

Minutes

Date: Wednesday 16 June 2004
Time: 9.30am to 11.47pm
Venue: Committee Room 2, National Assembly for Wales

Members

Lorraine Barrett	Cardiff South and Penarth
Tamsin Dunwoody-Kneafsey	Preseli Pembrokeshire
Sue Essex, <i>Minister</i>	Cardiff North
Alun Ffred Jones	Caernarfon
Mike German	South Wales East
Ann Jones, <i>Chair</i>	Vale of Clwyd
Laura Ann Jones	South Wales East
Peter Law	Blaenau Gwent
Dai Lloyd	South Wales West

In attendance

Hugh Rawlings	Director, Local Government and Culture Department
Kate Cassidy	Local Government Modernisation Division
Ian Thomas	Local Government Modernisation Division
Stephen Phipps	Local Government Modernisation Division
Lisa James	Local Government Finance Division

Secretariat

Siwan Davies	Committee Clerk
Liz Wilkinson	Deputy Committee Clerk

Introductory remarks

The Chair thanked all those involved in the launch and plenary debate of the Committee's first report 'The operation of new political management structures in local government', held on 15 June.

Item 1: Introduction, apologies, substitutions and declaration of interests

1.1 Apologies for absence were received from Glyn Davies. There were no substitutions or declarations

of interest.

Item 2: Minister's report

Wales Programme for Improvement

2.1 The Minister referred to the encouraging findings of the report on the operation of the first year of the Wales Programme for Improvement (WPI). Local authorities shortly were required to produce improvement reports for the coming year, which would include details on actions taken in 2003-04 to support WPI.

2.2 In response to an enquiry, the Minister confirmed that an Advisory Board was continuing to support Blaenau Gwent County Council in tackling its improvement needs. No other local authority in Wales had sought similar assistance.

2.3 Members emphasised the importance of leadership training for local authority leaders, and for consistent induction training for new councillors across Wales following the recent local government elections. The Minister agreed to raise these points with *Syniad*, who were providing the training.

Local Government Partnership Council

2.4 Members stressed the need to reflect on the nature of the relationship between local government and fire authorities in the event of devolution of the fire and rescue service in Wales to the Assembly. The Minister agreed to discuss the issue with the Minister for Social Justice and Regeneration.

Action point

The Minister to raise with *Syniad* the consistency of induction and leadership training for councillors across local authorities and report back to the Committee before its next meeting - **Minister, Local Government Modernisation Division.**

The Minister to discuss with the Minister for Social Justice and Regeneration the nature of the relationship between local government and fire authorities in the event of devolution of the fire and rescue service in Wales to the Assembly - **Minister, Local Government Modernisation Division.**

Item 3: Community Strategies

3.1 The Committee considered the progress of community strategies in Wales and noted that ten Local Authorities in Wales had produced plans. Discussion focussed on the following points:

- Status of agreed plans following the local government elections. Due to the emphasis on

partnership, it was not anticipated that the recently agreed strategies would be amended as a result of changes in councils' administration. There would however, be an opportunity to review strategies annually or to revise them in agreement with the partners and in the light of changed circumstances;

- Measurement of success of strategies, in particular improvements in 'well-being'. Performance measures have been incorporated in the plans to track progress in achieving objectives and local authority policy agreements would be aligned with Community Strategies. In addition, local authorities had been asked to develop evaluate their plans;
- the need for local authorities to engage with sectors of the community that were 'hard to reach', in particular businesses, young people and the infirm;
- the scope for simplifying the reporting procedure. This would be examined in the context of plan rationalisation and the evaluation of community strategies, which would result in the dissemination of good practice.

3.2 The Minister agreed to report back to the Committee on the results of the evaluation of the first round of community strategies.

Action point

The Minister to report back to the Committee on the results of the evaluation of the first round of Community Strategies - **Minister, Local Government Modernisation Division.**

Item 4: Legislative timetable

4.1 Members identified the following statutory instruments (SIs) for detailed consideration at future meetings:

- *The Valuation Tribunals (Amendment)(Wales) Regulations 2004;*
- *The Council Tax (Chargeable Dwellings, Exempt Dwellings and Discount Disregards) (Amendment)(Wales) Order 2004; and*
- *The Council Tax (Liability for Owners)(Amendment)(Wales) Regulations 2004.*

Item 5: European Legislation

5.1 The Committee identified the Green Paper on Public-Private Partnerships and Community Law on Public Contracts and Concessions for future scrutiny; this would be included on the agenda of the 7 July meeting.

Action point

Green Paper on Public-Private Partnerships and Community Law on Public Contracts and Concessions to be included on the agenda of the 7 July meeting and briefing to be provided for Members in advance

of meeting – **Chair, Members’ Research and Committee Services.**

Item 6: Balance of Funding

6.1 The Committee noted that this was the Welsh Assembly Government’s draft response to the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister’s (ODPM) review. Discussion focussed on:

- the relative merits of local income tax and property tax as local taxation systems, particularly in the context of fairness and any equalisation to counter the ‘gearing’ effect, and efficiency of the system . The Committee noted that further work was being done on the various options;
- the effect of police precepts on council tax bills. Members favoured central government wholly funding police authorities, which would serve to clarify lines of accountability for taxpayers;
- review business rates, and the merits of income versus property based rates, and the link between rate increases and the Retail Price Index (RPI);
- the need for transparency in local taxation, so that taxpayers could see the services funded by the local taxpayer..

6.2 The Minister undertook to refer to the funding of police authorities in the final response to ODPM, which would be circulated to the Committee.

Action point

The Minister to refer to the funding of police authorities in the Welsh Assembly Government’s response to the ODPM-led review - **Minister, Local Government Finance Division.**

The Minister to circulate the Welsh Assembly Government’s final response to the Committee - **Minister, Local Government Finance Division.**

Item 7: Local Government Partnership Scheme

7.1 The Committee endorsed the Local Government Partnership Scheme Report 2003-04. Members welcomed the strengthened commitment to partnership working and the successes, which had been achieved as a result.

7.2 Members noted improvements made to address shortcomings in the arrangements for the announcement of the Assembly’s proposals for utilising the additional resources resulting from the Chancellor’s Pre-Budget Report.

Item 8: Minutes of the previous meeting

8.1 The Committee approved the minutes of its 19 May meeting.