

Answers to Questions not reached in Plenary 23 November 2000

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

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Questions to the Deputy First Minister and Minister for Economic Development

Marketing Wales as an International Tourist Destination

Q7 Rhodri Glyn Thomas: What benefits are there in promoting the Welsh brand rather than British brand when marketing Wales as an international tourist destination? (OAQ8001)

The Deputy First Minister and Minister for Economic Development (Michael German): It is important that we promote Wales as a modern, vibrant country with its own heritage, culture and traditions. But we can also take advantage of what the British brand can do for us in promoting Wales's distinctiveness within Britain.

The Survival Rate of SMEs in Wales

Q8 Janice Gregory: Can Michael German give us the current survival rate of SMEs in Wales? (OAQ7927)

Michael German: The latest available figures show that 61.7 per cent of businesses first registering in 1995 survived to 1998 in Wales compared to 61.0 per cent in the UK. 87.9 per cent of businesses first registering in 1997 in Wales were still there in 1998. In the UK the equivalent figure was 88.4 per cent. 72.6 per cent of businesses first registered in 1996 in Wales survived to 1998, compared to 72.7 per cent in the UK.

The Review of Business Advice in Wales

Q9 Glyn Davies: What progress has been made on the review of business advice in Wales? (OAQ7958)

Michael German: This is a matter for the Economic Development Committee, not the Executive.

Developments regarding Objective 1 Projects

Q10 Nick Bourne: Can Michael German make a statement on the latest developments in relation to Objective 1 projects in Wales? (OAQ7950)

Michael German: The Welsh European Funding Office has received 676 Objective 1 project applications. These include fast track projects and applications submitted with action plans on 29 September. All of these projects have indicated that they can make an immediate start. Projects are currently undergoing appraisal.

A List of the Most Deprived Areas (Representations to the Treasury)

Q11 Brian Hancock: What representations has Michael German made to the Treasury regarding the drawing up of a list of the most deprived areas who will benefit from the tax credits announced in the pre-budget statement? (OAQ7999)

Michael German: The package of measures worth an accumulative £1 billion over five years announced on 8 November by the Chancellor is to help make Britain's towns and cities better places in which to live and work, stimulating enterprise and employment. We welcome this move by the Government. Discussions will take place over the next few months on the list of deprived areas to benefit from stamp duty relief and VAT exemptions on property conversions as well as several other measures.

Meeting with the Welsh Development Agency

Q12 Janet Ryder: Will Michael German report on his last meeting with the Welsh Development Agency? (OAQ7996)

Michael German: Since I took up my appointment I have had a meeting with the Welsh Development Agency chair on 25 October, attended the board dinner that night, and had a tour of the agency and a detailed briefing from them on 30 October. I also met Graham Hawker, the chief executive designate on 11 November. At these meetings I explained that through regular, direct contact with the WDA I wished to build a relationship with them based on collaboration, teamwork and effective communication. I intend to meet the agency chairman and chief executive, and senior Assembly officials on a bi-monthly basis in order to keep in close touch with all aspects of the agency's work.

Promoting and Marketing Local Welsh Produce

Q13 Brian Hancock: How is local Welsh produce promoted and marketed within the tourism sector? (OAQ7998)

Michael German: The Wales Tourist Board contributes £55,000 per annum to a scheme led by the Welsh Development Agency to promote the use of quality Welsh food and drink throughout the hospitality and tourism industries in Wales.

Other Welsh products such as books and crafts can be promoted and sold via the Tourist Information network.

Operating Aids to Support Objective 1 Structural Funds

Q14 Alun Cairns: What is the latest progress on Michael German's negotiations for operating aids to support Objective 1 structural funds? (OAQ7954)

Michael German: I shall be making a report to the Economic Development Committee on this matter for its meeting on 13 December 2000.

The Delivery Mechanism for 'Finance Wales'

Q15 Christine Gwyther: Can Michael German make a statement on the delivery mechanism for 'Finance Wales'? (OAQ7922) *Withdrawn*

The Allocation of Objective 1 Funds by WEFO

Q16 Phil Williams: What steps is Michael German taking to ensure that the allocation of Objective 1 funds by WEFO accurately matches the division of the total budget into separate measures? (OAQ8000)

Michael German: Applicants submitting Objective 1 project bids are required to complete a separate application form for each measure of the Objective 1 programme. In this way it is possible to ensure that financial allocations are made at measure level and can therefore relate accurately to the programme complement measure level financial tables.

The Distribution of Business Support Grants

Q17 Elin Jones: What specific action is Michael German intending to take to monitor the way in which the distribution of business support grants, reflects the regional diversity and economic needs of all areas of Wales? (OAQ7992)

Michael German: The Objective 1 Programme Monitoring Committee has agreed that further work is required in respect of business support, including grants, to ensure that Objective 1 funding is allocated in a strategic and effective way.

This work is ongoing and will be incorporated into the proposed priority action plan for priority one of the programme.

Appointing Separate and Accountable Bodies for the Priority and Local Partnerships

Q18 Phil Williams: When does Michael German anticipate that separate and accountable bodies will be appointed for each of the priority and local partnerships? (OAQ7984)

Michael German: I anticipate that a decision on accountable bodies will be reached after the next meeting of the Objective 1 Programme Monitoring Committee on 15 December, which will consider the priority and local action plans.

Considering Applications for the Objective 1 Scheme

Q19 Ron Davies: Has Michael German considered any changes to the way in which applications for the Objective 1 scheme are considered? (OAQ7926)

Michael German: Following the Programme Monitoring Committee's decision on 16 October to move towards six priority action plans work is in progress on developing a process which facilitates the movement of applications through the proposed new system. Details of the process will be submitted to the next Programming Monitoring Committee to be held on 15 December 2000.

Pay Differentials between Men and Women

Q20 Richard Edwards: Can Michael German make a statement on pay differentials between men and women in Wales? (OAQ7921) *Withdrawn*

The Resource Implications of the Entrepreneurship Action Plan

Q21 Helen Mary Jones: Will Michael German make a statement on the resource implications of the entrepreneurship action plan? (OAQ8003)

Michael German: Following the Economic Development Committee's recent consideration of the entrepreneurship action plan's implementation plan, the Executive will be working closely with the wider partnership to identify appropriate funding mechanisms, including European structural funds, for the projects and programmes identified in the implementation plan.

The Economic Development of Non-Objective 1 Areas

Q22 Christine Humphreys: What provision is Michael German making to assist the economic development of non-Objective 1 areas of Wales? (OAQ8009)

Michael German: The aim of this administration is to ensure that the whole of Wales benefits from Assembly policies that provide support to areas of social and economic need. The Assembly's first strategic plan, 'Betterwales.com', sets out our plan to create fresh 'Made in Wales' policies.

Many forms of assistance are available to facilitate economic development in non-Objective 1 areas, one of which is regional selective assistance which is available to almost all businesses investing in manufacturing, and to service industries which operate beyond a local market, as long as they are located in assisted areas. It is a discretionary scheme, which gives grants to industry to help meet the capital costs of an investment project. It is the main form of financial incentive to industry to encourage investment and growth in Wales.

Finance Wales also offers a range of programmes to support and encourage business, throughout Wales.

Objective 2 will support the economic and social conversion of areas facing structural difficulties. Wales's population coverage is 272,000, and should give just over £48 million over the seven years of the scheme (based on current exchange rates). A major concession secured by UK Government is that areas, which lose their Objective 2 and 5b status, will be eligible for transitional funding for up to six years.

The Objective 3 programme, which was formally approved on 17 July 2000 covers seven unitary authorities including Flintshire and Wrexham. Around £81 million will be available for the Objective 3 programme over a seven-year period (2000-06). The exact amount will depend on prevailing exchange rates.

The URBAN II community initiative, which covers west Wrexham has obtained around £6 million (based on current exchange rates) from the European regional development fund, and with match funding this should amount to £12 million over a seven year period (2000-06).

The National Assembly's local regeneration fund will also share a £6.8 million allocation across seven local authority projects in Wales.

Accelerate Wales, which is a Welsh Automotive Forum sponsored, National Assembly for Wales supported, industry-led initiative was launched yesterday. Its aim is to help the Welsh automotive sector improve its performance by working through supply chains, so that companies will be able to compete effectively in the new global market.

We are also urgently considering what additional support might be appropriate for the electronics sector. This together with assistance to steel industry shows the Assembly is committed to helping sectors in Wales, which are at a disadvantage.

Discussions with MANWEB

Q23 Peter Rogers: Is Michael German taking any action as a result of recent discussions he has had with MANWEB? (OAQ7953)

Michael German: I have met recently with MANWEB plc on an informal basis and discussed various issues of mutual interest. I have asked the chairman of the WDA to meet the chairman of MANWEB at an appropriate date.

Assembly officials are in regular contact with MANWEB and are presently exploring a range of issues for developing renewable energy projects in Wales.

Colli Swyddi yn Ffatri Panasonic yng Nghaerdydd (Datganiad)

C24 Owen John Thomas: A wnaiff Michael German ddatganiad ar sefyllfa'r ymdrechion i ddatrys y problemau sy'n codi yn sgil colli swyddi yn ffatri Panasonic yng Nghaerdydd? (OAQ7940) [W]

Michael German: Rhoddais ddatganiad manwl i'r Cynulliad ar 26 Hydref mewn ymateb i'r newyddion am y diswyddiadau yn ffatri Panasonic ym Mhen-twyn.

Ar 27 Hydref, ymwelais â'r ffatri, a chefais gyfarfod â'i uwch reolwyr er mwyn trafod cynlluniau'r cwmni am y dyfodol. Dangosodd y cyfarfod imi fod Panasonic yn llwyr ymroddedig i Gymru. Rhoddwyd llawer o gyhoeddusrwydd i'r rhesymau am ailstrwythuro'r cwmni, ac mae dyfodol y diwydiant yn dibynnu ar ymchwil a datblygu, sef y maes a fydd yn llywodraethu cyfradd y newid o fewn y sector hwn sy'n datblygu'n gyflym. O ran ymchwil a datblygu, mae Panasonic mewn sefyllfa arbennig: mae ganddo gyfleusterau ardderchog, ac mae'n cyflogi nifer sylweddol o beirianwyr sydd wedi'u hyfforddi i lefel uchel.

Ar 31 Hydref, mynychais gyfarfod Fforwm Electroneg Cymru er mwyn trafod y broses o sefydlu tasglu a arweinir gan y diwydiant er mwyn mynd i'r afael ag anghenion tymor hir y diwydiant yng Nghymru. Byddaf hefyd yn mynychu cyfarfod cyntaf y tasglu ddiwedd y mis hwn, pan y bydd ei nodau, ei amcanion a'i gylch gwaith penodol yn cael eu penderfynu'n derfynol. Yn y cyfarfod hwn hefyd, trafodir camau gweithredu brys er mwyn cynorthwyo'r diwydiant yn gyffredinol.

Yr wyf hefyd wedi ymweld â Sharp yng ngogledd Cymru ac yr wyf yn bwriadu ymweld â chwmnïau electroneg allweddol eraill cyn gynted ag y bo'n bosibl.

Job Losses at the Panasonic Factory in Cardiff (Statement)

Q24 Owen John Thomas: Will Michael German make a statement with regard to the situation of the attempts to solve the problems arising following the job losses at the Panasonic factory in Cardiff? (OAQ7940) W

Michael German: I made a detailed statement to the Assembly on 26 October in response to the news of redundancies at Panasonic's Pentwyn plant.

On 27 October I visited the plant and met its senior managers to discuss the company's plans for the future. The meeting served to illustrate Panasonic's total commitment to Wales. The reasons for its restructuring are well publicised, the future of the industry lies with research and development which will govern the pace of change within this fast evolving sector. Here, Panasonic is exceptionally well placed: it has superb facilities and employs a significant number of highly trained engineers.

On 31 October I attended a meeting of the Welsh Electronics Forum to discuss the establishment of an industry led taskforce to address the long-term needs of the industry in Wales. I shall also attend the first meeting of the taskforce at the end of this month, where its aims, objectives and specific remit will be finalised, and when immediate action to assist the industry generally will be discussed.

I have also visited Sharp in north Wales and propose to visit other key electronics firms as soon as possible.

Discussions with Representatives of Tesco and WH Smith News

Q25 Gwenda Thomas: Has Michael German had any discussions with representatives of Tesco and WH Smith News, regarding their proposed agreement and its effect on businesses in rural Wales? (OAQ7919)

Michael German: No. However, I understand that the agreement has not been implemented pending talks at national level about the general magazine distribution system.

The recent announcement that W H Smith News are proposing to sign an exclusive deal with Tesco to supply all their stores is nonetheless a cause of concern to me since there are aspects of the proposal that could have particularly unwelcome impacts in Wales, and particularly our rural communities

The Office of Fair Trading (OFT) is monitoring the current industry led discussions. The First Minister has recently written to the OFT to outline our concerns for rural areas of Wales, not only in terms of Welsh language publications but also regarding continued viability of shops, and requesting that the OFT consult the National Assembly about any new exclusive arrangements that are proposed to ensure it is fully aware of the Welsh dimensions of this issue.

The Prince's Trust Report into Deprivation in Wales

Q26 Christine Chapman: Has Michael German read the Prince's Trust report into deprivation in Wales and how will that report impact on economic development in the Valleys? (OAQ7952)

Michael German: We need to respond to these issues raised in the report in two ways. First, by improving education and training opportunities and the advice and support services that connect young people with these opportunities – this agenda was addressed in detail in the report 'Extending Entitlement: supporting young people in Wales' which was debated in the Plenary on 2 November. Secondly, by improving the opportunities for young people in deprived areas – that means generating the jobs that will motivate young people to learn and train. This is about delivering not only on Objective 1 but also on our wider strategy to spread economic prosperity to the Valleys and to the rest of Wales.

New Initiatives to Attract Overseas Visitors to Wales

Q27 William Graham: Will Michael German make a statement on the new initiatives to attract overseas visitors to Wales? (OAQ7938)

Michael German: A major new initiative by the Wales Tourist Board will be the development of a destination management system for Wales, which will provide global internet information and booking access. Funding for this initiative is being provided within the proposed significant increase in the Tourist Board's budget as part of the Assembly's budget plans for next year.

But effective marketing is the key to increasing international tourism to Wales. I am discussing this crucial area and its plans with the Wales Tourist Board.

Consulting the Economic Sectors in Wales about the Pre-Budget Statement

Q28 Ieuan Wyn Jones: What meetings has Michael German had with the Secretary of State for Wales in relation to ensuring that the economic sectors within Wales are consulted about the measures in the pre-budget statement? (OAQ7983)

Michael German: Unlike the National Assembly, the Chancellor of the Exchequer is not required to consult business sectors in Wales in the exercise of his functions. However, some of the measures he announced will be the subject of specific consultation, in which the Welsh business community's views

will no doubt be welcome. At official level, National Assembly staff are involved in the drafting of some of the consultation documents.

Using Objective 1 Funds to Promote Facilities for Backpackers

Q29 Geraint Davies: How can Objective 1 funds be used to promote facilities for backpacking tourists in Wales? (OAQ7989)

Michael German: There are no specific measures in the Objective 1 programme which deal with the promotion of facilities for back packing tourists in Wales. There are, however, measures which allow for the promotion of tourism and the development of tourism facilities. Projects promoting facilities for back packing tourists could apply under these measures.

The Implementation of the Objective 1 Programme

Q30 Peter Black: Will Michael German make a statement on the implementation of the Objective 1 programme? (OAQ7937)

Michael German: The Objective 1 Programme Monitoring Committee has met on three occasions taking forward the implementation of the Objective 1 programme.

At its last meeting the Committee agreed the programme complement thereby enabling projects to be formally approved. Work is currently in progress on the rationalisation of regional action plans and their integration into six priority action plans.

Questions to the Minister for Finance, Local Government and Communities

‘Accommodation Arrangements for the National Assembly for Wales’

Q7 Alison Halford: Will Edwina Hart make a statement on the report by the National Audit Office on behalf of the Auditor General for Wales: ‘Accommodation Arrangements for the National Assembly for Wales’? (OAQ7975)

The Minister for Finance Local Government and Communities (Edwina Hart): It would not be appropriate to make a statement until the Assembly Cabinet has formally responded to the Audit Committee’s report to the Assembly on the Auditor General for Wales’s Report. The response must be laid before the Assembly within one month of the First Minister receiving the Committee’s report. If the response is an interim one, then a final response needs to be laid within a further two months.

Easing the Financial Pressures of Rate Demands

Q8 Peter Rogers: What additional money is available to ease the financial pressures that large rate demands have placed on local businesses in north Wales? (OAQ7994)

Edwina Hart: No additional money has been set aside to help businesses with their rate bills. However, we have introduced a self-financing transitional relief scheme to protect small businesses from large rate increases, and almost 90 per cent of businesses facing increases of 10 per cent or more are benefiting from this. Businesses that do not qualify for the scheme may seek help from their local council if they are having difficulty paying their bills.

The Under-representation of Women at Senior Management Level

Q9 Jocelyn Davies: Will Edwina Hart report on any discussions she has had about the under-representation of women at senior management level? (OAQ7971)

Edwina Hart: I have had discussions within the National Assembly for Wales with regard to the imbalance of women at senior civil service level. Targets have been set to redress this imbalance and I will continue to monitor the situation.

While no specific discussions have taken place outside the National Assembly for Wales to date the Equal Opportunities Commission report on 'Women in Senior Management in Wales' makes recommendations which will be considered by the National Assembly for Wales in the coming months.

The Cost of Establishing the National Assembly (Auditor General for Wales's Report)

Q10 William Graham: Will Edwina Hart make a statement on the Auditor General for Wales's report on the cost of establishing the National Assembly for Wales? (OAQ7970)

Edwina Hart: It would not be appropriate to make a statement until the Audit Committee has submitted its report to the Assembly on the Auditor General for Wales's report. In accordance with Standing Orders, the Cabinet will respond to the Audit Committee's report within one month of the Committee laying it before the Assembly.

Additional Funding for the National Assembly for Wales

Q11 Phil Williams: Has Edwina Hart had any discussions with the Secretary of State for Wales regarding additional funding for the National Assembly for Wales following the Chancellor's pre-budget statement? (OAQ7977)

Edwina Hart: The Secretary of State and I have regular discussions about the issues affecting Wales including the Chancellor's pre-budget statement. An additional £9.9 million has been allocated to the Welsh budget this financial year, and I announced on 16 November that this would be allocated to education. I shall make a further statement on the additional funds arising from the aggregates levy as part of the final budget.

New Assembly Sponsored Public Bodies (Funding and Location)

Q12 Christine Gwyther: Will Edwina Hart make a statement on the funding and location of offices of new Assembly sponsored public bodies? (OAQ7929) *Withdrawn*

The Chancellor's Pre-budget Statement (Implications for the National Assembly's Budget)

Q13 David Lloyd: Will Edwina Hart report on any discussions she has had with the Secretary of State for Wales regarding the implications for the National Assembly's budget of the Chancellor's pre-budget statement? (OAQ7974)

Edwina Hart: The Secretary of State and I have regular discussions about the issues affecting Wales including the Chancellor's pre-budget statement. An additional £9.9 million has been allocated to the Welsh budget this financial year, and I announced on 16 November that this would be allocated to education. I shall make a further statement on the additional funds arising from the aggregates levy as part of the final budget.

The New Assembly Building (Total Cost of Land)

Q14 Glyn Davies: What is the total cost of land acquired on which the new Assembly building will be constructed? (OAQ7965)

Edwina Hart: The land has been made available to the Assembly for a peppercorn rent.

Communities First

Q15 Janice Gregory: Will Edwina Hart give an update on the current situation with the Communities First programme? (OAQ7928)

Edwina Hart: 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.

Welsh Index of Multiple Deprivation (Communities First)

Q16 Lynne Neagle: What role will the Welsh index of multiple deprivation play in the Communities First programme? (OAQ7944)

Edwina Hart: As you are aware, I will be consulting soon on the policy framework for Communities First. I will be proposing that in the region of one hundred 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.

Value for Money (Assessment Criteria)

Q17 Ann Jones: What criteria are used to assess the value for money obtained by the Assembly in respect of our spending on marketing and communications? (OAQ7918) *Withdrawn*

Ownership of the Land for the New Assembly Building

Q18 Glyn Davies: Is all of the land required for construction of the new Assembly building in the National Assembly's ownership? (OAQ7966)

Edwina Hart: Negotiations are still taking place to agree the lease for the Assembly Building. It is expected that these negotiations will be concluded shortly, as soon as agreement is reached on certain points of detail related to the exact boundary of the land required by the Assembly. This relates to the precise layout of the road. This land will be made available to the Assembly for a peppercorn rent.

Comprehensive Spending Review (Wales's Spending Needs)

Q19 Janet Ryder: Will Edwina Hart report on any discussions she has had since the comprehensive spending review announcement regarding the future assessment of Wales's spending needs? (OAQ7976)

Edwina Hart: I have had informal discussions within the Assembly with Cabinet colleagues and finance spokespersons about the future assessment of Wales's spending needs. These discussions are ongoing.

Additional Funding for the National Assembly for Wales

Q20 Dafydd Wigley: Has Edwina Hart had any discussions with the Secretary of State for Wales regarding additional funding for the National Assembly for Wales following the Chancellor's pre-budget statement? (OAQ7964)

Edwina Hart: The Secretary of State and I have regular discussions about the issues affecting Wales including the Chancellor's pre-budget statement. An additional £9.9 million has been allocated to the Welsh budget this financial year, and I announced on 16 November that this would be allocated to education. I shall make a further statement on the additional funds arising from the aggregates levy as part of the final budget.

Additional One-off Capital Expenditure in the Health Service

Q21 Alun Cairns: What calls has Edwina Hart received for additional one-off capital expenditure in the health service? (OAQ7967)

Edwina Hart: The Assembly continues to receive requests for capital funding from NHS trusts across Wales in the form of business case submissions, and in the past two years, officials have assessed and prioritised proposed developments against clear criteria.

In March the Minister for Health and Social Services announced a £53 million package of schemes approved for funding in the current financial year. Confirmation of the schemes approved for funding in future years will be made in December as part of the Assembly's final budget announcement. Officials will be discussing how available resources are to be most effectively spent with the NHS in Wales over the coming weeks.

Equal Opportunities (National Assembly's Policymaking)

Q22 Ieuan Wyn Jones: Will Edwina Hart report on progress towards mainstreaming equal opportunities into the National Assembly's policymaking process across the board? (OAQ7979)

Edwina Hart: As a first step towards mainstreaming equality, the National Assembly for Wales has carried out an equality audit. The first phase of this was to establish to what extent equality issues are taken account of in developing policies, what policy objectives have an equality dimension and what data is available to monitor outcomes. The second phase is now in progress and involves the identification of practical actions to be undertaken by each division of the Assembly. An important element is the review of training on equality issues in order to ensure that the Assembly provides effective development for all staff and members.

I have made funds available this year and next to develop better communications between the Assembly and organisations acting for under-represented groups. The development of improved links will enable policy makers in the Assembly to better reflect the needs and concerns of those groups.

Property used by the National Assembly (Acquisition and Maintenance Costs)

Q23 William Graham: Will Edwina Hart make a statement concerning costs of acquiring and the maintenance of property used by the National Assembly? (OAQ7969)

Edwina Hart: Any decision by the National Assembly to acquire premises includes consideration of surplus space on the Assembly's own estate and the rest of the government estate and reference to the needs of Assembly business. Since the beginning of the current financial year the total estimated cost involved in acquiring property used by the National Assembly amounts to £6,300. The cost comprises the professional fees incurred in the acquisition process from property search through to completion of legal formalities, but as the properties are leasehold no purchase price has been payable. The estimated annual

rental costs of the acquired properties amount to £185,000. The estimated annual maintenance cost of property used by the National Assembly for 2000-01 is £1,500,000.

Accommodating People with Hearing and Sight Disabilities

Q24 Peter Black: When considering access issues will Edwina Hart look at how people with hearing and sight disabilities can be accommodated? (OAQ7935)

Edwina Hart: The Equality Policy unit of the Assembly is reviewing accessibility to Assembly premises and services. The review will consider access issues in respect of all disabilities including sight and hearing impairment. Disability groups have been actively involved in consultation on the design of the new Assembly building, and an access advisory group has been established to consider access to the new building across the complete range of disabilities. I have investigated the use of font size in Assembly communications and have been advised that the Assembly follows RNIB guidelines. The Wales Council for the Blind and the RNIB have been consulted to ensure that the design for the Assembly's new internet site meets their requirements. An audit of the availability of minicom systems at Assembly locations has also been undertaken and recommendations arising from that audit will be included in the accessibility review.

Communities First (Views of the South East Wales Regional Committee)

Q25 Lynne Neagle: What consideration has Edwina Hart given to the South East Wales Regional Committee's views on the Communities First programme? (OAQ7943)

Edwina Hart: The South East Wales Regional Committee was generally supportive of the proposed policy framework to be included in the next communities consultation paper. I have been made aware of the issues raised and I have read the minutes of the Committee in order to consider them in depth. I have also seen annex 2 of the minutes, which is a detailed written response from my officials on the individual points made. I have taken these into account in the drafting of the paper, which will issue shortly. I hope Members will take the opportunity to respond to this document.

Improving Flood Defences in North Wales

Q26 Alun Pugh: What provisions exist in the budget to improve flood defences in north Wales? (OAQ7963)

Edwina Hart: The Assembly's budget includes £7.271million for flood and coastal defence for each of the years 2000-01 to 2003-04. This is available to help fund capital schemes throughout Wales, including north Wales, as appropriate. In addition, a further £3 million has recently been provided by the Treasury as a consequential to the sum provided in England for flood defence.

Accessibility for People with Hearing and Sight Disabilities to Assembly Services

Q27 Peter Black: What money has been allocated in the budget to improve accessibility for people with hearing and sight disabilities to Assembly services? (OAQ7934)

Edwina Hart: Funding has not been allocated to improve access to Assembly services for any specific category of impairment. A review is currently being undertaken, which will provide information on accessibility issues across all disabilities. It is anticipated that the costs of any recommended action above and beyond that already undertaken or planned, will be accommodated within existing budget allocations.

Private Finance Initiative Discussions

Q28 Rhodri Glyn Thomas: Will Edwina Hart report on any discussions she has had regarding PFI during the current Assembly session? (OAQ7978)

Edwina Hart: A Plenary debate on the public-private partnership/private finance initiative is scheduled for 5 December, when we will be able to review the results of the consultation exercise with the public and private sectors which took place during the summer.

National Assembly's Budget (Impact of the £1 billion Package for Deprived Communities)

Q29 Huw Lewis: Will Edwina Hart make a statement on the impact to the National Assembly for Wales's budget of the £1 billion package announced by the Chancellor to regenerate deprived communities in the UK? (OAQ7942)

Edwina Hart: The package of measures worth an accumulative £1 billion over five years announced on 8 November by the Chancellor is to help make Britain's town and cities better places to live and work, stimulating enterprise and employment. We welcome this move by the Government. This is not additional expenditure as such, but relief on stamp duty and VAT exemptions on property conversions as well as several other measures.

The Auditor General for Wales's Report on the Costing of the New Assembly Building

Q30 Alun Cairns: What conclusions has Edwina Hart accepted from the recent Auditor General for Wales's report on the costing of the new Assembly building? (OAQ7968)

Edwina Hart: It would not be appropriate to make a statement until the Audit Committee has submitted its report to the Assembly on the Auditor General for Wales's report. In accordance with Standing Orders, the Cabinet will respond to the Audit Committee's report within one month of the Committee laying it before the Assembly.