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Y Pwyllgor Cymunedau, Cydraddoldeb a Llywodraeth Leol
Communities, Equality and Local Government Committee
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Llywodraeth Cymru
Welsh Government

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Dear Christine

Thank you for your letter of 8 October regarding the Committee's request for additional information following the evidence session on 24 September.

I am pleased to provide further information. This is attached in Appendix 1. I have structured the information around the Committee's questions for ease of reference.

I trust the information will be helpful. Please do not hesitate to contact me if you have anymore queries.

Regards
Lesley

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Rydym yn croesawu derbyn gohebiaeth yn Gymraeg. Byddwn yn ateb gohebiaeth a dderbynnir yn Gymraeg yn Gymraeg ac ni fydd gohebu yn Gymraeg yn arwain at oedi.

We welcome receiving correspondence in Welsh. Any correspondence received in Welsh will be answered in Welsh and corresponding in Welsh will not lead to a delay in responding.

Appendix 1

National System for Home Adaptations

Update on the work being taken forward to develop a national system for adaptations:

- write to the Committee by March 2016 to provide information on the outcome of the task force group's work considering;**
- how to improve the performance of home adaptation services; and**
- how to ensure the effective evaluation and performance monitoring of all adaptation services, not just Disabled Facilities Grants.**

As I mentioned in the Committee session, I have asked officials to work with stakeholders to deliver an enhanced adaptations system which was a key feature of the report on the review of adaptations I announced last February. The group has been tasked with developing and agreeing an enhanced system by next March. A number of work streams have been identified, including how to ensure the system is streamlined and clearer for all applicants irrespective of age and tenure. The group will also report on how to measure and evaluate delivery of the enhanced system. This will cover not just Disabled Facilities Grants but all types of adaptations, and all delivery organisations. I will share the proposals with the Committee in due course.

Ask the Minister for Natural Resources to share any planning work undertaken on the viability of forestry commission land in relation to housing development with the Committee:

The Welsh Government worked with Forestry Commission Wales around 10 years ago to survey the woodland estate it managed at that time on behalf of Welsh Ministers to assess its suitability for the development of affordable housing. The survey indicated a small number of potentially suitable sites and developments were carried out at two locations - Dinas Mawddwy in Gwynedd (2 houses) and Dolwyddelan in Denbighshire, where two houses were built in association with local housing associations. Other sites were assessed but were ruled out at that time due to difficulties with access to public roads or other essential services. Natural Resources Wales assumed responsibility for the management of this land in 2013 and I will raise the issue of its potential use for housing development with the Minister for Natural Resources.

Provide information on the amount of land released for housing in the last two years, and how much is likely to be released in the forthcoming two years:

The Welsh Government's Land Release Programme plays an important role in utilising land to increase the provision of housing. In 2010, sixteen sites were transferred to the Housing Department and work is ongoing to unlock the sites to provide housing, with twelve sites sold to date, of which five were sold in the last two years. Work is ongoing to sell the remaining four sites and it is hoped these will be sold within the next two years.

The Land Release Programme is expected to deliver a total of approximately 400 affordable homes on its land during the term of this administration with over 100 further affordable homes resulting from the remaining sites after this time.

The Land Release Team is continuing to work with colleagues in Economy, Skills and Natural Resources (primarily) and other Welsh Government departments to discuss and explore further potential land sites for the purpose of housing development on an ongoing basis. Colleagues in Economy, Skills and Natural Resources have also sold a number of land sites for housing developments where the Housing Department's input to bring them forward has not been necessary.

Public sector land is making a significant contribution towards the delivery of affordable homes with 1,238 new affordable homes delivered on it in the 2012-13 and 2013-14 years. Of which; 793 homes were on Local Authority land, with an additional 445 affordable homes on land owned by Welsh Government, Welsh Government sponsored bodies, other central government departments, health authorities and police and fire and rescue services. The 2014-15 figures are due to be released by the end of October.

The Land Release Team will also be exploring other ways it can expedite and maximise housing and affordable housing delivery through land and will contribute more widely to the implementation of the proposals for the more strategic use of public land being considered by Chris Sutton on behalf of the First Minister.

In addition, following the pilot of the Affordable Housing Land Scheme in 2014-15, the 2015-16 renamed "Land for Housing Scheme," will provide loan funding to Registered Social Landlords to purchase land to support housing supply. The scheme will help tackle the problem of limited supply of housing by increasing the funding options available to them to acquire land sites for affordable and/or market housing development. The loans awarded from the 2014-15 scheme are due to deliver 200 additional homes on 12 land sites. The application window for the 2015-16 scheme closed in mid-September and interest for the scheme has been high. Awards of the successful applications are expected by the end of October.

Whether the commencement of Part 1 of the Housing (Wales) Act 2014 is likely to go ahead as planned in October:

"Rent Smart Wales" is the name for the landlord registration and landlord and agents licensing scheme introduced under Part 1 of the Housing (Wales) Act 2014. I mentioned previously that I hoped the scheme would launch in October 2015. Following detailed consideration of the IT system required to support the scheme, and to allow extra testing of it a functionality before the scheme goes live, I have agreed a slightly later launch date and am pleased to inform you that Rent Smart Wales will commence operations on 23 November 2015.

Update on the development of the Code of Practice that will be issued under Part 1 of the Housing (Wales) Act 2014:

Committee members will recall that we have formally designated Cardiff Council as the single licensing authority. Cardiff is developing the IT system which will allow landlords and agents to register on-line. In addition, the licensing authority has published the training requirements and will shortly begin approving training providers ready for the scheme to open. Finally, the Code of Practice, to which licensed landlords and agents will have to adhere, has been revised to reflect comments made during the consultation exercise and also incorporates many of the views of the Committee. We laid the document on 6 October 2015 in advance of the debate next month.

Concerns about the definition of vulnerability in Section 71 of the Housing (Wales) Act 2014 in light of the recent Supreme Court judgement:

I issued clarification of the impact of the Supreme Court cases to Local Authorities in July this year. Our legislation on homelessness provides greater protection than in England, and we continue to work in partnership with Local Authorities, Shelter Cymru and others to ensure this protection continues to be provided in Wales. The Judgments do not fundamentally change the approach in Wales as set out in the legislation and the accompanying code of guidance and will not result in vulnerable people in Wales being faced with a tougher test than vulnerable people in England. However, ultimately the application of rights under the law can only be decided in each case through the courts.

Whether Local Authorities are clear on how they should be applying the law in this area, following the judgement, and whether Welsh Government guidance regarding vulnerability should be made clearer:

We issued statutory guidance in April this year to support the effective implementation of the Housing (Wales) Act 2014 including vulnerability. We will keep the document under review and continue to update it to reflect case law.

How the National Pathway for Homelessness Services to Children, Young People and Adults in the Secure Estate will be monitored:

The National Pathway for Homelessness Services to Children, Young People and Adults is in the process of being finalised following public consultation. After its launch, we will monitor its implementation through our regular liaison with all key stakeholders, including the national implementation group for the Wales Reducing Re-Offending Pathways Group and our Prisoner Accommodation Resettlement Working Group. In addition, we are preparing to commission specific research to evaluate the impact of the legislation in Part 2 of the Housing (Wales) Act 2014 on preventing homelessness amongst former prisoners.

How the e-PIMS database is being used to facilitate affordable house building, how much land has been made available for affordable housing as a direct result of the e-PIMS database and what annual targets have been set for the future release of land from e-PIMS for the purpose of providing affordable housing:

Over the last few years, significant progress has been made in efforts to populate the e-PIMS all Wales public sector asset database. There are circa 22,000 entries within Wales. The approach has been based on a phased strategy populating the system with estate records, holdings in the name of Welsh Ministers and Welsh Government sponsored bodies, the NHS estate in Wales and the emergency services. Unitary authorities have been placing details of their holdings within the database and there has been engagement with Town and Community councils too.

Welsh Government officials arranged for a number of seminars to be delivered to Registered Social Landlords to explain how e-PIMS maps the public sector assets (including land). e-PIMS is a voluntary system but Registered Social Landlords across Wales have access to it and can interrogate assets offered as surplus. Furthermore, on the back of the Faith in Affordable Housing initiative, the Church in Wales and the Presbyterian Church of Wales have recorded their assets too. In common with other users, if Registered Social Landlords have an interest in an asset they make direct contact with the asset holder. As a result we do not hold records of sales or transfers as a direct consequence of the e-PIMS contact.

The National Assets Working Group Land Transfer Protocol recommends that it is best practice to offer surplus property assets within the public sector for 40 days prior to wider marketing. That public sector offer extends to Registered Social Landlords who therefore can have an exclusive first option on public sector assets. As part of that service, Welsh Government officials email the community of e-PIMS users (including Registered Social Landlords) with a surplus list once a month.

Registered Social Landlords are not the only developers of affordable housing. Land may have a specific allocation within the terms of any local planning requirement. e-PIMS includes a public portal, allowing local and national builders the opportunity to see (after the 40 day period) surplus public sector property. This is a developing area but we understand that representatives from within the building professions have been seeking lists of surplus public land for some years.

The e-PIMS tool was developed and released very much for local use and we cannot predict which assets organisations would declare surplus. Under those circumstances there are no targets allocated specifically to e-PIMS site delivery. e-PIMS itself is seen very much as a tool to support the collaborative agenda; the desire to collaborate must come from the individual public bodies.

