

Answers to Questions not reached in Plenary 19 March 2003

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

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

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Questions to the Minister for Health and Social Services

Neath Port Talbot Hospital

Q6 Gwenda Thomas: Will the Minister make a statement on her recent visit to Neath Port Talbot Hospital? (OAQ23363)

The Minister for Health and Social Services (Jane Hutt): On 3 February, the new Neath Port Talbot Hospital was opened by His Royal Highness Prince Charles. This 270-bed, state-of-the-art facility replaces the existing Neath General Hospital and Port Talbot General Hospital. Patients, carers and the local community have been involved in designing the hospital, influencing both the layout and the way in which services are provided, in what is now the most modern hospital in Wales.

Waiting Times in South Wales Central

Q7 Jonathan Morgan: What measures is the Minister taking to reduce waiting times in South Wales Central? (OAQ23373)

Jane Hutt: Significant investment has been made in reducing waiting times, with improvements being made in the priority areas of cardiac surgery and orthopaedics in South Wales Central. The new ambulatory care surgical unit at the University Hospital of Wales Cardiff has resulted in 4,000 more treatments in the past year for routine surgery. In addition, I have announced new funding to develop orthopaedic ambulatory care at Llandough hospital and the strengthening of orthopaedic services in North Glamorgan NHS Trust.

The Townsend Formula (Torfaen)

Q8 Lynne Neagle: Will the Minister make a statement on the impact of the Townsend formula on addressing health need in Torfaen? (OAQ23395)

Jane Hutt: I am allocating £7.1 million to nine local health boards and an additional £3.1 million to six local health boards. In total, 10 local health boards benefit from these allocations. These are the areas of greatest need, as identified under the direct-needs formula. Torfaen local health board will receive a Townsend allocation of nearly £1.8 million in 2003-04. An additional £1 million will be available for the remaining local health boards.

Provision of Pharmaceutical Services

Q9 John Griffiths: What strategy will be followed to ensure that the provision of pharmaceutical services in Wales complements the Welsh Assembly Government's aims and objectives in primary care? (OAQ23356)

Jane Hutt: In September of last year, I presented 'Remedies for Success: A Strategy for Pharmacy in Wales' for consultation. The strategy aims to ensure that Wales offers an attractive and challenging environment to enable the profession to fulfil its potential and deliver high-quality pharmaceutical services to the population of Wales.

Entry Control Regulations for Pharmacies

Q10 Nick Bourne: Will the Minister make a statement on proposals by the Office of Fair Trading to deregulate entry control regulations for pharmacies? (OAQ23359)

Jane Hutt: Since the report was published, I have received a great deal of correspondence from Assembly Members, Members of Parliament, representative organisations and individual pharmacists. While views are varied, many of these correspondents stress the need for me to be wary of the impact that the report's recommendations could have on small pharmacies, particularly in rural parts of Wales. I shall weigh these and opposing views carefully before reaching a decision on my response.

Recruitment and Retention of GPs

Q11 Geraint Davies: Will the Minister make a statement on the recruitment and retention problems of general practitioners in Wales? (OAQ23385)

Jane Hutt: The recruitment and retention of GPs is identified as a key priority within the primary care strategy. I have set a target of 175 extra GPs by 2010 and have increased GP training places from 110 in 2001 to 136 in 2003 to assist in addressing this issue.

Last week, I announced increases to golden hello payments of up to an additional £7,000, with a new maximum payment of £12,000 for areas of shortage; extended the golden thanks scheme, making it payable to GPs until their seventieth birthday; and announced that a new GP returner scheme will be introduced in Wales.

'A Question of Balance'

Q12 David Lloyd: How will the Minister address the capacity problems identified within 'A Question of Balance'? (OAQ23404) [R]

Jane Hutt: As an immediate response, a sum of £7 million was allocated to improve access to services in Wales, particularly for the winter period when emergency pressures are at their height. The funds were made available through health authorities, with £5 million being targeted at emergency care in trusts facing the highest pressures, and £2 million allocated to social services to augment the delayed transfer of care grant scheme money. A project board is currently being established to oversee the detailed progression and implementation of this report.

Promoting Healthy Eating among Children

Q13 Ann Jones: Will the Minister give her evaluation of the Welsh Assembly Government efforts to promote healthy eating among children in Wales? (OAQ23377)

Jane Hutt: Over 500 schools are participating in the Welsh network of healthy school schemes, and many of these are taking action on nutrition issues. Over half of them have set up fruit tuck shops on a cost-recovery basis. Pilots on healthy packed lunches and healthy options in vending machines are taking place in Pembrokeshire and the results will be shared nationally.

Consultant Neurologists in North Wales

Q14 Janet Ryder: What measures has the Minister introduced to recruit and retain consultant neurologists in north Wales? (OAQ23380)

Jane Hutt: The workforce planning information for all healthcare professionals, which is collected annually, is providing the Welsh Assembly Government with a full picture of the needs of NHS Wales. From the results of this year's workforce planning process, and in conjunction with locally-prepared recruitment and retention strategies, we will be able to produce realistic plans for the future in all consultant specialties, including neurology. Last year, I set workforce targets that commit the Assembly to increasing the number of consultants by 525 in Wales by 2010.

We are training more doctors in Wales and the annual intake of students has been increased from 190 in 1998 to 290 in 2001. By 2004, there will be at least 1,385 medical students enrolled in Wales. More staff are also being trained in the grades leading to consultant grade. This year, there are seven specialist registrars in the field of neurology.

The shortage of neurologists remains an UK-wide problem and the Welsh Assembly Government is working with NHS trusts in Wales to identify long-term vacancies and to explore the potential for recruiting consultants from overseas.

The Health Service in Gwent

Q15 Lynne Neagle: Will the Minister make a statement on the level of funding support for the health service in Gwent for 2003-04? (OAQ23396)

Jane Hutt: On 7 March 2003, I announced the 2003-04 local health board allocations. Funding for the new local health boards will total £2.5 billion. The five local health boards in the Gwent area will, between them, receive £462.6 million, including funding of £84.1 million to Torfaen local health board. In addition, Torfaen will benefit from other expenditure, for example, that of the new Health Commission Wales (Specialist Services), the budget for which I shall be announcing shortly.

Questions to the Minister for Education and Lifelong Learning

Future of Higher Education in Wales

Q6 Huw Lewis: Will the Minister make a statement on the meetings she has held with the Secretary of State for Education and Skills regarding the future of higher education in Wales? (OAQ23420)

The Minister for Education and Lifelong Learning (Jane Davidson): I have been in regular contact with the Secretary of State for Education and Skills in the run-up to the publication of his strategy, and since its publication. Our meetings have been positive. We have a shared commitment to widening access to higher education and to modernising the sector.

Recruiting School Governors in Wales

Q7 Brian Hancock: What measures has the Minister introduced to promote the recruitment of school governors in Wales? (OAQ23435)

Jane Davidson: The Assembly funds Governors Wales to promote the role of school governors, including their attendance at high profile events such as the Eisteddfod and the production of an information leaflet. I have met with equality, ethnic and disability organisations to encourage more of the groups that they represent to become governors.

Food Education

Q8 Ann Jones: What consideration has the Minister given to increasing the amount of food education, with particular emphasis on nutrition and healthy eating in schools in the most deprived communities of Wales? (OAQ23443)

Jane Davidson: We are taking forward a number of measures to promote the importance of food education in schools across Wales. Opportunities for pupils to learn about food occur in the national curriculum. It also features in the new framework for personal and social education, which the Assembly Government has decided to make a statutory requirement in all maintained schools from September 2003. We will be asking the Qualifications, Curriculum and Assessment Authority for Wales to review the current framework for personal and social education as part of the review of the school curriculum.

Question 9 (OAQ23414) was withdrawn.

School Building Funding

Q10 Lynne Neagle: Will the Minister make a statement about school building funding allocated to local government in Wales? (OAQ23412)

Jane Davidson: I refer you to the statement that I made in Plenary on 5 February. I am currently consulting the Welsh Local Government Association on the proposal for the future distribution of additional capital funding for schools.

Schools that are 'Too Rich'

Q11 Ieuan Wyn Jones: Will the Minister make a statement further to the comments of the First Minister that some schools in Wales are 'too rich'? (OAQ23431)

Jane Davidson: The First Minister's remarks were made in the context of Audit Commission findings in its report 'Money Matters' that a significant number of local education authorities had not reviewed their funding formulae for schools for some years. As a result, formulae did not properly reflect the funding needs of schools, leaving some with insufficient funds and others much better placed. His remarks also took account of the fact that some schools have substantial balances.

Empowering Disadvantaged Communities (Education)

Q12 John Griffiths: What further steps will be taken to ensure that formal education in Wales empowers our most disadvantaged communities? (OAQ23447)

Jane Davidson: As I indicated to Lynne Neagle, in response to OAQ23413, our education and training policies are designed to empower all communities in Wales, but our work on the foundation phase, the transition from primary to secondary schools, 'Narrowing the Gap in the Performance of Schools', 'Extending Entitlement', the Welsh baccalaureate, the national basic skills strategy and the skills and employment action plan will all benefit our most disadvantaged communities.

Truancy in Wales

Q13 Christine Chapman: What action has the Minister taken to address the problem of truancy in Wales? (OAQ23424)

Jane Davidson: I presented the action plan from the task and finish group on attendance to the Education and Lifelong Learning Committee last month. This details how the 16 short and long-term recommendations in the original report will be taken forward. As well as the specific approaches

recommended, there are more general initiatives taking place in Wales, such as the work on developing learning pathways for 14 to 19-year-olds, which are about giving our children more opportunities and making our schools a place where children want to be.

Citizenship Classes in Schools

Q14 Alison Halford: Would the Minister provide an update on the content and state of citizenship classes in schools in Wales? (OAQ23411)

Jane Davidson: The main focus for citizenship is within the community aspect of the personal and social education framework, implemented in September 2000. In May 2002, the Qualifications, Curriculum and Assessment Authority for Wales recommended to the Assembly that personal and social education be included within the basic curriculum. From September 2003, it will form part of the basic curriculum for maintained schools in Wales.

Present Financial Position of the Education Service

Q15 Jonathan Morgan: Would the Minister make a statement on the present financial position of the education service? (OAQ23429)

Jane Davidson: In October, the Assembly approved provision for the education and lifelong learning main expenditure group of over £1,171 million in 2003-04—an increase of 8.7 per cent over the baseline for 2002-03 and rising to over £1,386 million by the end of the budget period. Provision for local authority education services is contained in the local government settlement. The Finance Minister's statement in January detailed the increase in the general funding to local authorities of £211 million—an average increase of 7.4 per cent. In addition, local authorities will receive £30 million performance incentive grant and £20 million under the new deprivation grant. With these grants, total Assembly support in the settlement is up £261 million, or 9.2 per cent.