

ENVIRONMENT, PLANNING AND TRANSPORT COMMITTEE

Date: Wednesday 17 July 2002
Time: 2.00pm to 5.00pm
Venue: Committee Room 3, National Assembly Building

REPORT BY MINISTER FOR ENVIRONMENT

COUNTRYSIDE

Countryside and Rights of Way Act

On Friday 28 June 2002 I launched the public consultation on the Countryside Council for Wales' draft access maps for the Eastern South Wales Valleys area. A significant proportion of the people of Wales live and work in this area making this consultation exercise particularly important.

The draft maps aim to show open country and registered common land in the area - land to which the public will have a new right of access on foot under the Countryside and Rights of Way Act.

Wales Coastal and Maritime Partnership

The second meeting of the Wales Coastal and Maritime Partnership took place in St Asaph on 4 July. The Partnership had an interesting presentation by the Crown Estate on their developing "Windbase" system - a Geographical Information System model that may be helpful in determining the most suitable locations for offshore renewable energy projects.

The next meeting is provisionally organised for 7 November in Milford Haven.

The Environmental Protection (Restriction on Use of Lead Shot) (Wales) Regulations 2002

The Assembly has approved Regulations that will restrict the use of lead shot over wetland

areas. Lead shot has been identified as posing a particular threat to wildfowl. The Regulations will come into force on 1 September in preparation for the next shooting season.

Montgomery Canal

On 26 June I visited the Montgomery Canal and met with representatives from the British Waterways Board, and opened their new Welsh Head Offices at Burgedin.

Environmental Protection

Drinking Water Inspectorate's Drinking Water for Wales Annual Report 2001

On 10 July, the Drinking Water Inspectorate published its Annual Report for Wales 2001. Overall in Wales there has been continuing high compliance with statutory drinking water quality standards with 99.78% of tests carried out meeting the required standards.

Copies of the report have been placed in the library and can also be found on the Inspectorate's website at www.dwi.gov.uk. The report will also be posted to the Assembly's Internet site.

I will be sending all Assembly Members, Welsh Members of Parliament and Members of the European Parliament copies of summary leaflets that have been produced by the Inspectorate intended to complement the Annual Report and which relate directly to Dwr Cymru's and Dee Valley Water's individual performances.

Meeting with Philip Fletcher, Director General of Water Services

On 9 July, I met Philip Fletcher, Director General of Water Services, to discuss issues relating to the forthcoming periodic review of water prices and other issues relating to the regulation and performance of water companies in Wales.

Meeting with the Environment Agency

On 4 July I met Sir John Harman and Barbara Young, the Chair and Chief Executive of the Environment Agency, along with the Environment Agency Board Member for Wales, and a representative of the Agency's Director Wales.

We discussed a wide range of matters of common interest to the Agency and the Assembly

including developments on the Agency's Corporate Strategy, Statutory (Section 4) Guidance to the Agency from the Assembly, the 'BRITE' reorganisation within the Agency. We also discussed issues arising from the Assembly's Nant-y-Gwyddon investigation including matters related to transparency and openness, the Agency's bids for additional grant in aid, and a review of current activities and performance by the Agency in Wales.

PLANNING

Sustainability Fund for Wales

I launched the *Sustainability Fund for Wales* at the Maesmawr Hall Hotel in Caersws on 26 June. The fund supports the recycling of aggregates and promotes the use of alternative materials for example the increased use of construction and demolition waste. The Fund will also be available to communities affected by aggregates' extraction, and will support projects that provide amenity and environmental benefits to those communities. The Fund has received very positive feedback so far, with over a hundred application packs issued to date.

TRANSPORT

Transport Meetings

On 20 June I met senior road safety officials from the Department for Transport, Scottish Executive, and the Department of Environment Northern Ireland when they attended the UK Road Safety Directors meeting in Cardiff.

On the 24 June I chaired the 8th meeting of the Welsh Transport Forum in Cathays Park. The next meeting is scheduled to take place in the North Wales Police Headquarters in Colwyn Bay on the 7 October.

On 26 June I visited the Safe Routes to School scheme at Newtown, Powys.

Bus Service Operators Grant - Use of Executive Procedures

I am seeking approval for the use of Executive Procedure to introduce secondary legislation to extend eligibility to receive Bus Service Operators Grant (formerly called Fuel Duty Rebate) to include a "wider range of community transport operators" (they will be able to claim the grant once they have satisfied the eligibility criteria). I would welcome the Committee's support for the use of this procedure on this exceptional basis.

Reasons for Using Executive Procedure It is essential that funds are channelled to community transport operators as quickly as possible. By using the Executive Procedure these regulations can be brought into force by early August. The use of the Standard Procedure,

taking into account the summer recess, will result in these regulations coming into force, at the earliest, at the end of this year.

The new funding will help community transport organisations to expand and develop their valuable services by saving up to 80% for conventional fuels and a 100% rebate of duty on gas used as road fuel. It means a saving of 36.68 per litre on diesel and 34.30p on petrol or 9p per kilogram on gas fuel. Community transport is in the front line in tackling social exclusion and making sure that people who are very frail, disabled or isolated can get about.

Eligibility The Bus Service Operators Grant (Wales) Regulations 2002, set down the range of services operated under a permit under Section 19 of the Transport Act 1985 which are newly eligible to receive the grant. These regulations also re-enact the previous eligibility rules for fuel duty rebate under Section 92 of the Finance Act 1965, which is now superseded by Section 154 of the Transport Act 2000. To qualify for the grant community transport services must be eligible services operated by non-profit making bodies on the basis of a permit issued under Section 19 of the Transport Act 1985. The Department for Transport administers the grant for the Welsh Assembly Government and we refund the costs. Eligible services are services used wholly or mainly by :

- a. persons who have attained the age of 60 years;
- b. disabled persons;
- c. persons in receipt of income support under Section 124 of the Social Security Contributions and Benefits Act 1992;
- d. persons in receipt of Jobseekers' allowance under the Jobseekers Act 1995;
- e. persons suffering a degree of social exclusion by virtue of unemployment, poverty or other economic factors, homelessness, geographical remoteness, ill health or religious or cultural mores;
- f. persons who believe that it would be unsafe for them to use any public passenger transport services; or carers or persons under 16 years of age accompanying any of the foregoing.

SUE ESSEX

MINISTER FOR ENVIRONMENT