

Answers to Questions not reached in Plenary 1 February 2001

[R] signifies that the Member has declared an interest.

[W] signifies that the question was tabled in Welsh.

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Questions on Local Government to the Minister for Finance, Local Government and Communities

The Democratic Empowerment of Citizens

Q7 John Griffiths: What steps will be taken to encourage best practice in the democratic empowerment of citizens by local authorities? (OAQ9267) *Transferred for written reply.*

The Minister for Finance, Local Government and Communities (Edwina Hart): The Local Government Act 2000 is due to come into force in Wales in July this year. It will include several measures that will increase democratic empowerment, notably the requirement to produce community strategies. I will also shortly announce the terms of reference for a review of electoral systems in Wales. This will directly focus on ways of increasing involvement in the democratic processes.

Question 8 was answered in Plenary.

Developing 'Community Capacity' in Deprived Communities

Q9 John Griffiths: What strategy will be followed to encourage and develop 'community capacity' in the most deprived communities in Wales? (OAQ9266) *Transferred for written reply.*

Edwina Hart: I consult widely on the implementation framework for the Communities First programme, which is the Assembly's non-prescriptive approach to provide community regeneration. Specific funding will be made available from April 2001 from the Communities First budget to ensure that effective capacity building and development can take place in disadvantaged communities in Wales.

Question 10 was answered in Plenary.

Co-opted Independent Chairs for Standards Committees

Q11 Christine Gwyther: Will Edwina Hart confirm whether or not all county councils in Wales have co-opted independent chairs for their standards committees? (OAQ9213) *Withdrawn.*

Adjusting Local Government Budgets

Q12 Dafydd Wigley: What capacity does Edwina Hart have to adjust local government budgets to take account of new burdens? (OAQ9246)

Edwina Hart: It is my responsibility to ensure that new burdens imposed upon local government by the Assembly are recognised within the general revenue settlement. In doing so, I take account of the consultative forum on finance expenditure sub-group's report and of the bids made to me by my Cabinet

colleagues for resources. The settlement for 2001-02, which I announced on 30 January, provides over £35 million for local authorities in respect of the costs of new burdens in the next financial year.

Including Race Equality in the Communities First Programme

Q13 Brian Hancock: What steps are being taken to ensure that race equality is included in the Communities First programme? (OAQ9237)

Edwina Hart: We have been rigorous in our attempts to ensure that equality organisations, including race organisations, are included in the Communities First consultation process. Copies of both Communities First consultation papers were sent to several race organisations, including the Commission for Racial Equality, and the All-Wales Ethnic Minority Association, which provided members of the black and Asian communities in Wales the opportunity to help shape the Communities First policy at an early stage of its development.

In addition I have asked the CRE whether we need to consult any other organisations.

The details of Communities First are currently being considered. However, in developing our implementation and monitoring plans for the programme, we will seek to ensure that the interests of equality organisations, including race organisations, are fully represented.

Overseeing the Activities of Local Authorities

Q14 William Graham: Will Edwina Hart make a statement concerning her overseeing the activities of local authorities with regard to housing? (OAQ9256)

Edwina Hart: It is for local authorities to prepare housing strategies that address their local priorities. I would expect these to be broadly in line with the national housing strategy, which is being developed through a comprehensive consultation exercise. Local strategies can be supported from the allocated general capital funds, supplementary credit approval and other Assembly grant programmes. It would not be appropriate for the Assembly to become more directly involved in setting local housing priorities, as authorities have a duty to deliver their services in accordance with Best Value.

Funding Local Government

Q15 Ieuan Wyn Jones: Can Edwina Hart make a statement on the budget input into the funding of local government in Wales? (OAQ9254)

Edwina Hart: On 6 February, the Assembly will be invited to approve the local government finance report and in doing so will have an opportunity to debate my settlement.

Addressing the Problems of Bad Neighbours in North Wales

Q16 Peter Rogers: What work is being done on community initiatives to address the problems of bad neighbours in north Wales? (OAQ9212)

Edwina Hart: All social landlords are expected to take steps to tackle anti-social behaviour caused by their tenants, particularly where this involves a breach of their tenancy agreement. We are aware that landlords use a range of measures to tackle this problem, including introductory tenancies, community caretakers, and protocols with the police to exchange information on anti-social behaviour and criminal activity. We understand that landlords in the Denbighshire area have just agreed arrangements for establishing a community-based mediation service for the area, which should help to resolve problems before they get out of hand.

A range of provisions in the Crime and Disorder Act 1998 can be used to address the problem of bad neighbours and disorderly communities. These include the anti-social behaviour order, which curbs the activities of an individual or group of individuals whose behaviour is anti-social. One such order has been made against an individual in Wrexham. Other provisions include the child curfew order, child safety order and parenting orders.

In addition, the Crime Reduction Programme is funding closed circuit television on two socially disadvantaged estates in north Wales. This should prove effective in deterring disorderly neighbours. A neighbourhood warden scheme has also been approved for the Maes Bercer Estate in Carnarfon a full-time neighbourhood warden there will be able to help diffuse disputes between neighbours before they get out of hand.

Promoting the Principle of Equality of Opportunity

Q17 Richard Edwards: How is Edwina Hart encouraging partners in local government, business and the voluntary sector to promote the principle of equality of opportunity? (OAQ9187) *Withdrawn.*

Increasing Home Energy Efficiency

Q18 Richard Edwards: What plans does Edwina Hart have to increase home energy efficiency in Wales? (OAQ9192) *Withdrawn.*

The Commissioner for Local Administration

Q19 Rhodri Glyn Thomas: Who will appoint the commissioner for local administration in Wales? (OAQ9235) *Withdrawn.*

The Local Government Act 2000

Q20 Janet Ryder: Will the Local Government Act 2000 White Paper for Wales incorporate the principles governing conduct of members of relevant authorities? (OAQ9234) *Withdrawn.*

Home Energy Efficiency Scheme Grants

Q21 Nick Bourne: Does Edwina Hart have any plans to increase awareness of the availability of home energy efficiency scheme grants? (OAQ9227)

Edwina Hart: The scheme has already been heavily marketed. We have held seminars in north and south Wales to promote the scheme to partner organisations such as health professionals and local authorities. This momentum has been maintained by the scheme manager who is in the process of establishing referral networks with these organisations.

The scheme also forms a part of the Assembly's 'Keep Well This Winter' campaign and has been promoted through that initiative.

The scheme manager is responsible for publicity under the scheme and is drawing up plans for a major marketing campaign, involving leaflets, newspaper, radio and television publicity.

Local Authority Expenditure on Education

Q22 Delyth Evans: Can Edwina Hart anticipate the expenditure of local authorities on education next year? (OAQ9224)

Edwina Hart: I have no intention of anticipating what local authorities will spend on education or on any other service funded through the general revenue settlement, which is not hypothecated.

Appointing the Commissioner for Local Administration

Q23 Geraint Davies: How will the commissioner for local administration in Wales be appointed? (OAQ9236) *Withdrawn.*

The Redevelopment of Swansea

Q24 Alun Cairns: Will Edwina Hart make a statement on the redevelopment of Swansea? (OAQ9232)

Edwina Hart: The re-development of Swansea is in the first instance a matter for the City and County of Swansea local authority.

Council Cabinets

Q25 Jocelyn Davies: Has Edwina Hart discussed the requirement of council cabinets to meet in the open under the Local Government (Access to Information) (Variation) Order 1992 with local authorities? (OAQ9240) *Withdrawn.*

Engaging with Young People

Q26 Delyth Evans: What is Edwina Hart doing to ensure that local authorities are engaging with young people and responding to the recommendations set out in 'Extending Entitlement: Supporting Young People in Wales'? (OAQ9225)

Edwina Hart: The overarching community strategies which local authorities will have a duty to prepare will be required to take fully into account the needs of young people. The draft guidance currently out to consultation states that community strategy partnerships should make specific and appropriate efforts to ensure that young people are able to influence decisions. It refers to 'Children and Young People: a framework for partnership' and 'Extending Entitlement'. The guidance reiterates the importance of supporting the participation of young people, including those disadvantaged in different ways, to promote their own development as individuals and citizens and to promote creative solutions to problems.

Local Government Structures

Q27 Kirsty Williams: What interest has been shown by Welsh councils in adopting the Assembly's proposed fourth option of local government structures? (OAQ9265)

Edwina Hart: I have issued an addendum to the draft guidance on Part II of the Local Government Act 2000 outlining the Assembly's proposals regarding the fourth option. Local authorities have until 28 February to respond to our proposals and it is too early to gauge the degree of interest.

Implementing Environmental Policies

Q28 David Lloyd: Has funding been provided to enable local authorities to implement environmental policies? (OAQ9253) [W] *Withdrawn.*

Poor Housing and Social Exclusion

Q29 David Lloyd: Will Edwina Hart make a statement on the links between poor housing and social exclusion? (OAQ9245) [W] *Withdrawn.*

Implementing the Waterhouse Recommendations

Q30 Gwenda Thomas: What monitoring system does Edwina Hart intend to develop to ensure the implementation of the Waterhouse recommendations that affect local government? (OAQ9260)

Edwina Hart: The National Assembly is monitoring progress against the action points identified in the National Assembly's response to the Waterhouse report and expects local authorities to do the same where the action is for them.

The National Assembly is co-ordinating implementation and monitoring under the Children First programme. Revised guidance, to be published shortly, will require local authorities to submit costed action plans against key objectives, focusing on improving outcomes for looked-after children and improving compliance with procedures which strengthen safeguards. Baseline information, targets and performance indicators will be required. Local authorities will be required to report on progress against targets for 2001-02 by 31 March 2002. Progress reports will be evaluated and a report made to Health and Social Services Committee.

This work is supplemented by visits to local authorities, by the research programme and by inspection visits undertaken by Social Services Inspectorate for Wales.

Questions to the Minister for Environment

Strategy on Recycling

Q3 John Griffiths: What strategy will be followed with regard to recycling, to spread best practice across Wales? (OAQ9274) *Transferred for written reply.*

The Minister for Environment (Sue Essex): I am in close discussion via the Wales waste forum with representatives of local government, the voluntary sector and business about the development of a new waste strategy for Wales. Recycling will be one of the most important elements of this. A draft of the strategy will be issued for consultation in the spring. Both the preparation and the implementation of the strategy will involve the dissemination of best practice from within Wales and drawing on experience from elsewhere, where this is of value.

Questions 4 and 5 were answered in Plenary.

Improving Safety on Welsh Roads

Q6 Richard Edwards: What plans does Sue Essex have to improve safety on Welsh roads? (OAQ9200) *Transferred for written reply.*

Sue Essex: I consider road safety to be one of our priorities and I have set up a road safety strategy board, to take forward the development of an implementation programme for the Great Britain road safety strategy in Wales. The board includes representatives of local government, the Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents, health interests, the police, Friends of the Earth, Sustrans and a community design consultant.

This year we increased our spending on trunk road safety by £0.5 million and we have distributed a special road safety grant of £3.6 million to local authorities. This special grant supports councils in their work to address road safety issues in relation to the whole community, and includes projects targeted at motorist behaviour and speed as well as design of the highway.

Question 7 was answered in Plenary.

Planning Permission for Siting Mobile Phone Masts

Q8 Peter Black: Will Sue Essex make a statement on appeals against the refusal of planning permission for the siting of mobile phone masts in Wales? (OAQ9221)

Sue Essex: There is a statutory right of appeal to the Assembly against refusal of planning permission by local planning authorities. Authority to determine such appeals is transferred to the Planning Inspectorate, which appoints a planning inspector to determine each appeal.

The Assembly has the power to recover appeals for its own determination but this power is rarely used. Since July 1999, all planning appeals relating to masts have been dealt with by planning inspectors. None have been recovered for determination by the Assembly.

In the last year, the Planning Inspectorate has dealt with 19 planning appeals involving mobile telephone masts, five were subsequently withdrawn, six were allowed, three dismissed and five have yet to be determined.

Green Compost Scheme

Q9 Alison Halford: Has Sue Essex any plans to introduce Flintshire's green compost scheme nationwide? (OAQ9202)

Sue Essex: I refer to my earlier answer to John Griffiths on recycling. Composting too will have a central role to play in the new Wales waste strategy and the Wales waste forum has a specialist sub-group examining this issue. We will certainly want to consider any successful examples of composting in Wales and elsewhere to see if they can be used more widely in Wales.

Increased Use of Renewable Energy

Q10 Mick Bates: What steps is Sue Essex taking in revising planning guidance to promote increased use of renewable energy? (OAQ9259)

Sue Essex: A review of planning guidance is currently underway and the draft Planning Policy Wales will issue for wide public consultation later this month. This will be followed by a detailed review of the Technical Advice Note (Wales) 8: Renewable Energy, which will consider the planning implications associated with the development of all renewable energy sources in Wales. It is intended that the guidance should establish an effective way of meeting energy targets whilst respecting the quality of the local environment.

A technical advisory group is being set up to progress the review of the technical advice note in an inclusive way, and will consist of a range of those with an interest in planning policy for renewable energy. The revised technical guidance will be designed to bring clarity to all those involved, including applicants, planning authorities and their committees, landowners, local residents, and environmental groups and will contribute to greater public familiarity with, and acceptance of, prospective renewable energy developments.

Membership of the technical advisory group is likely to include representatives from the Countryside Council for Wales, Forestry Commission, Environment Agency Wales, Campaign for the Protection of Rural Wales, World Wildlife Fund, Welsh Local Government Association, National Parks Authorities, Council for the National Parks and representatives of the renewables industry such as the British Wind Energy Association. You have also been invited.

Low Floor Buses in Carmarthenshire

Q11 Christine Gwyther: Will Sue Essex make a statement on the introduction of low floor buses for use by disabled people in Carmarthenshire? (OAQ9199) *Withdrawn.*

Tir Mostyn Windfarm

Q12 Peter Rogers: When will a decision be made on the planning application for the Tir Mostyn windfarm? (OAQ9204)

Sue Essex: I called in the planning application on 1 November 2000. A revised environmental statement has recently been received from the applicants. This is being assessed for completeness. Once the assessment is concluded papers will be passed to the Planning Inspectorate and, if a public inquiry is necessary, the Inspectorate will seek to arrange it and pass a report to the National Assembly. When the inspector's report is received it will be considered by officials before being put to a planning decision committee for decision. A decision can be expected at the end of the year.

Earth Summit 2002

Q13 David Lloyd: Has Sue Essex had any discussions with organisations in Wales regarding preparation for the earth summit in 2002? (OAQ9269)

Sue Essex: In parallel with the UK Government (in whose preparations for the 2002 summit we are now involved) and with the other devolved administrations, we shall be taking soundings with interested organisations.

Public Advice and Information on Planning

Q14 Nick Bourne: Does Sue Essex have any plans to increase the advice and information available to the public on planning issues? (OAQ9230)

Sue Essex: Yes, and we are involving them in the preparation of planning policy and guidance documents.

The Assembly will shortly issue Minerals Planning Policy Wales, following consideration of the response to consultation on the draft document last year. This will be followed in the spring by consultation on draft minerals technical advice notes on aggregates and coal. We will be consulting widely shortly on a comprehensive revision of our main planning policy guidance, Planning Policy Wales. In the spring, we will also publish updated guidance on unitary development plan preparation. In addition, a number of technical advice notes are either in preparation or are under review.

The Assembly's other planning publications, which provide advice on development plan and control procedures, are kept under review and will be revised and supplemented as necessary.

Revision of the Trunk Road Programme

Q15 Jonathan Morgan: When will the next revision of the trunk road programme be announced? (OAQ9211) *Withdrawn.*

Improving Local Transport and Reducing Congestion

Q16 Delyth Evans: What is Sue Essex doing to improve local transport and to reduce congestion in Welsh communities? (OAQ9217)

Sue Essex: I announced on 11 January a comprehensive package of investment amounting to £300 million over the next five years in local authority projects. A copy of the press notice is in the Library. These will enable local transport plans to be implemented to a significant extent. Other measures, including support for bus services and road safety, will contribute to improving local transport and safety on roads.

I have also commissioned studies to examine ways of making better use of the existing trunk and motorway network. Key objectives of these studies are to improve traffic flow and increase the reliability of journey times, all within the context of sustainable transport and encouraging an increase usage of public transport.

‘Telecommunications Mast Development’

Q17 Karen Sinclair: Will Sue Essex give a brief statement on the findings of the ‘Telecommunications Mast Development’ consultation paper? (OAQ9196) *Withdrawn.*

Commitment to Sustainable Development

Q18 Phil Williams: What measures is Sue Essex taking to ensure planning policies enable us to fulfil our commitment to sustainable development? (OAQ9284)

Sue Essex: The draft Planning Policy Wales, which will issue for consultation soon, embodies the key overarching commitment of the Assembly to sustainable development. It has been informed by both the Assembly’s sustainable development scheme and the recommendations of the land use planning forum’s sustainable development working group.

I have approved recently the other key national planning policy document, Minerals Planning Policy Wales, and this will issue shortly. The document is based on, and espouses, sustainable development, and is the first consolidated document containing minerals planning policy developed in Wales, specifically for Wales. Policy for aggregates dredging is currently in process of being developed; again it will be based on sustainable development principles.

Public Access to Land

Q19 John Griffiths: What steps will be taken to protect and promote public access to land in Wales? (OAQ9270)

Sue Essex: The Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 will enable the Assembly to enhance the existing accessibility to the Welsh countryside with a new right of public access on foot to open country and registered common land, potentially an area double that of the existing three national parks.

The new right cannot come into force immediately, as regulations and other important preparatory work are needed first. Very importantly, the Act also provides for restrictions to protect farming and other land management activities. Properly implemented, the Act offers important potential social and economic benefits for Wales and I am keen that we grasp these.

User groups, and the general public, will be kept fully informed of access opportunities through local access forums and published guidance.

Managing Environmental Emergencies

Q20 Geraint Davies: What role does the Environment Agency play in managing environmental emergencies in Wales? (OAQ9289)

Sue Essex: Arising from its statutory functions in relation to pollution control and flood defence, the Environment Agency plans for and responds to a wide range of pollution, flooding and other emergency incidents.

The agency contributes to the prevention of major incidents and emergencies through its regulatory role in the integrated pollution prevention and control process and in a consultative role as part of the control of major accidents and hazards legislative requirements. It contributes to the development of environmental contingency plans for major industries and local authorities and has produced its own oil pollution protection booming plans for many estuaries in Wales. It also participates in multi-agency exercises to test contingency plans.

The agency can also provide expert advice on a number of topics ranging from environmental toxicity information to air dispersion modelling.

In responding to environmental pollution incidents the agency seeks to identify the cause and source of the pollution, undertake appropriate enforcement action and implement remedial measures to minimise environmental effects. All incidents are classified according to their impact upon the environment and this classification forms the basis for the level of subsequent enforcement action taken.

In relation to flooding, relevant duties include maintaining flood defences, monitoring water levels, issuing flood warnings, supporting the joint response by providing representatives to the various emergency control points and, by local agreement, providing manpower and equipment to help alleviate the effects of the flooding.

Developments on Brownfield Sites

Q21 Helen Mary Jones: What measures will Sue Essex take to ensure that developments on brownfield sites are monitored? (OAQ9277)

Sue Essex: Planning policy emphasises the importance of redeveloping brown-field sites. It is therefore important that brownfield site development is monitored to assess the effectiveness of the policy and to gauge whether optimum use is being made of such sites. The Assembly has commissioned a research study to advise on the feasibility of setting up a system to monitor the supply and re-use of previously developed land. The findings will be published shortly and will be the subject of consultation with local authorities and others. Building on this, further research will be commissioned in the spring with a view to establishing possible pilot projects.

Meeting Targets on Climate Change

Q22 Brian Hancock: How will Sue Essex ensure that Wales meets the targets on climate change? (OAQ9273)

Sue Essex: The Assembly's role in the fight against climate change is set out in section 4 chapter 3 of 'Climate Change: the UK Programme', which was published on 19 November last year. Copies of a programme summary were sent to all Members. Copies of the full report are available in the Library or from the Assembly's Environment Division. I plan to publish an expanded version of the Assembly's programme for climate change in the next few months.

An All-Wales Waste Strategy

Q23 Karen Sinclair: What progress has been made on the formulation of an all-Wales waste strategy? (OAQ9198) *Withdrawn.*

Road and Public Transport Accessibility

Q24 Alun Cairns: Will Sue Essex make a statement on road and public transport accessibility during the recent cold weather? (OAQ9248)

Sue Essex: The recent periods of cold weather have not caused any exceptional problems concerning access to the transport network across Wales.

During the most severe period, between 28 and 29 December, all trunk roads were kept open by regular salting and ploughing where necessary. The worst affected areas, particularly on high ground, were passable with care. North Wales routes were affected by snow and ice more than those in the south.

The M4 was closed on 28 December between junctions 37 and 35 eastbound due to a jackknifed lorry between 5:15 a.m. and 9:04 a.m. Traffic was diverted via the A48 but caused no problems.

Winter maintenance on local roads is the responsibility of the relevant local authority. General reports from our trunk road agents indicated that some minor roads were impassable, particularly in mid and north Wales, during this period.

There were some minor problems with public transport during the period immediately after Christmas when air temperatures of minus 16 degrees Celsius were recorded.

Some bus operators in mid Wales suffered vehicle breakdown due to freezing fuel. Rail services on the heart of Wales line suffered disruption and replacement bus services were provided.

Both Railtrack and train operating companies make every effort to ensure that disruption to train services caused by adverse weather conditions, is kept to a minimum. Particular attention is given to maintenance and monitoring of railway infrastructure and rolling stock during these periods.

Air Quality Strategy for Wales

Q25 Kirsty Williams: What steps have been taken to develop an air quality strategy for Wales? (OAQ9271)

Sue Essex: We are about to undertake consultations on revised limits for a range of air pollutants and are currently considering the implications for the role and powers of the statutory bodies, including the Environment Agency.

Increasing Biodiversity in Wales

Q26 Kirsty Williams: What targets have been set for increasing biodiversity in Wales? (OAQ9272)

Sue Essex: The UK biodiversity action plan contains 59 steps for action to contribute to the objectives of the plan for conserving biodiversity. Action plans containing targets to conserve and enhance biodiversity have been drawn up for 391 priority species, and 45 key habitats (184 and 37 respectively are applicable to Wales). The millennium biodiversity report expected in the spring will report on progress against these targets.

The Assembly is committed to conserving and enhancing the variety of life in Wales, and can only succeed in partnership with others. Important themes in the UK biodiversity action plan are improving public awareness and understanding of biodiversity, and promoting action at the local level. The Countryside Council for Wales has operational targets and programmes aimed at conserving and enhancing biodiversity.

The Trunk Road Programme

Q27 David Melding: Will Sue Essex make a statement on the trunk road programme? (OAQ9209)
Withdrawn.

Promoting Sustainable Development

Q28 Cynog Dafis: How will sustainable development be promoted through planning policies in Wales? (OAQ9268)

Sue Essex: The draft Planning Policy Wales, which will issue for consultation soon, embodies the key overarching commitment of the Assembly to sustainable development. It has been informed by both the Assembly's sustainable development scheme and the recommendations of the land use planning forum's sustainable development working group.

I have approved recently the other key national planning policy document, Minerals Planning Policy Wales, and this will issue shortly. The document is based on, and espouses, sustainable development, and is the first consolidated document containing minerals planning policy developed in Wales, specifically for Wales. Policy for aggregates dredging is currently in process of being developed; again it will be based on sustainable development principles.

Sites of Special Scientific Interest

Q29 Christine Gwyther: Can Sue Essex make a statement on the number of sites of special scientific interest in Wales? (OAQ9203)

Sue Essex: As of 31 December 2000, the Countryside Council for Wales has notified 1,004 sites of special scientific interest.

Improving the Transport Infrastructure in South Wales

Q30 David Melding: Will Sue Essex make a statement on steps to improve the transport infrastructure in south Wales? (OAQ9210) *Withdrawn.*