

## **Answers to Questions not reached in Plenary 14 September 1999**

[R] signifies the Member has declared an interest.

### **Questions to the First Secretary**

#### **The National Institute for Clinical Excellence**

**Q5 David Lloyd:** Following the First Secretary's announcement of the first list of topics referred to the National Institute for Clinical Excellence, could he make a statement on the input from Wales to the process? (OAQ825JS)

**The First Secretary:** The list was developed taking account of current issues for, and developments affecting, the NHS in Wales. The Secretary for Health and Social Services was consulted on and jointly agreed the list of topics. I am satisfied that it addresses the initial priorities for Wales.

#### **Local Authorities (Objective 1)**

**Q6 Geraint Davies:** What administrative and financial assistance will be given to local authorities to support their applications for Objective 1 funding and will the First Secretary make a statement on the additional difficulties that local authorities may face? (OAQ826JS)

**The First Secretary:** It will be a matter for individual local authorities to decide what applications they may wish to make, but the agency responsible for administering the new structural funds programmes will be expected to adopt a proactive role, and provide assistance to any bodies, including local authorities, preparing proposals for European funding.

#### **Strategic Rail Authority**

**Q7 Peter Black:** In view of the 8 per cent increase in complaints about train companies in Wales, has the First Secretary had or does he plan to have any discussions with the Secretary of State of the Environment, Transport and the Regions regarding the role that the Assembly should play in the new Strategic Rail Authority? (OAQ806JS)

**The First Secretary:** I share Members' concern that the train operating companies in Wales are still not providing the level of performance, which passengers and taxpayers have the right to expect. The Assembly will not assume responsibility for the regulation of the railways in Wales, but it will have a strong, close, working relationship with the Strategic Rail Authority and will be able to directly influence the train operators, Railtrack and the various regulatory bodies with responsibilities in this field.

The train operating companies providing services in Wales have appointed a manager to represent their collective interests in dealing with the Assembly, and I welcome this positive step.

The Strategic Rail Authority will include representation from Wales, and will consult the Assembly about the exercise of its functions as they relate to the Assembly's interests.

#### **Information Campaign**

**Q8 David Davies:** When does the First Secretary expect the report on the evaluation of the information campaign that took place in the run up to the Assembly elections? (OAQ811JS) *Withdrawn.*

#### **Local Education Authorities Expenditure**

**Q9 Owen John Thomas:** Will the First Secretary support the ring fencing of moneys given to local education authorities for spending by schools so as to prevent LEAs from diverting such moneys to other uses? (OAQ827JS)

**The First Secretary:** On revenue spending, I am satisfied that the identification and monitoring of the use of additional amounts for local authority education services has worked well in 1998-99 and 1999-2000. The Under-16 Education Committee should have a detailed report next week for discussion at its meeting on 29 September. This is a good example of successful partnership working with local authorities on shared priorities.

However I have some concerns about the position on capital spending. The Welsh Local Government Association's local government revenue settlement 2000-01 assessment published in July says that £325 million is needed to bring schools to a reasonable state of repair, the additional capital amount involved being £146 million. The WLGA's capital expenditure report published at the same time shows authorities spending £62 million on capital works for schools in 1999-2000 and planning to spend £57 million in 2000-01. However the report's analysis suggests that local authorities collectively are not proposing to use in full the basic credit approvals, which they have been allocated for education for that purpose. I recognise that authorities have full discretion in the use of their BCAs but they cannot sustain an argument for more resources for capital spending on education while failing to use for that purpose the resources they have already been given. I will be talking to local authorities to explore why this is happening and why our shared priority for education does not seem to be working for capital spending as well as it does on revenue spending.

#### **Tuition Fees**

**Q10 Jonathan Morgan:** What effect has the imposition of tuition fees had on the number of Welsh applicants to UK higher education institutions in 1998 and 1999 and what impact has this had on reducing social exclusion? (OAQ804JS)

**The First Secretary:** It is difficult to say at this stage as the final figures will not be available until next year and variations occur from year to year for reasons that are not always clear. We are committed to widening access to higher education for the least advantaged and for all those who have the ability to benefit from it. The key features of the new funding arrangements are that students from poorer backgrounds will not have to pay fees, and will have access to sufficient funds to cover their living costs while they are studying.

As to social exclusion, the University and Colleges Admissions Service has just conducted an important study. This shows that in the UK overall, the proportion of applicants from less well-off homes is up on 1998, while at the same time the proportion of applicants from higher income backgrounds has fallen.

I have placed in the Library today the Widening Access Progress Report to the Assembly by the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales, which summarises the action on access taken and planned by the Council. I regard these initiatives as very positive. The benefits will work through for the years to come.

#### **Welsh Produce**

**Q11 Michael German:** Will the First Secretary support the view of Friends of the Earth Cymru that it is in the interests of the economy, environment and health of Wales for Welsh produce to remain free from genetic modification? (OAQ809JS)

**The First Secretary:** I attach importance to ensuring that the regulatory regime controlling the release of genetically modified organisms is effective in protecting human health and the environment.

The Assembly's powers regarding the release of commercially produced genetically modified crops were set out in my reply of 5 June to Rhodri Glyn Thomas. I am aware that Friends of the Earth Cymru have

differing views and these were described in a paper presented to the Secretary for Agriculture and Rural Development, Christine Gwyther, when she met them on Friday, 3 September. This is currently under consideration.

### **Single Programming Document (Objective 1)**

**Q12 Cynog Dafis:** Will the First Secretary make a statement on the content and quality of the single programming document for Objective 1 funding? (OAQ807JS)

**The First Secretary:** The current draft of the Objective 1 single programming document has been developed by the Wales European taskforce. It will be amended by the taskforce following the current consultation exercise and in the light of initial comments by the European Commission. The proposals will be presented to the Assembly formally at the end of the month. The Assembly will then have a month to consider the document and make any necessary amendments before the document has to be submitted to the European Commission.

### **NHS Staff (Cutbacks)**

**Q13 David Melding:** What emergency financial measures will the First Secretary take to avert frontline staff cutbacks in the NHS in the wake of the stocktake report? (OAQ805JS)

**The First Secretary:** The NHS stocktake report emphasised the vital importance of all NHS bodies living within their means. Those NHS bodies which are in deficit are developing recovery plans to restore financial balance. Meanwhile brokerage loans of up to £22.6 million gross will be made available in this financial year to facilitate recovery and enable NHS bodies in deficit to make the necessary changes on a planned basis. We asked them to take action urgently, and in consultation with key stakeholders by making the changes that are necessary to achieve the required level of savings. We have made it absolutely clear that they must minimise the impact on frontline staff and services while recognising that difficult decisions may be required in some cases

### **BBC 2 *Newsnight***

**Q14 Janet Ryder:** Is the First Secretary aware that as part of its response to devolution in Scotland, the BBC will be introducing a 20-minute opt-out from BBC 2's *Newsnight* and what steps is he taking to ensure Welsh viewers receive parity with Scottish viewers with regard to news coverage? (OAQ803JS)

**The First Secretary:** Decisions about BBC programming are for the BBC itself but I am pleased to see that an element of opt-out from *Newsnight* is planned by BBC Wales. Proposals for *Newsnight* formed part of the programming response to devolution announced by the BBC Governors in December 1998. Personally, I am more concerned to see current affairs programmes developed by the BBC, and by other broadcasters, in ways which meet the needs of Wales than to see their priorities driven by some theoretical principle of parity which may or may not be appropriate in any given set of circumstances.

### **Discussions with Plaid Cymru**

**Q15 Nick Bourne:** Will the First Secretary make a statement about his recent discussions with Plaid Cymru on agriculture and other issues? (OAQ808JS)

**The First Secretary:** Christine Gwyther and I have had a number of useful and constructive discussions on the difficulties facing the agricultural industry in Wales with a wide variety of organisations, including Plaid Cymru.

### **Black and Ethnic Minority Communities**

**Q16 Lorraine Barrett:** What specific work is in hand for the Assembly to effectively engage with the black and ethnic minority communities in Wales? (OAQ821JS)

**The First Secretary:** The very first meeting in the Assembly's renovated Pierhead building was a consultation with black and other ethnic minorities from communities in Wales. An all-Wales Black and Ethnic Minority National Assembly for Wales Consultative and Participatory Association has been established to ensure that the views, needs and aspirations of their communities are heard by the Assembly. I fully support the establishment of this association and look forward to working with its representative forum.

The steering group is currently developing its committee structure. The Assembly will be able to consult these committees once they are in place.

In the meantime my officials are actively seeking to address the needs of the black and ethnic minority communities. An example of the work in hand is a review of the housing requirements of black and minority ethnic people in Wales which will consider the need for a strategy to help meet minority ethnic housing needs in Wales.

### **Ford Factory**

**Q17 Carwyn Jones:** Will the First Secretary make a statement on the situation in the Ford factory in Bridgend? (OAQ814JS)

**The First Secretary:** You will appreciate that I shall not breach confidentiality nor do anything that could damage our efforts to secure the future of Ford at Bridgend. I have had regular discussions with Jon McAllister as head of Ford UK. We have worked closely with unions and management at Bridgend against fierce competition from Germany and Spain and we have given Bridgend the best possible competitive position.

### **People in Communities Programme**

**Q18 Jane Davidson:** Will the First Secretary introduce a health improvement indicator as part of the monitoring and evaluation of the People in Communities programme? (OAQ820JS)

**The First Secretary:** Dr David Adamson of the University of Glamorgan has produced a consultation document on the monitoring and evaluation strategy of the People in Communities programme, which is currently being considered by the social exclusion advisory panel. The strategy includes both quantitative and qualitative indicators, including three statistical indicators related to health: incapacity and long term sickness, vaccination take up and low birth weight. One of the key issues in the use of indicators is the availability of data at an appropriate level. Other indicators can be included as part of the process of consultation with the social exclusion advisory panel and other experts.

### **Miners' Compensation Claims**

**Q19 John Griffiths:** What influence may be exerted by the Assembly to facilitate speedy and efficient processing of miners' compensation claims in Wales? (OAQ812JS)

**The First Secretary:** Responsibility for miners' industrial disease health claims, of which 100,000 respiratory disease cases are expected from across the UK, is a matter for the Department of Trade and Industry. I am acutely aware of the urgency for many elderly people in Wales and I am impressed by the positive way the responsible Minister, Helen Liddell, has responded to concerns in Wales. Assembly officials have been liaising closely with the DTI to try to ensure that the procedures are kept to a minimum and that claims are dealt with quickly.

We have been assured by The Department of Trade and Industry that compensation payments are being treated as a priority

### World Trade Organisation

**Q20 Rhodri Glyn Thomas:** What arrangements has the First Secretary made to ensure that the specific interests of Wales are represented during the ministerial deliberations to discuss World Trade Organisation negotiations in Seattle in November? (OAQ822JS)

**The First Secretary:** The UK priorities for the negotiations in Seattle reflect the trade interests of the UK as a whole, including those of Wales. Arrangements are in place to ensure that the Assembly and other devolved administrations have the opportunity to contribute at a senior level to the formulation of the UK position.

### Ford Motor Company (Future)

**Q21 Janet Davies:** Has the First Secretary discussed future work at its Bridgend plant with the Ford Motor Company and can he give Members any information on such discussions? (OAQ819JS)

**The First Secretary:** You will appreciate that I shall not breach confidentiality nor do anything that could damage our efforts to secure the future of Ford at Bridgend. I have had regular discussions with Ian McAllister as head of Ford UK. We have worked closely with unions and management at Bridgend against fierce competition from Germany and Spain and we have given Bridgend the best possible competitive position.

### Welsh Representation in Brussels

**Q22 Dafydd Wigley:** What steps have been taken by the Government to implement the recommendations made in Hywel Ceri Jones's report on improving Welsh representations in Brussels? (OAQ815JS)

**The First Secretary:** A paper showing the action taken in respect of each of the recommendations in the report was submitted to the Committee on European Affairs at its meeting on 1 July 1999 and is available on the intranet. Welsh representation in Brussels will be the subject of further discussion at the next meeting of the Committee in October.

### Agriculture Crisis

**Q23 Mick Bates:** How many meetings have the First Secretary and Cabinet colleagues had with Nick Brown in an attempt to solve the agricultural crisis? (OAQ824JS) [R]

**The First Secretary:** Christine Gwyther, the Secretary for Agriculture and Rural Development, has met Nick Brown twice in the last month to discuss the problems facing the agricultural industry. I have been in regular contact with him to explain the difficulties facing Welsh farmers.

### Equality Issues

**Q24 Richard Edwards:** What plans does the First Secretary have to use his position as leader in the Assembly to promote and advance equality issues in Wales? (OAQ816JS)

**The First Secretary:** I propose to continue to build on developments to date, which include the appointment of the Assembly Cabinet with a fair gender balance and the establishment of an equal opportunities committee; and at official level the appointment of a race equality project leader and the setting up of an equality policy unit.

The Cabinet and the Committee on Equality of Opportunity have already agreed a work programme that will deliver an action plan developed through all the component parts of the Assembly.

A key message is that promoting equality of opportunity is the responsibility of the whole Assembly and building a genuine dialogue with under-represented groups is a key step in doing that. I shall continue to encourage this actively, as will Jane Hutt and all my Cabinet colleagues.

### **Assembly Sponsored Public Bodies**

**Q25 Jocelyn Davies:** What are the First Secretary's plans to take a strategic overview of the Assembly sponsored public bodies? (OAQ817JS)

**The First Secretary:** Our devolution proposals set out clearly our policies on Assembly sponsored public bodies. We have merged the Development Board for Rural Wales and the Land Authority for Wales with the Welsh Development Agency. We have brought Tai Cymru into the Assembly. The Residuary Body for Wales has been abolished. Two special health authorities, the Health Promotion Authority for Wales and the Welsh Health Common Services Authority, have been merged with the Assembly and the number of training and enterprise councils has been reduced from six to four. The Cardiff Bay Development Corporation will be wound up by 31 March next year.

We are looking closely at the relationship between the Assembly and its other sponsored bodies. For example, we are currently looking at the Education and Training Action Plan for Wales produced by the Education and Training Action Group on post-16 education and training with a view to improving the arrangements for the delivery of the education and training programme in the future.

There is a continuing programme of examination into the operational efficiency, performance and the scope for improvements of Assembly sponsored public bodies. The Sports Council for Wales, the Qualifications, Curriculum and Assessment Authority for Wales (ACCAC) and the Further and Higher Education Funding Councils have all been examined recently. Final reports and action plans will be completed for these during 1999.

The publication of our strategic plan next spring will set out our main objectives and targets for the next few years and provide the overall framework within which we and others, especially Assembly sponsored public bodies, will need to work.