

Answers to Questions not reached in Plenary 7 February 2002

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

[W] signifies that the question was tabled in Welsh.

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Questions on Economic Development to the First Minister

Red Dragon Project

Q8 David Melding: Will the First Minister make a statement on the Red Dragon project at the Defence Aviation Repair Agency, St Athan? (OAQ15473) *Transferred for written answer.*

The First Minister (Rhodri Morgan): The Welsh Development Agency is working closely with the Defence Aviation Repair Agency, which has appointed consultants to design and commission a new facility for it. It is possible that a planning submission may be made to the local planning authority later this year.

Job Creation in Powys

Q9 Nick Bourne: How are the policies of the Government of Wales contributing to job creation in Powys? (OAQ15567) *Transferred for written answer.*

The First Minister: I am pleased that the Powys employment rate is 10 per cent above the all-Wales rate and that the unemployment rate is below the rate for Wales as a whole. I launched the Assembly Government's economic development strategy, 'A Winning Wales', on 28 January, and that recognises the need to support rural Wales. From April 2002, we will introduce a new, streamlined small and medium-sized enterprise investment grant scheme, covering all of Wales. SMEs throughout Powys will thus have opportunities for grants of up to £50,000.

Question 10 was answered in Plenary.

Fuel Cell Technology

Q11 Phil Williams: What discussions has the First Minister had with the car industry regarding fuel cell technology in Wales? (OAQ15525)

The First Minister: There have been no specific discussions with the car industry about fuel cell technology. This technology is part of the current consideration of a wider strategy for supporting the shift to low-carbon road transport. These issues are being addressed on a UK, European and international basis. The UK Government has issued a consultation document on the draft strategy entitled 'Powering Future Vehicles'. The Assembly is contributing to that to ensure that Welsh interests are included, enabling us to respond to the new opportunities.

Entrepreneurship Action Plan

Q12 Dafydd Wigley: Will the First Minister make a statement on the comparison of the targets of the number of business start-ups planned for 2001-02 in the entrepreneurship action plan and the actual out-turn to date? (OAQ15530)

The First Minister: Of the target of 4,600 assisted start-ups planned, 2,136 had been achieved by the end of December 2001.

Attaining an increase in the business birth rate is a key longer-term target enshrined in 'A Winning Wales', which we are determined to pursue. Although there might be a shortfall in this year's out-turn, we are confident that that will soon be resolved and will then be made up in subsequent years, leading to the plan's overall target being achieved.

Objective 1 Infrastructure Projects

Q13 Nick Bourne: Will the First Minister make a statement on the progress of Objective 1 infrastructure projects in Wales? (OAQ15566)

The First Minister: Within this Objective 1 programme, there is limited funding available for infrastructure. However, to date, £4 million of grant aid has been committed across a number of the infrastructure measures, which include energy, waste, transport and site development. All the infrastructure measures are open for bids to be developed and submitted for due consideration.

Cysylltiadau Rheilffordd o fewn Canol De Cymru

C14 Owen John Thomas: A wnaiff Prif Weinidog Cymru ddatganiad ynghylch gwariant Amcan 1 ar gynlluniau i wella cysylltiadau rheilffordd o fewn Canol De Cymru? (OAQ15468) [W]

Prif Weinidog Cymru: O fewn y rhaglen Amcan 1 hon, mae mesur penodol ar gyfer gwelliannau ym maes trafnidiaeth, er mai cymorth cyfyngedig sydd ar gael ar gyfer y seilwaith rheilffyrdd. Bellach, mae'r strategaeth ranbarthol ar gyfer seilwaith wedi'i chwblhau, a byddwn yn gwahodd ceisiadau o dan flaenoriaeth 6, mesur 1 (seilwaith trafnidiaeth). Derbyniwyd ceisiadau a datganiadau o ddiddordeb gan National Express ccc (y cwmni sy'n rhedeg trenau) a chan y consortiwm o awdurdodau lleol, Consortiwm Teithio Cyflym Integredig De Cymru (SWIFT). Nod strategaeth reilffyrdd SWIFT yw ceisio gwneud y trenau'n fwy dibynadwy, gwella'r amserlen a chynnig mwy o wasanaethau, gan gynnwys y rheini drwy Bontypridd. Mae Llywodraeth Cynulliad Cymru wedi ymrwymo adnoddau ar gyfer y gwelliannau hyn, a fyddai'n bodloni'r gofynion o safbwynt arian cyfatebol.

Rail Links in South Wales Central

Q14 Owen John Thomas: Will the First Minister make a statement on Objective 1 expenditure on plans to improve rail links in South Wales Central? (OAQ15468) [W]

The First Minister: Within this Objective 1 programme, there is a specific measure for transport improvements, although limited support is available for rail infrastructure. The regional strategy for infrastructure has now been finalised, and we shall invite bids under priority 6, measure 1 (transport infrastructure). Earlier bids and expressions of interest have been received from National Express plc (the train operating company) and from the South Wales Integrated Fast Transit Consortium of local authorities. The SWIFT rail strategy seeks to achieve improved train reliability, enhanced running times and more services, including those through Pontypridd. The Welsh Assembly Government has committed resources to these improvements, which would satisfy match funding requirements.

Alcoa

Q15 Gareth Jones: Will the First Minister make a statement on the options to provide employment for those affected by Alcoa's announcement that it is to close its plant at Dolgarrog in June? (OAQ15532)

The First Minister: I will visit Dolgarrog tomorrow for an update on developments, but I have already made it clear that the Welsh Assembly Government will offer all possible assistance.

Questions on Finance to the Minister for Finance, Local Government and Communities

Standard Spending Assessments

Q2 David Davies: Will local authorities be given enough money to spend up to their full standard spending assessments in the current financial year? (OAQ15562) *Transferred for written answer under the Minister's local government portfolio.*

The Minister for Finance, Local Government and Communities (Edwina Hart): At the Welsh level, the total of SSAs is the same as assumed standard budgets, but SSAs are a method of determining how to distribute funding between authorities, not a method of determining what their budgets should be. Authorities are responsible for setting their own budgets.

Budget Priorities

Q3 Kirsty Williams: How is the Minister taking account of the Wanless report in setting budget priorities? (OAQ15513) *Transferred for written answer.*

Edwina Hart: The Wanless report is an interim report at this stage and is the subject of consultation. It is intended that his final report will inform the UK Government's spending review decisions, which will feed through to the Assembly's budget in the normal way. The Minister for Health and Social Services will take account of the findings of the final report as appropriate when she draws up her spending plans for discussion in the Assembly's budget planning round later this year.

Questions 4 to 8 were answered in Plenary.

Best Value Initiative

Q9 William Graham: Will the Minister make a statement concerning whether the savings gained from the Best Value initiative were greater than the costs to local authorities for the implementation and evaluation of the scheme? (OAQ15557) *Transferred for written answer under the Minister's local government portfolio.*

Edwina Hart: It was never assumed that the full benefits of the Best Value initiative would be reaped in the first two years. However, there is enough evidence to suggest that the costs of Best Value inspection and compliance with the regime were disproportionate to the benefits initially being achieved from them. That is why the Welsh Assembly Government has developed the Wales programme for improvement, in partnership with local government and other bodies represented on the Partnership Council's Best Value project group.

I fully expect that the investment in this new approach will pay for itself many times over in terms of high quality, cost-effective services.

Wanless Report

Q10 Peter Black: What discussions has the Minister had with the Chancellor of the Exchequer about the impact of the Wanless report on the National Assembly's budget? (OAQ15515)

Edwina Hart: Derek Wanless will publish his final report in time to inform the UK Government's 2002 spending review. This is a UK Government spending review. It is for the Secretary of State for Wales to engage in the process on behalf of Wales. I meet the Secretary of State regularly to discuss this and other matters. The Assembly will receive consequential adjustments to the budget relative to the settlement for Whitehall spending departments.

Budget Underspending in Local Authorities

Q11 Alison Halford: Will the Minister update us on the discussions that she is having with local authorities to combat budget underspending? (OAQ15504) *Transferred for written answer under the Minister's local government portfolio.*

Edwina Hart: The Assembly collects information on authorities' budgeted expenditure and their out-turns, to inform the standard spending assessment formula for the annual settlement and to create and improve performance indicators, as well as providing indicators of local government spending and priorities. However, budget management, including budget underspend, is a matter for individual local authorities, not the Assembly.

Air Ambulance Service

Q12 Nick Bourne: What additional one-off money has the Minister made available for the national health service to fund the air ambulance service? (OAQ15510)

Edwina Hart: Following the Minister for Health and Social Services' recent announcement, I confirm that the Welsh air ambulance service has received £70,000 from the Assembly Government to cover the costs of the specially-trained paramedics who work for this service.

Additional Spending Allocations

Q13 Gareth Jones: Has the Minister received notification from the Treasury of any additional spending allocations to Wales since the beginning of January? (OAQ15561)

Edwina Hart: I have received notification of adjustments totalling £1.178 million in 2002-03, and £1.767 million in 2003-04. These are Barnett formula consequentials relating to increases in the Department for Education and Skills' departmental expenditure limit. These increases will be allocated to the education and lifelong learning main expenditure group and formally notified to the Assembly when I next table budget changes in Plenary.

Private Finance Initiative Bidding

Q14 Alun Cairns: What plans does the Minister have to allow private finance initiative bidding on an ad hoc basis? (OAQ15546)

Edwina Hart: I set out the direction in my statement of 13 December on investment through partnership in Wales. I will discuss bidding with the Minister for Health and Social Services and the Welsh Local Government Association in the near future.

Future Use of Public-Private Partnerships

Q15 Jonathan Morgan: What meetings has the Minister had with public sector representatives to promote the future use of public-private partnerships in Wales? (OAQ15508)

Edwina Hart: I carried out a lengthy consultation on the future use of public-private partnerships and the private finance initiative with representatives from the public sector. I set the direction in my 13 December statement on investment through partnership in Wales. I met with the Wales Trades Union Congress just before Christmas. I will discuss private finance issues with the Welsh Local Government Association in the near future and will meet with other public bodies to discuss this issue when appropriate.