

Answers to Questions not reached in Plenary 7 July 2004

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

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

Contents

- 1 Questions to the Finance Minister on Local Government
- 2 Questions to the Minister for Culture, Welsh Language and Sport
- 4 Questions to the House Committee

Questions to the Finance Minister on Local Government

Question 7, (OAQ36735), withdrawn.

The Wales Programme for Improvement

Q8 Val Lloyd: Will the Minister provide a progress report on the Wales programme for improvement? (OAQ36711)

The Finance Minister (Sue Essex): Local authorities will all have published this year's improvement plans by the end of this month. The common areas for improvement highlighted in the Audit Commission's overview of last year are likely still to feature, but I am confident that, overall, local government is making changes that will lead to sustained improvement in the quality of local services.

Schemes that Benefit the Environment

Q9 Christine Chapman: What action has the Welsh Assembly Government taken to encourage local authorities to support schemes that benefit the environment? (OAQ36753)

Sue Essex: The Assembly Government has provided guidance, funding or other support to local authorities in a wide range of areas that benefit the environment, including waste management and waste minimisation, local biodiversity action, air quality measurement and control, flytipping, litter and dog fouling.

Appointments to External Bodies

Q10 Rhodri Glyn Thomas: Will the Minister make a statement on any guidance that she has given to local government on appointments to external bodies? (OAQ36760)

Sue Essex: The Welsh Assembly Government has not issued specific guidance to local government on the appointment of elected members and officers to external bodies. We intend, over the coming year, to produce guidance on how partnership and joint working between local government and other bodies could be made more effective, and this will include appointments to external bodies.

Financial Support for Public Services

Q11 John Griffiths: How has the Assembly's financial support for public services grown since 1999? (OAQ36715)

Sue Essex: The Government is committed to providing high quality and effective public services for the people of Wales. Budget provision for public services since 1999-2000 has increased by 55.7 per cent.

Council Tax Service

Q12 Mick Bates: Has the Minister examined any alternatives to the current council tax service? (OAQ36706)

Sue Essex: The Welsh Assembly Government's consultation on the balance of funding for local authorities in Wales discussed alternatives to council tax. The outcome of the consultation formed the basis of the Welsh Assembly Government's response to the Office of the deputy Prime Minister's review.

The Balance of Funding Review

Q13 Leanne Wood: What discussions has the Minister had with colleagues at Westminster regarding the balance of funding review? (OAQ36763)

Sue Essex: I have discussed with the UK Minister for Local and Regional Government the importance of taking account of the Welsh perspective in the Office of the deputy Prime Minister's balance of funding review. I have also submitted a report to the steering group following the consultation conducted here in Wales.

The Wales Programme for Improvement

Q14 Jeff Cuthbert: Will the Minister provide a progress report on the Wales programme for improvement? (OAQ36708)

Sue Essex: I refer you to my answer to OAQ36711.

Public Access to Information

Q15 Michael German: Will the Minister make a statement on public access to information from local authorities? (OAQ36713)

Sue Essex: Public access to information from local authorities is provided for in two main ways. Part 5 of the Local Government Act 1972 provides for council papers and meetings to be available to the public, other than those considered to be 'exempt items' covered by Schedule 12A to the Act. The Assembly's regulations S.I. 2001/2290 (W.178) reinforce this. Councils are also subject to the provisions of the Freedom of Information Act 2000 and are required to have a publication scheme, outlining what information is available to the public. From 1 January 2005, each public authority must comply with requests for the information that it holds, unless an exemption from disclosure applies.

Questions to the Minister for Culture, Welsh Language and Sport

Leisure Facilities

Q10 Peter Black: What assistance is available to local councils to replace leisure facilities? (OAQ36678)

The Minister for Culture, Welsh Language and Sport (Alun Pugh): The Audit Commission in Wales reported in March 2004 that the new powers of authorities to promote wellbeing, coupled with the relaxation of controls over borrowing, provide the necessary statutory framework for local authorities to look at more innovative methods of financing the provision of leisure services.

Encouraging People to Learn Welsh

Q11 Mick Bates: Will the Minister make a statement on encouraging people to learn Welsh? (OAQ36786)

Alun Pugh: The Welsh Assembly Government, through various Assembly sponsored public bodies, is extending the opportunities for people to learn Welsh. The Assembly Government's policies encourage individuals to learn Welsh as well as facilitating and empowering people to use the language in all aspects of life in Wales.

Top Slicing Sports Funding

Q12 Eleanor Burnham: Will the Minister make a statement on the potential top slicing of sports funding in Wales to give increased funding to elite programmes? (OAQ36702)

Alun Pugh: We need to strike the right balance between encouraging participation in sport and physical activity for the many, and providing targeted support for the highly talented few. UK Sport's world class performance programme and the Elite Cymru scheme in Wales ensure that Welsh athletes are better supported than ever.

Promoting Welsh Culture Abroad

Q13 Nick Bourne: What is the Minister doing to promote Welsh culture abroad? (OAQ36699)

Alun Pugh: Wales Arts International has been highly successful in promoting Welsh art across the world. The exhibition by the Ruthin Craft Centre at the major Sculpture Objects and Functional Art exposition in Chicago last year is a good example of what they can do. Wales Arts International also promoted Welsh literature in Paris on St David's Day 2004.

Wales had its first ever exhibition at the Venice Biennale of Art in 2003, and plans are being prepared by the steering group for the 2005 event. The promotion of the international Artes Mundi prize has hugely increased awareness of Welsh culture around the world.

2002 was the Year of Wales at the Interceltic Festival of Lorient in Brittany, and Wales continues to have a presence there.

The Wales Millennium Centre is set to become one of the great world performance venues, and is unique in its mix of cultural residents. It will place Wales firmly on the world stage.

Rugby League in North Wales

Q14 Janet Ryder: Will the Minister make a statement on the development of rugby league in north Wales? (OAQ36783)

Alun Pugh: The establishment of the Welsh Rugby League Conference is a clear sign that rugby league is growing in south and west Wales. The Sports Council for Wales is in discussion with the Rugby Football League about establishing a Welsh governing body to develop the sport throughout Wales.

Rugby League in Wales

C15 Janet Ryder: Has the Minister any plans to develop Rugby League Wales? (OAQ36781)

Alun Pugh: I refer you to my previous answer, to OAQ36783.

Questions to the House Committee

The New Assembly Building

Q1 John Griffiths: What policies will be formed to engage the public in Wales with the new Assembly building? (OAQ36800) *Transferred for written answer by the Finance Minister.*

The Finance Minister (Sue Essex): In terms of the design of the new Assembly building, officials have engaged with the access advisory group and the arts advisory panel.

Responsibility for the new building will hand over to the House Committee in due course. However, I am keen for the public to continue to be consulted on the future of the building to ensure that it will meet the aspirations of the people of Wales and for it to be accessible to all.