

Answers to Questions not reached in Plenary 5 April 2001

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

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

Contents

- 1 Questions to the Minister for Finance, Local Government and Communities
- 5 Questions to the Minister for Environment

Questions to the Minister for Finance, Local Government and Communities

Council Tax in Pembrokeshire

Q8 Richard Edwards: How has the standard spending assessment formula affected the level of council tax in Pembrokeshire? (OAQ10810)

The Minister for Finance, Local Government and Communities (Edwina Hart): Council tax increases in Pembrokeshire, or anywhere else, are subject to a variety of influences. The SSA formula is only one factor, along with changes to local authority functions and decisions taken by the local authority. Because the new SSA formula recognises sparsity and deprivation better than the old formula, it more effectively allows for the extra need to spend for authorities where those are particular issues. That is perhaps reflected in the extremely good news for council tax payers in Pembrokeshire, where council tax is increasing by just 1 per cent.

Ombudsman for Welsh Housing

Q9 Dafydd Wigley: What steps is the Minister taking to develop an ombudsman for Welsh housing? (OAQ10820)

Edwina Hart: As you are no doubt aware, the establishment of a housing ombudsman service in Wales requires primary legislation. I am committed to introducing an ombudsman service for the registered social landlords sector and will seek to incorporate that into appropriate primary legislation proposals as soon as an opportunity arises.

Registered Social Landlords

Q10 Janet Davies: What evidence has been amassed to prove the support of local authority tenants for transfer of their homes to registered social landlords? (OAQ10835)

Edwina Hart: Local authorities have the ultimate responsibility for the management of their housing stock. It is a matter for individual authorities to explore options with their tenants. Should they determine that stock transfer is most appropriate to their circumstances, then there is an established procedure to follow. In particular, they must test the level of support through various stages of consultation with tenants, prior to a formal ballot. Further, no transfer may proceed without my approval, which will not be forthcoming unless I am satisfied that the specific transfer proposals are supported by the majority of tenants involved.

Consultation Documents

Q11 David Davies: How will the Minister ensure that all consultation documents issued by her departments are sent to consultees with sufficient time to allow for the submission of a proper response? (OAQ10867)

Edwina Hart: We normally allow at least six weeks. Sometimes that is not possible, as in the case of some papers on the new ethical framework that will affect all community councils, where there is a legislative deadline that must be met. In that specific case, we shall take into account all comments received up to Easter. In addition, two open consultation sessions on the ethical framework have been organised for all interested, one in Merthyr Tydfil on 11 April and one in Wrexham on 19 April.

Allgáu Cymdeithasol yng Nghymru

C12 Ieuan Wyn Jones: A wnaiff y Gweinidog ddatganiad ar yr ystadegau sydd ar gael ar allgáu cymdeithasol yng Nghymru? (OAQ10830) [W]

Edwina Hart: Nid oes yr un dangosydd unigol sydd yn gallu mesur allgáu cymdeithasol. Mae'r adroddiad, 'Mapio Dieithrwch Cymdeithasol yng Nghymru', yn cynnig 50 o ystadegau sydd yn ymwneud â ffactorau y tybir eu bod yn gysylltiedig ag allgáu cymdeithasol, sef incwm isel, diweithdra, iechyd gwael, cyrhaeddiad addysgol isel, byw mewn amgylchedd ffisegol gwael a lefelau troseddu uchel.

Social Exclusion in Wales

Q12 Ieuan Wyn Jones: Will the Minister make a statement on statistics available on social exclusion in Wales? (OAQ10830) [W]

Edwina Hart: There is no single indicator that measures social exclusion. The report, 'Mapping Social Exclusion in Wales', gives 50 statistics relating to the factors generally thought to be associated with social exclusion, namely low income, worklessness, poor health, low educational achievement, living in a poor physical environment and high levels of crime.

Provision of Public Services (Foot and Mouth Disease)

Q13 Alun Cairns: How is the Minister co-ordinating the provision of public services by local authorities in Wales that have been affected by the foot and mouth disease outbreak? (OAQ10881)

Edwina Hart: Advice has been issued that is consistent with control of the disease and the continuation of legitimate activity.

Independent Internal Audit Committees

Q14 Cynog Dafis: What plans does the Minister have to encourage local government to develop independent internal audit committees? (OAQ10821)

Edwina Hart: At present, there is no requirement for local authorities to have such committees. However, you may be aware that the Audit Commission has consistently recommended that audit committees should be established by local authorities to provide a focus for all audit matters in an authority. I will consider that recommendation to see how it might lie within the framework of the new political structures being introduced by local government.

Coalfields Regeneration Fund

Q15 Brian Gibbons: Will the Minister provide an update on the contribution of the coalfields regeneration fund to Welsh communities? (OAQ10812)

Edwina Hart: The financial assistance agreement between the Assembly and the Coalfields Regeneration Trust provides for grant assistance of up to £3.42 million over a period of three years to 31 March 2002. The trust prepared a written report on its activities in Wales as part of a presentation to the Assembly's Local Government and Housing Committee on 7 February 2001.

It advised that, up to 31 December 2000, 58 ongoing projects had been supported in Wales, receiving total grant assistance of £2.829 million.

The trust has recently indicated that it will fully utilise all the allocated funding of £3.42 million over the term of the existing financial agreement.

Social Inclusion

Q16 John Griffiths: Will the Minister make a statement on progress in achieving social inclusion across Wales? (OAQ10901)

Edwina Hart: The National Assembly for Wales is addressing the issues of poverty and social disadvantage on a wide range of fronts. The National Assembly's first report on this priority area was debated in Plenary on 8 March, and outlined the policies and programmes being implemented aimed at promoting social inclusion in Wales.

Reviewing Business Rates

Q17 Phil Williams: Does the Minister have any plans to review business rates in Wales? (OAQ10819)

Edwina Hart: I am presently looking at business rates as part of our wider review of local government finance in Wales.

Ombudsman for Housing

Q18 Dafydd Wigley: Has any assessment been made of the need for an ombudsman for housing in Wales? (OAQ10816) *Withdrawn.*

Implementing Communities First Programmes

Q19 Brian Hancock: Will the Minister make a statement on the timetable for implementation of Communities First programmes? (OAQ10825) *Withdrawn.*

Level of Council Tax in Wales

Q20 David Melding: Will the Minister make a statement on the level of council tax in Wales? (OAQ10904)

Edwina Hart: Local authority budget decisions mean that council tax in Wales will increase by an average of 6 per cent in 2001-02.

Communities First

Q21 Janice Gregory: Will the Minister make a statement on the progress being made on deciding which communities in Wales will participate in the Communities First programme? (OAQ10813)

Edwina Hart: On 28 March, I wrote to leaders of county councils in Wales, the Welsh Local Government Association and the Wales Council for Voluntary Action, extending the deadline for the nomination of communities for inclusion into the Communities First programme to 30 April 2001. That

will allow full consideration of factors that should be taken into account and enable close involvement of community level partners in the process.

Houses in Multiple Occupation

Q22 Alun Pugh: What problems arise from over-concentration of houses in multiple occupation? (OAQ10902)

Edwina Hart: An over-concentration of houses in multiple occupation can result in problems with the physical condition and management of such houses. Those can include overcrowding, anti-social behaviour, parking and traffic congestion, noise, litter, refuse and tenancy problems resulting from poor relationships with bad landlords. The character and social amenity of the area can also be adversely affected. The Government's proposals for the licensing of HMOs aim to secure proper regulation of this sector.

Council Tax in Pembrokeshire

Q23 Christine Gwyther: Will the Minister make a statement on the level of council tax charged in Pembrokeshire? (OAQ10808) *Withdrawn.*

Bonding System in Council Tax

Q24 Gareth Jones: What plans does the Minister have to review the bonding system in council tax? (OAQ10822) *Withdrawn.*

Improving Public Sector Housing

Q25 Alun Cairns: What is the Assembly doing to improve public sector housing in Wales? (OAQ10866)

Edwina Hart: We are committed to improving housing conditions in Wales and are consulting on proposals for a national housing strategy in our paper, 'Better Homes for People in Wales: the National Assembly for Wales's Proposals for a National Housing Strategy'. In parallel with that comprehensive consultation, the Local Government and Housing Committee is undertaking a policy review of stock transfer. We have also increased housing capital for the next three years. It is important that local authorities have housing strategies that address their local priorities in the use of those resources. I would expect those local strategies to be broadly in line with the proposed national strategy.

Tourist Tax

Q26 Christine Gwyther: Will the Minister make a statement on the proposal that local authorities should be able to charge a tourist tax? (OAQ10807) *Withdrawn.*

Allocating Council-Owned Houses

Q27 David Lloyd: Are there any plans to review the criteria used by local authorities for allocating council-owned houses? (OAQ10833) *Withdrawn.*

Houses in Multiple Occupation

Q28 Alun Pugh: Will the Minister make a statement on her plans to improve the quality of houses in multiple occupation? (OAQ10903)

Edwina Hart: The Assembly is committed to the introduction of mandatory licensing for houses in multiple occupation. Our consultation paper, 'Better Homes for People in Wales', seeks views on how the new arrangements should operate in Wales. In the meantime, we are encouraging all local authorities to

consider introducing registration schemes, which will enhance and strengthen the existing arrangements to tackle HMO problems.

Community Councils

Q29 Gwenda Thomas: What plans does the Minister have to provide incentives for Welsh communities to set up community councils, where none exist? (OAQ10836)

Edwina Hart: The power to establish community councils lies in the hands of individual communities. The Partnership Council recently discussed the importance of training and development around community councils and I shall examine that.

Funding for the Assembly (Foot and Mouth Disease)

Q30 Nick Bourne: Has the Minister had any discussions with the Government in Westminster about allocating additional and separate funding to the Assembly to help the areas of Wales that have been badly affected by the foot and mouth disease crisis? (OAQ10868)

Edwina Hart: I regularly meet the Secretary of State for Wales and we discuss a range of issues, including the financial implications for Wales of the foot and mouth disease outbreak.

Questions to the Minister for Environment

Progress of the Waste Management Strategy

Q6 John Griffiths: Can the Minister for Environment make a statement on progress with the National Assembly's waste management strategy? (OAQ10896)

The Minister for Environment (Sue Essex): I am working closely with representatives of local government and a wide range of other interests and bodies on the production of a consultation paper for a new waste strategy for Wales. I intend to consult on this in May.

Sustainable Communities ('Planning Policy Wales')

Q7 Cynog Dafis: How will 'Planning Policy Wales' support the development of sustainable communities? (OAQ10906)

Sue Essex: The Assembly's draft 'Planning Policy Wales' is currently at public consultation stage and, when issued in its final form, will set the framework for land use planning policy in Wales. The document reflects the key role of sustainable development in land use planning and embodies the Assembly's overriding commitment to sustainable development in its sustainable development scheme. In particular, in the context of housing land availability, the draft document makes clear the need for local planning authorities to allocate suitable sites for housing in their development plans with a view to creating and supporting sustainable communities where people want to live. The draft guidance stresses that, wherever possible, brownfield sites should be used in preference to greenfield sites.

Greater Public Control of Railtrack in Wales

Q8 Kirsty Williams: What discussions has the Minister had with the UK Transport Minister about possible ways of securing greater public control of Railtrack in Wales? (OAQ10923)

Sue Essex: In its strategic agenda announced on 13 March, the Strategic Rail Authority is already setting out new mechanisms which can assist in ensuring that strategic infrastructure development is not compromised by Railtrack. In future, it envisages that major infrastructure projects could be managed

through private consortia, independently and possibly including train operating companies, before transferring the completed works to Railtrack to maintain.

You will be aware of the announcement by the Deputy Prime Minister, John Prescott, on 2 April of a £7.5 billion package of rail measures and the new relationship to be established between the UK Government and Railtrack and the decision to appoint a new public interest director on the Railtrack board who will be able to act as a powerful voice for the public.

Professor Uff's and Lord Cullen's joint public inquiry into train protection systems was published on 29 March. In response to this report the UK Government commits to introduce comprehensive automatic train protection to the best European standards. This challenging programme of work will be underpinned with regulations. I look forward to hearing of the Health and Safety Commission's proposals for implementation. The commission will report on progress this September.

Appraising Transport Grant Bids

Q9 Janice Gregory: Is the Minister changing the criteria to be employed in appraising future bids for transport grant in Wales? (OAQ10846)

Sue Essex: A paper considering the categories of bids to be invited for transport grant support in 2002-03 was discussed by the Environment, Planning and Transport Committee on 7 March 2001.

This proposed that bids be invited for:

- preparation costs support for additional infrastructure schemes contributing to a wider community regeneration programme;
- road schemes currently receiving support in line with the indicative start dates in the five-year programme
- package schemes currently receiving support; and
- new packages presented as part of an overarching partnership or consortium strategy including innovative proposals for public transport
- Safe Routes to School/Safer Communities and closer relationship with road safety funding. This is subject to the outcome of reviews of Safe Routes to School and road safety arrangements

Additional infrastructure schemes including a road element or an interchange and other appropriate measures will be considered for inclusion for preparation programme costs support provide that they contribute to wider community regeneration.

Local authorities will have to demonstrate how any proposals will contribute to the enhancement of the quality of life and economic regeneration of the affected community if they are to be included in the programme.

Invitations to bid and guidance on bid completion will be issued to local authorities in June this year.

Transporting Goods by Rail

Q10 Phil Williams: What discussions has the Minister had with business representatives regarding incentives for transporting a greater volume of goods by rail? (OAQ10897)

Sue Essex: The Assembly administers the demand-led freight facilities grant scheme in Wales. My officials have met business representatives to discuss six specific projects during the last year. None have yet progressed to formal application stage.

The Strategic Rail Authority has its own challenging objective, imposed by the UK Government under its 10-year plan, to increase freight on rail by 80 per cent by 2010. The SRA has compiled its freight

strategy, designed to achieve that objective by supporting growth through network and access investment and targeted revenue support.

An agency agreement is being drawn up between the Assembly and the SRA, for it to evaluate all Welsh freight facilities grant applications on the Assembly's behalf. This will not transfer any powers to the SRA, but will enable applicants to deal with a dedicated SRA team. The Assembly will retain budget and decision-making powers.

Effects of Sand Dredging (South Wales Coastline)

Q11 Val Feld: Will the Minister update the Assembly on current work to monitor the effects on the south Wales coastline of sand dredging? (OAQ10878)

Sue Essex: Each contemporary dredging licence comes with a raft of strict environmental monitoring conditions. These include, bathymetric surveys of the sand source (usually a sandbank); beach profiling to measure long-term trends; cliff-face profiling where appropriate, and state-of-the-art detailed terrain modelling of all the beaches in Gower from Rhossili to Three Cliffs Bay—this latter technique now allowing us to quantify changes in volume at any given location. The existing survey methods employed provide efficient and relevant environmental monitoring of the south Wales beaches adjacent to the offshore dredging operations on a regular basis.

The Assembly has, and is continuing to fund, research in relation to the hydrodynamics of the Bristol Channel and Severn Estuary, and the way in which marine aggregates extraction and other activities may affect it. For example, we have a researcher working on the marine aggregates resource management and planning system. The Glamorgan coastal monitoring initiative is an offshoot of this, the results of which will be presented at a dissemination seminar in July. This year the Assembly has also commissioned work by the University of East London, for additional three-dimensional monitoring of the sea cliffs along part of the Glamorgan heritage coast.

Development on Brownfield Sites (South Wales)

Q12 Jonathan Morgan: Can the Minister make a statement on the National Assembly Executive's approach to development on brownfield sites in south Wales? (OAQ10887)

Sue Essex: National planning policy, as contained in 'Planning Guidance (Wales): Planning Policy, First Revision (1999)', emphasises the need for sustainable development and the importance of protecting the countryside. The guidance makes clear that brownfield sites should, wherever possible, be developed in preference to greenfield sites and that full and effective use should be made of land within existing urban areas, including the bringing into use of derelict, unused or waste land.

Planning policy is currently under review and draft 'Planning Policy Wales', which recently issued for consultation, includes enhanced guidance on the sustainable use of land. This draft guidance stresses that, wherever possible, brownfield sites should be used in preference to greenfield sites but acknowledges that there may be some sites where reuse may not be sustainable due to location, the existence of valuable wildlife habitats or high levels of contamination.

Combating Global Warming

Q13 David Davies: Are there any additional measures that the Assembly could undertake to combat global warming? (OAQ10873)

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. I plan to publish an expanded version of the Assembly's programme for climate change that will reflect recent developments, in the next few months.

There is, however, no room for complacency. The recently published report by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change 'Climate Change 2001: the Scientific Basis' indicated that global temperatures could rise by around 5.5 degrees centigrade if action is not taken. We need to keep continually under review the efforts we are making to ensure that we are as effective as possible if we are to avoid the worst effects of climate change.

Greenways Project (Pembrokeshire)

Q14 Christine Gwyther: How can the experiences gained from the Greenways project in Pembrokeshire be used in similar future developments? (OAQ10853) *Withdrawn.*

Developing a Passenger Rail Network

Q15 Peter Law: What discussions has the Minister had with Railtrack, the rail regulator and train operators about developing a passenger rail network in Wales? (OAQ10863)

Sue Essex: I have met Railtrack, the rail regulator and all train operating companies who provide services in Wales, and they are clear about the Assembly's aspirations for the future of rail services in Wales.

The Assembly has been working closely with the Strategic Rail Authority on the development of the new Wales and the Borders rail franchise, which is due to start operating in shadow form in the autumn. My officials have met the pre-qualified bidders for the franchise, and they too understand the Assembly's aspirations.

Ministerial Visits to Constituencies

Q16 Peter Black: What protocol does the Minister operate in informing Assembly Members of ministerial visits that she makes to their constituency and regions? (OAQ10848)

Sue Essex: The protocol is that constituency AMs and MPs are advised of all ministerial visits into their areas as a matter of routine.

Biodiversity Action Plans

Q17 David Lloyd: Will the Minister report on progress being made towards developing biodiversity action plans? (OAQ10909) *Withdrawn.*

Waste Management in Wales (Landfill)

Q18 Janice Gregory: Will the Minister make a statement on progress being made in reducing the contribution of landfill in the management of waste in Wales? (OAQ10845)

Sue Essex: I will be issuing a draft waste strategy for Wales for consultation at the end of May. It will include a range of policies aimed at moving away from our current dependence on landfill and maximising opportunities for more sustainable options such as recycling and composting. When finalised, the strategy will constitute a plan for the reduction of all biodegradable wastes to landfill as required by the EC Landfill Directive.

The Landfill Directive also specifically requires the UK to progressively limit the amount of biodegradable municipal waste sent to landfill by 2020. The Environment, Planning and Transport Committee has already agreed that Wales's share of the UK total should be allocated to local authorities in Wales by means of permits to send biodegradable municipal waste to landfill. The draft waste strategy will consult on a number of options for allocating permits to authorities and for the operation of the permit system.

Sites with Special Conservation Status

Q19 Helen Mary Jones: What resources would be necessary to ensure that all the designated terrestrial sites of special scientific interest, special areas of conservation and special protection areas in Wales are in favourable conservation status? (OAQ10920)

Sue Essex: Measures taken under the Habitats Directive (92/43/EEC), which provides for the establishment of the Natura 2000 network comprising special areas of conservation and special protection areas, must be designed to maintain or restore at favourable conservation status the habitats and species listed in annexes to the Directive. The Directive defines the favourable conservation status of a habitat or species in terms of its natural range. The Joint Nature Conservation Committee is developing advice on the implementation of these provisions through individual site management, which will provide a basis for estimating future resource requirements for special areas of conservation and special protection areas (the Directive does not apply to sites of special scientific interest). The Countryside Council for Wales is planning to spend £1.29 million in 2001-02 on managing and monitoring Natura 2000 sites.

Greater Understanding of Sustainable Development

Q20 Gareth Jones: What steps will the Minister take to develop a greater understanding of sustainable development in Wales? (OAQ10917) *Withdrawn.*

Transport Study

Q21 Tom Middlehurst: Will the Minister report on the progress of the transport study commissioned by the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions as it affects the Woodbank junction on the Deeside border? (OAQ10850)

Sue Essex: The study is expected to be completed by the summer.

Halting Development of Incinerators

Q22 Mick Bates: What discussions has the Minister had with the Environment Agency with a view to halting further developments of incinerators in Wales? (OAQ10888)

Sue Essex: My officials are liaising closely with the Environment Agency and other parties in the production of a waste strategy for Wales. This strategy will promote the role of recycling and composting as far as practicable; I have attended two meetings of the waste forum at which relevant issues have been discussed and the Agency is represented on the forum.

Reviewing the Conditions of Unused Listed Buildings

Q23 Elin Jones: Has the Minister had any plans to review the conditions of listed buildings no longer in use? (OAQ10915) *Withdrawn.*

Increase in Passengers and Freight on Welsh Railways

Q24 Janet Ryder: What steps can the Minister take to ensure a 50 per cent increase in passengers and an 80 per cent increase in freight on Welsh railways? (OAQ10925) *Withdrawn.*

Welsh Language in Planning Policy

Q25 Delyth Evans: What consideration is given to the Welsh language in planning policy? (OAQ10857)

Sue Essex: 'Planning Guidance (Wales): Planning Policy, First Revision (1999)' states that

'Where use of the Welsh language is a component of the social fabric of a community it is appropriate that this be taken into account in the formulation of land use policies.'

Technical Advice Note (Wales) 20: 'The Welsh Language—Unitary Development Plans and Planning Control' was published in June 2000. This was the subject of wide consultation and provides more detailed advice to planning authorities and others on the application of present policy guidance on planning and the Welsh language.

'Planning Policy Wales' was issued for consultation in February and has been updated to reflect advice provided by the technical advice note. The guidance is strengthened in that *all* local planning authorities should consider whether they have communities where the use of the language is part of the social fabric. *All* unitary development plans should include a statement on how authorities have taken the needs and interests of the Welsh language into account in plan preparation and how any policies relating to the language interact with other plan policies.

Single Wales Franchise (Railways)

Q26 Alun Pugh: What discussions has the Minister had with the Strategic Rail Authority regarding a single Wales franchise? (OAQ10889)

Sue Essex: I, and officials, have met the Strategic Rail Authority on a regular basis, and officials from the SRA have also made two presentations to the Environment, Planning and Transport Committee of the Assembly, on the development of the new Wales and the Borders franchise.

My officials have met the pre-qualified bidders for the franchise, which is due to start operating in shadow form in the autumn.

Trunk Road Network

Q27 David Melding: Can the Minister make a statement on the trunk road network in Wales? (OAQ10891)

Sue Essex: There are 1,576 km of trunk roads in Wales including 133 km of motorway. Trunk roads form a national system of strategic routes for through traffic. They facilitate the efficient movement of goods and people between major centres within and outside Wales.

'Driving Wales Forward: A Strategic Review of the Welsh Trunk Roads Programme', published in 1998, set out the trunk road programme for Wales. The role of the trunk road network is considered further in the consultation paper 'The Transport Framework for Wales: a Consultation Paper' which will be the subject of a full Plenary debate in April.

A further review of the trunk road network is planned to commence later this year.

Sustainable Housing (Planning Regulations)

Q28 Janet Davies: How will planning regulations act to support the need for sustainable housing? (OAQ10922) *Withdrawn.*

Issuing Free Bus Passes to Pensioners

Q29 Ann Jones: Will the Minister give an update on the progress made in issuing free bus passes to pensioners in Wales? (OAQ10862) *Withdrawn.*

Developing Greener Modes of Transport for Goods

Q30 Phil Williams: What discussions has the Minister had with businesses in Wales regarding the potential for developing greener modes of transport for goods? (OAQ10898) *Withdrawn.*