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Minister for Environment,
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Llywodraeth Cynulliad Cymru
Welsh Assembly Government

Our Ref: MB/CJ/5005/03

To: Leaders and Chairpersons
County Councils and National Parks in Wales
Welsh Local Government Association
National Association of Local Councils in Wales
Welsh Association of Community and Town Councils
Association of Larger Local Councils
North Wales Association of Town Councils

16 June 2003

I recently wrote to you to clarify some concerns about the implications of the Code of Conduct for members of planning committees. As you know, the code underpins the sound, openly taken, consistent planning decisions we all have a right to expect. In particular, it provides the basis for dealing with the personal interests of members involved in the planning process.

The Audit Commission recently made public the report of its investigation into member conduct and planning decisions in Montgomeryshire. Copies of the report should be available from Powys County Council.

The report concludes that certain decisions were taken with the participation of a member who should have declared a personal interest. More generally, it emphasises the need for clear meeting records, for decisions to be taken on planning grounds and for reasons for decisions to be given, for the provision of member training and for hospitality to be properly registered in order to avoid undermining the planning system.

Some of these issues were identified when the Commons Welsh Affairs Committee considered Rural Housing in Wales in 1992-3. Much has been done in recent years in Powys, and elsewhere, to improve the planning system. However, letters from the public, and organisations in the voluntary and private sectors continue to show dissatisfaction with decisions which are either inconsistent, unreasoned or do not appear to be based on planning considerations. It is clear that more work is needed across Wales to ensure that we maintain and, in some cases, restore public confidence in the operation of the planning system.

The Welsh Assembly Government consulted widely, in early 2002, on the package of reforms to the planning system set out in "Planning: delivering for Wales". These are intended to improve development plan preparation so that clear, up to date plans are in place as the basis for decisions. They are also intended to ensure that decisions are based on planning considerations, that reasons for decisions are stated, that member training is available and that the system is able to deliver decisions efficiently. The package of proposals is being taken forward in partnership with you, with the Welsh Local Government Association and with the private and voluntary sectors.

Some of the proposals require legislation. Others will be introduced over the next few years by new technical advice, by encouraging member training, and by the regular reports which will enable each authority to monitor the quality of the planning service it provides. The programme is intended, with the Code of Conduct and other measures, to change the way in which the planning service is provided in Wales.

The Assembly Government has responsibility for setting the policy and procedural framework within which we all operate. We will continue to develop this with you and other stakeholders to ensure that it is as practical, clear and unambiguous as possible. As you are aware, we also have the power to intervene in the development plan or decision making processes where this is clearly justified.

Responsibility for the effective operation of the planning system will continue to depend upon each local planning authority in Wales, and on the commitment and integrity of every member and officer of those authorities to deliver decisions which are clear, consistent and soundly based.

I look forward to working with you to build on the work already in hand to give Wales a planning service of which we can all be proud.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Cerys Jones', written in a cursive style.