

Information Further to Ministerial Answers

Information further to OAQ39421, issued by Sue Essex, the Finance Minister, on 23 November 2004

To Michael German:

In Plenary on 17 November, I promised to write to you with details of the funding we provide to local authorities as an incentive to improve performance. Overall, the package funding for local authority improvement authorities will be worth £33.77 million per annum from the next financial year.

The principal means of support is via the policy agreements, which we are in the process of concluding with each local authority. They set out agreed milestones and targets for performance in key service areas for the three years to 2007, plus other targets for services or developments of particular local importance. The agreements we have concluded thus far are available on the internet at <http://www.wales.gov.uk/subilocalgov/content/policy/2004-07/agreement-index-e.htm>.

In return for concluding an agreement, and subsequently for meeting the milestones and targets in it, each local authority receives an annual performance incentive grant. The total value of such grants is £30 million per annum until 2007, and the share each authority receives is calculated using the same formula as applies to the main revenue support grant. The grant is wholly unhypothecated and local authorities are free to apply it as they wish. However, we will withhold payment of the grant if an authority falls short of its milestones or targets without good cause.

Outside the local government revenue settlement, we also provide financial support to the Welsh Local Government Association for it to carry out improvement support work. In the next financial year, this will include core grants to its improvement, equalities and data units totalling £1.27 million with a further £1 million for direct support to local authorities to improve their services. In addition, we provide a grant of £1.5 million to Audit Commission Wales (soon to become the Wales Audit Office) for it to support the improvement process by means of independent audit and inspection of local authorities.

There are, of course, many other non-financial ways of incentivising performance, for instance, requiring consistent reports of performance data, improving scrutiny and public accountability, and spreading best practice. These and others are also central to our local government improvement framework.

Information further to the debate on the Wales spatial plan on 17 November 2004, issued by Sue Essex, the Finance Minister, on 6 December 2004

To David Lloyd:

During the Plenary debate on 17 November on the Wales spatial plan, you suggested that the WSP vision should recognise the urgent need to upgrade north-south transport links.

The upgrading of our north-south links is part of the Government's agenda, also acknowledged among the objectives in the Wales spatial plan. North-south links are due to be improved by the end of 2005. There will be a standard-pattern timetable, which gives regular two-hourly service between Holyhead and Cardiff via Wrexham.

The trunk road forward programme sets out a series of 21 improvements to the road system between north and south Wales. These include bypasses such as Talgarth, increased overtaking opportunities and other route improvements to increase journey reliability, especially on the A470, which is the main north-south link. Although the trunk road forward programme will be reviewed as part of the new transport strategy, the commitment to improve north-south connections will remain.

In addition, the Transport (Wales) Bill makes provision for the Assembly Government to support air links between north and south Wales.

Thank you for your positive contribution to the spatial planning process, which I believe will be of real benefit to Wales in the long term. I will keep the Assembly informed of progress.

To Alun Ffred Jones:

During the Plenary debate on 17 November on the Wales spatial plan you asked me to clarify how it would be ensured that growth in north-west Wales will not be solely centred on Bangor. You also wanted to see a greater emphasis on ensuring a fair distribution of jobs across Wales and availability of homes for young people.

The vision for north-west Wales is for the creation of a strong driver on both sides of the Menai straits, taking in Llangefni. This core is to be linked with the surrounding area to enable a wider reach, including southwards to Porthmadog. While Bangor is a very important element in this, we are certain that by making positive connections between the different centres, so that they can complement each other, the sum will be greater than its parts. Ensuring that this happens will form an important part of the forthcoming work in the north-west Wales area.

Addressing imbalances in employment opportunities and promoting a fair distribution of jobs across Wales, based on area's strengths and opportunities, is central to the spatial plan and its theme of promoting a sustainable economy. With regard to public sector employment, it is an important consideration in our location strategy and also feeds into the detailed planning at the regional level of the ASPB merger with the Assembly Government.

Finally, the important issue of availability of housing is recognised in the Wales spatial plan. It sets the context against which we will work with local authorities to improve the mechanisms to ensure availability appropriate and affordable housing across Wales.

The next stage will be to give further shape and substance to the area frameworks looking at the whole area.

Thank you for your positive contribution to the spatial planning process, which I believe will be of real benefit to Wales in the long term. I will keep the Assembly informed of progress.

To Mick Bates:

During the Plenary debate on 17 November on the Wales spatial plan, you stressed the importance that the legal status of the WSP in relation to the statutory land use planning system is understood. You also stated that in order to be really useful the WSP should provide a computer database that will enable planners to integrate policies and strategies. Finally, you suggested that the WSP overlooked the impact of climate change.

On your first point, the Wales spatial plan does not have development plan status. It is more comprehensive national Welsh Assembly Government policy than a national or regional land use and development plan. The Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004 states that new

local government development plans must have regard to it. This will be tested in a number of ways as the plan progresses through its various stages. Ultimately, if the Welsh Assembly Government's objections are not accommodated, it has the power to direct modifications or call in the plan.

Prior to commencement of the new system of development plans in the autumn of next year, the Wales spatial plan will be a material consideration in both unitary development plan assessments by the Assembly and the Planning Inspectorate, and in planning decisions.

On your second point, the Data CD-ROM that accompanied the draft Wales spatial plan last year was widely welcomed and my officials are currently in the process of updating this CD-ROM and enabling the information to be available via the internet. Our medium-term aspiration is for a versatile and user-friendly on-line information base that can inform decision making across all sectors in Wales.

I would disagree with you on your final point. The potential impact of climate change, how we can respond to it and what we need to do to reduce our contribution to it are central to achieving a sustainable future for Wales and form key considerations in the document. It is reflected in the national objectives as well as those in specific areas of Wales, where the possible impact is greatest.

Thank you for your positive contribution to the spatial planning process, which I believe will be of real benefit to Wales in the long term. I will keep the Assembly informed of progress.

To Eleanor Burnham:

During the Plenary debate on 17 November on the Wales spatial plan, you suggested that there needed to be a strong infrastructure assessment as part of the WSP.

I agree that it is important to analyse and understand the state of our infrastructure systems in Wales—and across the border where the impact is wider—and to be able to respond to any shortcomings. It is however not the role of the Wales spatial plan to reiterate detailed sectoral programmes and policies, where they exist. Much of the detailed work on these aspects is best carried out at the area level and will form an important part of the forthcoming area work in the context of the Wales spatial plan.

Thank you for your positive contribution to the spatial planning process, which I believe will be of real benefit to Wales in the long term. I will keep the Assembly informed of progress.