be focused. I also ask anyone who switched on a mobile phone or any other item of electronic equipment during the break to make sure that it is now switched off. Before we go on to the next item, the Minister has an update for us.

[125] **Edwina Hart:** This morning, we discussed the issue of meetings with the police authorities and the Police Minister. I had an opportunity to ring through to my office during the break and I have been advised that apparently an invitation has now been forthcoming. I will be taking advice on it this afternoon.

[126] **Janice Gregory:** Thank you for that, Minister, that was most helpful. And I thought that we were not being televised.

11.04 a.m.

**Adroddiad Blynyddol CAFCASS Cymru
CAFCASS Cymru Annual Report**

[127] **Janice Gregory:** I ask the Minister to introduce the paper, please.

[128] **Edwina Hart:** I hope that everybody will agree that this is a positive report. Members should look at it in conjunction with my letter of 5 July, which you have also had a copy of, from Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Court Administration, which I also thought was quite a positive report on Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Service Cymru. Of course, there were initial difficulties with the transfer, but we cannot expect transfers to be plain sailing. It has worked out quite well now in terms of how the issues are dealt with in Wales. CAFCASS has had difficulties with recruitment, which has impacted on delivering the development agenda in 2005-06. Unfortunately, CAFCASS Cymru, I am sorry to say, has undergone several intense scrutiny processes this year, not only by this committee. So, there is quite a lot of interest in the work that CAFCASS is doing. In terms of the inspection report, everything was identified internally and we did not require the inspectors to tell us what needed to be done. It has all been identified and taken forward in its operational plan for 2006-07. This has been a successful transfer in many ways, and we seem to have the confidence of people out there, in terms of the service that we provide in Wales. I am pleased to present the report to the committee and to take any questions.

[129] **Leanne Wood:** I have two questions. On complaints, I wondered whether most of those arose from cases where contact had been stopped, which was the Fathers 4 Justice complaint. Were the majority of those complaints of that nature or were they something else? The other question, which I have previously raised with you, Minister, is on pensions for CAFCASS staff. Can you give us an update on where you are with that?

[130] **Edwina Hart:** The pensions issue is not on my desk, but I understand that it has not yet been resolved and that there are still ongoing discussions. It will be a decision for the First Minister, not for me. I can follow that up and try to find out further information for Members, as to where it is in the system. In terms of complaints, I do not know whether we do have a breakdown. Do we, Dafydd?

[131] **Mr Ifans:** Yes. Most of our complaints—in fact nearly all of them—relate to private law and are around residence and contact issues. It is an emotive time for parents during divorce and separation, and they get anxious going through that sort of process, and, quite often, they complain about not understanding the processes.

[132] **Mick Bates:** Thank you for the report. I have two or three issues. First, on staffing, it was commented that there were problems with recruitment. I would like to know what you have been doing to remedy that situation, if you would like to take that question first.

[133] **Janice Gregory:** Minister, or Dafydd?

[134] **Edwina Hart:** Dafydd will take this question. I am not responsible for recruiting staff.

[135] **Mr Ifans:** There is a shortage of social workers in any event and CAF/CASS has been affected by those shortages, just as local authorities and the voluntary sector have. We have had several recruitment drives in order to attempt to fill the posts. However, the requirements of the posts mean that we are looking for people with considerable experience of working with children and families, and that makes it even more difficult for us to recruit the type of people that we want to do this work. We are currently looking at recruiting social workers at a lower level, so that we can start growing our own staff, and we hope to be more successful in recruiting at that level, with the intention of giving those people the experience to be able to move to the principal practitioner level.

[136] **Mick Bates:** Will you expand a little on that, in particular in terms of recruiting bilingual staff? I noticed that while it is not a high proportion, the demand for Welsh is quite low. Is that because you do not have enough staff?

[137] **Mr Ifans:** We are experiencing difficulties in recruiting bilingual staff, particularly in south-east Wales, but we have done particularly well in north Wales. From experience, I think that if an organisation can demonstrate its commitment to bilingualism, then what tends to happen is that Welsh-speaking staff are more inclined to join. I think that we have started demonstrating that commitment, and we are finding that people are joining us.

[138] **Edwina Hart:** How CAF/CASS was dealing with Welsh language issues is in our 'Iaith Pawb' report, which shows the amount of work going on within the organisation to cover some of the key issues, in terms of the delivery of services through the medium of Welsh. This is particularly important with vulnerable children.

[139] **Mick Bates:** Finally, on the advisory committee for CAF/CASS Cymru, which has been set up, could you give me a few more details on the roles and responsibilities and the composition of this advisory committee?

11.10 a.m.

[140] **Edwina Hart:** I will let you have a note on that in my next ministerial report, because I do not have the final submission yet.

[141] **Mick Bates:** Thank you.

[142] **Mark Isherwood:** I will focus on operational and communication matters, following a case in which I am currently involved. The person concerned received a letter with the date of a hearing at which CAFCASS would be present. That person did not, however, know what CAFCASS was and did not really understand what the hearing was about, so I gave him a CAFCASS number for the town in which he lives, the person rang the number and received, I think, the appropriate explanation, but was then told by his solicitor that he should not have rung CAFCASS because it could, technically, compromise his position in the hearing, which I believe is a mediation hearing. So, through no fault of his own, the person who received the letter has gone from confusion to concern as to how this might move forward. What consideration can you give to better communication at the outset of a process so that, when people receive letters referring to CAFCASS, they know what it is about?

[143] **Edwina Hart:** If this is an individual case, quite clearly, the Member should write to me and I can then liaise with CAFCASS staff, because I have had no other such instances reported to me about a lack of communication with regard to people understanding the role of CAFCASS. I would be grateful if we could deal with this matter outside of the meeting, with Dafydd.

[144] **Janice Gregory:** We certainly would not deal with an individual case in this committee, Mark, and you know that.

[145] **Mark Isherwood:** I know; it was an example.

[146] **Janice Gregory:** The Minister has asked you to write to her about the individual case.

[147] **Mark Isherwood:** Can I ask what CAFCASS's communication process, in general, is in such circumstances?

[148] **Janice Gregory:** In general will be fine, Dafydd.

[149] **Mr Ifans:** Certainly. Basically, first of all, letters would normally go from the court to set a first hearing, and we have no responsibility for notifying people of that sort of hearing. At the first hearing, CAFCASS is present to try to find out whether or not we can get a resolution to the problem before it turns into a protracted case. Whenever we have contact with any individuals, we send out an explanatory booklet on the service. As soon as we are told that we are going to engage with an individual, we send out that information. However, I think that you raise an important issue, namely the messages that are sometimes given by solicitors to their clients on the role of CAFCASS, and we need to work with the Law Society to try to ensure that the right messages are given by solicitors to their clients on the role of CAFCASS.

[150] **Janice Gregory:** Thank you for that useful explanation.

[151] **Sandy Mewies:** I have a couple of quick comments to make. First, I thank the Minister for her comments on pensions, because I would also raise that issue, and I realise that it is ongoing. Secondly, I congratulate CAF/CASS—the staff ought to be congratulated, as they have gone through great turmoil and change, and have faced the challenge well. I hope that people are settling down to their work.

[152] My question is on accommodation. It is still problematic in some areas, as I can see from the report. However, is it improving; has there been any forward movement? We have all heard the anecdotal evidence of people meeting in McDonald's and so on, which we all felt was unsatisfactory. Has that gone, and have alternative arrangements been put in place?

[153] **Edwina Hart:** We are looking at the accommodation issues; this is one of the key areas that we have been looking at since CAF/CASS came in to us. We are about to move into new accommodation in north Wales, you will be pleased to know, and we are pleased about that. This remains a priority for CAF/CASS, because we need to ensure that they have the right facilities for staff and that they have the right contact arrangements in terms of contact centres for meetings with its client base. So, the matter is in hand.

[154] **Janice Gregory:** Thank you. That is lovely.

11.14 a.m.

Cymunedau yn Gyntaf Communities First

[155] **Janice Gregory:** We have a paper before us informing us of the progress made to date in implementing the Communities First programme. I touched on this wonderful venue, where we are today, for which the Communities First partnership was the driver. It is a good example of what can be achieved, especially in a village such as New Tredegar. Is this a village or a town? It would be a village in my constituency. Minister, I understand that you are going to introduce the item.

[156] **Edwina Hart:** There are many issues under this agenda item. Members have received the Communities First guidance and I would welcome any comments that they might have on that. You will see that I am suggesting a proposal to take forward the impact of the Welsh index of multiple deprivation on the programme. This has arisen, not as a suggestion from me, but from people whom we have consulted about the best way of taking this forward. I might have had alternative views but those views have come through quite strongly for the partnerships. The overwhelming evidence from the consultation was that new areas should be included in the programme, which I think is right and proper. However, partnerships need time to assess how they will fit it in with the existing partnerships and how to look at it on the ground. If Members are content with this particular aspect, I will write to the key stakeholders asking how they intend to integrate the 46 new areas that are now among the top 10 per cent most deprived and not currently designated in the Communities First programme.

[157] Should the committee endorse this approach, my initial thoughts are that I should write to those who are consulted on Communities First guidance. They include Communities First partnerships, co-ordinators, local grant recipient bodies, local authorities, county voluntary councils, the Welsh Local Government Association, Communities First Support Network organisations, Communities First organisations, and Funky Dragon. I am keen to ensure that we get the views of as many children and young people as possible, so I intend to ask Communities First partnerships to consult the local youth fora to seek their views. I am also very conscious that I do not know whether I will get views from young people by using those mechanisms. They are the formal mechanisms, but if Members have any other suggestions about how we can engage young people, I would be more than happy to take them on board. I have also discussed these issues with Assembly Members, the police and the fire service, and we need to look at it.

[158] I very much welcome evaluation; for example, the revised Communities First guidance draws extensively on the evaluation. It endorses the fact that Communities First is helping communities to fulfil their role in contributing to the regeneration of communities. This is a very fine example. Evaluation confirms that our confidence in local people is paying dividends and will benefit this generation and those to come. I reiterate that this is very much a bottom-up approach. I want us to reinforce that we have confidence in people to run their own communities and develop ideas. We do not want to take a solid approach from the top down suggesting what people should do. That is quite important.

[159] The evaluation endorses our focus, as a Government, on capacity-building as being necessary. Even though others have asked how much has been spent on capacity-building, and how much has gone into projects, you sometimes look at communities where there has been no capacity and you have to build on it if you are to get some things done. There has been innovation, as a result of the need for learning, as the programme has developed. The weight of youth focus projects, I think, is helping mainstream provision; 70-odd youth workers are now employed by Communities First, which I think has certainly helped with that provision. You can argue about where the budget should come from, but, in real terms, it is quite important that these youth workers are employed.

[160] The majority of partnerships have successfully developed small and large community-led projects. The trust fund is still an enormous success. There are always problems in certain areas, and you will always have complaints, but, in the main, it runs quite successfully. I think that we have kept our basic commitment to communities through it, which I think is quite important.

[161] I obviously welcome comments from the committee on this. Anne might want to say something about future evaluation of data and so on.

[162] **Ms Stephenson:** Do you mean the baseline statistics?

[163] **Edwina Hart:** Yes. If Anne, perhaps, could comment on how we take those forward, I would be very interested in Members' comments to see if we can improve on what we have said and on what further layers might be added. This is a very open discussion, as far as I am concerned.

[164] **Ms Stephenson:** Just to explain, as per the last meeting, we have included this mock-up of Nant-y-glo to show you the format that the baseline report will take when it is published later in the summer. So, we have just used that as a random list. However, we have added to it the list of the baseline information that will be produced for each of the areas. This was intended to reassure Members about how comprehensive this statistical analysis has been and how comprehensive a baseline report we will have, going back to 2001 data.

[165] **Leanne Wood:** On the issue of capacity building, I accept the point that you have made that many of these communities had absolutely no organisation to start with, but we are now six years in to a 10-year programme. I really think that the capacity-building side of things should have been done and sorted at the beginning of the programme.

11.20 a.m.

[166] When the programme started, Minister, you stated its nine clear aims. I cannot remember all of those off the top of my head, but one was to create jobs, another was to raise incomes in Communities First areas and others were on energy efficiency and so on. However, the problem was that no measurable targets were set at the beginning of the programme. We must accept that it will be impossible to tell whether the Communities First programme will have met its stated aims. There is absolutely no way of getting the data that we need to reach the conclusion that this programme has been effective or otherwise. I can accept that it is fantastic that groups are working in partnership, building capacity and centres such as this one, and that individual projects throughout Wales are doing great work, but will that be sustainable after the end of the 10-year period? That is the key question. All this good work is great, but if it is only raising expectations in communities, with the funding likely to be stopped at the end because you cannot show that the programme and its investment of £131 million has had the impact that you wanted it to have—that you have met the original aims—then the projects will be under threat. I am concerned about that.

[167] The Cambridge review shows many positives, but it is also damning in parts, such as where it says that the department was understaffed. It also says that you should not have gone ahead with the first 100 communities. We are talking about taking on an additional 46 communities now. Are you confident that there is capacity in your department to deal with all of those?

[168] I am aware that some partnerships initially conducted social audits, which were quite in-depth studies of problems and issues that concerned residents in Communities First areas. I do not know what work has been undertaken to ensure that the issues raised were tackled and if there has been any monitoring of that. Some people have told me that those social audits were excellent documents but that they have pretty much been left on the shelf.

[169] What can you do about contradictions with other areas of Government, in terms of joined-up working? I have mentioned an example before of a school closing in a Communities First ward in the Rhondda, where a youth club, playschool provision, breakfast clubs, and so on, will be lost to the community. Despite reassurances that alternative provision will be made, that has not been the case. Clearly, other departments in your Government are making decisions that go against what you are trying to do with the Communities First programme, which makes a mockery of the joined-up Government that you claim to have.

[170] To conclude, therefore, we must be able to show, somehow, that this programme has made a difference. Other Government programmes may have increased employment, and employment may have increased right across the board, regardless of whether or not this extra investment has gone into communities, but we must be able to show that this investment has had an impact and has made a difference. Otherwise, at the end of the 10 years, that will be the end of that.

[171] **Edwina Hart:** I understand, to an extent, the points you make about joined-up Government. With the social justice portfolio, and I am sure that the Deputy Minister will agree, I find that, when we look at child poverty, not everything related to that issue is within my portfolio. There needs to be better joining up across Government in terms of how we develop strands of work. Huw and I would acknowledge that it has not been as smooth as we would want it to be. That is not because of a lack of will, but because it has been difficult to make people understand joint working. You only have to look at examples of our Westminster colleagues; they have their silos, portfolios and buildings, and there has always been a traditional way of working in Government. We are trying to overcome that in the Assembly, with more crossover working. We have been successful in some areas. For example, I have done considerable work with Andrew Davies in particular areas on getting closer links into that portfolio. I am now tackling many issues with Brian Gibbons under health. Huw is taking the lead on educational issues with Jane Davidson, based on his child poverty report on what issues we need to consider.

[172] Communities First is a holistic approach to issues. It is not primarily an anti-poverty programme or a traditional regeneration programme. It is about bringing all of the issues together. You can be criticised for taking a long time to go through capacity building, but you can only go at the pace of the community with which you are working. If we are genuine about that, then that is the pace at which we have to work. A community like New Tredegar has been able to bring the strands together quite quickly; it has had money in and has active people and a proactive local authority with which it can work, and this building is an example of that work. The library is here. The local authority has chosen to be a partner. Much is done in terms of the groups that use the facility—we saw a group doing exercises during the break. It is a holistic approach. To do this requires commitment from the community. Some communities will not even have voluntary groups to start off with. So, even though I can understand why Cambridge Consultants said that, at the beginning, we had bitten off more than we could chew and that we needed more people in, you could not stop it for that reason, in my opinion; you had to go with it, because there are expectations.

[173] This is a generational programme. We might not see the benefits of this for another 15 or 20 years—benefits that allow you to see a real difference within the community. It requires some guts on the part of any Government to say, ‘This is what we want to do’. It is much easier to say, ‘I have done this here; in three years, I have done this and have got down to this level’. However, if you are sincere about community regeneration, you do not speak in that type of language.

[174] On baseline figures, we have statistics from 2001 that we can use. We can look at the levels of income and economic activity from 2001 onwards, and I am happy to be updated about how we can get those figures into the public domain and work on them, which is important. So, there are issues around Communities First, but it is also important to recognise that Communities First has worked. It would be very nice for me to say that there are an additional 1,000 people in employment, or that 5,000 more people have undertaken training, but I want to change communities for life, not just in terms of any targets that we might set.

[175] From visiting Communities First groups, I know that they have used social audits successfully to look at issues within their areas—environmental concerns have come out in social audits, and a lot of work is going on with our partner organisations there. I am not saying that every group has done it, neither am I saying that there is a consistent standard across the board on Communities First, because people are different, as are their aspirations. However, what has emerged is that Communities First is certainly working. When I talk to people who are not political friends of the Government, they still admit that the programme is good and that it has worked. We still have complaints about the programme, but that is usually because groups are falling out in many cases; they cannot make progress because they cannot get on together in order for the work to function.

[176] I am trying to be open and fair in this discussion. Not everything is perfect, but there are a lot of good things in it. If I wanted to hide anything, I certainly would not have asked Cambridge Consultants to undertake a review of anything. I wanted the review because I wanted us all to have something upon which we could base our future work projections. I cannot say that I am happy with all of the findings, but I accept the findings. I see that as a basis from which we can move issues on and try to develop them, to get better practice and more realistic outcomes. I would like more targeted work, because we will now look at the long list of things that will bear fruit in the future. However, even though the funding is for 10 years initially, we have always spoken about it as being a generational issue. We now have the capacity to take on the further areas; I know that the partnerships are eager to do so. The original index upon which we based it was not ideal. We all knew at the time that there would be pockets of deprivation outside it. On the other hand, at the time, we gave local authorities the opportunity to identify those pockets and put them into the equation, but a number of them did not avail themselves of that opportunity, as Anne knows.

[177] Would you like to add anything, Anne?

[178] **Ms Stephenson:** On the evaluation, I am not sure whether it comes out yet in the emerging findings, but one thing that the evaluators have been doing as part of the action research is working with the partnerships in Rhondda Cynon Taf to develop internal evaluation mechanisms. That is something that we think will be a good basis to roll out across other partnerships, because that will give them a hand in developing their own targets and milestones, and get them into thinking about monitoring progress. That is one aspect that is particularly positive.

11.30 a.m.

[179] Furthermore, in a general way, the evaluators have been trying to pin down and report on a moving target, because it has almost been like a snowball gathering momentum, particularly over the last two years, while I have been managing the programme. There has been so much progress and development in partnerships that we have learnt from the action research and fed it back into our work. It is difficult to take a snapshot of what things were like, because they have continually kept improving. Those were the only points that I wanted to make.

[180] **Huw Lewis:** It is always interesting to hear a negative view, but, in this case, I do not feel that it is much of an education for any of us. If you will forgive me, it requires some degree of self-deception, when you are sitting in a facility such as this, which is at the heart of the process as the keystone partner of the Communities First organisation in this community, to say that there is some terrible question mark over the measurable output of Communities First. Just after this meeting, there will be a celebration on the part of the partners that have been involved with the work so far in New Tredegar—let us not forget that we are not yet finished—and I invite Members to come along to ask a simple question to the partnership members who will be there, namely whether they think that Communities First is a good thing or not. Ask them if they want it removed. I am sure that you will get a short and definitive answer to that question.

[181] Leanne mentioned the issues of jobs and income in particular, and she is right; they were part of the key aims of Communities First. However, what she neglects, fails or pretends not to understand, in terms of the capacity building in these communities, is the degree of complexity that existed and the social destruction that went on before this programme was created. That means that if you are going to be realistic—and the people who are the most realistic about these things are the community members themselves, who are no mugs, and know just how difficult these issues are and how long it takes to put them right—the most difficult, complex and scary issues of all are those involving the engagement of partnerships with economic issues in their community. When you are talking about people whose sole experience of being engaged in regeneration work has been through the Communities First partnership—and they may have been involved in that for one year, two years, three years, or whatever—we are only now getting to the point at which many partnerships, even the most advanced partnerships, such as that in New Tredegar, would feel confident enough to do justice to their community when they start to get stuck into the issues of jobs and the economy.

[182] It is beginning now, and the new Communities First guidance that will come out—I have had long discussions with officials about this—will offer a menu of options for Communities First areas. Let us remember that it is a bottom-up approach; we are not telling partnerships what to do, but encouraging them and holding out examples of best practice in terms of jobs and the economy, with which they might wish to engage. There are marvellous partners out there for them to work with—good councils such as Caerphilly County Borough Council, the Department of Work and Pensions and the credit union movement all spring to mind. There is good consolidation going on now, in terms of debt reduction, with the credit union movement. We are exploring some exciting options with Citizens Advice and others, working together with Communities First partnerships to look at income maximisations, particularly through debt reduction and benefit take-up. All these things, we anticipate, will have a massive impact. The pilot schemes that have gone on out there have drawn extra money into the pockets of local people in communities such as this, to the degree of millions of pounds a year. We are just about to embark on that work.

[183] Essentially, a criticism of the rate of progress on this is an implicit criticism of the quality of the communities themselves. They deserve an understanding of the fact that the issues that they are about to get stuck into are much more complicated and difficult than those of the first half of the programme. However, they are willing to do it, and they are up for it. Leanne asked about the potential for the survivability of this programme, if we cannot prove outcomes and so on. That is entirely in the hands of politicians such as us. At the moment, the greatest danger to the survivability of Communities First is this kind of simplistic, negative criticism of the path on which communities have travelled so far. It will not take too many headlines in the *Western Mail* to rattle the confidence of communities that are building themselves back up to a situation whereby they are some of the most robust, self-helping, agitating communities in Wales, as they were in the Valleys. We are building back towards that through the Assembly and our partners working together with local people.

[184] On joining up, I wanted to mention that the child poverty implementation plan will show some very clear ways in which Communities First can join up with that agenda, and we will be holding out that offer to Communities First partnerships to get stuck into the work that they could do to combat child poverty, not just in terms of income, because that is too simplistic, but the services and the life chances that are available to youngsters within the community.

[185] One has to ask: if these worries run so deep, what is the alternative prescription? The only one that I can think of out there is that we revert to some kind of top-down politician-knows-best prescription, where we turn up in communities and start bulldozing and building and doing what we think is best for them. Other than that, what is the answer? Should we just scrap this and start again? Should we wring our hands, and admit that it is a failure and that there is nothing that the Government can do in terms of assisting the communities that previous Governments tried their best to destroy? I encourage Members to come along to take a look. I am not pretending that every partnership in Wales has anywhere near the rate of development seen in New Tredegar, in terms of the drive and the capacity-building effort. It is probably, in some categories, the best in Wales. That, in itself, is an exemplar. The Chair mentioned that she would be encouraging people from Communities First partnerships in her area to come to take a look at New Tredegar; I do that too—this is my patch and my constituency, but awareness still needs to be built about the level of ambition that Communities First partnerships can aspire to, and New Tredegar is a great example

of that. There are some partnership board members in New Tredegar who are thinking of creating tour-guide jobs because there are so many visitors now taking a look at what is being done there.

[186] This is about complexity and realising, as the Minister said, that you can smash a community in a matter of months, but rebuilding it can take a generation. We are six years in; that is not a generation. We have a long way to go yet, and I am very proud of the communities that have engaged with this programme fully and shown their true potential and capacity. There are exciting times ahead.

[187] **Leanne Wood:** I just wanted to pick up on some of the points that were made there. I have made it clear at every stage during this debate that I am a supporter of the idea of this programme, and there is no way that I am criticising individual communities or projects. I am well aware of the benefits of Communities First programmes. I live in a Communities First ward and I can see the benefits in my own community. It is all very well being able to prove that individual projects are reaping benefits for people, but if you cannot show progress against your original stated aims, you are not going to be able to show that this programme has had an overall effect. The other point is that I have every right to scrutinise the spending of public money, and I make no apology for doing that. You asked what the alternative is; the alternative is to get a grip on this and prove that it is working. We are spending a lot of money on it; I want it to work, and it probably is working, but we have to be able to show that it is.

[188] **Edwina Hart:** Scrutiny of the programme is absolutely essential, hence this discussion. It is also important that we agree a way forward, in terms of the guidance and some of the other issues that I have raised, such as youth issues and the engagement of youth. However, like everyone else, I want to be able to prove that it can work, but I am not certain that I will be able to do so for another 10 to 15 years in many areas, and that is the issue. There are also many subjective issues in this programme, such as the feel-good factor that you can never measure when communities get together and do something. Therefore, we should also consider the many wider issues in this, rather than take the auditor's approach, of which I have always been highly critical. Auditors take no account of the fact that, sometimes, if you have a failure somewhere, you have a better result five years down the line. Therefore, we must be careful in terms of how we do it. However, I welcome the scrutiny of all these issues, as I know Huw does. It is important that we scrutinise them and have an honest discussion about them. I want to make improvements to the programme, if possible, and try to get more people involved and to get even better outcomes on this.

11.40 a.m.

[189] **Mick Bates:** It is an interesting discussion. I experienced capacity building under the old market towns initiative, which was a different process, but was similar in detail, where you had to bid. Therefore, you had to create the capacity to try to win a competition. This is a much better way of moving forward, although I accept all the difficulties of using data to identify where the activity is to take place. Therefore, we know about the imperfections of that.

[190] At first, changing behaviour is difficult, and it takes time. My experience—and I am sure that Leanne is right about scrutiny—is that it takes a long time to change behaviour, and turn around what is often the low self-esteem of people in a community. That is often the biggest challenge that we face. The problem is that it is difficult to measure. People have struggled with the concept of measuring wellbeing. If it were possible, it would be useful to have a good indicator of wellbeing. I am sure that if I walked down the street here today and asked, ‘Have you noticed any difference in the last few years?’, most people would say, ‘What are you on about, mate?’. It is difficult to get a good set of data that reflects, often, what is an improvement in people’s happiness, and in their levels of expectation and confidence. If it is possible, there are measures—I see that you are smiling, Minister, and it is good that you are happy—but it is difficult to get those. One thing that I used to say to the groups that I was involved with was, ‘Try to reflect in some way the improvement in people’s outlook on their own lives and that of their community’. Often, that is the essential part of capacity building. If you could measure that, it would help.

[191] I have two issues of concern regarding the future scrutiny of the programme. The first is the mainstreaming of funds. Whatever happens—and we are sitting in this great building today—there is a revenue issue that must be built in to all programmes. One of my major concerns—and, again, I remind you that I have been in this situation—is that, often, the money is not there to continue much of the capital investment. Often, securing capital investment, although that is difficult, is easier than securing revenue funding. On mainstreaming, I make a plea that, from all this, there is recognition through the partners, particularly the local authority, which is often key in this, that the programme bending, or whatever you want to call it, takes place, so that when the community has made this terrific effort, it knows that the revenue funding is in place in a secure timescale.

[192] Many years ago, we talked about introducing a minimum of three-year funding to the voluntary sector. Therefore, a 10-year programme such as this, and Sure Start, is essential for people to have that confidence that, when they do something, the funding is there for a reasonable period. More has to be done to convince many people that that continuity of mainstream funding will be there to provide the revenue of the future.

[193] Secondly, people must do internal evaluation. It is difficult for groups that are volunteering to audit their own activity. Work was undertaken by the Cambridge Group, previously, I believe, on the market towns initiative, which showed that the most successful groups were those that undertook their own evaluation as they went along. There comes a point where, within the toolkit, there has to be a recognition that that internal audit evaluation monitoring is the driver for the improvement agenda that they all want to see taken forward. I make a plea for that to take place, somewhere within that toolkit.

[194] **Edwina Hart:** I concur with Mick’s final point on internal evaluation and auditors being the driver. Looking at yourself constructively can help to develop the programme for the future. We will take that point up and further develop that area; Huw and I have discussed that issue.

[195] Mainstreaming is the key to this. You are right that it is much easier to provide capital than revenue. This building is a good example, because it brings in revenue to survive. We must understand the mainstreaming of programmes, and how they can add value. Communities First projects will not be successful just because they are in Communities First areas or are funded by Communities First; other circumstances surround the regeneration of an area and what is required in terms of the main portfolios and what they are doing. If we look at this, we see that you are opening a road and you need all those budgets mainstreamed in line to ensure the success of the community. For me, the key part now, as we move on, is to mainstream, and for all the resources to come together. Whether you are building a new school or developing a youth club, all these budgets and factors need to come together. So, I accept both of your points.

[196] **Mark Isherwood:** I think that we would all agree that the key aim of this is to give people a voice—not as an end in itself, but as a means to an end in all the other economic and social goals that we seek. A feel-good factor is essential, but it is not enough if people have poor health, high economic inactivity, low educational attainment, poor housing and poor transport and so on. I think that we will come back to some of those points in a minute, as a final comment.

[197] In every successful organisation, whatever sector it happens to be in, constant internal measures and self-evaluation need to be ongoing to ensure that they remain successful. That is not being negative. You need to look at quantitative and qualitative measures, both of which are vital in this context—you cannot look at one without the other. I acknowledge that you need to look at what works well, but you also need to look at what should be done differently, to overcome problems as they arise. That is not being negative either. Where you see criticisms, they should not be regarded as criticisms, but more as opportunities to be addressed objectively.

[198] Last Friday, I attended an event at Plas Madoc, near Wrexham; I think that the First Minister also went, but not when I was there. It was a successful event, celebrating making a difference. I am fully aware of achievements in Communities First areas. Interestingly, I was told by a representative of the Association of Voluntary Organisations in Wrexham that it is about to initiate a social audit, focused on quantitative and qualitative measures. Hopefully, that could feed into your wider consideration of how we can systematise internal checks.

[199] Many concerns have been raised with me, and I have raised some with you, about the possibility of this scheme being open to local political control, rather than equity for different Communities First areas. Points have been raised with me by staff in Communities First partnerships about the need for stronger national guidelines on local delivery, as well as for external accountability. At the moment, the more localism we have—which I certainly strongly support—the closer we can bring this to the people, and yet the greater the independent external checks must be to protect their interests.

[200] A specific point was raised with me recently about benefits, and I do not know how wide this is. People living outside Communities First areas have to pay for things that may be shared with people in Communities First areas, although those living in a Communities First area are entitled to free provision. That is more of a non-devolved matter, but we need to consider that benefits aspect.

[201] I apologise if I have missed it, but I have not seen much reference to the role of the voluntary sector in here. Of course, it is a huge and central issue to much of this. For instance, neighbourhood watch works successfully in cross-generational schemes, and warden resource centres are active not just for wardens but in a wider range of community regeneration work. We need greater investment in conflict resolution. I am aware, and I know that you are, of instances of Communities First areas being in conflict with the council, Communities First partnerships being in conflict with their communities, and of local authorities apparently being in conflict with their communities. Often, it is just a case of poor communication or a lack of understanding, but the mechanisms need to be in place to make it work. Also, I attended one partnership's AGM recently, which covered five Communities First areas. Three of them sent large numbers of representatives and elected their officers for the next year, while two of them were not represented at all, but all were launched in similar areas at a similar time. The solution is not to criticise, but to ensure that the good practice in those three areas can be shared with the other two.

[202] To finish, I have to mention sustainability. There has been a lot of mention about sustainability and quantifiable outcomes, but housing has a key role to play. To my mind, we cannot look at regeneration without things like the homelessness strategy, the Welsh housing quality standard, stock transfer and so on being central to it. In giving a tenant a voice, whole community regeneration, capacity building, training, employment, debt counselling, mortgage rescue schemes and all types of different areas can be, and are being, delivered effectively jointly, with the housing agenda being key and central to those. The housing agenda can certainly be part of the regeneration agenda, but not part of the Communities First agenda in its entirety. I will conclude with that.

11.50 a.m.

[203] **Edwina Hart:** I will let Huw come in later to answer some of the points. Not even selling off the family silver has helped in some of the housing discussions that have gone on, Mark, because there are wider issues here involving what has happened over the years. As Huw said when he first spoke, the guts have been knocked out of these communities, with the massive industrial changes that have taken place, and with changes in workforce patterns. The idea of the traditional male bread winner has disappeared now, and the notion of it not mattering whether you had any qualifications. It will take years and years to put the confidence back into these communities, and you say that five areas have set up a partnership together and three are at a certain stage, while two are at another. That is the real reason why we must take time on capacity building in Communities First, as not everyone will get up to speed or up to the capacity levels as soon as possible. You talk about political interference, but the revised guidance is dealing with this issue. I do not tolerate political interference in the partnerships, and if it is ever brought to my attention, I try to deal with it; indeed, I have dealt with some quite difficult customers, as Sandy will know from the discussions to which she has been party. People were saying, 'You must understand and work with your community', and we deal with that head on. We recognise that there is role for Assembly Members and councillors, but the most important people are those who live in the community who want to take a lead on this. It is quite scary for some people, because they feel as though Pandora's box has been opened and they are not quite sure where everything will go, but, ultimately, they must be prepared to take the risk.

[204] You also said that other areas are upset because they are not having something as they are not in a Communities First area. The whole point of programme bending is that sometimes you benefit deprived areas. It might not suit other people, but if you want to tackle issues such as poverty and others, you must get to grips with all of those issues. That is why Communities First is not just about community regeneration, or activity and capacity within communities; it is about everything, and that is why it is such a complex agenda to deliver.

[205] On housing, we know about that. Some of the key issues that are emerging are housing issues, and some of the environmental work that is going on in Community First partnerships is first class, because it is improving the environment in which people live, creating the open spaces that we need for children to play in, clearing up all the waste, and making the areas far better places in which to live.

[206] **Huw Lewis:** Mick made a very valid point on the difficulties with measurement, and everyone is keen to measure success. We have already discussed how we are entering a new era of measurement in terms of how we look at Communities First programmes. He is also right to say that it ain't simple, and to judge the success or failure of a complicated programme such as this on the number of jobs it might have created, for instance, is not doing it justice, and is not paying due respect to the people involved. Mick is also right to say that revenue must be at the forefront of everyone's mind, in terms of the survivability and sustainability of everything. Again, there are so many different ways of addressing that problem, but some interesting conversations could be had about how it is done here in New Tredegar, where some true programme bending from Caerphilly County Borough Council has led to the integration of these issues. We are not just talking about a community facility here; we are also talking about a building that houses the local library service and the police station. Just across the road, the anchor, on the public sector side, of the revenue would be the school, and yet the integrated children's centre also works out of there. Just this afternoon, we started drawing in the private sector by looking at the element of business units that are all part of the scheme in New Tredegar. So, there are many different ways, and the way here will not necessarily fit everywhere else, but Mick is right to highlight these as issues that matter.

[207] On Mark's points, no-one is denying that measuring success is important, and I hope that I did not equate the call for measurement with negativity per se about the programme. I see negativity as demanding measures that are unfair at this stage of the programme, because they are focused on an issue that is too early to be looked at, or measures that are too simplistic. That is when a call for measurement is, to my mind, a sly political smack in the ribs for the programme, rather than a genuine concern about how the programme is moving.

[208] Mark is also right that conflict arises, disagreements arise, and that is bound to happen. This is about empowering communities. If you hand over to a community a budget and an organisation—which, essentially, is what we do with Communities First; we give them the means to organise, and a budget to do something with the organisation—what you have handed to it is a parcel of power. We are not embarrassed about that, as that is the whole point of it, but what you also do is disturb the power relationships that were in place in that area previously. You suddenly have a community that is demanding, agitating or standing up for itself in a way that it did not before. That rattles people's cages, and it is just something that we have to work through and resolve, and the Minister is quite correct in saying that there is a key role here for elected representatives, councillors, Assembly Members, Members of Parliament and all the rest, to ensure that those conflicts are resolved and worked through.

[209] I do not necessarily see them as such a terrible symptom, actually. It is proof, to me, as there would be no conflict if Communities First did not make a difference. No-one would be bothered, because nothing would have changed as a result of Communities First. The friction—which is perhaps a more subtle word to use than conflict—is there because everyone knows that Communities First does make a difference.

[210] We do face—and I face them in my community, Mark—those people who are not in Communities First areas. Again, here is more subjective evidence of the fact that Communities First works: those who are not in Communities First areas universally want to be in them. There is a difficult political answer to that, but an honest one, which is to say that we are prioritising the worst communities first, so please remember that your community pays for the damage that has been done to the Communities First area. You pay for it in the housing problems, the crime levels, in the general look of your community and in the investment that might be attracted to your community. So, you already pay. Let us get to pay for the cure rather than patching up the symptoms all the time. I always tell people that I will take that criticism fully on board when a Communities First area is so attractive that they want to move there.

[211] **Sandy Mewies:** Huw just took the words out of my mouth, actually, because one of the measures of success that I use is the number of communities that want to move into Communities First areas, because they can see what is happening there. I am not saying that there are not difficulties, because there are. I think that this is an honest report. There are problems; no-one denies it. There will be problems, and we will have to find ways of solving them. I agree with Leanne that scrutiny is necessary, but we must try to be positive in the process, and Mick's idea of monitoring and internal evaluation—which I have always said is extremely important, as it is not just evaluating; it is actually monitoring how things are going—is not the only way of measuring what is happening. You cannot just rely on organisations to do it themselves; they must be encouraged to enter into that process, and that is then evidence that you can present to people.

[212] Joint agency working is so important, and there is no doubt that there are frictions. If you start moving power around, it always causes friction and there is no doubt about that. However, if you have joint working in which people come around to working together—and people are coming around to that in many areas—it is successful. I was at an interesting scheme the other day, at which the Department for Work and Pensions—the benefits advice shop part from Rhyl, so not in my constituency—was doing outreach work in my constituency in Gronant and Talacre. It has been greatly supported in what it has done by the Communities First programme. It is based in the same building as DangerPoint, which was given to it by BHB Billiton Ltd from the private sector. The building also includes voluntary organisations which give support. That is how Communities First can work: by drawing people together.

[213] I note that there is an action for this committee to note progress and how we move forward, and I think that we ought to do that. It recognises very fairly, as people here have recognised, that there are problems, but that it will be a long-term process, like Sure Start and like everything else. It will be some years hence before we can even start to think, ‘Well, in the long term, we have made a difference’. However, this building, in particular, shows that you can overcome one of the main obstacles to providing big capital projects, and I congratulate the people involved on that. They can be sustainable, but it does depend on partnership working.

12.00 p.m.

[214] **Janice Gregory:** Before I bring you in, Minister, I will put in my two penn’orth. You will know that I have spoken to you before about the advantages of social audit, and I sat on the panel of the Gilfach Goch Community Association in my constituency for its social audit. I thoroughly enjoyed the experience. I think that it is important that organisations go through this particular self-evaluation. No-one around this table would disagree with Leanne on the issues of scrutiny. Of course we need to scrutinise this, but I think that we need to be very careful about the use of language, because some Communities First partnerships in my constituency can withstand criticism but others are not yet ready for politicians to start marching in there and criticising. You can look as exasperated as you like—

[215] **Leanne Wood:** No-one is criticising the projects—[*Inaudible.*]—the Government’s approach to lack of measurement. Please do not insinuate that I am criticising communities and projects—

[216] **Janice Gregory:** What I have said is that no-one disagrees with the issues of scrutiny. What I and other people do not want is for measurements to be used as a stick to bash whomever and the programmes themselves, because there are organisations and partnerships that will take that as a personal criticism. Let us be careful about the language that we use. It is fine if you are criticising the Government, because we can all take that, as politicians. However, we need to be very careful about how we use language with regard to Communities First partnerships and about how they will see it. You may not use it in that way, but the *Western Mail*, as Huw says, might. It only takes a couple of headlines in my local paper for my telephone to be ringing off the hook with calls from the Communities First partnership, and someone has to go there and spread oil on troubled waters. Let us be very careful with the language that we use.

[217] **Edwina Hart:** It has been a very useful discussion. Is the committee content with how I am going to try to deal with the additional areas? I need to know that the committee understands where I am coming from on the basis of that to bring the additional ones in in the way that I have suggested.

[218] **Janice Gregory:** Is everyone content with that? I see that you are.

[219] **Edwina Hart:** I think that it is the usual suspects that we are discussing in terms of youth. Perhaps I could run a couple of pilots of a different type of discussion with young people in Communities First. I would be delighted if anyone had any suggestions, so could they drop a line via you, Chair? I would like to try something more experimental than using the school fora and so on. If there is a way that we can really reach out to younger people, not just using the usual structures, I would be happy to look at some pilots for type of discussion, which could then perhaps produce better guidelines for us on the involvement of young people. So, I think that that would be quite useful to look at. If Members have any suggestions to make on that, via the Chair or directly to me, we will look at that over the summer and return to it when we look at Communities First again in the autumn.

[220] I accept the scrutiny of Government and I accept concerns about issues, but I do not want, as Janice said, a knock-on effect for communities because some of these communities are in a very fragile state and they do not necessarily understand that this is a criticism of me and my department, and is not a criticism of them. They feel that that pans out into them not doing their bit. I think that language is quite important, but it is also important to get the message out that we will look at baseline data and the focus issues in this. I am happy to come back to any other aspect of it, but the important thing now is that the new guidance will be very valuable.

[221] One point that I did not pick up from Mark was that the voluntary sector is key to this. The voluntary sector, in the main, is quite happy with Communities First, across the partnerships, with regard to the level of engagement, because the voluntary sector sees Government adopting best practice from it about the bottom-up approach that it is taking. It feels that we have learned from it in how we are trying to structure this particular agenda. I think that this has been a very good example for us to come to visit today, but we could go out and see other partnerships that are very fragile. We have done a lot of work with them, perhaps as much work as we have done here, but they have never quite come together. At some stage, we will have to make decisions about partnerships that do not come together and work out, because there will have to be discussion then within the community about how to take things forward. I thank Members for the discussion. I look forward to hearing suggestions on youth participation, because I do not think that we have got that right.

[222] **Janice Gregory:** Okay. That was the last item. Huw, did you want to add anything other than another invitation to join you after the meeting?

[223] **Huw Lewis:** I have made the invitation. If Members do have time, there will be a celebration of the progress so far in New Tredegar, and the opening of the new road and business units. I think that people are gathering in the foyer just after the meeting for that.

[224] **Janice Gregory:** That is great; thank you. The next meeting will be held on Thursday 21 September in the National Assembly. As usual, the Members' Research Service is here listening to anyone who wants to say anything, and if anyone wants a specific briefing, the service is happy to oblige. With that, I declare the meeting closed. Thank you very much.

Daeth y cyfarfod i ben am 12.05 p.m.
The meeting ended at 12.05 p.m.