

Minister for Housing, Regeneration and Heritage

Address to the Bevan Foundation

**Tuesday 12 July, 6.00pm – 7.30pm
Wales Millennium Centre**

Introduction

Thank you for inviting me here tonight. I am always happy to support the work of The Bevan Foundation a valued critical friend of the Welsh Government and an essential instigator of debate, thought and independent research in Wales.

I am a proud member of the Foundation and last year, as Deputy Minister for Children I was delighted to write the foreword to your publication on Poverty and Social Exclusion in Wales.

I am just as pleased today to be addressing you as Minister for Housing, Regeneration and Heritage.

Of course this Foundation takes its name from perhaps one of the most important but less celebrated Housing Ministers in this country's past; Bevan's other achievements were such that his phenomenal record as a Housing Minister in the post-war period is sometimes overlooked.

Bevan does sometimes suffer by comparison to the arch-house builder of modern Britain, Harold Macmillan. But whereas Macmillan delivered quantity – the matter for Bevan was always – quite rightly, the quality of homes available to the British people.

Bevan rebuilt vast swathes of the country following years of war damage and neglect and the Beveridge Report from which Bevan took his lead said that;

"The greatest opportunity open in this country for raising the general standard of living lies in housing."

For too many families in Wales today, this challenge remains true. How we rise to this challenge, in the face of such tight financial restraints and in the face of sporadic intransigence to raising standards, will be fundamental to the work of my department over the coming five years and I will come on to this later in my speech.

I should perhaps begin with an explanation of this department, new as it is.

Keen observers will be aware that all the key elements of my current portfolio were previously held by Plaid Cymru Ministers.

And if that wasn't enough to paint a target on my back, the official abbreviated title of the Department – Housing, Regeneration Heritage to HRH is surely red rag to a bull!

There is, in all seriousness, a logic and an empathy between the different areas of the department; that is something I am determined to develop.

The first thing I asked of my officials is that they break out of old silos, old ways of thinking and support each other as a Department – that will take time, but is already being embraced by most and allowing for a flourishing of ideas and creativity.

The successful delivery on these three policy areas of housing, regeneration and heritage are central to this Government's desire to see sustainable vibrant communities.

But they are also at the heart of our commitment to individual - and indeed community wellbeing.

In all likelihood, if you are not working, not at school or in hospital – then you will either be at home or taking part in

arts, culture or sport. These are the building blocks that give our lives meaning beyond that which we are compelled to do.

I am under no illusion about what an awesome responsibility that is for a Ministry.

And we are acutely aware of the scale of the challenge we face.

The combination of very difficult circumstances is unprecedented in the short life-time of the Assembly. The global recession is leading to higher unemployment and increasing demands in all aspects of social policy including housing. And in some cases – such as the changes to housing benefit – these demands are in effect being exacerbated by decisions taken by the Tory-led Government in Westminster.

Those challenges are real, and political disagreement and conflict is to be expected – indeed at times it is absolutely essential. But that does not mean the acceptance of an excuses culture, or scapegoating in this Department or across Government.

My commitment is to make sure that housing, regeneration and heritage make the maximum possible contribution to achieving the promises we made to the people of Wales through the Labour Manifesto in May.

I'm confident that we are going to be able to make that contribution.

I'm confident not just because of the talent within the current Government, but because the One Wales Government has given us a solid platform on which to build. It is right to recognise this, particularly on housing

and I pay tribute to the work done by my predecessor
Jocelyn Davies.

The partnership working that started under the last
Government was impressive and we will build on this, both
within my portfolio and between us and the rest of
government.

Regeneration

In future our regeneration projects must involve even
stronger integration involving all aspects of my new
Ministerial responsibilities.

We will be better placed to coordinate the housing
elements of our regeneration efforts in places like Rhyl for
example. But I also want to see a further strengthening of
the heritage aspects of regeneration.

What's happened in Blaenafon over recent years illustrates the benefits of this approach.

But a town does not need to have World Heritage status for its historic character to be respected and built upon.

I want us to build on the Townscape Heritage Initiative.

I want the Heritage Lottery Fund and the Welsh Government to work with local authorities to secure the conservation of valued but vulnerable buildings within conservation areas.

This process will be challenging.

Too often citizens are not engaged with their heritage and do not think about the part that an amazing past has to play in their lives and those of their communities and families.

Cadw will therefore be undertaking a programme of studies across Wales that identify the ways in which history makes places special and gives them their distinctive character.

We also need to strive even harder to make sure that the physical aspects of regeneration for which my department is responsible are fully integrated with programmes targeting individuals and communities.

The refocusing of Communities First announced by Carl Sargeant provides an important opportunity. We must ensure that people have the skills they need to truly benefit from our investment in the quality of their lives.

Arts and Sport

Partnership working has also become an ever more important aspect of our work in support of sport and the arts.

I was very pleased to be able to open the Welsh School Games – Gemau Cymru – last week. This was an innovative project involving a range of sports governing bodies, schools, the Urdd and our major events unit.

Gemau Cymru was very much a pilot initiative. We are a long way from having evaluated the evidence from that pilot. But I feel confident in stating that if Gemau Cymru is going to become part of our annual calendar it will be crucially dependent on the need to build on the excellent partnership which is already in place.

We remain committed to ensuring that children and young people are provided with basic physical literacy skills from

an early age and that physical literacy is as important a developmental skill as reading and writing.

To that end, we will continue to invest in Free Swimming and to capitalise on its contribution to increasing physical activity levels.

In our communities, Free Swimming continues to deliver, year on year, huge numbers of swims and structured sessions.

Public libraries are an increasingly important resource within our communities which once again are being harnessed in new and innovative ways. Cymal – our libraries and museums division - is driving the development of new forms of partnership. Libraries are already a crucial aspect of our approach to digital inclusion. But so far we have only scratched the surface in developing their wider social role.

I am passionate about the provision of high quality cultural experiences – particularly for children and young people. The arts have a really important contribution to make to our wellbeing.

In this regard it is worth stressing how proud I am that the Welsh Government settlement for the arts and for museums was so much better than in England.

Arts funding will decrease by around 5 per cent in Wales over the next three years but the comparable figure in England is some three times that.

The Arts Council already has a portfolio of companies and programmes that are doing brilliant work with children and young people - Valleys Kids, Reach the Heights, Head 4 Arts, Splash, Young Promoters and so on.

However Leighton Andrews and I have recently launched a review of our work in this area with a view in future to ensuring even stronger provision for children and young people.

Housing

Housing is of course, central to improving the lives of the people of Wales, particularly those from the most disadvantaged communities. We believe that everyone should have the opportunity to live in a good quality home within a secure and safe community.

Those values are in marked contrast to those which underpin the Welfare Reforms currently being enacted by the Conservatives in Westminster.

But as I said earlier, we cannot and will not use this as an excuse to fail our people.

The people of Wales, who so overwhelmingly voted “yes” in the recent Assembly referendum will expect us to act, will expect devolution to deliver – they have every right to have that expectation.

Housing Benefit Cuts

Equally, we must be honest with people about what we are able to deliver.

The changes to housing benefit for example, will certainly lead to increased homelessness and household poverty, including child poverty. We have recently learned that Tory Ministers themselves have been privately warning as much.

As a result of the April 2011 changes alone nearly all local housing allowance claimants stand to lose an average £9.00 per week.

The housing benefit changes will be compounded for many by cuts in other benefits. I am unhappy at the lack of evidence gathered by the UK Government in advance of these changes to measure their likely impact.

We are therefore contributing to research over the next two years to assess what the consequences are for people reliant on housing benefit.

We cannot shield people entirely but we can help people to prepare for and cope with the changes to their benefits. But we will only succeed if we continue to strive to find new ways of responding to these challenges.

You may have heard that the First Minister announced earlier today that a Housing Bill will be an important feature of our legislative programme for this Assembly. This will be fundamental to addressing that challenge I set out at the start of this speech this evening.

I will be publishing a policy statement later in the year which will set out first the broad approach towards the housing challenges we face.

I want to engage with the sector about these challenges before we publish a draft Bill, but that conversation must take place by recognising that we will be unable to properly respond to these challenges unless our policy solutions reflect the same principles of partnership and innovation that I referred to earlier.

That means recognising the role for the private sector. That means encouraging local authorities to develop new ways of working with housing associations and others.

And we need to be prepared to devise new and ambitious methods for leveraging in non-governmental sources of funding.

I am very excited about the possibilities offered by mutual and cooperative organisations. And I am open to offers from far sighted private sources of funding looking for an ethical and long sighted return for heir investment.

These sorts of innovations will not always be comfortable.

They are likely to involve changes to certain well established ways of working.

But then that is my ambition for my Department, to work together, to work differently, to work to deliver. To build on successes and to share expertise.

Change is essential if we are to rise to the challenges before us.

There is and there will be no magic pot of money in this Government's term of office to allow us to pull rabbits from a hat.

Necessity is the mother of invention; and to that we must add innovation.

Conclusion

Thank you once again for inviting me here tonight, the initiative is an important one and I wish you good luck with it.

I am happy to take questions.