

WLGA ANNUAL CONFERENCE 2005

Members will be aware that the Annual WLGA Conference was held in Swansea on 3 and 4 October 2005. Councillors Devichand, Hall and Philpott attended, and a report on proceedings is as follows:

Following the welcome address by Councillor John Davies, Pembrokeshire (Councillor Gravell from Carmarthenshire was unfortunately unable to attend), the first session got off to a lively start with an address from WLGA Leader, Councillor Alex Aldridge followed by the Deputy Local Government Minister for the Welsh Assembly Government, Christine Chapman AM. She majored on the policy of revitalising Welsh Local Government by collaboration rather than a restructuring. She warned that it would be unacceptable if the UK Government implemented changes in England which might have legislative or financial implications for Wales, potentially undermining our collaborative way of working; she was referring to Sir Michael Lyons' inquiry into Local Government Funding.

Ben Page, a Director with MORI Social Research Institute gave a humorous presentation on how Local Government is seen by the public before a panel discussion on 'What is Local Government for?' On the panel were Sir Michael Lyons, Dennis Reed of the LG Information Unit, David Walker of the Guardian's 'Public' magazine and the Auditor General for Wales, Jeremy Coleman. The interesting contribution to this was Sir Michael's first major speech since the remit of his inquiry had been extended and thereby delayed. He highlighted the need for an UK political process to decide whether targets should be improved centrally as opposed to local decision making. He also argued for much more public debate on the cost of public services.

Following lunch, there were six breakout sessions on Education, Social Services, Local Environment, Prosperous Communities, Community Safety and Social Housing.

Two debates followed the breakout sessions, one on Better Governance for Wales with the panel consisting of AMs, the Director of the Institute of Welsh Affairs and two professors, Kevin Morgan from Cardiff and Laura McAllister from Liverpool University.

The second debate was on Regeneration – the cultural transformation of Wales, with panel members chosen from the Arts Council of Wales, Plaid Cymru, the Wales Millennium Centre and BBC Wales.

The evening reception before dinner was taken up with the launch of 'Excellence Wales' and the First Minister gave the keynote after dinner speech.

The second day commenced with presentations on the theme of "Collaborate or Stagnate: joint working in Wales". Andrew Davies AM, Minister for Economic Development and Transport opened the session stating that the future wasn't only about making tough decisions but about seeing them through. The only way that the

vision would be achieved was by working in partnership and Authorities who chose to work on their own would struggle. The Welsh Assembly Government was committed to building a new Welsh public service based on collaboration and co-operation rather than competition. There was a need to improve the ways in which services were designed as well as the way that they were delivered so as to achieve the vision of delivering accountable, responsive and effective public services.

Ann Beynon, National Manager (Wales) BT spoke from the perspective of the private sector and of the changes that had occurred within BT and the challenge it faced for a large company to act as a small local company.

The Chief Executive of Carmarthenshire County Council spoke in his capacity as the Chair of SOLACE Wales and outlined wide ranging examples of good collaborative practice arrangements throughout Wales.

The session closed with a somewhat provocative presentation by David Moffet, Chief Executive, Welsh Rugby Union who stated that the Assembly should concentrate on setting strategy and KPI's and allow the Local Authorities to concentrate on delivering services with adequate resources.

Breakout sessions were held on the same themes as the first day but explored different aspects of the subject areas .

Prior to the closing session, the Members Charter was launched and it is hoped to discuss with the WLGA how the Charter can be modified to meet the needs of Fire and Rescue Authorities. The Charter recognises achievement and progression in support and development for Members across Welsh local authorities and aims to provide a broad framework of help and support as authorities strive to continually improve the services they provide to elected members.

The final session consisted of a panel discussion with Paul Wheeler, Director, Political Skills Forum, Cllr Rodney Berman, Leader, Cardiff City Council, Dr Colin Copus, INLOGOV and Cllr Rhiannon Wyn Hughes, Leader, Denbighshire County Council who shared their own personal insights on meeting the challenge as Members.

In general, the Conference proved to be a worthwhile event and particularly useful now that responsibility for Fire and Rescue matters has been devolved to the Welsh Assembly Government and fire and rescue matters sit within the Welsh local government family.