

Social Justice and Regeneration Committee

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Title: Edwina Hart – Report to S J & R Committee – 28 September 2005

1. DTI's Face-to-Face Debt Advice Fund

DTI have been allocated £45 million from the UK Government's Financial Inclusion Fund to support the expansion of free face-to-face debt advice in both England and Wales.

The monies will be made available for use across financial years 2005-06, 2006-07 and 2007-08 (£nil/15m/30m) and the overall objective is increasing both the number of debt advisers and the hours that they are available. This acknowledges that the existing provision falls far short of present demand. The consequence is that the financially excluded cannot access this assistance when it is needed.

Funding will be directed toward the high financial exclusion areas of England and Wales, as defined by HM Treasury. ODPM's Index of Multiple Deprivation in England and the new Welsh Index of Multiple Deprivation in Wales will also be taken into account.

The Review of Overindebtedness in Wales highlighted the importance of face-to-face debt advice, particularly for the most vulnerable groups. The new resources will therefore be a welcome boost.

Assembly Government officials play an active role in the Advisory Board that has been established to support the DTI-led Project Board, which oversees the administration of the Fund. The Project Board, includes, at the request of the Assembly Government, the Director of Citizens Advice Cymru, Fran Targett.

Officials are also working with representatives of the debt advice sector in Wales to ensure that Welsh based advice organisations are able to take full advantage of the new resources.

2. Credit Union Funding

Welsh Assembly Government officials in partnership with colleagues from the DTI and HM Treasury developed a draft notification for the public funding of credit unions in Wales and England. This

notification was based on the recently approved Scottish Executive model which allows the public funding of credit unions contracted to provide services of general economic interest (SGEI). The original intention was to submit this notification to the European Commission for approval as soon as possible.

European Commission Decision

The European Commission has decided to introduce a block exemption for SGEI – this had been anticipated though the timing was unknown. A decision of the College of Commissioners was made in mid July though this will not enter into legal force until 20 days after it is published in the Official Journal. The decision exempts from notification (subject to certain criteria being met) all aid for SGEI under €30million granted to undertakings with turnover of less than €100million in the preceding two years. The aid may cover the costs of providing the SGEI allowing for a reasonable profit.

The decision will only apply to SGEI which have been properly defined and entrusted (provided as part of a contract with the public funding body). Detailed records of aid must be kept for ten years and public funders must regularly check that there is no overcompensation (which is illegal aid). Reports must be sent to the European Commission every three years and there will be a review on the functioning of the block exemption within four years.

Public funding bodies may decide that any profit from activities outside the scope of the SGEI should be also used to offset the amount of aid but this is not an absolute requirement. We may also fund the costs of infrastructure improvements as part of any funding programme based on the decision, provided that they are directly linked and essential to the provision of the service.

The Assembly Government's Directorate of Legal Services (DLS) and officials of the DTI have advised us that this decision means we no longer have to provide the European Commission with a notification on the public funding of credit unions, hence shortening our original estimated timescale for resolution of this issue. Instead we can proceed and develop our funding programme. However, we must still base our funding around the provision of SGEI and the decision's requirements and there are still likely to be significant hurdles to overcome before we can put in place our proposed credit union funding programme. This will nevertheless be a timetable of our own making and we will no longer be required to await the approval of the European Commission. It should be noted however that there are often delays in publication of Commission decisions – if this becomes an issue when the necessary administrative requirements are in place, DLS will re-evaluate the position.

Assembly Government officials are continuing to work with the Wales Co-operative Centre on the funding programme and met with colleagues from HM Treasury and the Scottish Executive on 1st September to discuss how best to put the block exemption into practice. The SGEI block exemption requires a series of checks be put in place both on the part of the credit union and the funding body. The outcome of this meeting will give us a clearer idea of the likely timetable for implementing the SGEI measures.

3. Regeneration: A Simpler Approach for Wales

A Report by the Wales Audit Office

Members will be aware that on 19 August, the Wales Audit Office published a report entitled "Regeneration: A Simpler Approach for Wales". I am always prepared to acknowledge criticisms when they are based in fact and offer constructive ways forward. I have to say that I am disappointed with the report's comments on the Communities First programme and have written to the Auditor General for Wales to explain why.

My concerns with the report focus on:

- In my view the Summary of Findings is a rather crude over-simplification of the points made in the main body of the report. The report itself contained several analyses and recommendations with which I would agree and am acting upon. However, the way that the more reasoned and contextualised comments in the body of the document have been reduced in the Summary of Findings is crude to the point of distortion. This is unfortunate since many observers are going to read only the Summary of Findings.
- The investigations on which the report is based were undertaken two years ago during 2003-04. I believe this should have been pointed out in the main body of the text since in 2003-04 the Communities First programme was in its early stages. The programme is innovative in its approach to the issue of regeneration and the activity taking place in 2003-04 (of which there was a lot) was preparatory and exploratory. A report coming out a considerable time later than the period reported upon should acknowledge that 2003-04 was the initiation phase of Communities First.

We will continue to press forward with the Communities First programme and are taking account of the more constructive elements in the report. I regret, however, that the message of those elements may be lost to many of those involved in the programme because of the discrepancies I have mentioned and conveyed to the Auditor General.

4. 2005 – the Year of the Volunteer

This initiative continues, and our campaign to promote volunteering, managed by CSV Wales, is attracting substantial media interest. Over a dozen radio interviews and TV items have been transmitted, and there has been good coverage in local and national press. Over 2,500 posters have been distributed to libraries, community centres, GP surgeries, etc. Publicity has focused on how to volunteer, notably on promoting the new national one-stop phone line (0845 265 2005), and the national volunteering website (www.volunteering-wales.net).

Four more large-scale events to promote the Year are planned. Two events in late September will

highlight the work of volunteers in helping to reduce poverty and homelessness. Two further events in December will focus on people who volunteer for international causes.

A secondee has been recruited from the voluntary sector to lead the 'employee volunteering' element of the Year. Julie Bush began work on 11 July. She will be promoting employee volunteering to staff in the Assembly, ASPBs, local government, and the health sector. She will also be promoting secondments between the Assembly and the voluntary sector. The Assembly Government's employee volunteering drive will be launched on 18 October.

5. Independent Commission's Review of the Voluntary Sector Scheme

I have promised to keep members informed of progress in implementing the recommendations made by the Independent Commission to Review the Voluntary Sector Scheme. See Annex A for a full update.

On 13 June, the Voluntary Sector Partnership Council accepted the completion of recommendations 18, 19, 34 and 41. This brings the number of completed recommendations up to fifteen. Up to eight more recommendations will be put forward for sign-off to the 21 October VSPC. Work is in hand to implement all of the remaining recommendations.

6. Partnership Agreement for funding the Voluntary Sector Infrastructure

A Partnership Agreement between the Assembly Government and the Wales Council for Voluntary Action was signed on 7 September. The Agreement sets out a new basis for core funding the WCVA, and for the other organisations that make up the voluntary sector infrastructure, namely the 19 County Voluntary Councils (CVCs) and the 34 Volunteer Bureaux. It includes specific standards and performance measures for each element.

The Agreement will run from 1 October 2005 until 31 March 2010, subject to a review by 31st March 2007. Progress will be reviewed at twice yearly service review meetings.

The Agreement enables the Assembly Government to set more detailed outcomes in return for its core funding. It provides the basis from which the Assembly Government may negotiate individual partnership agreements with CVCs and volunteer bureaux. For WCVA, the CVCs and the Volunteer Bureaux, the Agreement provides more secure funding, and a five-year rather than a three-year commitment.

7. All Wales Youth Offending Strategy Implementation Group

I have agreed to the establishment of an to monitor progress against the original targets in the Strategy and to set challenging objectives and targets in respect of future years.

I have seen a report on out-turn against the objectives and targets in the All Wales Youth Offending

Strategy for 2004-05 and I am content with the progress made during the first year of the Strategy.

The Implementation Group has proposed a series of new objectives and targets in respect of 2005-06 and I have accepted that these are reasonable. The targets are wide-ranging in their scope and include measures to reduce and prevent youth offending by all the partner agencies including police, probation, housing, health and education. The Group will be reporting to me on progress in implementing these targets at the end of the financial year.

I will also be presenting a paper to Social Justice and Regeneration Committee on progress with 2004-05 targets and proposed targets for 2005-06 at one of the Committee's meetings this autumn

8. Single Non Emergency Number (SNEN)

The Home Office has written to the Permanent Secretary asking for Assembly representation on the Single Non Emergency Number Steering Committee and 2 members of the Assembly's Human Resources Department have agreed to undertake this role. Cardiff is one of 7 pilots for the SNEN throughout the UK which will commence on the 7 September and be fully functional by May 2006. It is anticipated that the full roll out of the SNEN throughout the UK will be in place by 2008.

9. Crime Figures

Overall crime in England and Wales has fallen by 6% according to Police recorded crime statistics in comparison to a 7% decrease in Wales. The British Crime Survey estimates that the risk of becoming a victim of crime has fallen from 40% in 1995 to 24% according to BCS interviews in 2004 – 05 the lowest level since the BCS began in 1981.

10. Publicity of the Domestic Violence Strategy

At the Social Justice and Regeneration Committee of 6th July, I agreed to provide members with a note about the All Wales Care Pathway and I agreed to look at how the Assembly can better publicise the work around domestic abuse.

I wrote to the Chair of the Committee about the Care Pathway on 6 September 2005. The Working Group on Domestic Abuse met on 13th September and the issue of publicising the Assembly's work on domestic abuse was discussed. It was noted that a lot of good work has already taken place eg the launch of the All Wales Strategy received a lot of media interest and Welsh Women's Aid recently included a front page article about the strategy in their regular newsletter. However the Group have agreed to provide further suggestions for action in time for their next meeting in December. The minutes of the meeting are available on www.wales.gov.uk/subicrimeprevention/index.htm. I will continue to regularly update the Committee about progress on these issues.

11. All Wales Training Needs Analysis and Workforce Development Activity

In January 2004 I agreed to fund an All Wales Training Needs Analysis matched against Drug and Alcohol National Occupational Standards (DANOS) which would be the first step for taking the implementation of these standards forward. The final report was delivered and agreed on 4th July 2005.

The aims of the project were as follows:

- Define and describe the drugs and alcohol workforce in Wales including specialist and non specialist workers
- Provide a competency breakdown for each major occupational group mapped against the Drug and Alcohol National Occupational Standards (DANOS)
- Provide a Training Needs Analysis matched against DANOS
- Make recommendations for workforce development based on the study's findings

The report has provided my officials and I with robust information on the training needs of substance misuse practitioners, service managers and commissioners as well as the wider workforce. These needs have been matched against Drug and Alcohol National Occupational Standards (DANOS) and will provide a useful starting point for planning training priorities for these groups.

One of the main recommendations of the All Wales training Needs Analysis was to establish a workforce development group. The first meeting of this group took place on the 30th August This group will consider and advise on the recommendations of the All Wales Training Needs Analysis and lead on the development of a strategic workforce development action plan.

A series of regional workshops will be held in November to disseminate the findings of the All Wales Training Needs Analysis and to discuss the work of the workforce development group.

In order to progress workforce development activity for the substance misuse sector in Wales, I funded two separate activities this year. They are:

- the compilation of a directory of substance misuse training available in Wales and
- the development and delivery of a training programme to develop job descriptions and person specifications in line with Drug and Alcohol National Occupational Standards.

Both of these activities were also present in the recommendations of the All Wales Training Needs Analysis and issues arising and recommendations made will be considered by the workforce development group who meet next on the 12th October.

12. Development and delivery of a training programme to develop job descriptions and person specifications in line with Drug and Alcohol national Occupational Standards

Newlink Wales were commissioned by the National Assembly for Wales in March this year to develop and deliver a training course to develop job descriptions/person specification in line with Drug and Alcohol National Occupational Standards, other National Occupational Standards and the Knowledge and Skills Framework if appropriate. This was in response to a request from the sector at workshops in December 2003 and would serve as a starting point for beginning the implementation of Drug and Alcohol National Occupational Standards (DANOS). Alongside this, I have also provided funding for An All Wales Training Needs Analysis which was also completed this year. The development of job descriptions in line with DANOS was one of the recommendations of that report.

Newlink Wales were asked to offer the programme to managers and commissioners of substance misuse services. As part of the training programme, they were asked to enable those managers/commissioners to help their staff develop job descriptions in line with these standards once they had returned to their usual workplace.

The training programme was favourably received by the majority of participants who felt it was relevant to their post and well organised. 97% of participants said that they were now able to coach others in the development of job descriptions in line with DANOS.

Issues raised in the final report such as the development of guidance for services on implementing DANOS will be considered by the workforce development group at its next meeting.

13. Social Housing Ombudsman for Wales (SHOW) Regulations

During the plenary debate held on 5 July to discuss the Social Housing Ombudsman for Wales (SHOW) Regulations, Mick Bates raised the issue of evaluation of Ombudsman reports. He wanted to know how I proposed to evaluate the process of the Ombudsman. I offered to report back to committee.

Just to recap, what we have at present in terms of reports is contained in the SHOW Regulations

- the SHOW shall annually prepare and lay before NAFW a general report on the performance of his functions (Schedule 12 paragraph 6 of the Housing Act 2004)
- the SHOW may from time to time prepare and lay before the NAFW such other reports with respect to his functions as he thinks fit (Schedule 12, paragraph 6 of Housing Act 2004)
- the SHOW may publish his determination on any complaint (Schedule 12 paragraph 7 of the Housing Act 2004)
- if the SHOW is not satisfied with the response by the social landlord (or has not received a response) as a result of a determination, he must prepare a special report which would be sent to (amongst others) the NAFW. These provisions are contained within paragraphs 8 and 11 of the SHOW Regulations.

- If a social landlord does not comply with the SHOW's recommendation, the issuing of a special report in practice 'names and shames' the social landlord. The pressure of public opinion to make an authority comply with an ombudsman's recommendation should not be underestimated. Wales has an excellent record of complying with such recommendations and we can see no reason why this should not equally be the case in relation to the SHOW. As regulator, we will, however, keep a watch on this and, if, the extremely unlikely event a social landlord was unwilling to comply with the SHOW's, determination, it would be reported to me.

The Ombudsman is independent of Government and will provide an independent means of investigating complaints made against social landlords in Wales.. He has a public duty to maintain high standards of investigation and reporting to ensure the continuing effectiveness of the service he provides. If his reports or the recommendations deriving from them were found to be flawed then those recommendations would be subject to challenge by the bodies concerned.

Similarly, if a complainant thinks that the Ombudsman has not acted properly in investigating their complaint, the complainant has the option of judicial review of the Ombudsman's investigation.

However the Ombudsman is a Crown appointment, and the Queen can remove him from office on the ground of misbehaviour (on recommendation of the Secretary of State following consultation with the Assembly)

14. Consultation on proposals for legislation in respect of Bed and Breakfast

Following my report to you in July regarding consultation on proposals for legislation in respect of Bed and Breakfast and other temporary accommodation for homeless people, my officials have now completed further impact assessment work. The conclusion of this work is that the proposals for extension of standards in 2008 to supported and other social housing remain broadly appropriate, but that some points of detail and timing need to be adjusted to reflect the needs of homeless people for continuity of provision at an acceptable standard. Lawyers have begun preparatory drafting of the legislation, and I will report to you on the final proposed legislation in November.

15. Fuel Poverty and Home Energy Efficiency Scheme

I provided an update to committee in January on the Interim Review of the Home Energy Efficiency Scheme. The review has now been published, and is available on the housing website www.housing.wales.gov.uk.

The review examined the current HEES eligibility criteria and the effectiveness of the Scheme in reaching fuel poor households, who are vulnerable and living on low incomes. The evaluation made recommendations on how the eligibility criteria and management of the scheme could be improved to better target the fuel poor. Having examined the review's recommendations we are now considering a

number of changes to both the assistance available to households under HEES, and the way the scheme is delivered.

The role of HEES Scheme Manager is currently out to tender through the EU Procurement process, and evaluation of tenders is currently taking place. I expect to be able to make an announcement shortly on the award of contract for the role of Scheme Manager. The new contract is due to commence in December 2005, and in advance of the commencement discussions will be held with the Scheme Manager on improving the management and targeting of HEES. I expect that the revised management arrangements will operate from commencement of the contract. These arrangements will be subject to ongoing monitoring and review.

I also expect that we will shortly have an indication from the Living in Wales Survey of the number of households living in fuel poverty in Wales. Once this is available, an analysis will be made of the number of households in fuel poverty against the resources available to assist the fuel poor. This will be helpful in informing future budget requirements for the Home Energy Efficiency Scheme.

The Home Energy Efficiency Scheme Regulations, which set out the assistance available under the scheme and households which are eligible, are also under review. DLS are currently drafting revised regulations, and these will be subject to public consultation, examination by the Business and Legislation Committees, and plenary debate before coming into force next year.

16. Safety Centres

At oral questions on 11th May I agreed to raise the issue of supporting safety centres such as "DangerPoint" in North Wales with the Minister for Education and Life Long Learning (ELL).

"DangerPoint" (North Wales Safety Education Centre), aims to improve the safety awareness of young people across all communities in North Wales, by reducing crime, accidents and promoting community safety. It will do this via the provision of imaginative learning resources and educational experiences.

To date these issues have been covered within the Personal and Social Education (PSE) curriculum, in particular under the physical aspect of the PSE framework, where young people are helped to understand how to keep themselves safe. The context for this includes the road, water, the home and other environments.

When planning how they are going to implement PSE the Local Education Authority and schools take into account their local circumstances and priorities, including how much time they devote to safety education.

The Minister for ELL has advised that there is no capacity within the Education budget for 2005-2006 to allocate funding to DangerPoint or other such Safety Centres. However, under the Community Fire Safety Budget funding of £10,000 has been provided towards the set-up costs of the "fire/arson"

elements within "DangerPoint".

Safety Centres, such as this one can help to improve young people's safety awareness. A number of local authorities have expressed an interest in developing similar centres in their areas and I have discussed with fire and police services where these centres should be located. It is important that children and young people are taught about the general issues surrounding safety.

17. Attacks on Firefighters

In my statement to Committee on 6th July I reported about the Private Members Bill which Allan Williams MP tabled which calls for a specific criminal offence to be created in respect of attacks on emergency workers. This Bill calls for powers which are similar to those in the Emergency Workers (Scotland) Act 2005 which came into effect in May this year.

We have been monitoring the passage of both the Bill and the effect of the Scottish Act. The Bill is now due for a second reading sometime in early 2006.

The official numbers of prosecutions as a result of the Scottish Act will be not known until May next year. However there has already been one very high profile case of a successful prosecution by a hospital worker resulting in a 6 month sentence for the attacker.

We will continue to monitor the effects that the Emergency Workers (Scotland) Act 2005 has had on keeping workers safe from harm.

18. Attendance standards to fires in the home

I have asked the three fire and rescue authorities in Wales, along with other stakeholders, to develop proposals for attendance standards to fire in the home. I will be consulting on Integrated Risk Management Planning guidance later in the year and the work on attendance standards will form a key part of the response options available to fire and rescue authorities through that guidance.

The development of attendance times to fires in the home is technically a complex matter. Whilst a simplistic position could be taken, in the form of a single maximum time that the public could expect an attendance from the fire and rescue service, there could be significant costs in setting such a standard. Consequently, any meaningful standard should take account of risk, and more specifically the mitigation of risk, if it is to meet the expectations of the public.

In taking forward this work, the fire and rescue authorities are using the Fire Service Emergency Cover Model (FSEC) which plots actual incidences of fire against the demographic profile of an area. It uses a combination of demographic identification of people at risk of fire injury or death and predicts a casualty rate for an area around which a related standard can be determined.

The actual attendance standard arrived at will need to take account of other factors such as population density and known survival rates. The most important issue, however, is the population spread, particularly across the large rural areas of Wales, where the remoteness of many properties from fire stations will mean that the risk to people can only be properly reduced by the introduction of robust, proactive fire safety measures to support the attendance of fire crews.

The work will, of course, need to be fully validated before it can be implemented.

Representatives from the three fire and rescue authorities are scheduled to attend the Committee's meeting on 16th November where they will be able to discuss this important work with members.

19. Helicopters

I have also had discussions with the Fire and Rescue Authorities in respect of the feasibility of using air support by helicopters in the Fire and Rescue Service. I have concluded that the matter should be referred to the Joint Emergencies Services Group (JESG) to explore the options.