

## **FIN(4) AM 02**

### **Finance Committee Inquiry into Asset Management**

#### **Response from Blaenau Gwent**

Is asset management linked to wider strategic and policy objectives, both in the Welsh Government, and across the wider public sector?

We are trying to link in with wider strategic and policy objectives. However, the collaborative agenda is making it very difficult to strategically manage and plan for the estate. For example, in Blaenau Gwent we are collaborating with Caerphilly CBC in Social Services. Our Education Service is part of the wider E.A.S. and we have recently agreed a joint Chief Education officer with Newport CC. Collaborative arrangements are being discussed in respect of elements of Neighbourhood Services and Highways and consideration is being given to Leisure Trusts. If we need to discuss ICT implications we are in collaboration with Merthyr CBC. The issues are two fold:

- Project management is extremely complex due to the number of partners that need to be involved/consulted
- Future accommodation arrangements for the new collaborations may well take staff/services physically out of the Borough and/or out of the management of Blaenau Gwent CBC. The many unknowns, due to the early stages of the collaborative projects, make planning for the estate beyond the next couple of years extremely difficult. In addition, the property implications of collaborative service delivery are not always considered at the appropriate time.

Despite the budget constraints, there are still political issues with difficult decisions being made and localism.

What lessons can, or have, been learnt from existing good practice in Wales, or elsewhere, in relation to approaches to asset management improvement in the public sector?

The approach to assessing the condition and suitability of schools for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Schools project whereby Welsh Government provided resources to undertake high level surveys was a good one (although would have been better if they also included high level costs). Despite the annual data returns many Councils still do not understand their maintenance issues fully due to lack resources to undertake surveys – many of the returns are not based on reliable data.

Whilst there are facilities available for sharing good practice, they do not appear to be used/kept updated. The W.A.O. Good Practice Exchange has

few recent case studies. The CIPFA Property website does have a resource sharing area but very few Welsh Local Authorities supply information. We have undertaken a lot of research into different approaches in the last couple of years to develop our own policies, predominantly in the following areas:

- Corporate AMP
- Corporate Landlord models
- Performance Management frameworks
- Maintenance Strategies
- Place Based/Collaborative asset management
- Agile Working/Workplace Transformation
- Community Asset Transfer

However, it is difficult to access relevant and up to date examples of good practice together in one place and the research has been very time consuming. A centrally maintained and regularly updated resource would be very useful broken down by subject areas.

Whilst we would not necessarily recommend an audit regime as prescriptive as the previous Comprehensive Area Assessments in England, there may be a role for W.A.O. to be more robust as to the requirement for Local Authorities to meet a prescribed asset management framework. The W.A.O. Buildings Management audit provided the internal driver Blaenau Gwent needed to progress asset management at a corporate level. It would have been useful to have received a return visit to assess progress and help us take forward the areas we still need to address.

One of the main issues that inhibits progress within Blaenau Gwent is a lack of resources. We are fortunate to have received NAWG and WG Invest to Save funding which means we can progress our Workplace Transformation, Collaborative Asset Management and LABV projects. However, there are some areas we still need to progress, particularly those involving non-traditional approaches that we have limited or no experience of. We are not able to utilise consultancy due to budget constraints. WG did at one time consider a secondment scheme for their property staff. A centralised WG Asset Management Team to provide specialist consultancy as needed could be a significant benefit.

What progress has been made by the Welsh Government in strategic asset management and implementing initiatives to improve the efficiency of asset management across the Welsh public sector?

The NAWG and WG Invest to Save funding has enabled us to undertake projects that we could not resource otherwise. The benefits of engaging with the NAWG and potential funding, however, are not generally known (evidenced through speaking with colleagues at the CIPFA/CLAW events). There may be a need to promote the initiative more widely, potentially in partnership with CLAW/CIPFA? One of the consultants working with us on

Workplace Transformation has also offered to organise a seminar for Welsh Local Authorities on Smarter Ways of Working ([www.flexibility.co.uk](http://www.flexibility.co.uk)).

In 2010 the Wales Audit Office made the following recommendations, from your experience, to what extent has progress been made in relation to these?

- the Assembly Government should enable more effective land and buildings management across Wales by consulting with public bodies to ascertain what further guidance, information, support and incentives may be required to encourage an improved and more co-ordinated approach to the management of land and buildings;
- ensure land and buildings strategies are up to date and link clearly with corporate and service objectives;
- involve all stakeholders in the development of land and buildings strategies with ownership of the strategies at the highest level.
- develop service land and buildings plans which link to the corporate land and buildings strategy;
- integrate land and buildings management with service planning, workforce planning and ICT strategies, doing more to improve utilisation through flexible working and land and buildings rationalisation;
- ensure roles and responsibilities for managing land and buildings are clearly defined, understood and communicated

The NAWG project is a good start but as noted above, the different collaboration footprints do present issues when trying to strategically plan for future property requirements. Whilst we completed our Corporate AMP early in 2012, service delivery is changing at a rapid pace and it is already out of date (although annual AMP updates will be provided). Our Workplace Transformation project for example has had to respond to several significant changes since initiated; ICT collaboration, Social Services collaboration and the integrated Education Achievement Service. This does however highlight and support the requirement for an integrated approach to asset management and service planning, workforce planning and ICT strategies.