

Answers to Questions not reached in Plenary 16 November 2000

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

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Questions to the Minister for Finance, Local Government and Communities

Free Central Heating Installation for the 'Fuel Poor'

Q6 Jocelyn Davies: Does the administration intend to offer free installation of central heating to those classed as being 'fuel poor'? (OAQ7784)

The Minister for Finance, Local Government and Communities (Edwina Hart): Yes, all those eligible to receive central heating under the new home energy efficiency scheme, will do so free of charge.

Low-grade Housing (Mid and West Wales)

Q7 Nick Bourne: What plans are in place to address the problem of low-grade housing in mid and west Wales? (OAQ7754)

Edwina Hart: We are committed to improving housing conditions throughout Wales and have increased housing capital for the next three years in our draft budget. The flexibility local authorities have in using those resources enables councils in mid and west Wales to address their local housing priorities.

The Home Energy Efficiency Scheme

Q8 David Lloyd: Can Edwina Hart assure the National Assembly that there are sufficient resources to be able to carry through the home energy efficiency scheme effectively? (OAQ7791) [R]

Edwina Hart: Yes. My current budget proposals provide for £37 million funding towards the scheme between now and March 2004.

Guidance for Councillors on the Submission of Evidence to Committees

Q9 Peter Rogers: What guidelines have been issued to councillors regarding the submission of evidence to committees on standards of conduct? (OAQ7845)

Edwina Hart: I intend to issue draft guidance on the operation of standards committees before Christmas.

Greater Openness in Local Government in Wales

Q10 Richard Edwards: What plans does Edwin Hart have to encourage greater openness and accountability in local government in Wales? (OAQ7756)

Edwina Hart: Under the Local Government Act 2000, Welsh local authorities will be required to introduce new political management structures. These will lead to greater transparency, efficiency and accountability in the decision making process. Overview and scrutiny committees will have an important

role in ensuring that those responsible for decisions can be held to account. Decision taking meetings will be held in public under the existing access to information regime.

Poor Housing (Social Exclusion)

Q11 Cynog Dafis: What action is being taken to reduce the effects of poor housing as a contributory factor towards social exclusion? (OAQ7859)

Edwina Hart: My draft budget includes increases in housing capital of £5 million, £15 million and £20 million over the next three years. These additional resources, along with our proposals to regenerate communities through Communities First, will help to improve poor housing, which is so often a fundamental issue for those who are socially disadvantaged.

Community Councils

Q12 Kirsty Williams: Will Edwina Hart make a statement on the future role of community councils? (OAQ7794)

Edwina Hart: The Local Government Partnership Council will be considering a paper by the community councils associations in December. We will look at the future roles of community councils in the light of that discussion.

Removing Student Household Exemptions from Council Tax

Q13 David Davies: Will Edwina Hart comment on proposals to remove exemptions for student households from council tax? (OAQ7762)

Edwina Hart: The Assembly has no current plans to remove exemptions for student households. We are currently consulting people in Wales about possible changes to the local government finance system, and will consider fully the responses that we receive.

Local Authority Best Value Proposals

Q14 William Graham: Can Edwina Hart comment on the reported weaknesses in every Welsh local authority's Best Value proposals? (OAQ7849)

Edwina Hart: Best Value is new and it is no surprise that the audit of Best Value performance plans has identified areas for improvement. At the same time, auditors found many examples of high standards in front-line service delivery.

The areas of weakness identified in a third of authorities in Wales centred around the corporate management arrangements in place to deliver Best Value and monitor performance. The National Assembly will work closely with authorities, the Welsh Local Government Association, Syniad, the Audit Commission, the Audit Service and inspectors to facilitate improvements in these areas.

Promoting Equality of Opportunity

Q15 Richard Edwards: How is Edwina Hart encouraging partners in local government, business and the voluntary sector to promote the principle of equality of opportunity? (OAQ7753) *Withdrawn*

Reviewing Local Government Electoral Systems

Q16 Christine Humphreys: What plans does Edwina Hart have to review the electoral systems in place for local government elections? (OAQ7795)

Edwina Hart: The conduct of local government elections is a non-devolved matter. In accordance with the commitment contained in the Partnership Agreement, the Assembly will be commissioning an independent review to examine alternative electoral systems for local government elections. However, any proposed changes to the existing statutory framework will require primary legislation that can only be made by the UK Government.

Limiting Council Tax Increases (Transitional Assistance)

Q17 Janet Ryder: Will Edwina Hart explain how the three councils eligible for transitional assistance to limit council tax increases named in the debate on 31 October were selected? (OAQ7786) [R]

Edwina Hart: We do not yet know which authorities will receive transitional support. The exemplifications prepared before the debate were based on broad assumptions and data available at that time: these indicated that three councils would be eligible for transitional support. When we have the final information from authorities to feed into the settlement, the outcome may be different, and the authorities that are eligible to receive support may change.

Local Election Participation

Q18 Lorraine Barrett: Can Edwina Hart make a statement on discussions she has had with local authorities to examine alternative methods of voting, including telephone and internet voting, as a means to making voting easier and increasing participation in local elections in Wales? (OAQ7804)

Edwina Hart: I have had no discussions with local authorities on this subject. The conduct of elections is a matter for the Home Office.

'Cabinet Style' of Local Government

Q19 William Graham: Will Edwina Hart make a statement concerning the implementation of the 'cabinet style' of local government in Wales? (OAQ7848)

Edwina Hart: Most Welsh local authorities have introduced new executive arrangements ahead of the Local Government Act 2000 coming into force. This has resulted in considerable progress towards more transparent, efficient and accountable decision making. I envisage that where authorities have already modernised their structures, they will continue with them for that reason.

I intend to consult shortly on the fourth option of introducing a modified committee structure with enhanced scrutiny mechanisms. This too will be considerably different from the old committee structure.

Social Housing Grants

Q20 Glyn Davies: What is Edwina Hart's policy in respect of social housing grants on developments that are subject to appeal against refusal of planning permission? (OAQ7807)

Edwina Hart: My officials will be consulting with the Welsh Federation of Housing Associations and the Welsh Local Government Association on this issue. Following completion of this consultation exercise I will decide the approach to be taken.

Communities First

Q21 Lynne Neagle: How will Edwina Hart ensure that the Communities First programme targets the most deprived communities in Wales? (OAQ7798)

Edwina Hart: As you are aware, I will consult soon on the policy framework for Communities First. I will be proposing that in the region of 100 of the most deprived communities in Wales should be

identified, using a combination of the index of multiple deprivation and local knowledge against criteria which will be set out in the consultation paper. Local authorities' and their partners' views will be sought about this proposal.

Changing the Timing of Local Government Elections

Q22 David Davies: What plans does Edwina Hart have to change the timing of local government elections? (OAQ7761)

Edwina Hart: Section 86(4) of the Local Government Act 2000 empowers the Assembly to make an Order specifying the years in which the ordinary elections of a local authority can be held. I shall shortly be conducting a consultation exercise on whether the Assembly should make use of this power.

Communities First (Youth Justice and Substance Misuse)

Q23 Peter Black: How is Edwina Hart incorporating action on youth justice and substance misuse into the Communities First agenda? (OAQ7808)

Edwina Hart: The Assembly is committed to building safer communities throughout Wales; crime reduction will be one of the essential elements of Communities First. There will be vital roles for the police and their crime and disorder reduction partners to play, together with drug and alcohol teams that represent key local agencies. Communities, acting in partnership with key statutory and voluntary agencies, will determine the priorities for action.

Co-ordinating the Range of Community Regeneration Projects

Q24 Janet Davies: Does the administration have any plans to co-ordinate the range of community regeneration projects now being proposed? (OAQ7787) [R]

Edwina Hart: A second consultation document on Communities First, which will be issued shortly, sets out the policy framework that I propose for Communities First and seeks views on the key aspects of our approach. It is our intention that the projects of the People in Communities programme and the Sustainable Communities programme will be incorporated into the Communities First programme. I do not see Communities First replacing existing community regeneration projects, but using them as the basis for building the new concept that is Communities First. I am also looking at other ways in which I could rationalise existing programmes.

Communities First (Update)

Q25 Dr Brian Gibbons: Will Edwina Hart provide an update on Communities First? (OAQ7759)

Edwina Hart: The Communities First consultation document was discussed at the South West Wales Regional Committee at Gwaun-Cae-Gurwen, Neath on 27 October. I was very pleased that you attended that discussion. I intend to issue the second consultation paper, which sets out the proposed policy framework, within the next few weeks. These proposals will draw on the responses to the initial consultation paper.

Plans to Develop Community Councils in Wales

Q26 Christine Humphreys: What plans does Edwina Hart have to develop community councils in Wales? (OAQ7796)

Edwina Hart: I intend to listen to the views of community councils and those who work with them before announcing plans.

Economic Impact of Calling in Planning Applications on Local Businesses

Q27 Peter Rogers: In deciding to call in planning applications, is any assessment made of the economic impact on local businesses? (OAQ7857) *Transferred for answer by the Minister for Environment*

The Minister for Environment (Sue Essex): The Assembly has a certain amount of discretion about which planning applications should be called in for its determination but the principal consideration is whether or not the proposed development is of more than local importance. The detailed planning merits of an application would not be considered in the Assembly's evaluation of whether to call it in. A fuller response about which applications are called in can be found in Peter Law's reply to Glyn Davies on 5 October 1999 (WAQ1415).

It would be possible for a proposed development that is deemed to be of more than local importance to have an impact on local businesses, but a detailed assessment of this impact would be considered during the decision-making process.

Promoting Tenants' Participation

Q28 Lynne Neagle: How will Edwina Hart promote tenants' participation in Wales? (OAQ7799)

Edwina Hart: We have issued guidance to local authorities and registered social landlords on the introduction of tenant participation compacts across Wales. These compacts should ensure that tenants can participate in the management of their homes and that their views are reflected in the delivery of services. We are monitoring their implementation. Tenant participation will be further promoted through dissemination of good practice and funding the work of the Tenant Participation Advisory Service and Welsh Tenants Federation. Grants are also being provided to support innovative practice by tenants and landlords.

Introducing Proportional Representation for Local Government

Q29 Mick Bates: What progress has been made to introduce proportional representation for local government since the signing of the partnership agreement? (OAQ7801)

Edwina Hart: As stated in the partnership agreement, we will commission an independent review of possible electoral systems for local government elections but the precise details of such a review are currently under consideration. Given that the conduct of elections is a non-devolved matter, any changes to the electoral system would require primary legislation, to be made at Westminster.

Licensing Zoos (Animal Welfare)

Q30 Christine Gwyther: Can Edwina Hart make a statement on how local government makes animal welfare a necessary factor to be considered when licensing zoos? (OAQ7758) *Withdrawn*

Questions to the Minister for Environment

Excessive Working Hours of Professional Drivers

Q7 Janice Gregory: Does Sue Essex have any plans to consult with the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions on the issue of excessive working hours of professional drivers in Wales? (OAQ7768)

The Minister for Environment (Sue Essex): The European Commission's proposals on detailed working time provisions for the road transport sector are currently under discussion in the Transport Council but a working group, under Lord Whitty, has been set up to work out how best to manage the implementation of the working time directive in the UK. The group has representatives from the Government, the employers' organisations and the TGWU. We do not have a direct responsibility for this.

The Government's Commitment to Sustainable Energy

Q8 Helen Mary Jones: Will Sue Essex make a statement on the Government of Wales's commitment to sustainable energy? (OAQ7837)

Sue Essex: A key target in 'Betterwales.com' is the development of Wales as a global showcase for clean energy production. In the partnership agreement we affirmed our commitment to the full integration of environmental and socially sustainable development throughout all government policies.

A study commissioned by the National Assembly into potential renewable energy resources is approaching completion and its conclusions will be fed into the development by the Assembly of a strategic energy framework for Wales. A study into the commercial potential for farmers diversifying into alternative sectors, including energy crops such as biomass, has been commissioned by the National Assembly Agriculture Department and its recommendations are also being considered. The Minister for Economic Development is responsible for energy matters and is content with this answer.

Flooding and its Affects

Q9 Nick Bourne: What plans does Sue Essex have to heighten awareness of flooding and its affects amongst the Welsh public? (OAQ7775)

Sue Essex: I attach great importance to raising the awareness of the public in Wales to the very real risk of flooding. The National Assembly is encouraging and providing financial assistance to a number of relevant actions to this end.

Reducing the Emission of Greenhouse Gasses

Q10 Phil Williams: What policies are in place to reduce the emission of greenhouse gasses in Wales? (OAQ7834)

Sue Essex: I refer you to my answer to question OAQ7830 given earlier today.

Planning Guidelines for Flood Plain Areas

Q11 Lorraine Barrett: Does Sue Essex have any plans to revise the planning guidelines for flood plain areas? (OAQ7772)

Sue Essex: Planning policy in Wales is under review, and guidance in respect of development and flood risk is integral to this process. I expect the review to be issued for public consultation at the end of January 2001.

The Proposed Re-opening of Passenger Rail Services

Q12 Peter Law: Will Sue Essex give her full support to the proposed re-opening of passenger rail services from Ebbw Vale/Abertillery to Cardiff/Newport? (OAQ7766)

Sue Essex: I am keen to support the reintroduction of passenger services on freight routes, where practical, but the cost of doing so has to be justified in each case. I await the results of the feasibility study being carried out by Gwent Consultancy. In the meantime, we have highlighted the Assembly's interest in this rail link within the bidders pack which has been issued to all eight prequalified companies who are preparing bids for the Wales and the Borders franchise.

Transport Grants for Road Improvements

Q13 Peter Black: How much money is available for transport grants for road improvements in the next three years? (OAQ7814) [R]

Sue Essex: The draft budget published by the Minister for Finance, Local Government and Communities on 19 October is to be discussed by the Assembly. This proposes that the available Transport Grant is £45.343 million, £56.343 million and £66.343 million for 2001-02, 2002-03 and 2003-04 respectively. Transport grant is used to fund packages of integrated transport measures, which cost over £1 million, Safe Routes to School projects, as well as major road schemes, which cost over £5 million, that cannot be accommodated within local authorities' own unhypothecated resources. I have yet to take a decision on the final balance between the elements for 2001-02. However, some commitments are carried forward in respect of committed road schemes and have been made as forward allocations for packages of £13.732 million and £8.566 million for 2001-02 and 2002-03 respectively. I have also decided to allocate at least £2 million towards Safe Routes to School projects in 2001-02. I plan to announce my decision on allocations for 2001-02 early in January 2001.

The Number of Sites of Special Scientific Interest

Q14 Christine Gwyther: Will Sue Essex make a statement on the number of sites of special scientific interest in Wales? (OAQ7776) *Withdrawn*

Working towards the Overall International Targets

Q15 Rhodri Glyn Thomas: Will Sue Essex make a statement on how our sustainable development scheme is working towards the overall international targets? (OAQ7852)

Sue Essex: Under the provisions of the sustainable development scheme before the Assembly today, the National Assembly for Wales will be committed to helping to achieve international and European Union targets relating to sustainability. A range of measures is in hand to deliver on this commitment, including action on waste management, air and water quality and habitats.

Promoting Bus Travel in Wales

Q16 Richard Edwards: How will Sue Essex promote more bus travel in Wales? (OAQ7774) *Withdrawn*

The Levels of Pollution in Cardiff Bay

Q17 Brian Hancock: Will Sue Essex make a statement on the levels of pollution in Cardiff Bay? (OAQ7833)

Sue Essex: The Environment Agency has advised me that water quality in the bay is considered to be acceptable at present.

Cardiff Harbour Authority is in the process of arranging long term measures to maintain the dissolved oxygen water quality standard prescribed by the Cardiff Bay Barrage Act 1993 using a bed-mounted aeration system: installation of this system is expected to commence in the new year.

During this period of saltwater impoundment, a flushing regime has been used to maintain the water quality of the bay. This has involved disimpounding the bay on the ebbing tide and refilling on the next high tide at predetermined intervals since impoundment. Due to the recent high river flows coming in to the bay, it has become predominantly fresh water. This has improved the dissolved oxygen levels within the bay and has resulted in less frequent flushing over the past few weeks.

As dredging proceeds, it is envisaged that regular flushing of the bay may again be needed to maintain the appropriate standards of water quality. The Environment Agency is ensuring that water quality is regularly monitored and has agreed with the Harbour Authority a protocol for additional monitoring during the dredging works which will continue until spring 2001. As part of its environmental quality programme, Dŵr Cymru is improving a number of discharges upstream of the bay, which should benefit water quality.

The North Wales Coast Line

Q18 Gareth Jones: Will Sue Essex make a statement on any progress made towards the north Wales coast line? (OAQ7827)

Sue Essex: My officials have recently been in discussion with Railtrack concerning the delay in implementing line-speed improvements along the north coast main line. Although all the infrastructure works are in place, design flaws have resulted in a delay in Railtrack being able to authorise drivers to travel at the optimum speeds for the route.

On 11 October, my officials wrote to the North West Zone director expressing our concern, and he has asked for an urgent review of the current installation, and hopes to be able to offer 90mph for some 12 route miles, and 85mph for the remainder of the route.

Preparing a Waste Strategy

Q19 Janet Ryder: Will Sue Essex make a brief statement on progress in preparing a waste strategy? (OAQ7841)

Sue Essex: The Assembly will publish a draft waste strategy for consultation in the spring and introduce a final document in the autumn of 2001. The strategy will be developed in partnership with key stakeholders and I am establishing a waste forum so that we can take forward the strategic issues that need to be addressed. A paper considered by the Environment, Planning and Transport Committee yesterday sets out the issues in detail.

Gwella Darpariaeth Cludiant Cyhoeddus ym Mae Caerdydd

C20 Owen John Thomas: Pa gynlluniau sydd yn cael eu hystyried i wella darpariaeth cludiant cyhoeddus yn ardal Bae Caerdydd? (OAQ7819)

Sue Essex: Mae Cyngor Caerdydd wedi cyflwyno ei gynllun trafndiaeth leol sydd yn cynnwys gwella trafndiaeth gyhoeddus ardal y Bae. Yn 2000-01 dyrannwyd bron i £6 miliwn i Gaerdydd o dan y grant trafndiaeth, a bydd dyraniadau'r dyfodol yn rhoi ystyriaeth i'r cynllun. Rhoddwyd grant cymhorthdal bysiau gwerth £274,000 i Gaerdydd yn 2000-01, a bydd cam II o'r datblygiad cyfredol i Sgwâr Bute yn cynnwys llwybrau sydd yn rhoi blaenoriaeth i fysiau. Mae'r Cynulliad wedi dyfarnu comisiwn er mwyn cael astudiaeth ddichonoldeb o'r opsiynau ar gyfer cyfnewid y cysylltiad rheilffordd presennol yn Rhodfa Bute gyda system rheilffordd gul diesel. Mae'r Cynulliad wedi trafod y posibilrwydd o ddatblygu cynlluniau teithio gwyrdd yn ardal y Bae, mewn partneriaeth â chyflogwyr lleol.

Improving Public Transport Provision in Cardiff Bay

Q20 Owen John Thomas: What plans are being considered to improve the public transport provision in the Cardiff Bay area? (OAQ7819)

Sue Essex: Cardiff Council has submitted its local transport plan including strategies for improving public transport in the Bay. In 2000-01 almost £6 million was allocated to Cardiff under transport grant, and future allocations will have regard to the LTP. Bus subsidy grant of £274,000 has been made available to Cardiff in 2000-01, and the current phase II development of Bute Square will include bus priority lanes. The Assembly has awarded a commission for a feasibility study into the options for replacing the existing Bute Avenue rail link with a diesel light rail system. The Assembly has discussed with Cardiff Council the possibility for developing green travel plans for the Bay area, in partnership with local employers.

Flood Protection in Wales

Q21 William Graham: Will Sue Essex make a statement concerning flood protection in Wales? (OAQ7853)

Sue Essex: The aim of The National Assembly is to reduce the risks to people and the developed and natural environment in Wales from flooding by: encouraging the provision of adequate and cost-effective flood warning systems; encouraging the provision of adequate, technically, environmentally and economically sound and sustainable flood defence measures; and discouraging inappropriate development in areas at risk from flooding.

I announced to Members on 31 October that I would be reviewing flood defence arrangements in Wales.

Processing Transport Grants in 2001-02

Q22 Peter Black: What timetable is envisaged for the processing of transport grants in 2001-02? (OAQ7815) [R]

Sue Essex: Transport grant bids were received from all local authorities in Wales by 31 August. The bids are now being assessed and I will announce allocations early in January 2001.

Planning Applications for Mobile Phone Masts

Q23 Ieuan Wyn Jones: Will Sue Essex make a statement in respect of planning applications for mobile phone masts? (OAQ7842)

Sue Essex: I have accepted, in response to one of the key recommendations of the report of the independent expert group on mobile phones—the Stewart report—that all telecommunications masts should be the subject of applications for planning permission. A consultation paper covering our proposed changes to planning legislation, together with draft related guidance/advice, issued to a wide range of interests on 8 November 2000. Comments have been invited by 5 January 2001.

Ensuring a Supply of Fuel to Wales

Q24 Ieuan Wyn Jones: Are there any contingency plans to ensure supply of fuel to Wales? (OAQ7829)

Sue Essex: The memorandum of understanding signed with the oil companies commits them to work with the Assembly and the police to maintain security of supplies of fuel to Wales. Systems are in place to ensure that the movement of fuel to users, especially priority users, is maintained as much as possible. The emergencies working group which was established following the September crisis, has co-ordinated

the work of the Assembly, local authorities, NHS Wales and the emergency services to deliver a combined response in Wales to any fuel crisis. The group has been successful in obtaining for Wales over 10 per cent of all the designated fuel stations in Britain where deliveries of fuel for priority purposes would be enforced by statute during a fuel crisis.

Carrying Freight on the Rail Network

Q25 David Davies: As part of the integrated transport scheme, what is Sue Essex doing to encourage more freight to be carried on the rail network? (OAQ7778)

Sue Essex: The Assembly recognises the importance of encouraging modal shift from road to rail freight carriage, and is pressing Railtrack through its network management statement, for gauge enhancement on the key freight routes in Wales. Grant is available from the Assembly through the freight facilities grant scheme, which provides financial assistance towards the capital cost of providing freight handling facilities where this may help rail transport compete in economic terms with road. Grant is offered in recognition of the environmental benefits derived from removing heavy lorry traffic from roads. Track access grant, a revenue grant calculated in the same way as FFG, is also available and is administered by the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions in England and Wales.

My officials are in discussion with the shadow strategic rail authority on the future of freight grants generally, and the Assembly is also contributing to the development of the SSRA's overall UK freight strategy.

Minimising Disruption to the Transport Network

Q26 Geraint Davies: What measures will be taken to minimise the disruption to the transport network in the event of extreme weather conditions? (OAQ7831)

Sue Essex: The National Assembly is responsible for the trunk road network in Wales. The Assembly aims to provide a maintenance service which as far as possible allows the safe movement of traffic on motorways and trunk roads throughout Wales and keep to a minimum delays and accidents caused by winter and other adverse weather conditions. Local authorities are responsible for their local roads as local highway authorities. The Assembly has no formal locus in relation to the public transport network, we are, however, kept informed of the contingency plans of the train operating companies.

Discussions with Railtrack

Q27 Dafydd Wigley: Will Sue Essex make a statement on any discussions she has had with Railtrack concerning the track condition in Wales? (OAQ7779)

Improving the Condition of the Tracks in Wales

Q28 Dafydd Wigley: What discussions has Sue Essex had with Railtrack regarding the need to improve the condition of the tracks in Wales? (OAQ7780)

Sue Essex: I attended a meeting with the Deputy Prime Minister, the Minister for Transport and Railtrack's Chief Executive, Gerald Corbett, in London on 2 November, to review progress towards the national track recovery programme.

I understand that Railtrack has identified track defects on the up line, in the Swansea to London direction, at Gwyn y Gaer, near Bridgend. A temporary speed restriction of 20 mph has been imposed and Railtrack plans to repair the line as soon as possible.

The Cost of Improving the North-South Transport Links

Q29 Alison Halford: Will Sue Essex make a statement on the cost of improving the north-south transport links, as outlined by the Welsh north-south transport links study of May 2000? (OAQ7770)

Sue Essex: I am committed to improving links between north and south Wales. The report prepared by Babbie estimated that the total cost to implement the schemes to improve the north to south road route is £270 million. I have to consider the levels of investment in the context of the funding provided in the draft budget.

My decision must also take into account the needs for transport infrastructure and public transport investment across Wales. In terms of public transport, I am expecting improved rail links between north and south Wales to be included in the new Wales and Borders franchise with revenue subsidy from the shadow strategic rail authority.

Improving Safety on Welsh Roads

Q30 Richard Edwards: What plans does Sue Essex have to improve safety on Welsh roads? (OAQ7773) *Withdrawn*