



Cynulliad National
Cenedlaethol Assembly for
Cymru Wales

Audit Committee

The National Homelessness Strategy

Committee Report (2) 05-07
April 2007

THE NATIONAL ASSEMBLY FOR WALES

AUDIT COMMITTEE

Report presented to the National Assembly for Wales on 4 April 2007 in accordance with section 102(1) of the Government of Wales Act 1998

The National Homelessness Strategy

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Summary

1. In the three years between September 2001 and September 2004, the number of people officially recognised as unintentionally homeless and in priority need increased by 85 per cent. In November 2005, the Welsh Assembly Government published its National Homelessness Strategy (the Strategy), replacing the previous Homeless Strategy, published in 2003. The Strategy aims to strengthen the focus of homelessness services on prevention, support, and access to housing.
2. On 8 February 2007, based on the report of the Auditor General¹, the Committee took evidence from Dr Emyr Roberts, Director of the Department for Social Justice and Regeneration, and Linda Whittaker, Director for Housing. We examined whether the Strategy can help to prevent homelessness. We concluded that the Strategy can help to prevent homelessness, but further progress is required. In particular:
 - a. recent reductions in homelessness figures are welcome, but hidden homelessness and a lack of affordable housing are serious concerns;
 - b. the Assembly Government has made welcome progress in implementing the strategy but more work is needed to co-ordinate action and improve delivery; and
 - c. more robust evaluation is required to assess the impact of the strategy

Recent reductions in homelessness figures are welcome, but hidden homelessness and a lack of affordable housing are serious concerns

3. The development and introduction of the Strategy has coincided with reductions in both the number of households requiring a decision as to whether they are statutorily homeless, and the number of households accepted as homeless and in priority need. This is a welcome sign that the Strategy is having a positive impact, although recent increases in homelessness figures are a concern. However, the headline figures do not tell the whole story of homelessness in Wales. Not all people who are homeless present themselves to their local authority. We are concerned that some local authorities might be interpreting definitions of statutory homelessness and guidance too narrowly, thereby “gate-keeping” access to services, and keeping the homelessness figures lower. We are particularly concerned that not all local authority allocation and homelessness policies comply with statutory guidance and legislation and that therefore not all decisions are correct.

¹ AGW Report, *Tackling Homelessness in Wales: A Review of the Effectiveness of the National Homelessness Strategy, January 2007*

4. We believe that housing shortages pose a serious risk to the Strategy. It is positive that more use is being made of social housing and the private sector to house homeless people. However, the downside of this trend is the pressure it places on the declining levels of social housing stock; reducing the amount of accommodation available for people with a general housing need and increasing the risk that these households may present as homeless in the future.
5. The pressure on social housing is exacerbated by a lack of affordable private housing which Ms Whittaker acknowledged meant some people are staying for longer periods in social housing instead of buying their own home. We note that the Assembly Government is taking action to increase the amount of affordable housing, in particular through the affordable housing toolkit, and hopes to have a clearer picture of the scale of the problem when local authorities report back on their housing market assessments in April 2007.

The Welsh Assembly Government has made welcome progress in implementing the strategy but more work is needed to co-ordinate action and improve delivery

6. The Assembly Government has made welcome progress in implementing the Strategy. It has made progress in incorporating the Strategy's principles into a number of key Assembly Government strategies and it is working with local authorities to develop their services and local partnerships. It is also working with the independent sector and with other government departments and agencies whose work impacts on homelessness. However, further work is needed to co-ordinate action and improve delivery by:
 - a. raising awareness of the Strategy among Assembly Government officials;
 - b. providing further guidance on homelessness and allocations to local authorities;
 - c. monitoring the quality of temporary accommodation against new standards;
 - d. helping local authorities to improve their housing advice services;
 - e. working with partners to ensure sustainable funding for good practice projects; and
 - f. resolving the uncertainty about the future of the Supporting People programme.

More robust evaluation is required to assess the impact of the strategy

7. There is scope for the Assembly Government to improve the evaluation of progress in delivering the Strategy. The introduction of a prevention indicator should enable the

Assembly Government to better monitor overall progress in preventing homelessness. However, further work is needed to better evaluate specific areas, including:

- a. progress against the five objectives in the Strategy which currently have no clear, measurable, targets;
- b. evaluation of the schemes the Assembly Government funds to prevent homelessness, in particular to focus on impact and outcomes;
- c. progress made by the other organisation on which the Strategy places expectations; and
- d. the adequacy of services from the users point of view.

Recommendations

- (i) The Strategy's focus on prevention is welcome, but creates the risk that local authorities "gate-keep" access to services and housing by narrowly interpreting legislation and guidance, thereby reducing the overall homelessness figures. **We recommend that the Assembly Government's forthcoming guidance should clearly set out:**
 - a. **how local authorities should interpret homelessness legislation and definitions in practice, with practical examples to assist local authorities in their decision making; and**
 - b. **the difference between "gate-keeping" and prevention.**
- (ii) The National Homelessness Strategy has been incorporated into a number of other Welsh Assembly Government strategies, but some officials working in areas relevant to homelessness are still not clear as to how their work relates to the Strategy. **We recommend that the Assembly Government's homelessness team should raise awareness of the Strategy amongst other teams and departments, for example through seminars and sitting on working groups.**
- (iii) We are very concerned that the services provided to homeless people may not be in line with statutory requirements, in particular the standards of temporary accommodation and local authorities' allocation policies. **We recommend that the Welsh Assembly Government should commission or carry out:**
 - a. **inspections of temporary accommodation, with risk-based follow-up spot checks; and**

- b. a full assessment of whether local authority's housing allocation and homelessness policies and practices are in line with statutory requirements.**
- (iv) The Assembly Government has not examined in detail the relationship between access to housing and homelessness, and is awaiting local authorities' local housing needs assessments to build a clearer picture of the gap between supply and demand of social and affordable housing. **We recommend that the Assembly Government should:**
 - a. use the housing needs assessment to develop a national baseline of housing need and supply; and**
 - b. assess the capacity of the private sector to continue accommodating people with a general housing need while increasing access for homeless people.**
- (v) We are concerned that short term funding arrangements mean that some projects which clearly demonstrate good practice in preventing homelessness are unable to continue once their period of funding is over. **Allied to recommendation vi, below, on evaluation, we recommend that the Welsh Assembly Government should work with local authorities, the independent sector and other Government agencies to develop a clear and consistent strategy to secure sustainable funding for projects that can demonstrate good practice.**
- (vi) The Welsh Assembly Government recognises that further progress is needed to monitor and evaluate the implementation of the Strategy. **We recommend that the Welsh Assembly Government should develop a clear plan to monitor and evaluate:**
 - a. progress against each of the Strategy's 10 objectives;**
 - b. progress against actions delivered by other organisations;**
 - c. the impact and quality of homelessness services it funds directly;**
 - d. the impact of prevention services provided by local authorities, housing associations and other independent organisations; and**
 - e. the adequacy of services from the users' perspective.**

Recent reductions in homelessness figures are welcome, but hidden homelessness and a lack of affordable housing are serious concerns

The downwards trend in homelessness is positive

8. The Auditor General reports a fall in the total number of households accepted as unintentionally homeless and in priority need; from a high of 2,600 in the three months to September 2004, to 1,898 in the three months to the end of June 2006. This includes a particular fall in the rates of homelessness amongst 16-17 year olds, from a high of 322 in the quarter to September 2004, to 208 in the quarter to June 2006. These reductions coincide with the period in which the Welsh Assembly Government's National Homelessness Strategy was being developed and implemented.² It is therefore highly likely that the National Homelessness Strategy is having a positive impact on the overall rates of homelessness.
9. There has also been a reduction in the number of decisions on whether or not a person is statutorily homeless.³ This indicates that the Strategy's focus on prevention is having an impact; with fewer people reaching the stage where they require the local authority to take a decision on whether or not they are unintentionally homeless.
10. Despite the overall downwards trend, recent figures show that number of people accepted as homelessness actually increased between December 2005 and June 2006.⁴ Dr Roberts told us that he was not sure why there had been such increases, but there was some evidence of a seasonal variation, with rates higher over the Christmas period. We recognise that Christmas brings particular pressures to bear on individuals and families, but the figures in the Auditor General's report do not suggest a uniform pattern of increases in the final quarter of the year, following Christmas.⁵ We note Dr Roberts' assurance that the latest figures showed a reduction on the previous quarter and that he is confident that the reductions will continue into the future.⁶

² AGW report, paragraph 1.2 and 1.3 and Figures 1 and 2

³ AGW report, paragraph 1.4

⁴ AGW report, paragraph 1.6 and Figure 1

⁵ AGW report, Figure 1

⁶ Annex A, paragraphs 15 to 19

'Hidden homelessness' remains a concern

11. The headline statistics do not tell the full story of homelessness in Wales.⁷ We are particularly concerned about the risk that some homeless people are being left out of official figures because local authorities may be “gate-keeping”; adopting too narrow an interpretation of legislation and guidance thereby preventing access to services, and artificially deflating homelessness figures.⁸ We recognise that, at present, there is only anecdotal evidence of such “gate-keeping”.⁹
12. Ms Whittaker’s explanation of the definitions of unintentionally homeless emphasises the difficulty for local authorities in making a judgement on an applicant’s status; she told us that it often depends on a consideration of individual circumstances.¹⁰ Dr Roberts told us that there was “an awful lot” in the 2003 guidance on homelessness that had been issued to local authorities to help them make correct decisions.¹¹ However, we are very concerned that some local authorities may not be making the correct decisions, and, we note that, following examinations by the Public Services Ombudsman, all local authorities need to re-examine their allocation and homelessness policies and ensure that they comply with the legislation and the code of guidance.¹² Dr Roberts urged organisations representing tenants to take up individual cases, and the Auditor General reports that Shelter successfully appeals many local authority decisions.¹³ The Assembly Government is currently revising its guidance on homelessness and will be issuing it later in the year. We hope that this guidance will help local authorities to improve their decision making.¹⁴
13. The Auditor General’s report showed that not all homeless people present themselves to the local authority.¹⁵ In particular, we were concerned that many prisoners leaving prison do not present themselves to local authorities on discharge. Dr Roberts explained that a lot of work goes on in prisons, for example, by Prison Link Cymru, to ensure that prisoners are offered accommodation on their release. In order to develop an understanding of why some prisoners do not take up offers of accommodation, the Assembly Government partly funds a secondment within the

⁷ AGW report, paragraph 1.7

⁸ AGW report, paragraph 2.8

⁹ Annex A, paragraph 52

¹⁰ Annex A, paragraph 11

¹¹ Annex A, paragraph 52

¹² Annex A, paragraph 48, AGW report, paragraph 1.11

¹³ Annex A, paragraph 52, AGW report, paragraph 1.11

¹⁴ Annex A, paragraph 52

¹⁵ AGW report, paragraphs 1.8 and 1.9

National Offender Management Service to look at the issue of prisoner release and accommodation, and is conducting research with Trothwy, a supported housing organisation, that provides accommodation and advice to prison leavers.¹⁶

14. The Committee is also concerned that young people without accommodation may not be presenting to their local authorities as homeless, meaning that they do not get the support they may be entitled to, and also that they are not then included in the homelessness statistics. Ms Whittaker explained that the Assembly Government is seeking to raise awareness of homelessness amongst young people; funding several projects that encourage local authorities to work with schools in raising awareness of what homelessness is and what options are available to them.¹⁷

Action has been taken to increase the supply of housing but this remains an ongoing risk

15. Commendably, the Welsh Assembly Government is seeking to reduce the reliance on temporary bed and breakfast accommodation to house homeless people. As a consequence, an increasing proportion of social housing stock is used to house homeless people, with, for example, the number of social rented lettings to homeless people rising from 2,220 in 2001-02, to 3,299 in 2004-05. The Assembly Government is also working to increase the amount of private sector accommodation available to homeless people. Ms Whittaker explained that increased use of the Assembly Government's housing lease scheme subsidy had resulted in an increase in private sector accommodation available for homeless people.¹⁸ Ms Whittaker also provided examples of schemes in Cardiff and Carmarthenshire where, in order to increase private sector accommodation available to homeless people, private sector landlords transfer the risks associated with collecting rent and insurance to a registered social landlord who will manage the properties.¹⁹
16. While these developments are beneficial for homeless people, there is a risk that they will place pressure on other people who need access to social housing. The key problem is that, while allocations to homeless people are increasing, the supply of social housing, partly due to "right-to-buy", is decreasing.²⁰ Also, as Ms Whittaker explained, rising house prices mean that some people were spending longer periods

¹⁶ Annex A, paragraphs 25 to 31

¹⁷ Annex A, paragraph 103

¹⁸ Annex A, paragraphs 121 to 123

¹⁹ Annex A, paragraph 153

²⁰ Annex A, paragraph 77; AGW report, paragraphs 1.18 and 1.19

in social housing because they could not afford to buy their own home.²¹ These factors inevitably result in more restricted access to social housing for those with a general housing need, or those who are accepted as homeless, but either intentionally so, or not in priority need (around 6,000 in 2004-05).²² Dr Roberts told us that local authorities have a duty to provide housing advice to every person who presents themselves as homeless.²³

17. The Assembly Government is taking steps to address these wider housing issues. Local authorities are due to produce local housing needs assessments by April 2007, based on a thorough assessment of local supply and demand. However, Ms Whittaker told us that even if local authorities identify a shortage of social housing, there is unlikely to be sufficient social housing grant to meet identified needs.²⁴ Not all local authorities will complete their assessments by April 2007, and have requested an extension until June 2007.²⁵
18. In order to address the shortage of affordable accommodation to buy, the Assembly Government has introduced the Affordable Housing Toolkit. The toolkit aims to encourage local authorities to secure more affordable housing through the planning system.²⁶ Ms Whittaker explained that the Assembly Government was helping deliver more affordable housing through Homebuy, a shared equity scheme which provides a 30 per cent subsidy, rising to 50 per cent in rural areas, to enable people to purchase a new-build or existing property. Local authorities have made progress in securing affordable accommodation without subsidy, by requiring private developers to provide affordable housing as a condition of planning permission.²⁷ Dr Roberts told us that the Assembly Government is encouraging the private sector to bring forward more shared-equity type products.²⁸

²¹ Annex A, paragraph 58

²² AGW report, paragraph 1.10

²³ Annex A, paragraph 58

²⁴ Annex A, paragraphs 57 and 64

²⁵ Annex A, paragraphs 62,66 and 68

²⁶ Annex A, paragraph 57 and 77

²⁷ Annex A, paragraphs 57, 58, 76, 82 and 83

²⁸ Annex A, paragraph 81

The Welsh Assembly Government has made welcome progress in implementing the strategy but more work is needed to co-ordinate action and improve delivery

The greater co-operation that the Strategy has encouraged needs to be built upon to deliver further improvements

19. The Assembly Government has made progress in implementing the principles of the Strategy into other key Assembly Government strategic frameworks, including those for:
- substance misuse;
 - ethnic minorities;
 - social care;
 - domestic abuse;
 - young people
 - offenders; and
 - health²⁹
20. Dr Roberts told us that homelessness has been included in draft guidance on Health, Social Care and Well-being strategies, and that the Assembly Government has ensured that projects on homelessness are eligible for new European convergence funding.³⁰ This progress is welcome, but the Auditor General reports that joined-up working amongst officials is not yet comprehensive. Some Assembly Government officials working in areas that can help prevent homelessness were not clear as to how their work relates to the Strategy, nor how the Strategy impacts on their work.³¹
21. The Strategy recognises that many different organisations are involved in preventing homelessness, and has a welcome commitment to partnership working.³² To support this, the Assembly Government has set up a National Homelessness Strategy Working group, which includes local authorities and independent organisations.³³ The Welsh Assembly Government works with individual local authorities, through visits; and also influences local government through the guidance it issues and through policy agreements.³⁴ Dr Roberts and Ms Whittaker also provided practical

²⁹ AGW report, Figure 4

³⁰ Annex A, paragraphs 107 and 108

³¹ AGW report, paragraph 2.3

³² AGW report, paragraph 2.5

³³ AGW report, paragraph 2.9

³⁴ Annex A, paragraph 96

examples where the Assembly Government was working with other organisations, on research and policy assessments.³⁵

22. There has been progress in developing local partnership working. The Auditor General reports that 80 per cent of local authorities have homelessness forums, and three quarters of local authorities believe them to be effective. However, only 20 percent of local authorities use their forum to evaluate activity to prevent homelessness.³⁶ Dr Roberts and Ms Whittaker provided examples of local joint-working, including Registered Social Landlords working with local authorities to develop shared housing lists, and to maximise the amount of affordable housing.³⁷ We note that the Assembly Government hopes that the introduction of Local Service Boards will further improve local homelessness services.³⁸
23. One particular area where further co-ordination is clearly required is housing advice. The Auditor General reports that 88 per cent of local authorities said that their advice services need improvement, and that just 25 per cent said their information referred to other advice services.³⁹ Dr Roberts highlighted the complex funding arrangements in place for advice services, and we are concerned that the current arrangements, where providers compete for resources and clients, are not necessarily the most effective. Dr Roberts told us that imminent changes to the system for commissioning advice services, driven by the Legal Services Commission, are intended to ensure more unified, high-quality provision of advice services across Wales.⁴⁰ We hope that the Assembly Government will seek to influence the development of this new model for advice, to ensure that it complements the delivery of the Strategy.

The Assembly Government is spreading good practice but short term funding poses a risk to sustainability

24. As part of the Strategy, the Assembly Government intends to spread good practice in preventing homelessness. It provides funding for a number of projects, identified as good practice. Ms Whittaker gave examples of such projects as the Llammua project in Cardiff, which provides mediation and prevention services, and another project, working with young people and schools in Conwy.⁴¹ Dr Roberts told us that the

³⁵ Annex A, paragraphs 29, 48,

³⁶ AGW report, paragraph 2.20

³⁷ Annex A, paragraphs 50 and 57

³⁸ Annex A, paragraph 108

³⁹ AGW report, paragraph 2.20

⁴⁰ Annex A, paragraphs 136 and 137

⁴¹ Annex A, paragraphs 103 and 132

Assembly Government holds regular seminars to roll out good practice, and distributes reports to local authorities.⁴²

25. We are concerned about the sustainability of funding for good practice projects. Dr Roberts and Ms Whittaker could not give categorical assurances that funding would continue for projects that are found to represent good practice.⁴³ Ms Whittaker told us that successful prevention projects will reduce the cost of homelessness in the local area, and local authorities should therefore continue the funding once the initial grant phase is over.⁴⁴ However, demonstrating these financial benefits depends on high quality, detailed evaluation of the impact of projects, which the Assembly Government recognises is not in place at present.⁴⁵

New standards for temporary accommodation need to be monitored effectively

26. The Assembly Government has introduced new legislation covering the quality of temporary accommodation.⁴⁶ We are concerned that Auditor General found that local authorities believed that only some of their temporary accommodation complied with the new legislative standards.⁴⁷ Dr Roberts told us that he had no evidence that local authorities are not complying with the legislation, but recognised that the Assembly Government would need to assure itself that there was compliance by working with organisations such as the Wales Audit Office.⁴⁸

The Supporting People programme provides vital services but concerns about strategic delivery need to be resolved

27. The Assembly Government's Supporting People programme funds services and projects that can help prevent homelessness. Although, undoubtedly, the scheme provides valuable support for vulnerable people, the Auditor General reports two concerns: that the distribution of Supporting People funding many not fully match strategic need; and the split in control over funding between the Assembly Government and local authorities may lead to a lack of unity between strategy and funding.⁴⁹ Ms Whittaker explained that the Assembly Government had set up a working group to consider re-distributing the Supporting People funding⁵⁰. While this is welcome progress towards ensuring funding matches need, we are concerned that

⁴² Annex A, paragraph 129

⁴³ Annex A, paragraphs 131 and 132

⁴⁴ Annex A, paragraph 132

⁴⁵ Annex A, paragraph 160

⁴⁶ Annex A, paragraphs 114 and 115; AGW report, paragraph 2.15

⁴⁷ AGW report, paragraph 2.15

⁴⁸ Annex A, paragraphs 116 to 119

⁴⁹ AGW report, paragraphs 2.27 to 2.31

⁵⁰ Annex A, paragraph 140

the process of re-distribution will be difficult, especially if it means that projects and schemes are to be cut. Ms Whittaker assured us that re-distribution will be phased to allow local authorities to manage any changes.⁵¹ Ms Whittaker also told us that she hopes that the issue of handing control of Supporting People funding over to local authorities will be resolved by April 2008.⁵²

More robust evaluation is required to assess the impact of the strategy

There is scope to improve the evaluation of progress against the Strategy's objectives

28. Dr Roberts told us that a new indicator, measuring prevention of homelessness, will be introduced from April 2007.⁵³ This should help the Assembly Government to measure and monitor progress against the overall goal of the Strategy. However, there remains a need for the Assembly Government to measure and monitor progress against the specific actions that are needed to deliver the Strategy's objectives. The Auditor General reports that five of the ten objectives in the Strategy have no clear targets.⁵⁴ We recognise that measuring these objectives will be challenging but progress needs to be made; the Strategy only runs until 2008, and it is imperative that robust evaluation is in place to assess the effectiveness of the Strategy, and to inform future strategy development.

More robust evaluation of the impact of prevention schemes is required

29. The Auditor General reports that the Assembly Government needs to further develop its systems for evaluating prevention projects that it funds the independent sector to provide. In particular, the monitoring forms that grant recipients submit to the Assembly Government do not contain sufficient data for robust outcome assessment.⁵⁵ Dr Roberts acknowledged that the Assembly Government needs to strengthen this evaluation, in particular to move from simply measuring what organisations are doing, to measuring the impact and outcomes.⁵⁶

30. The Assembly Government also recognises that progress is needed to evaluate local authority prevention services. Dr Roberts explained that the introduction of the prevention indicator will also help assess the overall impact of local prevention

⁵¹ Annex A, paragraph 154

⁵² Annex A, paragraph 141

⁵³ Annex A, paragraph 156

⁵⁴ AGW report, paragraph 3.2 and Figure 6

⁵⁵ AGW report, paragraph 3.6

⁵⁶ Annex A, paragraph 160

services.⁵⁷ However, progress is still needed in respect of evaluating the services themselves. Dr Roberts told us that the initial visits to local authorities, which include evaluation, have been completed and will be followed up across 2007.⁵⁸ We expect that the Assembly Government will now review its longer term monitoring of local authority services; the Auditor General reports that the Assembly Government intended to consider plans to formalise the monitoring arrangements once the prevention indicator was developed.⁵⁹

The Assembly Government needs to understand what progress other organisations are making to achieve the objectives

31. The Strategy places a number of expectations on a wide range of organisations.⁶⁰ Dr Roberts told us that the Assembly Government has written to all of the organisations covered in the Strategy to find out what progress they are making against the objectives that have been set for them. He assured us that the Assembly Government will follow up any concerns if it believes organisations are not prioritising homelessness as they should.⁶¹

The Assembly Government has supported work to develop service user involvement; this now needs to be rolled out more widely

32. Making the Connections, the Assembly Government's overarching strategy for public services in Wales, emphasises the importance of citizen focused public services, based around the user.⁶² The Assembly Government is taking steps to involve homeless people in the design of services, in particular:

- a. commissioning and publishing research on good practice in consulting homeless people;
- b. funding the City and County of Swansea to develop a toolkit, including a CD-Rom, on how to involve users in service planning, which will be distributed later in the year;
- c. making recommendations to local authorities, based on a review of homelessness strategies; and

⁵⁷ Annex A, paragraph 156

⁵⁸ Annex A, paragraph 96

⁵⁹ AGW report, paragraph 3.7

⁶⁰ AGW report, paragraph 2.5

⁶¹ Annex A, paragraph 158

⁶² AGW report, paragraph 3.9

- d. working with the local government data unit to develop a set of model questions for service users, as part of guidance for local authorities that will be issued later in the year.⁶³

⁶³ Annex A, paragraph 162



**Cynulliad Cenedlaethol Cymru
Y Pwyllgor Archwilio**

**The National Assembly for Wales
The Audit Committee**

**Dydd Iau, 8 Chwefror 2007
Thursday, 8 February 2007**

Cofnodir y trafodion hyn yn yr iaith y llefarwyd hwy ynnddi yn y pwyllgor. Yn ogystal, cynhwysir cyfieithiad Saesneg o gyfraniadau yn y Gymraeg.

These proceedings are reported in the language in which they were spoken in the committee. In addition, an English translation of Welsh speeches is included.

Aelodau Cynulliad yn bresennol
Assembly Members in attendance

Leighton Andrews	Llafur Labour
Mick Bates	Democratiaid Rhyddfrydol Cymru Welsh Liberal Democrats
Janet Davies	Plaid Cymru (Cadeirydd y Pwyllgor) The Party of Wales (Committee Chair)
Jocelyn Davies	Plaid Cymru The Party of Wales
Mark Isherwood	Ceidwadwyr Cymru Welsh Conservatives

Swyddogion yn bresennol
Officials in attendance

Ian Gibson	Dirprwy Swyddog Cydymffurfiaeth, Swyddfa Gydymffurfiaeth y Cynulliad Deputy Compliance Officer, Assembly Compliance Office
Dr Emyr Roberts	Cyfarwyddwr, Adran Cyfiawnder Cymdeithasol ac Adfywio Director, Social Justice and Regeneration Department
Linda Whittaker	Cyfarwyddwr Tai, Cyfarwyddiaeth Dai Director of Housing, Housing Directorate

Eraill yn bresennol
Others in attendance

Jeremy Colman	Archwilydd Cyffredinol Cymru Auditor General for Wales
Margaret Griffiths,	Arbenigydd Perfformiad, Swyddfa Archwilio Cymru Performance Specialist, Wales Audit Office
Rob Powell	Rheolwr Prosiect Archwilio Perfformiad, Swyddfa Archwilio Cymru Performance Audit Project Manager, Wales Audit Office

Gwasanaeth y Pwyllgor
Committee Service

Dr Kathryn Jenkins	Clerc Clerk
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Dan Collier

Dirprwy Glerc
Deputy Clerk

*Dechreuodd y cyfarfod am 9.32 a.m.
The meeting began at 9.32 a.m.*

**Cyflwyniad, Ymddiheuriadau, Dirprwyon a Datgan Buddiannau
Introduction, Apologies, Substitutions and Declarations of Interest**

[1] **Janet Davies:** Bore da a chroeso i aelodau'r pwyllgor, y cyhoedd a'r tystion i'r cyfarfod. **Janet Davies:** Good morning, I welcome committee members, the public and witnesses to the meeting.

[2] I remind everyone that the committee operates bilingually and that headsets are available for translation of Welsh into English, and also to amplify the sound.

[3] Atgoffaf pawb i ddifodd ffonau symudol, 'pagers' ac unrhyw ddyfais electronig arall, gan eu bod yn ymyrryd â'r offer cyfieithu a darlledu. Os bydd yn rhaid gadael yr ystafell mewn argyfwng, dylid gadael drwy'r drws agosaf a dilyn cyfarwyddyd gan y tywysyddion. I remind everyone to switch off mobile phones, pagers or any electronic device, as they interfere with the translation and broadcasting equipment. If the room has to be vacated in an emergency, you should leave through the nearest door and follow the ushers' instructions.

[4] Yr wyf wedi derbyn ymddiheuriadau gan Denise Idris Jones, Carl Sargeant, Catherine Thomas ac Irene James. A oes gan Aelodau unrhyw fuddiannau i'w datgan? Gwelaf nad oes. I have received apologies from Denise Idris Jones, Carl Sargeant, Catherine Thomas and Irene James. Do Members have any interests to declare? I see not.

9.33 a.m.

**Mynd i'r Afael â Digartrefedd yng Nghymru: Adolygu Effeithlonrwydd y
Strategaeth Genedlaethol ar Ddigartrefedd
Tackling Homelessness in Wales in Wales: A Review of the Effectiveness of the
National Homelessness Strategy**

[5] **Janet Davies:** We will be discussing the Auditor General for Wales's report, 'Tackling Homelessness in Wales', which suggests that the national homelessness strategy is preventing homelessness. However, the report makes some recommendations about the requirement for further research to understand the issue in more depth, establishing joined-up advice services, improving the strategic commissioning of Supporting People schemes and improving the monitoring and evaluation of prevention services.

[6] I welcome the witnesses. Will you introduce yourselves for the Record?

[7] **Dr Roberts:** I am Emyr Roberts, director of the Department for Social Justice and Regeneration.

[8] **Ms Whittaker:** I am Linda Whittaker, director of housing.

[9] **Janet Davies:** I will start with a few questions, but before I get to the first general question, can we have, for the record, some definitions of people who are intentionally homeless and what people are classified as vulnerable, because it is important to get those definitions in our minds before we start.

[10] **Dr Roberts:** I will immediately cross over to Linda to explain that. There is quite a lot of material in the code of guidance about the definitions, but perhaps I could ask Linda to try to answer that.

[11] **Ms Whittaker:** I will try. The idea that someone is intentionally homeless is based on whether or not they have been able to somehow prevent it themselves. If someone is generally seen as being vulnerable and therefore in a position where they would not have had the opportunity to prevent it, they would not be seen to be intentionally homeless. For instance, if someone gave up their home or, in some circumstances, if someone has their house repossessed, they may be seen as intentionally homeless. However, often, whether or not it is considered intentional is down to their individual circumstances and the make-up and circumstances of the family.

[12] On vulnerability, again, it is very much on the individual case basis. There are specifics that mean that people would be seen as being vulnerable. Certainly, in terms of their age and if they have mental health or other health problems, or substance misuse problems, they would be deemed as being vulnerable. It is also often age-related.

[13] **Janet Davies:** I will move on to paragraphs 1.2, 1.3 and 1.6, where it says that the number of decisions made by local authorities decreased by 18 per cent from 2004-05 to 2005-06. If that drop was due to the national homelessness strategy and its prevention agenda, are you satisfied with the decrease and can you predict that 2006-07 might show a similar drop?

[14] **Dr Roberts:** I think that we are making good progress against the targets that have been set in the homelessness strategy. As you indicate, both the number of applications for homelessness and the number of acceptances are falling. We are receiving regular information from local authorities. We believe that the main reason behind this is that local authorities are engaging far more in the prevention agenda. In other words, they are working with people who are potentially homeless to ensure that they do not become homeless. That is obviously one of the major focuses of the strategy and we think that that is coming through very much in terms of the number of applications for homelessness, for example.

[15] On future trends, the information that we are getting back is that local authorities are very well engaged on this. We found it quite heartening that, when you compare a quarter with the same quarter 12 months previously, for the past 18 months, there has been a regular fall in that quarter-on-quarter comparator. So, we are hopeful and fairly confident that that will continue into the future.

[16] **Janet Davies:** There was an increase in the number of homeless people in the

last quarter of 2005-06 and the first quarter of 2006-07. What do you think that increase is due to? Is it a blip?

[17] **Dr Roberts:** The truth is that we are not actually sure. There is some suggestion of a seasonal variation in homelessness, but that is not conclusive. We get information back, but this time of the year—the period after Christmas—is the busiest time for homelessness services and the blip may well be seasonally related. However, we are very careful in looking at single quarter figures. More meaningful, from the point of view of the strategy, is the long-term trend, which is obviously what we are focused on.

[18] **Janet Davies:** Given that those two quarters were together, it seemed a bit worrying.

[19] **Dr Roberts:** Yes, we were starting to get a bit concerned ourselves, but the more recent figures, for the July to September quarter, show that the figure has dropped down again. However, we will obviously be monitoring the figures very closely.

[20] **Jocelyn Davies:** You mentioned prevention services a little earlier, but paragraph 1.5 tells us that, between 2004-05 and 2005-06, there was no significant drop in the percentage of people found to be unintentionally homeless and in priority need once they had presented themselves as homeless to the local authority. So, can prevention services work at that point?

[21] **Dr Roberts:** Yes. Given the actual percentage of numbers accepted over numbers who have applied, it is not surprising that that figure is increasing, because, as I said before, one of the main focuses of the strategy is prevention and stopping people from applying in the first instance—ensuring that they are housed before then. So, it is not surprising that that particular percentage is increasing.

9.40 a.m.

[22] What we would expect to happen is that, if the prevention agenda is kept up and it continues to be effective, the number of acceptances will also reduce, as indeed it is at present—it will continue to reduce. Obviously, that percentage focuses attention on local authorities getting homeless people out of temporary accommodation more quickly, so that they are housed permanently. That is the challenge that that particular figure throws out.

[23] **Jocelyn Davies:** Perhaps I did not explain myself clearly, but it seems to be at the point where people present themselves. As that figure has not been reduced significantly, it does not seem as though there is much success in prevention at that point. I accept that an awful lot of work has been done with local authorities in prevention before that point, but once you get to that point, it seems to be very limited.

[24] **Dr Roberts:** The figures refer to the acceptance of those in priority need, and, inevitably, a number of people with priority needs will come through and have to be dealt with. I hope that prevention does not just prevent applications, but that the

number of acceptances, and the number of those in priority need, are dealt with far sooner in the process, so that they do not get to the stage of becoming homeless and having to be put into temporary accommodation. We are also hopeful that the number of acceptances will fall, as is happening at the moment.

[25] **Jocelyn Davies:** Turning to paragraph 1.7, I am glad that Janet mentioned definitions. That paragraph tells us that homeless people can choose whether or not they present themselves as homeless, and that is fair enough. However, we are concerned that, in the case of ex-prisoners, for example, not all of them are presenting themselves as homeless. Everybody acknowledges that the reason why they are on the list of people who can present themselves as homeless is because of the real need for stability to aid their rehabilitation. Do you have any idea as to why ex-prisoners are not currently presenting themselves as homeless? Does this, perhaps, have anything to do with the definition of what constitutes suitable accommodation that they are then offered? Cases have been referred to me in which the local authority accepts ex-prisoners, after a struggle, but offers them bed-and-breakfast accommodation many miles outside the borough in which they actually want to live.

[26] **Dr Roberts:** The first thing that I would say about prisoners is that a lot of work is done within prisons before they are released, to ensure that they have a care package and accommodation lined up. For instance, we fund Prison Link Cymru to conduct that kind of assessment while prisoners are still in prison. The concept is that they are offered accommodation on their release.

[27] We do not have a clear understanding of why all prisoners do not take up that offer. There is anecdotal information that, on release, they simply do not turn up for the appointments made for them or to the accommodation offered to them, but we do not actually properly understand why that is happening. A lot of work is being done on this; we partly fund a secondment at the National Offender Management Service, for instance, to look at the issue of prisoner release and accommodation. As you say, it is a serious issue. There is also 'Housing and Ex-Offenders Risk Management: The Link Protocol Wales', which has been developed by the Welsh Local Government Association and the social justice agencies to smooth that transition.

[28] In terms of the suitability of accommodation, another aspect of the strategy is to drive up the quality of accommodation. You will be aware of the 2006 Order passed by the Assembly that prevents authorities from using bed-and-breakfast accommodation as a long-term solution to homelessness. We feel, therefore, that we are driving up the quality of accommodation, but whether it is suitable in terms of distance, I am not sure. I am happy to take that matter away, unless Linda has any views on it.

[29] **Ms Whittaker:** It certainly is an issue that we are keen to try to find out more about. We are doing some research with Trothwy, which works closely with prisoners and ex-offenders, to determine their needs and what problems they face. That is due to report this summer. We are also keeping a very close eye on some research that is being funded by the Home Office in the west of England that tracks prisoners in the longer term. Again, we are awaiting that report to see how it might be reflected in Wales.

[30] **Dr Roberts:** This is an area that we need to review, because the numbers coming through are not reducing as we would have hoped.

[31] **Jocelyn Davies:** It occurs to me that vulnerable individuals have the fewest resources to challenge a local authority definition of suitable accommodation. I can understand that, if accommodation is offered and is many miles away from where they want to be and they have no transport and very little money, they might not consider it suitable whereas the local authority might. I would be interested to see how your research pans out.

[32] **Dr Roberts:** We are certainly happy to talk to organisations like Shelter, which may have some knowledge of that.

[33] **Mark Isherwood:** When I spoke to prisoners in Liverpool, they told me that housing was their first concern in terms of what would happen to them when they left prison. Related to that, the group of young men from north Wales that I met was concerned that they should not return to the community that they had come from because they would fall back in with the same peer groups, drug providers, and so on. The Social Justice and Regeneration Committee has been looking at the issue of youth homelessness, and there are some reciprocal agreements in place between local authorities to avoid that problem. What are your views on that as a solution? Building on from that, there is a perception in some communities that many ex-prisoners are coming into their areas from outside and taking services from local people. What do we need to do within those local communities to address that problem?

[34] **Janet Davies:** I do not know if you will be able to answer this question.

[35] **Dr Roberts:** I think that we are trespassing a little on policy here. You are right to say that there are reciprocal arrangements in place, but there needs to be a connection between the prisoner and the area into which they are being released. The definition of 'local connection' is laid out quite clearly in the guidance, so there is statute around this. In terms of the policies adopted by local authorities—I do not know, Chair, if you want to come on to this later—there is an issue here about housing allocation policies, which you may want to consider further.

[36] **Janet Davies:** I think that we will get to that later.

[37] **Dr Roberts:** It is later in the report, is it not?

[38] **Jocelyn Davies:** Are you happy with the definition of 'local connections'? It seems to be broad enough to accommodate the needs of most people.

[39] **Ms Whittaker:** It certainly should be.

[40] **Leighton Andrews:** I will look at paragraphs 1.16 to 1.19. Obviously, local authorities are not responsible for finding accommodation for those who are homeless but not in priority need, but some are approaching local authorities. Where will they find a home?

[41] **Ms Whittaker:** Local authorities have a duty to provide housing advice and

homelessness advice. So, in terms of trying to help them to find accommodation, there is plenty of evidence that, with regard to those who are classed as being intentionally homeless, local authorities are working with letting agencies, looking at leasing in the private sector and working with their registered social landlord partners in terms of working out their opportunities to find housing. Local authorities have a statutory duty to provide housing advice to all those who present themselves as homeless, whether they are intentionally or unintentionally homeless.

[42] **Leighton Andrews:** We know that more local authorities are using both private and social rented housing for those in priority need, and that that is having an impact on stock. The report suggests that it is creating a bottleneck for those who are not homeless but who may wish to change their accommodation—they may have other needs that require them to change accommodation within the social rented sector. Are you undertaking research to look at the longer term implications of the temporary use of permanent accommodation for homeless households?

9.50 a.m.

[43] **Ms Whittaker:** Currently, we do not have any ongoing research looking at that issue specifically, but we are working with local authorities to determine what impact it is having in their local areas.

[44] **Leighton Andrews:** Paragraph 1.19 explicitly says that more research is needed in this area. What is your observation on that?

[45] **Ms Whittaker:** That is something that we will look at and take account of.

[46] **Dr Roberts:** We appreciate that local authorities are in a difficult position, because of the stock of social housing that is available to them, but that is why we are working closely with the private sector to improve the amount of private sector properties that might be available to local authorities to use specifically in the context of homelessness. We are funding things like bond schemes and advanced-rent-payment-type schemes so that there are more outlets available to local authorities when they make those allocation decisions.

[47] **Leighton Andrews:** Notwithstanding that, paragraph 1.11 suggests that there are local authorities that have not introduced housing allocation or homelessness policies that meet legislative requirements. What are you doing to require them to do so?

[48] **Dr Roberts:** The statute and the code of guidance are clear about local authority responsibilities in this regard. However, we are concerned that some local authorities are not complying with the law on this; I am sure that you are aware of the ombudsman's special report last year that drew attention to this issue. We have done some joint work with Shelter, which will be published shortly, and the conclusion is that all local authorities need to review their allocation policies—some because there are minor things wrong with them, but in other cases because the authorities are simply not complying with the code or the law in this regard. We are drawing the matter to local authorities' attention. Organisations such as Shelter are representing their clients in this regard, and the ombudsman's report has been powerful; he has

done reports on individual local authorities, and we understand that they are coming into line, following representations from the ombudsman. So, what is happening is a sort of ratcheting-up of the pressure to ensure that local authorities fully comply with the code and with their statutory obligations.

[49] **Leighton Andrews:** Are you satisfied that the allocation schemes of registered social landlords are effectively supporting local authorities in meeting the needs of homeless people?

[50] **Ms Whittaker:** Yes, they are generally effective. We know that an awful lot of work is going on across Wales where local authorities and RSL partners are working towards joint waiting lists. At the moment, only six lists are fully operational, but most local authorities that we have talked to are working towards that. They had quite a long way to go, so having six lists that are up and running is good. Those lists are working effectively in terms of the local authority's ability to place homeless families and young people with RSLs much more easily than they could have done previously.

[51] **Janet Davies:** Going on from that, there is the issue of gate keeping as opposed to prevention. When people wish to register themselves as homeless, gate keeping can be defined as stopping people from presenting themselves as homeless, or accepting fewer applicants as unintentionally homeless and in priority need, and in prevention. Before I came to the Assembly, I spent 13 years as a councillor on a council with housing functions, and I often had huge problems with the fight to get people whom I felt were unintentionally homeless to be accepted as unintentionally homeless. Do you think that gate keeping is still a problem? Have you given local authorities sufficiently clear guidance to help them to distinguish between gate keeping and prevention?

[52] **Dr Roberts:** On the guidance, there is an awful lot in the 2003 document on the definitions and what local authorities should be doing on that. We are revising the guidance at the moment and we will be issuing it later this year. Like you, we hear anecdotal evidence that gate keeping is happening, although we do not have any systematic evidence that it is happening regularly. If it was, we would urge the organisations representing tenants to take up those cases. What will make the issue more transparent is that we are hoping to introduce a prevention indicator as part of the suite of indicators by which we monitor local authorities. That will show far more clearly, if people are re-presenting after six months, that, in the first instance, they may have been kept out of the system. It should be able to show, if they are re-presenting, that there may be a problem with gate keeping.

[53] **Janet Davies:** It is understandable that it happens, from the point of view of local authorities; officials can be concerned about their budget being stretched, but, clearly, the needs of vulnerable people who are homeless must override the issue of stretched budgets. Having that extra guidance will be helpful.

[54] **Dr Roberts:** We are regularly sharing what is good practice in terms of prevention as opposed to gate keeping.

[55] **Mick Bates:** Moving to the section about increasing the supply of affordable

housing, paragraphs 1.20 to 1.23, it is explained that the Government has introduced policies to increase the amount of affordable housing that is built, but there is still a shortage of affordable accommodation. The figure given for Cardiff, for example, is that there is a shortfall of 2,500 units. Will the policies introduced by the Assembly Government ensure that there is sufficient affordable housing for people in Wales?

[56] **Dr Roberts:** This is a major issue and the Government published its affordable housing toolkit last year. I will ask Linda to say what we are doing on that.

[57] **Ms Whittaker:** Probably one of the key areas in which we are looking at this at the moment is within the local housing market assessment. We expect all local authorities to undertake a full assessment of their local housing needs, right across the board—the private sector and the social rented sector—and their likely requirements over the next three to five years. Within that, we would expect local authorities to put in place the measures to acquire the additional accommodation that they need, whether that is in the private sector or the social rented sector. We know that there is unlikely to be enough social housing grant to provide all of the social housing that is required in all areas, so, over the last year, we have produced the affordable housing toolkit, which is a tool that local authorities can use to maximise the level of affordable housing through planning. We are already finding that a number of local authorities are becoming competent in using the toolkit. We are also finding that RSLs are getting on board and working with their local authorities to maximise the amount of affordable housing under 106 agreements that is coming out of more or less every planning opportunity that local authorities have. Those are two of the measures that we are looking at.

[58] As the house-price market goes up, we are seeing more people staying in the social housing market and not going into the private market. Entering the private market becomes more difficult for people who would have done so naturally in the past. We need to maximise that area, but also allow people to go into the private market with some subsidy; that is why we are looking at the homebuy option, which is proving to be successful. We are also maximising that through 106 agreements, and a number of local authorities are providing a fair amount of homebuy options without any public subsidy—it is purely coming out of the planning gain. We are doing that with about a 30 per cent subsidy in most areas of Wales, but recognising that rural areas have a particular problem in terms of the difference between average earnings and average house prices—the subsidy there is up to 50 per cent. That is one way of trying to alleviate the pressure on social housing: allowing people who are borderline in terms of ability to go into the private sector, to do so, freeing up more social housing for others to move into.

10.00 a.m.

[59] **Janet Davies:** RSL stands for registered social landlord.

[60] **Ms Whittaker:** Yes—housing associations.

[61] **Mick Bates:** Thank you for that comprehensive answer. Let us start back at the beginning. I noted with interest that you said that some local authorities are becoming fairly competent at using local housing needs assessments. How many

authorities have not undertaken full local housing assessments?

[62] **Ms Whittaker:** They all provided such assessments a few years ago, but they are due to complete another by April 2007, so that is the requirement at the moment. We would expect the results to feed through into their local housing strategies, which are due in April 2007.

[63] **Mick Bates:** That is fairly optimistic. When I last looked, there were six authorities, I believe, that had not undertaken full housing needs assessments; and not only that, but it also seems that some had not fed the results through into their housing departments anyway, so they were not acting on the figures that they had. What is the legal status of the assessment once it has been undertaken? Do local authorities have to implement it, and build the number of units that they have identified as necessary?

[64] **Ms Whittaker:** No, I do not think that there is a statutory duty on them to do that; for some local authorities, it just would not be possible to do everything that they recognise that they need to do. However, they have a statutory duty to produce a local housing strategy, and we will then monitor that and look at how they are progressing towards fulfilling the requirements that they identified.

[65] **Mick Bates:** I emphasise this issue because, later on in the report, at paragraph 2.7, I think that half of all local authorities emphasise in their returns the need for a supply of affordable housing. If they undertake the assessment, but do not adapt their policies according to the identified need, we will always be short of affordable housing. What mechanisms do you have to ensure that, first, they complete the collection of data, and secondly, they act upon it?

[66] **Ms Whittaker:** In terms of the collection of data, we have supported local authorities in part-funding the carrying out of local housing assessments, and we have also encouraged them to undertake the assessment on a regional basis. We recognise that housing markets are not restricted by local authority boundaries, and therefore we have been encouraging local authorities to act in market sectors, and the funding has been granted more or less on that basis. We have been supporting them in getting that information. From discussions with local authorities, I am not aware that there are any that will be unable to provide the data. We know that some of them will not make the April deadline, but the Minister has agreed that they can delay until June. Part of the reason for that is that there are a limited number of consultants who can carry out the work, and as all local authorities in England and Wales are undertaking the assessment at the same time, it will not be done by April; it will be done by June. In terms of how we ensure that they carry it out, it is very much a case of monitoring them and working with them and the social landlords in their areas to try to maximise the output of affordable housing in their areas.

[67] **Mick Bates:** I am still a little unclear about the number of authorities that have undertaken the full assessment. I wonder if your monitoring gives you a satisfactory result, because you say that the April deadline for completing this full assessment has already been extended, for some authorities, until June. That indicates to me that they are not very successful at completing the work that they are meant to have undertaken. How many authorities are in that position?

[68] **Ms Whittaker:** I do not know how many have asked for the extension until June; there are a number that have completed the assessment, but we are not anticipating that they will provide the results to us until April, through their local housing strategy.

[69] **Mick Bates:** I wonder if we could actually have the figures about how many authorities have completed the work, and how many have not.

[70] **Ms Whittaker:** I would not know how many have completed it yet, simply because we have not yet asked them for it.

[71] **Janet Davies:** If you could send us a note, that would be fine.

[72] **Mick Bates:** I think that we need to see how well they are implementing this strategy, and to know how many authorities have undertaken that work. That is crucial.

[73] Finally, on the use of section 106 agreements to ensure that there is a full supply, you identified that one problem with that is that, if people purchase below market value, they are almost stuck in that forever unless their wages increase so that they can get into another part of the market. In terms of 106 agreements, has any work been done to see how many people cannot ever afford to move from that type of property? It will often be a small, two-bedroom house, and if they have a family they want more beds. Do you know how many people are stuck in that sector because of 106 agreements? I may not have explained that too well.

[74] **Ms Whittaker:** In Michael Jones's research from Cambridge last year on the homebuy scheme—although it is not specifically on 106 agreements but homebuy, which is the product that we often see through the 106 agreements—there was evidence that there are people who move through that, and move on to, perhaps, a house of the same size, but who will increase their mortgage value to do that. Therefore, there is evidence that people are moving through, but we will have to continue to look at that over the longer term. Although homebuy has existed for a few years now, we would expect to see differences over a longer period of time.

[75] **Jocelyn Davies:** Are you satisfied that the 106 agreements are rigorously enforced? I do not have any evidence on this but I am sure that we have all heard of cases where the local authority has not fully enforced the 106 agreement or where the agreements have been negotiated and changed after planning permission has been given.

[76] **Ms Whittaker:** Where affordable housing is determined as part of the 106 agreement, we do not have any evidence that that is not being built out and transferred as affordable housing. I have heard similar anecdotal evidence of developers having potentially bought out their responsibility where other things have been asked for within 106 agreements. I have not necessarily heard that that happens so much in Wales, but I know that, in the past, it was a problem in England.

[77] **Dr Roberts:** The whole thrust behind the affordable housing toolkit is to raise awareness of the use of 106 agreements and the fact that it is available to local

authorities. The market conditions are difficult in some areas, but, nevertheless, there is a strong obligation on local authorities to use them wherever possible, particularly as the numbers of social and rented housing have reduced so dramatically in many areas. The Assembly Government is trying to do that.

[78] **Janet Davies:** Do you want to come in on this, Mark, before you go on to your own part?

[79] **Mark Isherwood:** Yes. When homebuy was originally introduced as the Loco scheme in the mid 1990s, it was primarily focused on new build. Since then, homebuy has become almost exclusively focused on do-it-yourself—the purchase of existing properties. Do you feel that the time has come to look again at using homebuy on new build, or is that still financially imprudent?

[80] You mentioned the increasing co-operation between housing associations and local authorities. To what extent are you also talking to housing associations about their wider proposals for increasing supply, and also to private sector landlords? I am familiar, for instance, with the first private sector homebuy scheme, under which the builder in Wales would take that 30 per cent themselves—with 106 in perpetuity. Finally, on the role of the rural housing enabler, which I do not believe has been mentioned, to what extent is that having a positive impact—or not—thus far, and do we need more of them?

[81] **Dr Roberts:** On contact with the private sector, we have ongoing discussions with the private sector. We are encouraging it to bring forward new products—shared-equity-type products—into the market, which do not need social housing grant, for instance. We believe that that is already happening quite a bit in England, and we would like to see more of it happening in Wales.

[82] **Ms Whittaker:** On homebuy and new build, you are right that there is quite a lot of do-it-yourself homebuy, which involves existing properties. However, where homebuy is a product of 106 agreements, it always relates to new build. Therefore, we are finding that there are quite a lot—certainly in areas such as Newport and Cardiff—of homebuy products that are new build, so we do promote that. I would add that, with the Order that was brought in last year on the right of first refusal, when the homebuy purchaser sells on, the local authority or the registered social landlord—whoever holds the 30 per cent equity—has the ability to purchase that property back, so the property remains as an affordable unit. That is another way in which we are trying to keep those properties in the sector.

10.10 a.m.

[83] In terms of our maximising affordable housing, a number of us in Wales are providing affordable housing without the social housing grant, so we are seeing more units being provided in that way.

[84] On the private sector landlords, as Emyr said, we are looking at renting in the private sector and at private developers providing new products for affordable housing.

[85] You also mentioned the rural housing enabler. We now have rural housing enablers covering all rural areas in Wales and those that have been in operation for longer are starting to see that there are benefits to the work that they are doing. They also work as a network across Wales, so where good practice is being achieved in one area, where they are getting rural exception sites, it is being shared with the other enablers so that they can try to replicate it in their areas. We are now seeing rural exception sites coming forward that private landowners are transferring at nil, or at very low cost to enable the provision of affordable housing on the edge of rural areas. So, we are seeing the benefits from that work.

[86] **Mick Bates:** To return to my questions, one of the issues was the supply of land. Within the toolkit, there is a recommendation that—and I think that this relates to a value of under £2 million—you release Government-owned land. How much land is being released for affordable housing that is owned by local authorities or the Government?

[87] **Leighton Andrews:** Chair, we seem to be drifting away from the homelessness strategy and into broader issues of housing policy.

[88] **Mick Bates:** Chair, if I may draw your attention to page 18 of the strategy. The fourth bullet point says that the toolkit

[89] ‘removes restrictions on procedures for the disposal of land for affordable housing, so that local authorities can dispose of land up to a value of £2 million in any one year for affordable housing, without the Assembly Government’s approval’.

[90] **Leighton Andrews:** That is just an observation.

[91] **Mick Bates:** It is not an observation—it is part of the policy. I am simply asking how much land is being disposed of in that way.

[92] **Janet Davies:** I ask you to consider, Mick, whether this relates to policy or to audit and value for money. If you are concerned that it is relevant, you can ask the question, but we must be careful not to drift into policy issues here. I am just putting up a marker for the moment.

[93] **Dr Roberts:** Neither Linda nor I have the figure available, so it might be better to provide you with a note on the figure, if it is available.

[94] **Janet Davies:** Thank you. Mark, are you looking at paragraphs 2.10 to 2.13?

[95] **Mark Isherwood:** Yes. Regarding the expectation of local authorities to respond to people with housing problems, and the official visits made to monitor progress in that area, are you planning return visits in 2007? If so, how will you prioritise the visits, given the available resources?

[96] **Dr Roberts:** Yes. All the visits have now been completed and reports have been drawn up on each visit. We will continue with those visits over a slightly longer timescale, so we aim to visit each local authority again within the next two years. We will be prioritising those local authorities to which we felt we needed to return to look

at what they are doing on homelessness and to try to encourage them to increase their activity.

[97] **Mark Isherwood:** There are a number of bullet points in paragraph 2.12, one of which refers to the

[98] ‘...refocusing of homelessness teams on housing options and advice.’

[99] We are aware from the evidence taken for a report that was published yesterday that there were concerns that housing options are concealing a high and growing degree of hidden homelessness, and there was a recommendation that the strategy should be revisited accordingly to recognise and address that. Although, you cannot respond directly to that report, do you feel that the housing options are having an unexpected or undesirable impact on homelessness figures? Related to that, and outlined in paragraph 2.13, are preventative support, securing accommodation and tackling repeat homelessness. How are you addressing the need, not only for permanent homes, but for shelters, hostels, supported housing and move-on accommodation prior to permanent housing?

[100] **Dr Roberts:** We support, through our homelessness grants, a number of activities, from the provision of advice through to the provision of services. Our Supporting People programme supports many hostels and facilities aimed at homeless people. Those budgets have increased and we continue to support all those activities.

[101] **Mark Isherwood:** So, what can you say about the housing options and the impact on hidden homelessness that has come to the fore in a recent report and is referred to here?

[102] **Dr Roberts:** Part of the duty on the local authority is to ensure that it has good information on housing need, including a need that is not currently presenting itself. So, as part of their housing market assessments, we would expect local authorities to make an assessment of the housing need in each area. There is an issue on hidden homelessness in terms of people who are not presenting themselves to local authorities. However, we undertake ongoing work, for example in our discussions with Shelter, on that kind of issue.

[103] **Ms Whittaker:** This is also about raising awareness of homelessness and what it is. Several projects are funded through the social housing management grant programme to encourage local authorities to work with schools, for instance, so that young people are aware of what homelessness is, because many people would be seen as vulnerable and unintentionally homeless but they would not recognise themselves as such and, therefore, would not go forward to look for help. There are examples of very good practice throughout Wales. For example, Conwy County Borough Council has undertaken some work with its local registered social landlord, Tai Clwyd, and others. It has produced a DVD, which it takes around schools, where it is having a very good impact in terms of teachers, for instance, recognising where there may be problems within their pupil population. The idea is for people to recognise it if they are homeless and for local authorities to advertise what they do in terms of housing advice. Often, a vulnerable 16-year-old would not necessarily think about going to a housing advice centre to ask for help, but it is available to them.

[104] **Mark Isherwood:** I have seen that film and I have met a group of homeless young people in that area. I commend their concerns to you because they can tell us a great deal. You referred to Supporting People and said that there had been an increase in funding. Do you agree that, in fact, that has been reduced over the last couple of years and that, this year, the increase was below inflation and was, therefore, a cut in real terms? That is just an observation of fact rather than a comment on policy.

[105] **Dr Roberts:** Clearly, there was a decrease in 2004-05, but since then, we have been able to maintain the funding in Supporting People. More importantly, we are asking authorities to re-profile the kind of activities that they support through Supporting People, so that they better meet the needs of these kinds of groups. Homelessness is one of the key priorities in Supporting People, so we expect local authorities to come forward to re-calibrate their services more around their strategic objectives on this.

10.20 a.m.

[106] **Mark Isherwood:** I would like to move on to question 11 on paragraphs 2.14 to 3, under the next heading referring to new guidance for the health, social care and wellbeing strategies and community strategies that, with ministerial agreement, are likely to recommend a reference to homelessness. Has this guidance been published yet, and is it appropriate and possible for guidance on other strategies to make reference to their role in preventing homelessness?

[107] **Dr Roberts:** That is a very important issue. The health, social care and wellbeing guidance is currently out for consultation; it was issued in December and it mentions homelessness as one of the issues that needs to be picked up. The general point, which I will take as a personal responsibility, is to ensure that all the guidance issued by the Assembly Government is joined up and that it makes provision for vulnerable groups such as homeless people. We are doing a lot of work to ensure that that is embedded in the various forms of guidance. For example, we have ensured that projects on homelessness are eligible for the new European convergence funding; so, that has also been built in.

[108] The other thing to say about guidance is that it is currently being issued on local service boards, which has come out of the Beecham review. We very much hope that some local authorities will pick up homelessness as a difficult cross-cutting issue that needs to be picked up locally and that the local service boards can be used to drive service improvements forward there.

[109] **Mark Isherwood:** Would one of the other strategies that could incorporate this perhaps be 'Wales: A Vibrant Economy', given the references and concerns expressed by CBI Cymru, and others, that housing has little or no recognition in that document? I see progress here, given that you referred to convergence funding, in terms of linking this with the economic development agenda.

[110] **Dr Roberts:** I think that WAVE is for a slightly different purpose because it is more focussed on economic development per se. An attempt was made in that document to narrow the focus, but the general point is that we are working with all

Assembly Government departments to ensure that support for people, such as the homeless, is embedded in their strategies.

[111] **Mark Isherwood:** Do you agree with such organisations as Business in the Community and CBI Cymru that housing is central to economic success?

[112] **Dr Roberts:** I think that that is a question about policy, which is also outside the social justice remit.

[113] **Janet Davies:** Yes; I think that you can leave that one.

[114] **Leighton Andrews:** It is good to see a reduction in the use of bed and breakfast accommodation between October 2005 and 2006. However, are local authorities doing enough to ensure that they comply with the new legislation on standards being set for temporary accommodation?

[115] **Dr Roberts:** Yes, obviously the standards legislation is fairly new, in that it came in late last year, and it is ratcheting up the quality of accommodation. The current code of guidance advises local authorities to check at least annually on all accommodation that they use, and we expect them to comply with the new legislation as it comes in.

[116] **Leighton Andrews:** But how are you monitoring that?

[117] **Dr Roberts:** I think that we will need to work with organisations such as the Wales Audit Office and others to ensure that they are complying with the legislation on that.

[118] **Leighton Andrews:** You just said that they were ratcheting up the standard of accommodation, so, presumably, you have some monitoring going on.

[119] **Dr Roberts:** Yes, we do. We visit local authorities regularly; the working group on the homelessness strategy meets regularly. There is no evidence that they are not complying with the legislation, but equally, we would need to satisfy ourselves that they are.

[120] **Leighton Andrews:** Okay. Moving on to paragraph 2.17, which looks at the leasing scheme subsidy for private-sector accommodation, some local authorities say that that is very complicated and that it, therefore, becomes problematic for them use. What are your observations on that?

[121] **Ms Whittaker:** We had feedback that, when it was initially introduced, it was complex, and a number of local authorities did not attempt to access that subsidy for that reason. We produced clearer guidance for local authorities on that and we have also worked on a one-to-one basis with several local authorities, with the staff who actually monitor that, so that local authorities probably no longer have an excuse for not accessing that subsidy where there is sufficient good-quality, private-sector rented housing in their areas for them to lease.

[122] **Leighton Andrews:** Has that led to an increase in the number of properties?

[123] **Ms Whittaker:** Yes, very much so; it has increased quite considerably.

[124] **Janet Davies:** Could we now look at the funding schemes, which can be used by local authorities, housing associations and independent organisations, outlined in paragraphs 2.18 and 2.19? Do you think that this is the best way of funding the implementation of the national homelessness strategy, or do you think that funding schemes could be amalgamated or even included in the local authority housing settlement?

[125] **Dr Roberts:** For these kinds of schemes, it is difficult to put them in to any kind of formula. We believe that the current schemes that we offer give local authorities an incentive to come forward with innovative projects that are suited to the needs of their localities. We also want to try to encourage a wide range of projects, as I have said before, such as advice services and innovative approaches to working with the private sector. Some of the initiatives are also time-limited because we want to be able to evaluate how much they have achieved and other initiatives are focused on people who are not in priority need.

[126] I think that we would prefer to keep it as a separate grant scheme; it is well understood by local authorities and the other organisations. That is another point that I want to make: we do not just support local authorities through this; we also support advice agencies and so on. I would be concerned that if we put the grant in the local authority settlement, resources would be taken away from this area. I think that we are quite content with how it currently works.

[127] **Janet Davies:** It is always difficult to decide whether to keep things hypothecated or put them into the general funding pot. I can understand that, in this case, perhaps it would be better not to put it in the general settlement.

[128] **Jocelyn Davies:** The idea of the grants is to encourage good practice, so is there any evidence that you have been able to roll that good practice out elsewhere through this system?

[129] **Dr Roberts:** Yes, we have regular seminars to roll out the good practice that comes out and we share the reports with the local authorities as there is a local authority network on this issue. We regularly ensure that people are aware of what is happening because, as you said, that is the purpose of the grant.

[130] **Jocelyn Davies:** If you find good practice, does that funding then continue?

[131] **Dr Roberts:** It might.

[132] **Ms Whittaker:** It can; an example of good practice was the Llamau preventative project, looking at preventing homelessness among young people and providing a mediation service, which cuts in as soon as they present as homeless. They had grant funding to initially start that project in Cardiff, and, because it was seen to be successful, it was replicated in other areas and grant funding was given to others to try to replicate the work elsewhere. The idea is that once it starts to work, it should almost become self-funding because the cost of homelessness in that local

authority area should reduce with that group of young people, where the preventative measures are successful. We may fund it for two years, to get it going, but once the local authority sees the benefits, it should be able to continue that funding.

[133] **Jocelyn Davies:** But do they? I am sure that we can all think of an example of good practice or a project that seemed to be a good idea and which received investment to get it up and running, but then the funding ran out, no-one picked up the tab and the whole thing ceased.

[134] **Ms Whittaker:** Where that seemed likely, we would consider continuing to fund the project or maybe fund it from another source. With some projects, we would look at a maximum of only two years, but if we can see that it is being effective, we would look to another source to help that project. There are also other bodies, for example, Shelter, that will come in, where they see that schemes are successful, and help to promote them.

[135] **Leighton Andrews:** On advice services, outlined in paragraphs 2.21 to 2.23, there is a degree of competition between local authority advice services and others. Clearly, we want people to have the best and most comprehensive advice service that makes the best use of resources without that degree of competition, necessarily. On the other hand, people may see independent advice services as offering a service that is of a different nature from that of a local authority. Therefore, what observations do you have about how we can develop comprehensive advice, but also ensure that local authority advice services are effective?

10.30 a.m.

[136] **Dr Roberts:** First, we expect local authorities to plan the provision of housing advice services in their area and to involve the voluntary sector partners in that, as is embodied in the code. Independent housing advice services are provided in all areas of Wales. They are mostly provided by Shelter Cymru, but they are also supported by citizens advice bureaux, law centres and solicitors.

[137] You are right that funding for advice centres come from a number of sources, including us, the Legal Services Commission and from local authorities directly. As I say, it is up to the local authorities to organise those in a way in which they do not compete with each other. I think that this issue will be forced in any case because, as you may be aware, the Legal Services Commission is currently consulting on a different form of commissioning of advice services; perhaps moving to a more regional model rather than an individual local authority model. Therefore, I think that that will fortify the planning of advice services and we will need to be part of that discussion. I know that there have been discussions with local authorities and the Legal Services Commission on what may come out of that. However, the idea is to make a more unified, but high-quality provision of advice services across Wales.

[138] **Leighton Andrews:** You referred earlier to Supporting People. This area has raised a lot of heat and concern in the Assembly and elsewhere. Local authorities have to develop the strategic framework, but the Assembly Government retains control over quite a significant proportion of the budget. You were planning to, as it were, devolve that budget to local authorities last year. However, it is argued that the split in

funding leads to an inconsistency in the level of funding for schemes to support and prevent homelessness. Is that your experience?

[139] **Dr Roberts:** I will ask Linda to comment as she chairs the working group that is currently looking at this issue.

[140] **Ms Whittaker:** We are currently looking at the redistribution of the Supporting People funding across Wales, which is slightly different from just allowing local authorities to manage the entire amount that they receive. Those that have quite a lot of Supporting People funding would not say that, but those that have the lower amount would; that is probably the fairest way to say that. That is why we are taking our time and working hard on the redistribution to ensure that we get it right and that there is adequate funding across Wales for homelessness work.

[141] **Dr Roberts:** There are some quite difficult issues in there. The Assembly Government's position is that we need to be satisfied that that funding would be used properly, particularly for vulnerable groups such as the homeless, before we would countenance transferring responsibility to local authorities. That work is ongoing.

[142] **Leighton Andrews:** Presumably, if some local authorities are getting a lot and others are getting less, you are spending a lot of time monitoring those that are getting a lot, in terms of their use of the service, and rather less time on monitoring why other authorities are not accessing it.

[143] **Ms Whittaker:** Only in terms of Supporting People. In terms of homelessness, we will be monitoring all local authorities at the same level according to how they address their homelessness issues.

[144] **Leighton Andrews:** Yes, but it was Supporting People, specifically, that I was asking about.

[145] **Ms Whittaker:** On how they allocate Supporting People funding and what service is being provided through that funding, then, yes, we would do so in terms of time.

[146] **Leighton Andrews:** What is your current timescale for reaching a final conclusion on transferring funding to local authorities for Supporting People?

[147] **Ms Whittaker:** At present, the working group is looking towards April 2008, but if there is no agreement at that stage, it could potentially go on beyond that. However, that is currently our aim.

[148] **Janet Davies:** You wanted to come in, Mark; I will give you a minute.

[149] **Mark Isherwood:** You just rightly commented that those with the largest amount of Supporting People funding were those who were most concerned, but do you not agree that many of those cases arise because they are the largest providers of supported housing? Do you accept the criticism expressed by some that they may not be able to sustain that unless their revenue grant maintains its value, and hopefully increases in future?

[150] On a separate, but related, Supporting People matter, you mentioned working with local authorities to encourage them to use, or see how they could use, private sector accommodation. What role do you see Supporting People and housing benefit playing with registered social landlords, housing associations and some charities and voluntary organisations that also use those funding streams, to act as an intermediary in supported housing in the private rented sector, taking the risk away for the landlord and, without any additional cost, providing supported housing for vulnerable people?

[151] **Ms Whittaker:** The Supporting People element is quite separate from the leasehold subsidy. There may be, for instance, floating support for people who are vulnerable, or who might be vulnerable in terms of being able to maintain a tenancy and who may be in a property funded by a leasehold subsidy element, which could then be funded through housing benefit. They may have a Supporting People grant supporting them as well, but it might be through two different providers—they may have the property through the local authority, but the Supporting People funding may be provided through the social housing provider or a support provider. I am not quite sure what you are asking, I am sorry.

[152] **Mark Isherwood:** The first point was the concerns expressed by some of the largest providers over funding. Secondly, there are some very effective schemes being delivered by housing associations—I am aware of one in Cardiff—and voluntary organisations, where they utilise existing funding streams to act as an intermediary between the tenant, or the client, and the private landlord. They manage the supported tenancy within existing funding streams, without local authority involvement, necessarily or directly. They then pay the landlord, taking the risk away from them. What role could they play in widening this supply agenda?

[153] **Ms Whittaker:** Two areas are working on that—there are schemes that do that in Carmarthen and Cardiff. We see that as good practice, that is developing and working quite well in terms of working towards the homelessness agenda. Many private landlords are concerned about this tenancy group, in that they may have problems in terms of collecting rent and the way that the property is looked after. So, there are schemes in Cardiff and Carmarthen, which we helped fund, where the risk is taken away from the private landlord. For instance, the contents insurance may be paid for by the RSL, which will cover their void periods. We are trying to maximise the number of private landlords who will come into the sector, to address part of the homelessness problem, by taking away some of the risk, as they see it.

[154] In terms of those currently receiving a significant amount of Supporting People funding concerned about losing it over the period of redistribution, we are looking, in the working group, at ensuring that the period of phasing is long enough to enable any local authority facing a reduced amount of Supporting People funding to manage that change. That is a big concern, and it is not one that we take lightly; we are looking at it.

[155] **Mick Bates:** I move to section 3, which is about the evaluation of the national homelessness strategy. The strategy was written without clear targets for five of the 10 objectives. We all accept that it is a challenge to write clear targets, especially where some of the outcomes are difficult to quantify, but I am quite concerned that

there is no prevention indicator. We heard earlier about the emphasis on prevention and the need for services to be co-ordinated. Will a prevention indicator be introduced to ensure that local authorities are able to consistently measure whether they are preventing homelessness?

10.40 a.m.

[156] **Dr Roberts:** Yes, I think that we have got some good news to report on that. The local government data unit reference group has refined the draft indicator that was rejected in 2006. This was resubmitted to the performance sub-group on 2 February and has been recommended for approval to the improvement board, which will meet on 14 February. Subject to this final approval, the performance indicator will come into effect from April 2007. The new indicator will require authorities to measure the percentage of prevention achieved for households that approach them as being at risk of homelessness. This will be measured by reference to data on people who re-present to authorities within six months. This is a bit of a gap at the moment, and, as I say, we will hopefully close that. This goes back to the issue of gate keeping that the Chair raised, and will give us more information on that. However, it will hopefully also demonstrate that the prevention initiatives are actually working.

[157] **Mick Bates:** I look forward to seeing the results. Monitoring the performance of local authorities is fine, but the statute requires other organisations to contribute to the prevention of homelessness, without monitoring their actions. Do you intend to monitor the contribution of other organisations to the prevention of homelessness?

[158] **Dr Roberts:** Yes, we have written to all organisations covered in the strategy to find out what progress they are making against the objectives that have been set for them. So, we are having that information fed back to us. If there are any issues arising from that information, we will take it up with the organisation concerned. I think that the ethos behind this is that we are trying to work in partnership with a whole range of organisations, and while we have obviously got some firm targets at a headline level, it would be wrong to try to micromanage this. We want to work in partnership, we do not have all the ideas ourselves, and we want the various organisations to come forward. Having said that, if there are gaps, and if we feel that organisations are not prioritising this as they should, we will take that up.

[159] **Jocelyn Davies:** Some of my questions have helpfully been covered by other members of the committee, but on that last point, if you directly fund independent organisations, it does seem to me that you need robust evaluation. Can we have some assurances that that will be the case?

[160] **Dr Roberts:** I can assure you that we generally do; if there is funding attached to the organisation, then we will evaluate. In light of the report, we want to have another look at evaluation, and the report is right to recommend that we strengthen the evaluation. We also want to move the focus away from simply measuring activity—what they are doing—to measuring the impact of what they are doing, and that is not so easy, but it needs to be done.

[161] **Janet Davies:** Lastly, on the issue of a consistent national approach, while you obviously want to allow local areas a flexibility to meet their needs, there is also a

need for a level of consistency throughout Wales. How will you encourage local authorities to incorporate the views of service users into the development of the prevention of homelessness service?

[162] **Dr Roberts:** Specifically on service user involvement, in 2004 we commissioned and published research into good practice on consulting homeless people on provision of services, and that was circulated to all local authorities and voluntary bodies. Last year we approved funding for the City and County of Swansea Council to produce a toolkit, including a CD-ROM, on how to involve users in service planning, and that will be distributed in 2007. We have looked at service-user consultations as part of our review of local homelessness strategies, and made recommendations to local authorities to develop that aspect where appropriate. With the local government data unit, we are developing a set of model questions as part of guidance for local authorities on obtaining the views of service users, and that will be issued in 2007.

[163] **Janet Davies:** I believe that we are all agreed that there is progress on dealing with homelessness, preventing it, and dealing with the problems that people have when they are homeless. You will receive a verbatim report before the committee report is published, which will possibly take us into the next Assembly.

[164] Thank you both very much. Coffee will now be available, if you would like some before you struggle back to Cathays park. The committee will take a coffee break now.



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Eich cyf . Your ref
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6 March 2007

FURTHER INFORMATION RESULTING FROM ASSEMBLY AUDIT COMMITTEE EVIDENCE SESSION, 8th FEBRUARY 2007, 'Review of the Effectiveness of the National Homelessness Strategy'

Further to the Committee's session on 8th February, I undertook to write to you with further information on a number of aspects/issues as follows:

- The number of local authorities that have completed Local Housing Need Assessments.
- A note on the proportion of local authority owned land that has been disposed of for the development of affordable housing.

Unfortunately, after investigation, I must advise you that we are unable to provide you with this information.

Local authorities are now required to provide housing market assessments by June of this year. Although work is in progress in all areas on these assessments, to our knowledge none have been completed yet. Some authorities would have completed assessments a few years ago, but these would now be out of date.



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No information is collected on the proportion of local authority land disposed for development of affordable housing.

I am sorry I cannot assist further.

I am copying this letter to the Auditor General for Wales and the Assembly Compliance Office.

DR EMYR ROBERTS
Director, Department for Social
Justice and Regeneration