

Social Justice and Regeneration Committee

Report to Assembly 2004/05

1. Introduction

1.1 Standing Order 9.9 requires subject committees to report to the Assembly on their progress in fulfilling their forward work programme. This report covers the period 1 April 2004 to 31 March 2005.

2. Membership

2.1 During the year membership was:

Janice Gregory (Chair)	
Peter Black	
William Graham	
Edwina Hart (Minister)	
Mark Isherwood	
Huw Lewis (Deputy Minister)	
Sandy Mewies	
Catherine Thomas	
Rhodri Glyn Thomas	
Leanne Wood	Jocelyn Davies substituted from January to March 2005 whilst Leanne Wood was on maternity leave

3. Meetings

3.1 During the period the Committee met formally in public on 14 occasions with one of these meetings held outside Cardiff, in Pontypridd. The Committee also held one informal meeting in Colwyn Bay.

4. Visits

4.1 The Committee visited Poundbury Village in Dorset and HMP Liverpool (Walton). Members of the Committee conducted a number of visits in connection with its review on substance misuse. These included visits to reference sites in Aberystwyth, Bangor, Bridgend, Cardiff, Carmarthen, Merthyr Tydfil, Newport, Swansea and Wrexham.

5. Remit and Responsibilities

5.1 The Committee's remit is based on the portfolio of the Minister for Social Justice and Regeneration, which covers the governments programme for regenerating the communities in Wales, in particular those communities that are most disadvantaged. It includes Community First, anti-poverty initiatives, the social economy, the voluntary sector, community safety and relations with the police, the fire service, drug and alcohol misuse, youth justice and housing. The responsibilities of subject committees, as set out in Standing Orders, are attached at Annex 1.

6. Aims and Objectives

6.1 The Committee set out its aims in the Strategic Forward Work Programme for the period from June 2003 to December 2004, which was approved following the meeting on 2 July 2003. The aim has been to address anti-poverty and achieve better, simpler government. The Committee believes that housing matters are the key to this agenda.

6.2 The Committee agreed that in reviewing and developing policy it would focus on those areas where it may be seen to complement, rather than duplicate policies being developed by the Minister.

7. Progress

7.1 The Committee has concentrated on its policy review and on regular presentations from interested organisations from the voluntary, public and community sectors to enhance its appreciation of all matters included in its remit. Because that remit is so broad, the Committee has developed a strategic approach to its work. It has done so by adopting a single theme approach (where possible) to each meeting that supplements the regular Ministerial reports on priorities identified in the Strategic Forward Work Programme.

8. Policy Development and Review (Standing Order 9.7)

Housing for Older People

8.1 The report was published in July 2004 and a launch was held at the National Assembly on 8 July 2004. The report included 26 recommendations, many with a cross-cutting theme of housing, health and social care for the Welsh Assembly Government to consider. The Minister welcomed the report and fully accepted most of the recommendations. Those recommendations she was unable to accept immediately, she promised to consider further.

Substance Misuse

8.2 The Committee began an inquiry into substance misuse in spring 2004. The Terms of Reference of this Review are at Annex 2. Written submissions from a wide range of interested parties were received during the spring and summer of 2004. Following this, the Committee agreed to concentrate initially on treatment and treatment services. A number of organisations gave oral evidence during the autumn 2004 and spring 2005. Members embarked on an extensive schedule of visits during spring 2005 to gather further information. It is expected that an interim report on treatment and treatment services will be produced in the summer term 2005 and the Committee will embark on phase II of the review, with the view to publishing the final report in Summer 2006.

Other issues of policy development and review

8.3 In addition to its own policy reviews, the Committee has contributed to the key policy developments being taken forward by the Minister for Social Justice and Regeneration. From the outset the committee has identified “housing” as the key element in the whole Social Justice agenda. It has prioritised those housing issues that have been identified in the Welsh Assembly Government’s Housing Strategy, including those surrounding homelessness the ageing housing stock, energy efficiency, local housing strategies and the special problems of rural areas.

8.4 The Committee also recognises the part being played by the Community First initiative in redressing the balance by helping to regenerate the poorest communities in Wales. It receives regular reports on progress.

8.5. The Committee has contributed to Welsh Assembly Government developing policies on Domestic Violence, Substance Misuse, Community Safety, Social Housing Grant, and the Fire and Rescue Services National Framework.

8.6. The Committee received presentations from a number of different organisations whose work impacts on that of the Committee. These include the Welsh Local Government association, the Youth Justice Board, the Parole Board, the National Offenders Management Service, Police Authorities, the Disability Rights Commissioner and the Children’s Commissioner.

Minister’s Report

8.7 The Committee scrutinises the Minister at each meeting via her regular reports to Committee. In addition, the Committee further scrutinised Royal Mail, DTI and DWP on their proposals for services in Wales.

9. Review of Assembly Sponsored Public Bodies (SO 9.7(iii))

9.1 The Committee’s remit only one ASPB - the Advisory Panel on Substance Misuse. As the title suggests this is an advisory panel only with no financial responsibility and its operations have not been scrutinised by the Committee

10 Scrutiny of Legislation (SO 9.8(i)).

Secondary Legislation

10.1 The Committee agreed a protocol for handling subordinate legislation in June 2003. The Committee received a detailed timetable of forthcoming legislation within the Minister’s portfolio at each meeting. In accordance with the agreed procedure the following items were considered by the Committee

- Procedures and timetable for handling subordinate legislation under the Housing Act
- Anti-Social Behaviour Orders

- Transfer of (CAFCASS) Functions in Wales to the National Assembly for Wales

European Legislation

10.2. Following the Panel of Chairs endorsement of the European and External Affairs Committee proposals for a system of more proactive scrutiny of European legislation by subject committees, papers have been prepared detailing all relevant social justice and regeneration documents deposited in the EU Parliament. Members are given the opportunity to identify items for future scrutiny. To date, none have been identified. However, following a request, MRS prepared a summary of the Drugs Action Plan.

10.3 Following the publication of the Commission's Annual Work Programme in January 2005, the Committee agreed that its initial concentration will be on the Drugs Strategy Annual Plan and Youth Policy.

Primary Legislation

10.4 Following the Queens Speech, Plenary determined that the Equality Bill should be referred to the Social Justice and Regeneration Committee for consideration.

The Bill was not printed in time to allow Committee consideration before the end of the year and was subsequently dropped when Parliament was dissolved on 11 April 2005. The Committee had however considered the Bill in its draft form, and made its comments known as part of the consultation exercise. It had also considered the draft Charities Bill and passed its comments, via the Minister, to the originating Whitehall Department.

11. Appointments (Standing Order 9.8)

11.1 Janice Gregory and William Graham have been the Committee's nominees for public appointments. Appointments made in the period 1 April 2005 to 31 March 2006 where subject committee nominees have been consulted were:

- Advisory Panel on Substance Misuse (new members)
- Advisory Panel on Substance Misuse (re-appointments)
- Social Enterprise Joint Working Group (new members)

12. Budget (Standing Order 9.8)

12.1 The Committee considered and commented on the Assembly Government proposed budget for 2004-2005. The Chair's letter conveying the Committee's recommendations is attached at Annex 3.

13 Cross Cutting Issues/Joint Working

13.1 On 27 January 2005, the Children's Commissioner attended a joint meeting of the Social Justice and Regeneration, Education and Lifelong

Learning, Health and Social Services and Equality of Opportunity Committees to discuss his Annual Report for 2003-04.

14. The Statutory Schemes

14.1 The Committee has taken account of the National Assembly's statutory schemes for relations with the voluntary sector and the sustainable development scheme in the course of its work. Similarly it has had regard to the requirements of the Disability Discrimination Act and the Race Relations Act.

14.2 Specifically, the Committee has considered the following issues in relation to equality:

- Welsh Assembly Government's Strategy on Tackling Domestic Abuse. This was referred to the Committee in draft before going out to consultation. The Committee subsequently considered the results of the consultation exercise and presented its comments to the Minister. The Committee also awaits a report being commissioned by the South Wales Police on higher incidents of domestic abuse during the Rugby International season.. The impact of the new licensing laws and its impact for domestic abuse is another area which the Committee will continue to monitor.
- The Committee were informed about the Iaith Pawb (Housing for Everyone) and the Welsh Language Scheme Annual Monitoring Report. Members commented that childcare provision should be available in Welsh and requested that the Home Information Packs include information on the Welsh Language,
- Disabled Facilities Grants and housing adaptations were considered throughout the year with the Minister publishing a review into all aspects in spring 2005. Members commented that adequate provision – physically and mentally - must be made for disabled children's childcare. The Disabled Right's Commissioner gave a presentation on Disabled Access to Ancient Monuments.
- Members noted a transfer of funds into BME housing during the period and welcomed the new BME Housing organisation, Tai Pawb.
- The Committee finalised and published its report into Housing for Older People. During the course of gathering information, vulnerable groups had been consulted and a number of BME housing facilities were visited.

14.3 On sustainable development, Communities First projects must be sustainable and The Welsh Housing Quality Standards 2012 adhere to the guidelines.

15. The Future Programme

15.1 The committee's priorities for 2005-2006 are set out in the Strategic Forward Work Programme. Key subjects include:

- Housing

- Substance and Alcohol Misuse
- Domestic Violence
- Crime and Disorder
- The Anti-Poverty agenda – including community regeneration
- Youth justice
- Police and Fire services
- CAFCASS
- Scrutiny of secondary legislation, particularly that relating to the implementation of the Housing Act in Wales
- Scrutiny of European Legislation
- Scrutiny of Primary Legislation included in the Queen's Speech and remitted to the Committee for consideration by Plenary

Janice Gregory
Chair

Responsibilities of Subject Committees

ANNEX 1

Standing order 9.7 and 9.8 set out responsibilities of subject committees.

Responsibilities

9.7 Each Subject Committee shall:

- (i) contribute to the development of the Assembly's policies within the fields for which the relevant Minister is accountable to the Assembly;
- (ii) keep under review the expenditure and administration connected with their implementation; and
- (iii) keep under review the discharge of public functions in those fields by public, voluntary and private bodies.

9.8 Each Subject Committee shall also, within the relevant fields:

- (i) advise on proposed primary, secondary and European legislation affecting Wales, including performing its functions under Standing Order 24;
- (ii) provide advice to the Assembly Cabinet on matters relating to the allocation of the Assembly's budget in accordance with Standing Order 21;
- (iii) perform its functions under Standing Order 23 (complaints);
- (iv) perform any functions assigned to it under the Code of Practice on Public Appointments Procedure made by the Assembly under Standing Order 22; and
- (v) consider matters referred to it by the Assembly within its fields.

Policy Review – Substance Misuse

Terms of Reference

To consider the effectiveness of current policies and arrangements for the prevention and treatment of substance misuse giving particular regard to:

Prevention

Identification of best practice in substance misuse education in Wales.
Assessment of guidance and support necessary to ensure the implementation of best practice in schools and other settings.
Assessment of action taking to reduce the risk of substance misuse in Wales by means other than education (e.g. within the areas of family support, housing, employment)

Treatment

Assessment of the availability of shared care and supervised consumption schemes across Wales and the barriers to recruitment of GPs and pharmacists to these schemes.
Identification of the key difficulties experienced by people trying to access treatment services, in particular, detoxification and rehabilitation.
Identification of best practice in reducing waiting times for treatment.

Groups effected by substance misuse

Availability of services necessary in order to protect and improve the well being of children who have substance misusing families
Identification of the needs of, and availability of services for, particular groups: children, released prisoners and people with mental health problems.

Alcohol

Identification of the needs of, and availability of services for, people with alcohol problems
Assessment of the impact of the focus on illegal drugs, for example from the Home Office, on the provision of services for alcohol misusers
Assessment of the effectiveness of policy initiatives which address the issue of alcohol availability and 'binge' drinking.

Letter to the Minister dated 23 November 2004

Consideration of the Draft Budget

I agreed to write to you following the discussion held on the draft budget in Committee on 17 November.

Members generally welcomed the draft budget and accepted the restrictions acknowledging that it was not possible to obtain requested funding on all streams within the portfolio. Members also welcomed your clear strategy showing exactly what each funding stream is for.

Members raised concern about impending cuts in the Assembly Government's Supporting People settlement and the fear that this would be translated to cuts in the Supporting People budget. The Members of the Committee fully appreciate that as an AME budget the settlement is within the gift of Treasury and that you have, together with the Finance Minister, lobbied to reduce the affect of cuts in the settlement. However, if the settlement does not improve then the Welsh Assembly Government must consider all possible avenues to alleviate its impact on the vital services which are funded by Supporting People. Members appreciate that you have done your utmost to forewarn local authorities about the possibility of cuts. As you know, it was agreed that I should write to the Finance Minister direct on this issue. That letter has been copied to you and circulated to all other members of the Committee. It was suggested that once the settlement was agreed, there was a requirement to have a 3-year budget to empower stability.

On housing capital for local authorities, reference was made to the considerable amount of private housing in disrepair owned and occupied by elderly people who cannot afford repair costs. This was highlighted in the Committee's review of Housing for Older People. The pilot equity scheme as recommended in that report was acknowledged but concern was raised that the Disabled Facilities Grant is at a comparable level £40m less than two years ago. The effect will be to increase waiting times for these grants.

Affordable housing is also identified as an area of concern to the Committee. The increase in resources is appreciated but much remains to be done to meet the scale of the challenge in Wales. Amongst the suggestions put forward to avert a potential crisis in social housing is the need to consider innovative and new affordable housing schemes and a review of the terms and conditions and a possible separate funding stream for Homebuy. I appreciate that this will be considered as part of your review of Social Housing Grant.

Members noted the excellent scheme, HEES, introduced to alleviate fuel poverty. However, a report from Help the Aged was cited which indicated that an extra 160 elderly people died of cold related illnesses last year and you

were asked to reconsider this stream in the light of those findings. I do feel, however, that there is a lack of knowledge amongst elderly citizens as to the benefits available to them under this scheme and am grateful to you to agreeing to look at the publicity material available for HEES.

Members noted that slow progress was being made with local authorities in the preparation of their housing strategies. It was suggested from representations received that some local authorities would not be able to meet the standard by 2012 as it was too high and funding of £3billion would be required. I am grateful to you for keeping Committee updated with progress on these strategies and that you are endeavouring to get all 22 strategies in for analysis.

Regarding the important work offered by the Community Mutual Support, Members asked if extra money would be vired in to cover the costs of proposed regeneration work supported by this model. You advised that once a reply is received to your letter from the Chief Secretary to the Treasury, you would be in a position to advise on this issue.

The substantial progress made on the Communities First budget and your proposed secondary legislation on B&B accommodation was welcomed.

Members raised the following questions to which you answered on the day about there being no reserve in the budget and as to why the SHG for older people (Wanless) was not commencing in year 1. It was recorded that the Community Fire Safety budget had not increased and you advised that you had not received any representations from the fire sector for an increase.

I am copying this letter to all Members of the Social Justice and Regeneration Committee.

Janice Gregory
Chair - Social Justice and Regeneration Committee