

Local Government and Public Services Committee

Date: 10 November 2004

Venue: National Assembly Building, Cardiff Bay

Title: Report by the Minister for Finance, Local Government and Public Services

Purpose

1. The purpose of this paper is to provide the Committee with an overview of the key issues and priorities within the Local Government portfolio.

Background

2. In preparing this report I have attempted to identify the most important issues that are currently being taken forward within the local government arena. They are grouped by broad subject area and I have concentrated in particular on those that will require both policy development and legislation.

Recommendation

3. The Committee is invited to note the content of the report and to comment as appropriate.

Issues

4. Local Government Settlement

I have been heavily engaged over the last two weeks considering the

various aspects of the local government settlement for unitary authorities which was published on 2nd November and which is a specific item on the agenda for today's meeting.

5. Transitional Arrangements

I have approved a policy of transitional arrangements to smooth the effects of council tax revaluation

and rebanding. The policy has been drawn up with the assistance of representatives of local billing authorities. A consultation paper together with draft regulations were issued on 26th October. By necessity the legislation needs to be made swiftly. At present it is proposed that the legislation will come into force at the end of November.

6. Lyons' Inquiry

I have written to Sir Michael Lyons to highlight the Welsh Assembly Government's submission to the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister-led Balance of Funding review. I have highlighted the close legislative and financial links between Wales and England and our interest in the non-devolved matter of Council Tax Benefit. I have suggested that we have an initial meeting to discuss these matters.

7. Council Tax Benefit

Whilst this is a non devolved matter the Welsh Assembly Government remains committed to ensuring that everyone entitled to Council Tax Benefit in Wales receives it. I therefore feel that we have a role to play acting as a facilitator between local authorities, the Department for Work and Pensions and other interested parties to bring together a community of best practice. This will help ensure that where authorities have good ideas on improving take up they can be disseminated and issues can be discussed. I have therefore asked officials to set up a Council Tax Benefit Working Group under the auspices of the Local Taxation Working Group to drive this forward.

8. Local Government Performance Measurement Framework & Performance Indicators 2005-06 – Consultation

In October I issued a major consultation on the above on a CD-ROM, which was sent to consultees in mid-October. I also issued a press release to accompany the consultation. This consultation contains proposals that will radically reform how the performance of local authorities is measured in Wales. Under the proposals the number of statutory performance indicators would be drastically reduced from 89 to 21 national strategic measures. These will be under-pinned by a larger set of "Wales Programme for Improvement (WPI) core indicator sets" that will help authorities manage their services and provide a common basis for comparing and reporting on performance across Wales. Further, the proposals will sharpen the focus on local authorities' achievement. They will provide local authorities and regulators with relevant, reliable and consistent performance measures that provide executive members with better management information and scrutiny members with better performance information.

The proposals contained in the consultation document are part of a distinctly Welsh policy for local government. It links with community strategies, the Wales Programme for Improvement and making less but better use of planning and inspection requirements.

Assembly members were sent copies of the consultation CD-ROM in mid-October. Responses are welcomed before 10th December 2004.

9. Consultations

I have also agreed to conduct two further consultations. The first of these has been discussed here before and is the issue of political restrictions on local government officers. I will await the responses on this matter but it will present the opportunity to review an existing system which prevents large numbers of officers from carrying out normal political activities.

The second consultation is on the current access to information rules in local government. They need to be made compatible with the Freedom of Information Act provisions which come fully into force in January 2005. I do not expect this to be a particularly controversial matter.

The Assembly has regulatory powers on both these matters and it is likely that draft regulations will be brought forward in the New Year

10. Good Councillors Guide

I launched "The Good Councillor's Guide" at the Annual General Meeting of the new representative body of community and town councils in Wales, One Voice Wales, in Llandrindod Wells, on the 23rd of October.

The guide is intended for community and town councillors, but most especially for those councillors who have recently been elected or co-opted to a council. The guide will ensure that local councillors are aware of their role, duties and responsibilities as decision makers for their local councils and electorate. Increasing councillors' understanding of their role will improve the performance and effectiveness of local councils

11. Iaith Pawb and Welsh Language Scheme Annual Monitoring Report 2003-04

The Assembly Government is committed to reporting annually on the implementation of Iaith Pawb and our compliance with the Welsh Language Scheme. I would like to draw to your attention to the executive summary of the first annual monitoring report of Iaith Pawb and the Welsh Language Scheme (Annex 1). The full report can be found at <http://www.wales.gov.uk/subiculture/content/iaithpawb-wls-report-2003-4-e.pdf>

12. Meetings

Business Improvement Districts

I attended the Swansea BID Breakfast with Anne Jones AM, where I spoke to the Swansea Business Community outlining the Assembly's perspective of the opportunities for benefit that BIDS will offer to business and to the wider community

Local Government Boundary Commission for Wales

I spoke at the Commission's Annual Public Meeting, held at Rhondda Heritage Hotel on 7th October. This was a well-attended event and enabled me to publicly thank the Commission for their work over

recent years

North Wales Visits

I have now completed my visits to every local authority in Wales to meet new leaders. Whilst in North Wales last week I also signed the policy agreements with Conway and Denbighshire.

Launch of Community Strategy for Conwy 2004 - 2014

I was invited to speak at the launch of Conwy County Borough Council's Community strategy at the North Wales Theatre & Conference Centre in Llandudno on 27th October.

Electoral Commission

I will be attending the launch of the Electoral Commission's report on the June local elections in Wales on the 8th December, which will be held in this building. I look forward to what will be the Commission's first report on local elections in the UK. I believe that all members of the Committee will be invited to this event.

Action

13. The Committee is invited to note the contents of this Report.

Sue Essex

Minister for Finance, Local Government and Public Services

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