

WRITTEN EVIDENCE PAPER TO EQUALITY, LOCAL GOVERNMENT & COMMUNITIES COMMITTEE

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to set out my priorities for the Communities and Children's portfolio. The portfolio is wide ranging and my overarching aim is to secure improved wellbeing and economic prosperity. With respect to the elements of it which are of interest to the Committee, my priorities include our commitment to housing supply and quality, regeneration, preventing homelessness, playing my part in tackling poverty, cohesion, equality of opportunity, human rights, justice, the armed forces community and community safety.

In these areas, I will be taking forward a number of priority actions set out in the Labour Party manifesto. Including:

- *Delivering an extra 20,000 affordable homes in the next term and making sure those homes are capable of adapting to society's changing needs and challenges;*
- *Protecting social housing by ending the Right to Buy;*
- *Working with communities to protect local facilities that bring people together and to assist communities to take ownership of community assets themselves where possible and appropriate; and*
- *Implementing and building on the provisions of our ground-breaking Violence against Women, Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence Act.*

These, and other priorities, have clear synergies, and will be taken forward in line with wider portfolio activities which focus on ensuring all children have the best possible start in life and the opportunity to thrive and succeed.

The work of my department will be underpinned by a commitment to the principles of the Well-being of Future Generations Act

Housing and Regeneration

Providing people with a safe, warm and secure home is a key priority for this Government. This is why we have committed to safeguarding social housing through the abolition of the Right to Buy. I will be introducing a Bill to end the Right to Buy and associated rights in the first year of the Government's legislative programme. The legislation will, if passed, protect our social housing stock from further reduction, and give social landlords the confidence to build new homes, ensuring social housing is available for people who need it.

I will also be bringing forward proposals to deliver on our ambitious target of providing a further 20,000 affordable homes during the term of this Assembly. We will deliver these homes in partnership with Registered Social Landlords, Local Authorities and private developers. I recognise the ambition and challenge this target presents. This is why I am looking at new and innovative ways of delivering housing,

to support our established programmes which exceeded our target of 10,000 affordable homes in the previous administration.

I also want to bring a sharper focus to new models of housing that, for example, reduce carbon emissions and help tackle fuel poverty which can subsequently deliver benefits for health and social services by preventing admissions into hospital and allowing faster discharges. We need to take the longer view as well as respond to the changing demographics within our communities. Doing things differently won't necessarily be easy or cheaper at least in the short term but the long term benefits are likely to be significant. There are good examples out there that will point us in the right direction and I want to set an example that others will follow.

I will continue to work with social landlords to ensure their homes meet the Welsh Quality Housing Standard by 2020 and that it is maintained afterwards. We have made excellent progress to date. By 31 March 2015, 74 per cent of the stock met the Standard and I'm anticipating further progress when the new statistics are released this Autumn. We are requiring social landlords to achieve community benefits through their contracts and I am also very pleased to say that this is delivering excellent outcomes in terms of jobs, training and other benefits in their local areas.

We are approaching the first anniversary of commencing the mandatory registration and licensing scheme for private landlords and lettings agents in Part 1 of the Housing (Wales) Act 2014. The first year has concentrated on raising awareness of the requirements of the new legislation and by the end of August 2016, 19,573 private landlords had already registered, with some 33,566 landlords and agents having opened accounts. We are now widening the communications activities we are undertaking with our partners. Moving forward, there will be a growing focus on compliance and an even sharper focus on the action required to tackle poor landlords.

Good progress has been made in the first year of our new legislation to prevent homelessness with an overall prevention rate of 65 per cent against the target rate of 64 per cent. Many challenges lie ahead, particularly given the impact of welfare reforms and continuing pressures on public finances. I am committed to helping local authorities to implement the legislation and I commend them and their partners for their work to date. An independent evaluation is in hand, which will help identify what more can be done to help people who are homeless or who are at risk of homelessness to avoid the negative impact it can have on their lives.

Discussions are well underway looking at the future of another Regeneration programme beyond April 2017. The Vibrant and Viable Places capital regeneration programme has supported many communities across Wales, creating 2,000 jobs, supporting 9,000 people into work, delivering 1000 affordable homes and 2,300 market housing units. If we are to deliver maximum benefit from our next investment programme we need to ensure that regeneration policies are aligned even more closely with our broader policy agenda in economically disadvantaged communities. We need to take into account the wider opportunities provided by other significant investment programmes such as the Metro. We also need to ensure that we are addressing the social as well as the physical aspects of regeneration. Our

commitment to improving employability and developing employment opportunities must be central to our Regeneration work.

Regeneration is also one of the policy areas where we are having to consider the impact of the EU referendum. Urban regeneration has always been a central component of the European Regional Development Fund programme in Wales. It is not too soon to be thinking about the nature of the programmes we need to be developing in order that we can carry on bringing jobs and prosperity to all parts of Wales in future.

Equality of Opportunity and Human Rights

My priorities for Equality are set out in the eight Equality Objectives, which were published on 10 March 2016. These objectives focus on tackling the most entrenched inequalities in Wales and promoting cohesive communities. My officials are currently drafting the Strategic Equality Plan for 2016-20 which will contain key cross cutting actions across all portfolios, enabling equality to be embedded and mainstreamed into the work of all Departments which will support delivery of the Equality Objectives. The Strategic Equality Plan will be published this year.

Key is the implementation of the Violence against Women, Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence (Wales) Act 2015. Our proposed approach to tackle these issues is currently out for consultation and will be formally published in November. The All Wales Honour Based Violence Leadership Group has been set up to take forward actions in Wales in regards to Honour Based Violence, Forced Marriage and Female Genital Mutilation. We have also ensured that the Supporting People Programme grant is more flexible for Local Authorities to use the grant more widely and to help support preventative services for victims of domestic abuse including low and medium levels of support. My officials are working with Local Authority commissioners and Local Health Boards and Public Health Wales to highlight examples of good practice such as mental health support services which reduce pressures on NHS and social care services.

I intend to bring forward legislation to remove the defence of reasonable punishment. The legislation is not about telling parents how to bring up their child but rather is about providing clarity to parents on acceptable and effective ways of disciplining their children. The proposed legislation is one part of a wider package of measures to promote positive parenting. The proposed legislation will be subject to the full scrutiny of the legislative process. We will be consulting formally and holding a series of engagement events to gather the views of relevant stakeholders and members of the public. The views we receive will be carefully considered to inform the development of the legislation, which we plan to introduce in either the second, or third years of the National Assembly for Wales.

Cohesion, Communities and Making our Communities Safer

Creating communities in which people feel safe is a theme which runs through many of the Government's commitments, including those in my portfolio. We deliver with

our partners in local government, the NHS and third sector; and work closely with non devolved organisations such as the police through a range of strategies and partnerships.

I am committed to ensuring this Government promotes positive community cohesion and provides enhanced victim support. However, I acknowledge that there are continued tensions and cohesion-related issues, particularly following the EU Referendum. I will be launching Inclusion Projects at the end of September, which include funding for the continuation of a National Hate Crime Centre.

I will continue work to tackle extremism through CONTEST and the Extremism Board Wales (CEBW). The Wales Extremism and Counter Terrorism Unit (WECTU), who are also represented on CEBW, provide Wales-level briefings to the Cabinet on a regular basis providing an overview of strategy and work in Wales to tackle terrorism and extremism.

I will meet regularly with the four Police and Crime Commissioners and Chief Constables and continue to build on our constructive and positive working relationship.

Wales has a strong history of providing sanctuary to refugees from all over the world. This tradition is continuing, with communities across Wales providing a warm welcome to Syrian refugees who have been forced to flee their war torn country. We are working closely with our partners to ensure Wales plays its full part in responding to the current crisis.

In March we launched our 3 year 'Refugee and Asylum Delivery Plan'. It is a living document and will be reviewed regularly, particularly in light of the Syrian Resettlement Programme and other new schemes to support refugee and asylum seeking children.

I will deliver the commitments in Children and Young People First (2014), the Welsh Governments and Youth Justice Boards joint Strategy to improve services for young people from Wales at risk of becoming involved in, or in, the youth justice system. I will work with the National Offender Management Service and wider stakeholders to develop a Framework to improve services for those engaged in or at risk of entering the criminal justice system in Wales.

We will build on the results of the evaluation of anti-slavery training and the Survivor Care Pathway which found evidence of high-quality work being undertaken with many stakeholders reporting their understanding that Wales is leading the UK in its response to modern slavery and that this is recognised by those working outside of Wales.

Wales has a good record of effective multi-agency working in civil emergencies which is built around the close co-operation and collaboration which exists between the emergency services, local authorities, NHS and other responder agencies. This was demonstrated in the safety and security arrangements for the Olympics in 2012 and for the NATO Summit in 2014. The experience of these events helps us prepare for future events such as the UEFA Champions League final in Cardiff in June 2017.

Demonstrating our ability to deliver the safety and security for these events enhances our reputation on the world stage.

I will also focus on sustaining the reduction in fires and using the capability of the fire service to tackle other hazards too. In particular, the Cabinet Secretary for Health, Well-Being and Sport and I will set out our shared priorities for how the fire service can best support the NHS. This will include preventing domestic accidents, facilitating discharge from hospital into a safe home environment, and responding to non-fire medical emergencies where that falls within the fire service's existing capability.

In line with our new National Framework for Fire and Rescue Services, I also propose to consult on a duty for the fire service to respond to flooding and other water-related emergencies. The service already provides such a response, but the risks of flooding in particular are too great for this to be based only on a voluntary commitment.

We have strong relationships with both Fire and Rescue Authorities and with firefighters' unions, and I intend to pursue these changes with the support of all of them.

We remain committed to providing effective services and support that meets the needs of the Armed Forces community in Wales. We have worked with and listened to our key partners to refresh our Package of Support. We have also produced a separate document for serving personnel and their families called Welcome to Wales. These two documents will set out the support available across Ministerial portfolios and support organisations such as the Royal British Legion and the Forces Family Federations.

We know that with some members of the Armed Forces community support for health needs is crucial that is why this Government continues to invest in Veterans NHS Wales and will continue to work with our partners to ensure in the future our veterans continue to receive healthcare that meets their needs, creating a more seamless approach to service delivery.

We are currently developing a Housing Referral pathway to enable veterans and their families to make an informed choice as to which option is most appropriate for them. I will be launching the Pathway during the Autumn term.

I will continue to hold my Armed Forces Expert Group meetings to bring together key partners to discuss issues affecting the Armed Forces community and to discuss collaborative measures on how to address these.

Helping to Tackle Poverty

[Giving children the best possible start in life is a key priority for my portfolio.](#) This is particularly important for those children who are most at risk of having their life chances harmed. I am committed to supporting all families, especially those living in poverty. I will continue to focus on tackling child poverty and improving the outcomes of low income households through the delivery of our Child Poverty Strategy, which

we revised and published last year. Underpinning this are programmes such as Flying Start and Families First. I will continue to deliver Flying Start which helps to provide parents with the skills they need to support their child's development, giving them the best start in life. Also, following a period of review, I am proposing to refine delivery of Families First to ensure it is able to develop services which address identified gaps in service provision for parents and young people and link the work of the programme clearly with my wider portfolio priority of the prevention of Adverse Childhood Experiences.

My portfolio also includes key programmes to tackle poverty by supporting people into employment which the Welsh Government recognises as the principle route out of poverty: Communities for Work, Lift, and PaCE (Parents, Childcare and Employment).

The Lift Programme reflects our commitment to provide 5,000 training and employment opportunities to people living in workless households by the end of 2017. Progress so far has been good and we are well on track to meet our target. Building on the success of Lift, we will continue to deliver the Communities for Work programme which is a community based advisory service, jointly funded by the European Social Fund, being delivered across the 52 Communities First areas in Wales to increase the employability of economically inactive and long term unemployed adults who have complex barriers to employment; it also works to reduce the number of 16-24 year olds who are Not in Education Employment or Training. Complementing both Lift and Communities for Work, the PaCE programme, jointly funded with the European Social Fund will continue to operate outside of Communities First areas delivering a community based advisory service to parents who consider childcare to be their main barrier to accessing training or employment.

I will develop a Financial Inclusion Delivery Plan in consultation with key partners and informed by responses to the public consultation on the draft Financial Inclusion Strategy. The Delivery Plan, which will be published later this year, will set out the actions and success measures required to increase financial inclusion across Wales.

I will continue to do all that I can to support volunteers and Third Sector organisations to deliver our shared objectives and enable local grass roots Third Sector organisations to continue to deliver on the ground, with support provided across Wales through the Third Sector Infrastructure (Wales Council for Voluntary Action, County Voluntary Councils and Volunteer Centres).

We are committed to the protection of Community Assets. There is interest across Welsh Government in this area of work and much progress has been achieved through strong collaboration across portfolios..

I will continue to work to mitigate the impacts of the UK Government's welfare reforms in Wales through our continued investment in frontline advisory services, maximising benefit entitlement and our Discretionary Assistance Fund.

**CABINET SECRETARY FOR COMMUNITIES & CHILDREN
SEPTEMBER 2016.**