

Answers to Questions not reached in Plenary 15 September 1999

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

Questions to the Secretary for the Environment and Local Government

Major Transportation Projects

Q4 Nick Bourne: Will Peter Law make a statement regarding major transportation and other infrastructure projects that he hopes can be supported with European funding from 2000 onwards? (OAQ833JS)

The Secretary for the Environment and Local Government (Peter Law): We are consulting on the draft single programme document for 2000-06 at the moment. It identifies infrastructure improvements as one of the elements needed to develop a properly competitive environment.

Council House Repairs

Q5 Carwyn Jones: What plans does Peter Law have to assist local councils to reduce the backlog of council house repairs in Wales? (OAQ830JS)

Peter Law: The housing resources that the Assembly can provide will be discussed in the forthcoming expenditure round. A working party of my officials, the Welsh Local Government Association, Welsh Tenants Federation Ltd and others has now completed its report on securing additional investment in local authority housing. That report will help the Assembly to tackle the problem.

Corruption in Local Government

Q6 Nick Bourne: Does Peter Law propose to take action to combat corruption in local government in Wales? (OAQ832JS)

Peter Law: A new ethical framework for councils will include new codes of conduct for members and employees. Every council in Wales will have to adopt them and every councillor and employee must sign up to them. I have set up a working group comprising representatives of the Local Government Ombudsman, Welsh Local Government Association, trade unions, the District Audit Office (Wales), the police and Assembly officials to advise us on how the framework will operate in Wales. It will report in the autumn.

Transport Grant Bids 2000-01

Q7 Jane Davidson: Will Peter Law announce the timetable used to decide applications under the transport grant bids 2000-01? (OAQ842JS)

Peter Law: The deadline for submission of 2000-01 transport grant bids was 31 August 1999. We hope to make an announcement on the settlement at the turn of the year as part of the overall local authority capital settlement.

Automatic Air Pollution Monitoring Site

Q8 Janet Ryder: Does Peter Law have any plans to set up an automatic monitoring site for air pollution in north Wales? (OAQ828JS)

Peter Law: Local authorities in Wales are undertaking reviews to identify those areas with air quality

problems. The findings will assist in deciding where future automatic monitoring sites should be located.

Transport Links

Q9 Janet Davies: Does Peter Law have any plans to implement policy to help improve transport links between Wales and the rest of the UK? (OAQ859JS)

Peter Law: Our plans are set out in the Welsh transport policy statement, 'Transporting Wales into the Future,' and in the report on the Welsh trunk road programme review, 'Driving Wales Forward', published last summer.

Flooding in Aberfan

Q10 Huw Lewis: Can Peter Law give an update on progress made on the joint working between his office and the Environment Agency on the provisions guarding against flooding in the Aberfan area? (OAQ844VB)

Peter Law: The Environment Agency is undertaking interim measures, which are reasonably well advanced, to reduce the risk of flooding. The provision of measures to guard against flooding is primarily a matter for the Environment Agency. The Assembly is represented on the Aberfan and Merthyr Vale project forum.

In addition, the Agency's consultants are considering long-term solutions to alleviate the flooding problems.

The primary role of my office is the provision of grant aid towards the cost of effective solutions. In this respect, I expect the Environment Agency to submit a formal application for grant together with details of its proposals.

Revenue Support Grant

Q11 Peter Black: What specific proposals are being considered as part of the review of the local government funding formula for the revenue support grant so as to reduce the gearing effect on council tax rises? (OAQ834JS)

Peter Law: The report produced following the independent review of the standard spending assessment formula carried out by Swansea University and Pion Economics commented on the effect of gearing on council tax. It suggested ways in which this might be alleviated. There were two specific suggestions, that total standard spending should be increased to be more in line with actual spending levels or that a tax taper should be introduced. These proposals, along with any other that is brought forward, will be considered as part of the ongoing discussions on the formula for 2001-02 between the Assembly and the Welsh Local Government Association under the Partnership Council machinery agreed by the Assembly.

Peripheral Distributor Road at Port Talbot

Q12 Brian Gibbons: What priority will Peter Law give to Neath Port Talbot County Borough Council's application for transport grant support to build the new peripheral distributor road at Port Talbot? (OAQ837VB)

Peter Law: All bids submitted will be considered alongside others received for the available resources. I intend to discuss the approach to assessment with the Environment and Local Government Committee on 20 October.

Performance Indicators of Local Authorities

Q13 Janet Davies: Has Peter Law taken, or does he propose to take, action to ensure that data for

performance indicators of local authorities are collected by robust and transparent methods? (OAQ839JS)

Peter Law: I am committed to ensuring that the data collected in Wales is of the highest standard. Data for many local authority performance indicators are derived from well established, robust statistical systems. However, we are currently working with the Welsh Local Government Association on an initial study for the development of a central statistical unit for Welsh local government with a remit to improve the quality and consistency of all local government statistical information. We will take every opportunity, in conjunction with the WLGA, Syniad and the Audit Commission, to evaluate performance indicators and promote consistency and robustness in their production.

Waste Strategy for Wales

Q14 Geraint Davies: Will Peter Law make a statement on the range of consultees when developing a waste strategy for Wales? (OAQ860JS)

Peter Law: 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.

Following publicity, my officials received further requests for copies from 13 individuals. In addition, the consultation paper was placed on the worldwide web.

Housing Related Benefit

Q15 Brian Gibbons: Does Peter Law have any plans to reduce the number of people who fail to claim housing related benefit in Wales? (OAQ838VB)

Peter Law: According to the Department of Social Security, local authorities are required to take steps regarding housing benefit, to ensure that individuals who may be entitled to housing benefit are made aware of this entitlement. Local authorities must also make copies of their housing benefit scheme available for inspection by the public under the Social Security Contributions and Benefits Act 1992, section 123 (3).

Japanese Knotweed

Q16 Peter Black: Will Peter Law consider reviewing action taken by Welsh local authorities in tackling the problem of Japanese knotweed by drawing up a Wales-wide strategy and identifying funding options? (OAQ835JS)

Peter Law: With the burden that it would impose on local authorities, I am not persuaded that such a review is necessary. The Environment Agency has issued guidance on the control of Japanese knotweed regarding riverbanks. However, this can equally apply to other habitats. The Welsh Development Agency has issued advice in respect of land clearance and the Assembly's road maintenance programme requires that agent authorities keep Japanese knotweed under control within the highway boundary. The Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 makes it an offence to plant or cause the plant to grow in the wild.

Hospital Waste Incinerator (Ynys Môn)

Q17 Peter Rogers: When is the result of the public inquiry into the planning application for a hospital waste incinerator in Ynys Môn expected? (OAQ843JS)

Peter Law: The Inspector's report has been received and is under consideration. I will ensure that the decision is issued as early as possible, and that you will receive a copy.

Management of Nant-y-gwyddon Site

Q18 Jocelyn Davies: Will Peter Law put before the Assembly plans to establish a public inquiry into the management of the Nant-y-gwyddon landfill site? (OAQ857JS)

Peter Law: We are exploring the possibility of an independent review of the evidence and the actions taken over the years, regarding this tip. The First Secretary has written to Pauline Jarman, as Leader of Rhondda Cynon Taff County Borough Council, seeking the views of the council on this suggestion.

Local Authority Expenditure

Q19 Phil Williams: Will Peter Law report the present state of negotiations with local government in Wales in preparing a replacement for the present formula for the standard spending assessment of local authority expenditure and will he estimate the date when the new proposals will be presented to the Assembly? (OAQ850JS)

Peter Law: The Welsh Consultative Council agreed an implementation plan on local government finance on 29 March. The distribution sub-group is taking forward the detailed work programme. Regular reports on progress will be made through the Partnership Council's machinery and all papers are available to Assembly Members on the intranet.

The plan is for the distribution sub-group to complete its work by the end of June next year and the proposals for change to be available to the Assembly before the summer recess.

Waste Management

Q20 David Lloyd: Does Peter Law plan to take a strategic overview of waste management in Wales? (OAQ847VB)

Peter Law: Yes. The consultation period on 'A way with waste' ends on 17 September. In view of comments made on that document, I will consider how best to take forward the strategy in Wales.

Waste Minimisation Act 1998

Q21 Brian Hancock: Does Peter Law plan to issue guidelines to local authorities concerning the implementation of the Waste Minimisation Act 1998? (OAQ855VB) [R]

Peter Law: This is one of the matters I shall be looking at in considering how to take forward the waste strategy in Wales.

Control of Waste Disposal

Q22 Geraint Davies: When will local authorities that operate waste disposal companies be allowed direct control of waste disposal? (OAQ858JS) [R]

Peter Law: The draft waste strategy, 'A way with waste', published on 30 June, included a commitment to repeal the provisions in the Environment Protection Act 1990, requiring local authorities to divest themselves of their waste disposal operations.

I understand that the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions will consult later this year on their proposals, with a view to implementing the repeal as soon as possible after 1 April 2000. Since the amendment of primary legislation is involved, this power rests with the Secretary of State, rather than the Assembly.

Removal of compulsory divestment and the bringing together of waste disposal and waste collection

services under the best value duty will allow authorities to adopt a more flexible approach to waste management. This would potentially allow waste disposal to be retained, or taken back, in-house but authorities doing so would have to demonstrate that it represented best value.

Pollution (Vehicle Emissions)

Q23 Alison Halford: Will Peter Law take action to reduce the level of pollution currently caused by emissions from the vehicles of some Welsh bus companies? (OAQ836JS)

Peter Law: Failure to comply with the maximum exhaust emissions limits prescribed in existing construction and use legislation is an offence. Enforcement rests with the police and the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions' Vehicle Inspectorate Executive Agency. Any vehicle suspected of exceeding the limits should be reported to the Vehicle Inspectorate's smoky vehicle hotline; the number to contact in Wales is 01443 224771.

Nant-y-gwyddon Landfill Site

Q24 Gareth Jones: Does Peter Law plan to visit the Nant-y-gwyddon landfill site? (OAQ845VB)

Peter Law: There is an outstanding appeal relating to the licensing of the site which means it would be inappropriate for me to visit it given my potential role in determining the appeal.

Use of Lead Shot

Q25 Brian Hancock: What steps has Peter Law taken to introduce regulation to prevent the use of lead shot? (OAQ856VB)

Peter Law: A UK wide consultation on a draft statutory instrument to prohibit the use of lead shot over certain wetlands in the UK was undertaken by the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions in April-May this year. Assembly officials have now received copies of responses relating to Wales. These responses will need to be considered before deciding whether and how to take forward the issue in Wales.

Heads of the Valleys Road

Q26 David Davies: How much was spent on the public inquiry into the heads of the Valleys road? (OAQ841JS)

Peter Law: The cost of the public inquiry, which was of two months' duration, was £412,000, excluding departmental staff costs.

Developing a Waste Strategy for Wales

Q27 Pauline Jarman: Will Peter Law make a statement on the progress of the development of a waste strategy for Wales? (OAQ851VB) [R]

Peter Law: The consultation period on 'A way with waste' ends on 17 September.

Sustainable Development Scheme

Q28 David Lloyd: What arrangements is Peter Law making to ensure that the drawing up of the sustainable development scheme takes into account issues concerning landfill sites? (OAQ854VB)

Peter Law: Issues concerning landfill sites are many and complex, and the draft waste strategy

(published on 30 June) seeks to address them. I do not believe that the sustainable development scheme should repeat the details of that strategy, but the issues covered in the strategy will be borne in mind in the drawing up of the scheme.

National Planning Framework

Q29 Cynog Dafis: What are Peter Law's intentions regarding preparing a new national planning framework? (OAQ831JS)

Peter Law: The planning policy framework for Wales is set out in Planning Guidance (Wales) Planning Policy (First Revision) April 1999. I am putting in place mechanisms to assist the development of this framework in a way which reflects the principles, statutory duties and priorities of the Assembly, including undertaking a research scoping study and establishing a technical planning forum.

Water Charges Policy

Q30 David Davies: Is it Peter Law's policy to implement a policy of water charges which will differ according to the financial circumstances of the user? (OAQ829JS)

Peter Law: The Water Industry Act 1999 provides power for the Secretary of State to issue guidance to the director general of water services on the provisions to be included within a water charging scheme and powers to specify provisions to be included within charging schemes. These powers will be transferred to the Assembly in the autumn by means of a separate Transfer of Functions Order. The transfer will allow the Assembly to specify within regulations for what services customers should be charged, on what basis those charges should be levied, and if special provisions should be made for certain classes of customers. I shall be considering how to give effect to these powers. Any proposals will be subject to consultation.