

**Speech by the Director of Housing Mr J A Miller, JP
at the meeting of the Housing Authority held on 13.4.2000**

Madam Chair,

I speak to emphasise the Housing Department's support for the various reforms proposed in this paper.

Staff of the Department pride themselves on their professionalism and on the contribution which they have made over an extended period of time to lifting the community's standard of living. None have felt more keenly than them the blow to reputation caused by recent events. None are more determined to ensure that such events do not recur, nor more anxious to rebuild the community's trust.

The period of discussion with our external partners, following publication of the consultative document, has also been a period of serious introspection. Discussion with staff at all levels has been marked by both frankness and frustration. The frankness has helped to shape many of the proposals in this paper, as well as to inform the comprehensive audit of our systems and procedures currently being conducted by a respected private sector project management practitioner. The frustration reflects a widespread feeling that these same systems and procedures are hampering rather than helping staff in their efforts to meet the community's rising expectations.

We have set out in paragraphs 18 and 19 of the paper the spirit of the reforms on which we have agreed in advance of hammering out the details. The starting point is a partnership between the Authority and the Department, and between both and the industry, which is based on clearer understanding of roles and mutual expectations. "Partnering" is a catchy word, easy to say, but rather less easy to define and to put into practice. It involves a complete change of mind-set for all involved in the construction process. It is not a change which can be accomplished overnight and the more honest of our partners have admitted that they are no better prepared than we are

ourselves. Nevertheless, they like us are determined to make a start sooner rather than later, first through joint workshops and then as soon as possible thereafter on new projects.

In reforming the way we work internally, we are looking to combine the efficiency of best private sector project management practices with the transparency and accountability required of public sector organisations. At present the responsibilities of those who manage the Authority's projects on the ground are not matched by sufficient authority to make decisions and solve problems swiftly in collaboration with partners. Standardisation and an emphasis on consistency has driven too much decision-making upwards and towards the centre. In the interest of both efficiency and more productive use of professional skills and judgement it must be delegated downwards and outwards. Compliance with specifications and prudent procedures will always be important, but quality control must focus ultimately on the product and not the procedure. We must, I believe, for other reasons move progressively towards more non-standard design. The creativity and initiative which this will require also demands a greater delegation of authority and responsibility, as well as trust.

Madam Chair, the production peak has stretched resources to the limit, even allowing for much contracting out. It has also highlighted areas where our resourcing has not adjusted adequately to cope with the changes in complexity of the projects we now build. There is no point our short-changing ourselves, particularly at this critical time, particularly on site, and I assure members that the necessary resources will be brought to bear. For the longer term, we must match staff numbers, skills and experience to the demands of individual projects rather than assume that one manning scale suits all. Once again our aim will be to follow best private sector practice.

Finally, Madam Chair, I would like to place on record my appreciation for Members' advice in moving these reforms forward. Many of them will require further detailed work before being put to the relevant committees for decision. You have my assurance that this will be done with all due dispatch. We have an opportunity for fundamental reform and, with your support, we intend to drive it through by example. Thank you