

Information Further to Ministerial Answers

Information further to OAQ39715, issued by Edwina Hart, the Minister for Social Justice and Regeneration, on 8 December 2004

In Plenary on the 24 November, I agree to provide a précis of correspondence that I have had with the Department of Trade and Industry on the above matter in the Members' Library.

The Secretary of State for Trade and Industry wrote to members of the Domestic Affairs Committee in September detailing her plans for the future of the rural post office network after March 2006. The UK Government agreed to make available up to £300m in funding from 2006-07 to 2007-08 (£150m each year) to maintain the rural post office network until March 2008. This is a continuation of the current support totalling £450m over three years to 31 March 2006. The UK Government also decided not to extend beyond 31 March 2006 the current no avoidable closures policy and postponed a decision on the long-term future until further information is available from a series of pilots run by Post Office Ltd.

I replied to Mrs Hewitt's letter requesting further information about the nature of pilots, where they would be run and how they would be evaluated. I made clear my view that some pilots should take place in Wales as the future of the network should, at least in part, be determined by evidence from what works in Wales.

The Secretary of State's statement also mentioned that the UK Government's requirement that Post Office Ltd should prevent avoidable closures of rural post offices would remain in place at least until 2006. I wrote to the Secretary of State requesting clarification and for confirmation that the commitment received from the chief executive of Post Office Ltd that they would extend the guarantee that they would not take the initiative to close branches supported under the fund to 31 March 2008 still stood. Mrs Hewitt explained that this commitment made by Post Office Ltd still stood and that the no avoidable closures policy will apply until 2008 for post offices funded under the post office development fund.

I received a reply from Patricia Hewitt on the 16 November. In her letter she said that the extension of transitional funding for rural post offices across the UK for a further two years was made to allow more time to gather evidence before taking decisions on the long-term future of the rural network. The funding includes a £25 million fund for Post Office Ltd to develop and pilot methods of delivering services with a view to identifying more sustainable ways to maintain access to post office services for rural communities.

Although it is an operational matter for Post Office Ltd, she expects the post office to gather evidence of what works in Wales, and her reply referred to a pilot involving a community bus service in Lawrenny.

The outcome of these pilots will inform the decision on whether or how to extend the direction to Post Office Ltd to prevent avoidable closures, but Mrs Hewitt is unable to say at this stage whether the current direction will be extended beyond March 2008. She does not believe that there would be no avoidable closures for offices funded by the post office development fund until at least March 2008.

Information further to OAQ39722, issued by Edwina Hart, the Minister for Social Justice and Regeneration, on 7 December 2004

To Janice Gregory:

In Assembly questions on 24 November you raised with me the issue of costs to voluntary groups of professional advice, with particular reference to architects' fees for community buildings. I agree to examine the position and open discussions with professional bodies.

Recent grant applications to the community facilities and activities programme show a wide range of fees charged, varying according to the work required and the individuals appointed. Most professionals are not bound by standard fee scales, so there are opportunities for groups to shop around. Some will occasionally prepare drawings at risk ahead of funding being available or may act for free if they have a personal involvement. However, I recognise that most will need to charge for their work.

A number of options may be appropriate to help groups who have difficulties obtaining services at reasonable cost. These include ensuring groups have advice on how to appoint professionals, supporting community-enterprise provision, and offering funding to help groups develop their plans. Officials have made arrangements to discuss these matters with the Royal Society of Architects in Wales and the Royal Institute of Chartered Surveyors and I will report to the committee in the new year.

Information further to OAQ39685, issued by Edwina Hart, the Minister for Social Justice and Regeneration, on 13 December 2004

To Janet Ryder:

During oral questions on 24 November you referred to the Choose Life project currently being run in Walton prison. I said that I was aware of this project but would seek further advice.

The Choose Life project is indeed an interesting one and I understand that the project is already operating in north Wales. Wrexham and Flintshire community safety partnerships are already participating in the project and to date nine secondary schools and four community youth service establishments have taken part. I also gather that the other partnerships in north Wales have indicated an interest in participating.

I have always seen educating our children as a key prevention method. That is why I supported the police-led, all-Wales schools programme. In addition, you might be interested to know that a couple of other schemes, similar to Choose Life, are ongoing elsewhere in Wales. Some of these focus on general community safety issues, not just on substance misuse.

For example, in Gwent, pupils are given a performance of a play called *Crime of your Life* about the decline from anti-social behaviour to offending behaviour ending in incarceration. Following the performance, pupils are encouraged to discuss topics arising from the play.

Cardiff Prison has also been involved with the project 'Prison! Me? No way!' since 1997. A team of four prison officers delivers the programme to schools and agencies throughout the Cardiff area. The presentation consists of an introduction, which is followed by a short video showing the effects of bullying. This is then followed by a question and answer session about prison life in general. After the presentation, schools are invited to take up the opportunity to visit Cardiff Prison.

The Home Office currently funds a play entitled *Off the Streets*. The play's main theme is around anti-social behaviour, but the play does involve alcohol and drug issues as well as teenage pregnancy. Funded by a £10,000 grant, the play will be seen by the majority of 11 to 13-year-olds across Wales during its three month run. The next tour of the play is due to start early January until the end of March 2005 and the organisers have asked to present to

Assembly Members either at local schools or in a special performance at the National Assembly.

I hope that this information is of use to you.