

Gwybodaeth Ychwanegol at Atebion Gweinidogion Information Further to Ministerial Answers

**Information further to OAQ36406 issued by Rhodri Morgan, the First Minister, on 12
July 2004**

To John Griffiths:

On 29 June I responded to a question about the protection of wetlands in Wales (OAQ36406). During that discussion I agreed to write to you with further information related to the specific conservation issues at Gwent levels.

I attach a summary of protection measures and management issues on the levels prepared by the Countryside Council for Wales, our statutory scientific advisers, for your information.

THE GWENT LEVELS

Description

The Gwent levels extend over 8,400 ha. The levels comprise two blocks of flat, low-lying land bordering the Severn Estuary and are the most extensive areas of wet pasture in Wales. The Rivers Usk and Ebbw divide the site into the Wentloog levels, which stretch westward from Newport to Cardiff, and the Caldicot levels, which stretch eastward from Newport to Sudbrook. The land has been progressively reclaimed from the sea since Roman times. As a result of its low-lying nature, an extensive network of ditches drains the area. These ditches also serve as field boundaries. Most of the area is below high mean water level and is protected from tidal inundation by sea defences. The importance of the Gwent levels is enhanced by its juxtaposition to the Severn estuary, which is of national and international interest in its own right.

Nature Conservation Interests

The variety of management practices, together with the timing and location of management within the ditches of the Gwent levels, has led to the establishment of a rich variety of plants and associated populations of invertebrates unique in Wales. The importance of this interest is reflected in the designation of 5,722 ha as sites of special scientific interest (SSSIs); the suite of six Gwent levels SSSIs (GL Rumney and Peterstone, GL St Brides, GL Nash and Goldcliff, GL Whitson, GL Redwick and Llandeenny, GL Magor and Undy) and Magor marsh.

The hedgerows along the ditches act as a haven for insects and other small creatures. Hares, otters and water voles are also found in the area. Typical farmland birds such as skylark and wren are present, as are birds more commonly associated with the adjacent Severn estuary, such as lapwing, and over-wintering whimbrel.

The Newport wetlands, formerly known as the Gwent levels wetlands reserve, lies within the area at the east of the mouth of the River Usk. It forms part of a wider package of compensation measures for the loss of the Taf/Ely estuary SSSI, (a wetland site SSSI, containing mud flats) to the Cardiff bay barrage. Compensation measures on this scale are unique in Britain. The reserve is owned by the Countryside Council for Wales. Of the 437 ha, 239 ha are within the Gwent levels SSSI (Nash and Goldcliff SSSI, and Whitson SSSI), 53 ha are within the Severn estuary SSSI and the remaining 145 ha are not SSSI.

Landscape

The importance of the Gwent levels extends beyond the nature conservation interests. The landscape is the visual representation of the grazing marsh habitat, the long-established drainage network, the archaeological interest and the history of agricultural management.

Historic Landscape

The importance of the historic landscape is reflected in the inclusion of the Gwent levels in the register of landscapes of outstanding historic interest (Cadw: Welsh Historic Monuments/ICOMOS UK (International Council of Monuments and Sites)/CCW), 1997), a non-statutory, advisory document. Competent authorities are asked to take into account information on the register when considering the implications of developments that are of such a scale that they would have more than a local impact on an area in the register. The following publications are relevant to the historic landscapes of the Gwent levels:

Rippon, S. 1996. 'The Gwent Levels historic landscape study: Characterisation and assessment of the landscape'. Cadw and CCW.

Rippon, S. 1996. 'The Gwent Levels: the evolution of a wetland landscape'. Council for British Archaeology (CBA) research report 105. CBA, York.

Further guidance on using the register in the planning and development control processes can be obtained in the recently published 'Guide to Good Practice on Using the Register of Landscapes of Historic Interest in Wales in the Planning and Development Processes', published by Cadw: Welsh Historic Monuments, from whom a copy can be obtained upon request. The guide contains a staged system to assess the significance of the impact of a development on historic landscape areas on the register, which a competent authority might request as part of an environmental impact assessment.

Management. Advice and Guidance

The SSSI legislation is the main underlying mechanism for much of CCW's work to protect the area. However, our involvement is much wider.

- SSSI Owners and Occupiers
CCW works closely with the 600 plus owners and occupiers of the SSSIs. As at 1 July 2004 we had 45 management agreements on parts of 5 SSSIs totalling 760 ha.
- Development Control
CCW is consulted on all developments that could affect SSSIs. We have provided guidance for developers in our booklet 'Nature Conservation and Physical Developments on the Gwent Levels'.
- Strategic Planning
Since mid 1989 there has been a significant increase in the numbers of site specific and strategic planning consultations. Partly in response to this pressure CCW produced a consultation document 'Towards a strategy for the Gwent levels into the next millennium'. This put forward 16 propositions to help protect and enhance the environmental interest of the area. Implementation involves many organisations working together, for example, CCW working closely with the three local authorities on their unitary development plans, such as the preparation of the shoreline management plan for the Severn estuary through the coastal cell partnership.

Management Planning

As part of our wider duties, CCW is in the process of preparing and implementing the site management statements, management plans and monitoring programmes for the SSSIs in the area.

Partnerships

Key partners include:

Newport City Council, Cardiff City Council, Monmouthshire County Council (through mechanisms such as UDPs and other strategic planning documents, grant aiding LANDMAP based landscape strategies, LBAPs, grant aided countryside programmes, access, development control)

The Caldicott and Wentlogg Levels Drainage Board (CWLDB)

Environment Agency (EA and CWLDB manage the major ditches or reens for land drainage and flood defence. We work with them to enhance the SSSI interest as part of their duties) Glamorgan Gwent Archaeological Trust (GGAT). Both historic landscapes and buried archaeological interest is in the area. Combined with the Severn estuary this is the prime archaeological site in Europe: including Newport ship, Bareland boat, iron age dwelling, footprints and Roman remains.

Cadw—as GGAT

SSSI owners/occupiers—see above

Gwent Wildlife Trust—Magor Marsh is an important wildlife trust reserve and it is included in CCW grant aid programme with the Trust.

Integration – Sustainable Development and Natural Heritage

Welsh Assembly Government is committed to safeguarding Wales's unique natural heritage and integrating the principles of sustainable development into all Government policies (Section 121 of the Government of Wales Act 1998).

At a national level the Wales spatial plan provides the mechanism to ensure integration of policy. At a local level, community strategies and national park and AONB management plans have the potential to perform a similar function with the local development plan providing a spatial expression of policy.

- Pre-application discussing with the local planning authority. From the outset of project planning and programming developers must consider the need to comply with environmental impact assessment legislation, appropriate assessment relating to European legislation and the interrelationship with other consents mechanisms, including species licensing, IPPC.
- Assessing the resource. A good understanding of the natural heritage resource and the pressures upon it is an essential part of developing a policy framework for future development. It will not be necessary to start from scratch as information is already gathered by organisations and agencies nationally and locally to inform policy development.

Key sources of information and data include: designations and monitoring reports and management plans, LANDMAP and LANDMAP+, Local Biodiversity Action Plans, CCW Phase 1 database, biological network and local record centres.

Information further to OAQ36417 issued by Rhodri Morgan, the First Minister, on 17 August 2004

To Val Lloyd:

In response to your Assembly questions about post offices in Plenary on 29 June, I commented that Post Office Ltd's vision was to have a network in which there are no post offices within a mile of each other. I agreed to write to you if this was not the case.

I have looked further into this matter and can confirm that Post Office Ltd's vision is that, even after the proposed changes urban network reinvention will bring, over 95 per cent of people in towns and cities would still live within a mile of the nearest Post Office branch,

I hope this clarifies the situation for you.

Information further to OAQ36422 issued by Rhodri Morgan, the First Minister, on 26 August 2004

To Elin Jones:

In Plenary on 29 June, I promised that I would discuss with Andrew Davies the issue of road markings on the A487 trunk road through Aberystwyth before giving you a comprehensive reply to your concerns. I am now in a position to do that.

Andrew's letter to you, dated 4 May, is completely accurate. Perhaps I could expand on it by emphasising further the role of the Welsh Assembly Government as the highways authority responsible for the trunk road network in Wales. By adopting the consistent approach of using English-only road markings through Aberystwyth, we have considered the importance of road safety, which is linked to the frequency of road markings. When motorists are faced with too much information on the road, it is accepted that this distracts them from following good practice while driving. This can affect not only them and other road users but also walkers in the vicinity. Although, under normal circumstances, we would provide bilingual road markings, it is not possible to do so on the A487 through Aberystwyth without endangering road safety.