

Social Justice and Regeneration Committee

SJR(2)-17-05(p.1)

Date: Thursday 8 December 2005

Venue: National Assembly for Wales Building

Title: Edwina Hart – Report to S J & R Committee – 8 December 2005

1. Fear of Crime

Background

In Committee on the 28 September I undertook to provide details on the work being carried out to measure the fear of crime in Welsh communities.

Fear of Crime

Fear of crime can have a critical effect on the quality of life of individuals and communities. The British Crime Survey (BCS) shows that perceptions of crime do not necessarily follow actual trends in crime, suggesting that levels of fear may be disproportionate to the likelihood of victimisation.

In the past, attention has focused on reducing crime and the causes of crime in the expectation that as crime levels go down so the fear of crime will also decrease. Whilst both crime and the fear of crime have been decreasing since the mid 1990s the BCS shows that the public's fear of crime is not falling at the same rate. The Home Office is working to significantly reduce crime in the key areas of violent crime, burglary, and car crime by 2007 – 08 that greatly impact upon people's perception of crime levels in their community. The Assembly Government likewise is working hard to reduce the adverse effect that a disproportionate fear of crime can have on the quality of life of individuals and communities and have been working with the CSPs, Police and other agencies to tackle this issue.

Levels of Fear of Crime in Wales

The percentage of the population worried about burglary and violent crime was significantly lower in Dyfed Powys, Gwent and North Wales than the average for England and Wales; in South Wales, the percentage worried about burglary was 1% higher than the average for England and Wales but significantly lower than the England and Wales average for Violent crime. The percentage worried about car crime in Dyfed Powys and Gwent was also significantly lower than the England and Wales average,

it was the same for North Wales but significantly higher in South Wales.

Average figures show that:

- 10% of the population of Wales are worried about burglary

Compared to 12% in England and Wales

- 14% of the population of Wales are worried about car crime

Compared to 13% in England and Wales.

- 11% of the population of Wales are worried about violent crime

Compared to 16% in England and Wales.

Measuring the Fear of Crime

The measurement of the fear of crime is a complex area of community safety and, as with other quality of life issues, is extremely difficult to set qualitative targets for given the many factors that contribute to the perception of crime levels, many of which are not criminal incidents in themselves, such as anti social behaviour and the gathering of young people.

Community Safety Partnerships

Many of the Community Safety Partnerships and local authorities in Wales are engaged in work to measure the fear of crime. Many local authorities have policy agreements in place to ensure that community safety issues, including the fear of crime, are taken into consideration by its actions. A number of partnerships conduct area wide customer surveys in partnership with local agencies whilst others have the fear of crime built into their strategies as an objective although it remains difficult to set measurable targets for this. Public meetings and Citizens Panels encourage people to voice their fears whilst local area for a measure fear of crime at a ward level and steering groups involving the voluntary sector measure the fear of crime felt by vulnerable groups such as the young and elderly – this is often done through face to face interviews to gain a better understanding of their concerns.

Community Safety Partnerships are working closely with other organisations involved in crime reduction operating a range of projects throughout Wales to combat the fear of crime. Typically this involves providing extra CCTV cover, additional street lighting for targeted hotspots, locks and bolts for vulnerable properties and provisions to remove graffiti and rubbish - all of which are designed to make people feel more secure in their communities.

Specification of the Partnership projects include:

Victim and Witness Strategies designed to provide continued support to the victims and repeat victims of crime, community safety schemes which offer regular foot patrols and a clear uniformed presence in problem areas and multi agency panels to discuss and prioritise work on the fear of crime.

Established by the Powys Community Safety Partnership, the Powys Cultural Centre for Diversity promotes good race relations between people from different racial groups and it hopes to increase the reporting of racist incidents. It also provides support to victims of racism.

Blaenau Gwent recently launched its own Community Communication Network (CNN) which promotes community safety work being carried out in the area through large screen televisions installed in prime locations providing a highly visible broadcast medium. The CSP has also introduced a new 'Bogus Caller Watch' project – an early warning scheme that immediately passes details about con-men operating in the area to the drivers of the Council's fleet of 200 vans and lorries.

Safer Merthyr Tydfil operates a burglary reduction initiative called 'Homesafe' which provides free locks, security equipment and crime prevention advice. The scheme works in partnership with the Police, Local Authority, Victim Support and other voluntary organisations. There is also a Bobby Van service operating in many areas of Wales. The Bobby Van visits the homes of people who have been burgled to re – fit locks and provide advice on further target hardening to prevent repeat victimisation. The service is particularly aimed at vulnerable groups such as the elderly, single parents and ethnic minorities having the dual intention of offering both practical advice and providing a reassuring presence to the community.

Using the improved technology of the Ringmaster Community Messaging System, Powys Community Safety Partnership is working with Trading Standards and the Police, to share information so that traders, consumers and the wider community can be warned about rogue activity in the Powys area. This is invaluable for warning Community members such as those participating in Home Watch schemes.

A Prevention Strategy for Young People set up by Safer Neath Port Talbot which addresses the issue of young people hanging around on the streets and who appear threatening to certain community groups. Young people have been encouraged to work with youth workers and the community to develop projects and also provide the structures and funding to sustain them.

Media and the Fear of Crime

An increasing body of research suggests that the media, particularly tabloid newspapers, have a significant impact on people's perceptions and fear of crime finding that those who read national tabloid newspapers were more likely to consider crime to have increased significantly compared to broadsheet readers.

Research also suggests that local press provide their readers with a more balanced view of what is happening within an area, without relying on sensationalist reporting. Those who experience the greatest fear of crime are older people, women and those with disabilities. Many partnerships have or are in the process of developing specific media strategies that offer practical advice to address common fears and which highlight the work they are doing to promote community safety offering a reassuring message.

According to the 2005–06 BCS the proportions of people believing crime to have increased has fallen compared to 2004–05. However, figures still remain comparatively high. Sixty one percent of the public thought crime in the country as a whole had increased despite the total number of crimes estimated by the BCS falling over recent years.

Crime and anti social behaviour reduction programmes are working towards low crime and low fear. A little fear is healthy and ensures that people take common sense precautions. Many areas have already identified the need to better engage with local communities and local media in order to promote the very positive, good work that is underway in Wales.

2. Start Date for Home Information Packs

The UK Government has announced 1 June 2007 as the implementation date for the introduction of Home Information Packs (HIPs) in England and Wales. Research has revealed widespread dissatisfaction with the current process for buying and selling private homes. The UK Government is introducing HIPs to improve the process for consumers by reducing the number of failed transactions and abortive costs. It is anticipated that packs will cost around £600 each (plus VAT) and, as most sellers are also buyers, the costs will be broadly similar to the current regime. Whilst the legislation concerning HIPs is not devolved, the UK Government is obliged to consult the Assembly Government on draft Regulations affecting Wales. This is expected early in 2006.

3. Social Housing Ombudsman for Wales (SHOW): Financial arrangements for 1 April 2006

I have recently approved the transfer of funding for the function of the Social Housing Ombudsman for Wales (SHOW) from the SJR MEG to the Public Services Ombudsman for Wales MEG with effect from 1 April 2006.

It is a requirement of Schedule 2A to the Housing Act 1996, as inserted by Schedule 12 of the Housing Act 2004, to meet the operational costs in relation to SHOW.

The offices of the Welsh Administration Ombudsman, Health Service Commissioner for Wales, the Commission for Local Administration in Wales and the Social Housing Ombudsman for Wales will be abolished on 1 April 2006 and replaced with a Public Services Ombudsman for Wales. The PSOW will be funded from one central MEG.

4. The current position of Local Authorities in Wales in achieving the Welsh Housing Quality Standard by 2012

Local Authority	Current Position
Bridgend	Stock transferred to Valleys to Coast Housing Association in September 2003.
Monmouthshire, Swansea, Torfaen.	Business plans demonstrate that resources available to them will be insufficient to meet the Welsh Housing Quality Standard and they have resolved to ballot next year.
Newport.	An independent Housing Commission has considered all funding options and has recommended a ballot to transfer stock. The authority is considering how best to proceed.
Blaenau Gwent, Conwy, Gwynedd, Merthyr Tydfil, Neath Port Talbot, Rhondda Cynon Taff.	Business plans submitted by these authorities do not demonstrate that they will be able to achieve WHQS within the resources available to them. They are reviewing options and are expected to agree a way forward shortly.
Anglesey, Caerphilly, Cardiff, Ceredigion, Flintshire, Vale of Glamorgan.	The business plans of these Local Authorities seek to demonstrate that they can achieve WHQS using their own resources. Officials have raised concerns in relation to technical and/or financial aspects of the plans, which are not yet resolved.

Carmarthenshire, Denbighshire, Pembrokeshire, Powys.	The business plans of these Local Authorities demonstrate that they are likely to be able to achieve WHQS using their own resources. Initial concerns in relation to technical and/or financial aspects of the plans have now been resolved.
Wrexham	The authority is unable to achieve WHQS within the resources available to it. Following an unsuccessful ballot the authority is considering options.

5. Disabled Children's Means Test

Rhodri Glyn Thomas at the last Committee meeting asked whether it was possible for those parents, who have made DFG applications and who are required to make a sizeable contribution, to make a second application. My officials wrote to local authorities well in advance of the parental means-test for children being abolished informing them of the relevant date and I am afraid that the legislation is not retrospective. In those cases where an application has been made but not yet considered by the local authority it is open to an applicant to withdraw the application and re-apply. I am not aware of any cases in this category

6. Home Energy Efficiency Scheme Annual Report 2004-05

I am pleased to be able to inform the Committee that the 4th Annual Report of the Home Energy Efficiency Scheme (HEES) in Wales will be published shortly. It describes the progress being made towards the eradication of fuel poverty in Wales.

The Scheme has proved to be enormously popular since its implementation with over 51,000 households across the whole of Wales receiving some 140,000 measures that have helped alleviate fuel poverty at a cost of £40.5m. The Scheme clearly demonstrates our commitment to make a real difference to the lives of the most vulnerable members of our communities across Wales.

During 2004-05 I have introduced a Benefit Entitlement Check for applicants to HEES. This service identifies extra benefits to which HEES applicants are entitled. In previous years we would not have been able to offer assistance we can now advise whether an applicant should be claiming a benefit, which could entitle them to assistance under the Scheme. In many cases, a successful application for extra benefits also increases household income – another factor in helping households climb out of fuel poverty. Between August 2004 and March 2005, 1,312 checks have been completed with 423 households now eligible for additional benefits averaging over £64 per month.

For the future I believe that our ability to effectively target fuel poverty will be an important issue for the Scheme. I recognise that some fuel poor households may be either more difficult to reach or expensive to treat than those who have already been assisted under the Scheme. This is one more challenge that we must meet.