

# **Social Justice and Regeneration Committee**

**SJR(2)-05-06(p.1)**

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**Venue: National Assembly for Wales**

**Title: Edwina Hart- Report to the SJ & R Committee – 15 March 2006**

## **1. Levels of Crack Cocaine misuse in Wales**

At the last meeting I agreed to consider the specific data relating to levels of crack cocaine misuse in Wales. This issue came to the fore last summer following a press release from Turning Point Cymru who claimed that there was a growing crack misuse problem in Wales. The claims were based on a UK wide report and was not an accurate reflection of the specific situation in Wales. Figures they reported for the number of crack cocaine seizures in Wales did not correspond with the information the Assembly Government received from the 4 police forces in Wales.

Available data covering 2001/2 to 2004/05 from the National Drug Treatment Monitoring System shows that Welsh referrals for treatment reporting a crack cocaine problem rose from 1.0% of the total number referred for treatment in 01/02 to 1.8% and 1.9% in 02/03 and 03/04 respectively. Referrals dropped to 1.5% in 2004/05. Data from the All-Wales Database established in April 2005 shows under 1% of all referrals are reporting a crack cocaine problem. These figures do not indicate a significant increase in crack cocaine and this is confirmed by agencies across Wales. It is also reflected in the European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction in their Annual Report 2005. I gave a commitment to the Committee in my September report that I would share the first Annual Report from our new database system as soon as I am able. I understand the report will be available mid to late June.

However, though statistics show that the Crack problem is not as prevalent in Wales as it might be elsewhere, we are not ignoring the issue. Later this month a conference is being arranged to provide information on the current crack cocaine situation in Wales and to advise commissioners and providers of the implications. In addition, as part of the Home Office Drug Interventions Programme, the Welsh Assembly Government receives funding to build in treatment capacity for its three Drug Testing on Charge intensive areas to support any adult charged with a trigger offence and testing positive to either heroin, crack or cocaine. In Gwent some of this funding is being used to employ a Crack Cocaine/ Stimulants worker to provide structured support through harm reduction, relapse prevention and cognitive behavioural therapies for these clients. Similarly, South Wales has allocated funds to provide a cocaine/stimulants worker. In addition, generic drugs workers in statutory and voluntary agencies are tasked with assisting crack cocaine users.

## **2. Drug Intervention Programme 2005-06**

I have accepted the transfer of £1.5million from the Home Office to the Welsh Assembly Government's Budget for 2005-06 to operate the Arrest Referral Scheme in Wales and the Drug Testing on Charge in Newport, Swansea and Cardiff as part of the Drug Intervention Programme.

I am pleased to say that I have agreed with the Minister for Finance, Local Government and Public Services to carry forward £2 million of End of Year Flexibility provision into the Substance Misuse Action Fund Budget Expenditure Line in 2006-07, as a result of slippage on capital schemes related to the Drug Intervention Programme. It has taken longer than expected to gain local agreement to the location of some bases and to identify suitable properties and gain planning permission whilst ensuring value for money. These resources will be spent early in 2006-07.

## **3. Social Enterprise Action Plan priority for Asset Transfer**

The Social Enterprise Strategy action plan has been amended to increase the priority of asset transfer as agreed on 12th January.

I have agreed to grant Welsh Assembly Government funding to the Development Trusts Association (DTA) Wales to take forward a number of activities detailed in the action plan, including that of promoting asset development. DTA Wales are arranging, in partnership with my officials, a number of seminars which will begin to do this.

The intention is to target specific audiences such as community groups and voluntary sector organisations that could benefit from asset based development. DTA have produced a guide 'To Have and to Hold' which helps organisations through the process of obtaining assets and developing them to aid sustainability. This guide is currently being translated into Welsh. DTA Wales' Director is also a member of the Social Enterprise Joint Working Group (SEJWG).

One of these seminars will be specifically aimed at local government and other public sector organisations, which may have assets which are underused. The Welsh Local Government Association is also represented on SEJWG and I hope they will aid the facilitation of this event.

## **4. Evaluation of the Post Office Development Fund**

I shall shortly be publishing an evaluation of the Post Office Development Fund (PODF), and wish to inform the committee of its emerging findings.

PODF made £4.1m of grant support available to post offices located in, or serving the 125 most deprived and 125 most isolated communities in Wales. The objective of PODF was to support the retention and development of post offices in these communities, by promoting diversification and increasing viability.

The evaluation considers the extent to which PODF achieved its objectives, and assesses its impact on funded post offices and their local communities, with a view to informing government thinking at UK and Wales levels about any future public support for post offices. The study was carried out internally by a researcher, working independently of the policy branches involved.

The study sets out the policy, economic and commercial context against which PODF has operated since November 2002. It outlines the significant challenges facing the UK post office network during this period, including the introduction of Direct Payment of benefits and pensions.

The study found a high standard of day-to-day administration of PODF, and a high level of customer satisfaction with its administration. There was however a significant delay in the announcement of grant awards under rounds 3 and 4 due to an internal review of PODF, and further subsequent delays in commencement of these projects due to the introduction of legal charges on properties as a measure to protect public investment.

The evaluation found that overall, PODF had a positive impact on the commercial viability of funded post offices, keeping some open that would otherwise have closed, and increasing the income of others. It concludes that many post office businesses operate successfully on a day-to-day basis, but are capital-poor. Occasional injections of capital for specific purposes can therefore have a significant impact on survival. PODF also levered in well over half a million pounds private investment into the infrastructure of the post office network.

PODF also had a positive impact on the local communities and economies of funded post offices, by improving access to Post Office services in areas served by PODF funded post offices, leading to increases in their opening hours, and making improvements across a range of community facilities and services. It led to the creation of approximately 80 new part-time jobs in deprived or isolated areas of Wales.

The evaluation recommends that no further Assembly Government funding be made available to post offices until the UK Government and Post Office Ltd have reached agreement on their future direction and funding, and unless it can be established with reasonable certainty that funded post offices would remain open for at least the medium term.

The evaluation makes a number of general recommendations about grant schemes and more specific recommendations about schemes offering support to small businesses including post offices. The key general recommendations relate to the need for clarity of objectives and the importance of building arrangements for evaluation into the design of schemes from the outset. The key specific recommendations include the need for close liaison with Post Office Ltd at every stage of development and operation of a scheme, the importance of robust financial and business planning information and economic appraisal of bids, the need for care in the use of geographical eligibility criteria and the value of promoting links between post offices and other specific public or voluntary initiatives or services.

The full report and executive summary will contain an explanation of methodology, full analysis of the data and more detailed recommendations. I shall make the report and summary available to members as soon as they are finalised.

## **5. Legal Services Commission: Welsh Specialist Support Service**

Members may be aware of the decision by the Department for Constitutional Affairs and Legal Services Commission to withdraw funding of the Welsh Specialist Support Service from July 2006. I understand that the decision was taken following a review of all services funded from the 'top slice' of the legal aid budget.

I have written to Bridget Prentice MP at the DCA to register strongly with her my concerns about the potential loss of this valuable service in Wales. I believe that the Service has an important role in supporting and developing the quality of first tier advice services here in Wales and this is particularly important in the provision of housing, benefit and debt advice to people in our poorest communities. I propose to monitor the situation over the next few months to see how this decision impacts upon our ongoing efforts to prevent homelessness and other related social problems.

## **6. Child Support Agency**

I share the concerns of many Members about the quality of the support provided by the Child Support Agency in Wales and welcomed the announcement made by the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions on 9 February on the future operation of the Agency. In order to tackle the profound and structural problems faced by the Agency an Operational Improvement Plan will be introduced to achieve an immediate stabilisation in operations and improvement in performance, a crackdown on those who do not fulfil their responsibilities to their children and the delivery of a more efficient and effective service. The main objectives of the Plan are to strengthen enforcement; improve the management of debt by using the expertise of the private sector; and increase the efficiency of the Agency by the removal of significant backlogs and restructuring the organisation to develop staff expertise and increase productivity. This will be supported by a package of measures totalling £120 million - including £30 million to contract out some of the CSA's Debt Recovery work - which will be found from within the DWP's budget.

In tandem with these measures to stabilise the administration of the Agency, the Secretary of State announced a fundamental review of the policy and delivery framework for child support arrangements by Sir David Henshaw who will report by the Summer Recess. This report will inform decisions on the longer-term future of the CSA.

The actions put in place will apply across the child support scheme in England and Wales. My officials have already met the relevant DWP officials to discuss the issues in greater detail. They will continue to monitor progress on the Operational Improvement Plan and will co-ordinate a Welsh Assembly Government contribution to the Review.

## **7. British Irish Council Social Inclusion Theme**

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

I hosted a Ministerial meeting in Cardiff in July 2004 where British Irish Council (BIC) administrations agreed to focus the next strand of its work on disability and access to employment, education and training. Disabled people are particularly vulnerable to poverty and social exclusion, in part due to their low level of participation in the workforce.

During the work theme officials have exchanged details of the targeted benefit support and programmes for disabled people in their administrations and a range of disability statistics related to employment, education and training. They have carried out a Literature Review, which has been posted to the Assembly Government and BIC websites and undertaken a series of fact-finding visits in Belfast, Jersey and the Isle of Man to projects aimed at helping disabled people access the workplace, education and training.

Work on the strand has culminated in a report on work carried out and lessons learned, which was considered by BIC Ministers at a meeting in Edinburgh on 2/3 March. My Deputy Minister, Huw Lewis attended in my place.

## **8. Fire and Rescue Service Risk Reduction Plan and Service Standards**

The Fire and Rescue National Framework for Wales commits the Welsh Assembly Government to introduce guidance on risk reduction planning during 2006 for implementation in time for the 2007-08 planning period. The development of Risk Reduction Plan guidance (RRP) is intrinsically linked to the development of Service Standards, which the Welsh Assembly Government has committed to develop to set the speed of response to domestic fires.

In December 2005, the Assembly Government commenced a short consultation on Service Standards and a consultation on Risk Reduction Plan Guidance, of which the Standards will form a part.

The primary purpose of an Authority's RRP is to reduce risk. The RRP allows FRAs to assess their whole operating environment, both community and corporate. It is the fundamental assessment on how each Authority intend to manage risk, whilst integrating their service within the wider social justice agenda. It presents a risk management framework to develop RRP, allowing for a consistent, systematic and repeatable approach to be adopted across Wales.

The two consultations for Risk Reduction Plan guidance and Service Standards ended on the 31st January 2006. Forty Eight responses were collated for the Risk Reduction Plan consultation and twelve for the Service Standards consultation. The majority of responses were supportive of both plans, and

copies of the responses received will be made available on the Housing/Fire pages of the Welsh Assembly Government website for information. It is intended that formal guidance will be issued this month, with a launch planned for the 21st March at Ysgol Bryntawe, Swansea.

## **9. Fire Statistics**

Fire Statistics Wales 2004 was published on the 16th February 2006. This bulletin was the first in a series of publications for fire statistics in Wales, aimed at providing a more detailed picture of fires in Wales.

In the calendar year 2004, in Wales decreases were seen for all types of fires, false alarms and fatal casualties, compared with 2003. Key figures for 2004 include:

Total attendances (all fires and false alarms) decreased by 23 per cent to 45,700.

Primary fires decreased by 16 per cent over the last year to 10,200

Fatal casualties recorded were the lowest seen since 1994.

Non-fatal casualties increased by 4 per cent, the first increase since 1999. However there was a big rise in precautionary check ups, which played a large part in the increase in non-fatal casualties.

False Fire Alarms decreased by 10 per cent over the last year to 17,800.

Malicious false fire alarms decreased by 20 per cent

The proportion of fires in a dwelling, which did not have a smoke alarm fitted, decreased by 2 percentage points from 43 per cent to 41 per cent.

## **10. Overview of Report on the Housing and Support Services provided by Local Authorities to victims of domestic abuse.**

A letter was sent to local authorities during September 2005 requesting information on the services available for victims of domestic abuse. The letter asked local authorities how they were meeting the needs of this group. They were to provide the Assembly Government with an overview of their arrangements for meeting the rehousing needs of this group, and how effective these arrangements were in meeting their needs.

Responses from individual authorities were analysed and as a comparison officials also analysed a report detailing user experiences of some individual authority services from Welsh Women's Aid (WWA) compiled by the Housing co-ordinator.

It is clear that WWA found that Local Authorities across Wales deal with women who have suffered abuse differently, not only from authority to authority but within authorities as well, with different homeless officers having a different approach to the legislation.

Whilst individual authorities in their responses have shown that they strive to provide a responsive and sympathetic service it would seem that this may also be being undermined by the lack of consistency. This could be due to a lack of training and also a large workload.

Other clear issues identified by WWA are the restrictions on women's choices by referral to local Women's Aid groups even if it's not what the woman wants. In some instances an authority has even tried to deem the woman intentionally homeless if she refuses to go into refuge.

Also it would seem that a number of authorities are relating to the Statutory Guidance as only guidance and the reports of WWA would seem to evidence this.

Another issue identified by WWA is that there have been occasions where a local authority has changed a woman's area of choice without her permission and notifying her of the change. This is clearly not acceptable as this may place her at risk and is taking away her right to choose where she lives.

A way forward might be to re-emphasise the provisions of the Statutory Guidance that set out how authorities should deal with victims of domestic abuse, and their children. This re-emphasis might also incorporate stressing the need for appropriate training in the legislation and its application to individual cases on a consistent basis.

WWA believe that such a programme would assist in relieving the distress caused by victims becoming homeless as well as having to move away from family and friends and their links with the community. WWA has indicated that they would be happy to assist in any way to contribute to the programme.

## **11. Home Energy Efficiency Scheme**

### Introduction of oil fired central heating systems

As the Committee is aware I have decided that oil fired central heating systems should be made available to eligible HEES plus applicants during 2006-07. I am currently considering changes to the HEES Scheme regulations that will allow oil to be formally introduced as a measure under the HEES Scheme. I am hopeful that the necessary changes to the legislation and procurement arrangements can be in place by June 2006.

### Solid Fuel Pilot

I have previously agreed that a limited pilot of coal fired central heating be undertaken within HEES for

qualifying households without mains gas.

The main aim of the pilot is to determine if solid fuel heating is an effective and economical solution to heating homes of eligible HEES applicants whose homes are not serviced by mains gas supply.

The main issues that have so far been identified in the pilot are:

- Difficulty in identifying eligible clients – the main reasons for this appear to be that many coal merchant's clients already have solid fuel heating, while others were infirm or disabled and solid fuel would not be appropriate because of the need to carry coal from the bunker to the room heater or that clients preferred a 'hands free' system such as oil or gas.
- Solid fuel heating has proved to be expensive to install at an average of £4,123 exceeding the current grant maximum by some £1,400. However, many of the properties being dealt with are what we would construe as being 'hard to heat' households.
- The difficulties experienced in obtaining qualified contractor's to undertake the work Wales wide could present problems in the future. If sufficient installers could not be attracted to cover Wales its unlikely that realistic prices will be able to be obtained.

To complete the pilot a client survey will be undertaken this year after the client has experienced a full winter of running the system. This will allow sufficient time to have elapsed so that information can be gathered from households on matters such as system economy, ease of use and satisfaction with the system. The questionnaire that will be used for this purpose will be drawn up after consulting the Solid Fuel Association.

I will, in due course, update the Committee further on both of these issues.

## **12. Allocation of HEES funds to Social Landlords**

Bids have recently been invited from social landlords. An indicative budget of £3million has been allocated for applications received from social tenants to the scheme during 2006-07.

Whilst the priority of the HEES Scheme in Wales has shifted towards targeting the private sector where evidence suggests fuel poverty is highest we continue to provide an incentive, as in previous years, to social landlords to 'bid' for funds under the Scheme on a match funding basis.

Over time and with the continued level of investment from social landlords there is less demand from social landlords to seek HEES funding. The indicative budget of £3m (15% of total HEES budget for 06/07) compares with take up of £2.3 million in 2004-05 and £2.7m in 2003-04.

## **13. Transfer of resources to support Living in Wales Survey**



'Living in Wales' is a survey of 7500 households in Wales to establish views and actions on a range of issues. The 'Living in Wales' survey is being carried out over three years, 2004-05; 2005-06; 2006-07 with a different sample of 7500 households in each of the three years. It concentrated on collected information relevant to housing policy, although not exclusively, during 2004. It will and has become a more general social survey for the second and third years (2005 and 2006). It is possible the survey will continue from 2007 under OCSRO control. A stock condition survey, linked to the first household survey, also took place in 2004.

The Department for Social Justice and Regeneration funded the process of setting up the survey and the first year of operation (2004). The Department is responsible for the survey from 2004 to 2006, underwriting all costs, but with by-in from other divisions within the National Assembly in each year.

The Environment Division has agreed to buy-in 'time' and incorporate environmental questions to the survey. The information will be used to evaluate the impacts of the Environment Strategy on attitudes and behaviour of people in Wales.

The Committee will wish to note that I, and the Finance Minister, have agreed to the transfer of £94,000 from the Environment, Protection and Countryside (EPC) Main Expenditure Group (MEG) Environment and Research Budget Expenditure Line (BEL) to the Social Justice and Regeneration MEG, Research and Evaluation BEL, for the year 2005-06.