

ENVIRONMENT PLANNING AND TRANSPORT COMMITTEE

Date: Wednesday 4 April 2001
Time: 2.00 to 5.00 pm
Venue: Committee Room 2, National Assembly Building

REPORT BY MINISTER FOR ENVIRONMENT

COUNTRYSIDE

Millennium Biodiversity Report

On 26 March the UK Biodiversity Group published its Millennium Biodiversity Report on implementation of the UK Biodiversity Action Plan. The report, which is addressed to all the UK administrations, makes a number of recommendations and identifies five continuing challenges, including the need to enhance local action and to integrate biodiversity conservation into the mainstream policies and practices of all sectors of society. I shall be inviting the Wales Biodiversity Group to advise on the report's implications for Wales and will bring a paper to the EPT Committee on the Assembly's response later this year.

Candidate Special Areas of Conservation

I have announced a further 3 new candidate Special Areas of Conservation in Wales were put forward to the European Commission on 16 March. The sites were:

- Halkyn Mountain
- Johnstown Newt Sites
- Menai Strait and Conwy Bay

This brings the total number of candidate Special Areas of Conservation in Wales to 89. This is a significant contribution to the UK list of Natura 2000 sites and completes Wales's suite of sites, apart from three cross-border sites.

ENVIRONMENT

EC Water Framework Directive

On 23 March we issued a consultation paper jointly with the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions inviting views on key issues arising from the implementation of the EC's Water Framework Directive. The consultation paper is the first step in what will be an extensive consultation process: it is anticipated that further consultation papers will be issued in due course.

The Directive sets a strategic framework for managing the water environment. It establishes a common approach to protecting and setting environmental objectives for all groundwater and surface waters. At the heart of the Directive is the requirement to produce strategic management plans for each river basin setting out how the objectives that have been set within the river basin are to be achieved.

The Directive must be transposed into legislation by 22 December 2003. Officials have been discussing transposition of the Directive with their counterparts in the Department of the Environment, Transport and the Regions for some months. If the Assembly is to transpose the Directive in Wales, it is likely to need designation for this purpose under the European Communities Act 1972.

PLANNING

Planning Inspectorate

I have, in the last week, agreed the key performance targets for the Planning Inspectorate in Wales for 2001 – 02. As in previous years the targets deal with timeliness, finance, and the efficiency and quality of the Inspectorate's work. The targets are demanding and have remained broadly the same as last year with some further tightening of the timeliness target. The targets will be published in the Inspectorate's Business and Corporate Plan for the years 2001 to 2005, which will be available early this month.

TRANSPORT

Strategic Intermodal Development on the West Wales/Southern Ireland Corridor

I attended a presentation by consultants MDS Transmodal on their study "Strategic Intermodal Development on the West Wales/Southern Ireland Corridor" on 22nd March.

This study was commissioned by the West Wales Rail Forum and the Institute of International Trade of Ireland, and considered the viability of developing one or more rail freight terminals, including intermodal facilities in West Wales and Southern Ireland within the context of the wider Atlantic area. I am aware of members' interests in attending this session, and have asked that a copy of the report be sent to the Clerk.

The key findings from the study were:

- Those domestic freight flows in West Wales which are suitable for rail are already being moved by rail
- There is little potential for a switch to intermodal operations as the distances are either too short for rail to be competitive, or the volumes are too small.
- Significant amounts of international trade are carried by short sea shipping, or by pipeline, bypassing West Wales. For the rest, the goods carried are delicate, or urgent, and carried by small scale hauliers, for whom rail is an unattractive alternative.
- One option for rail development has been identified - Axis Milk is actively considering developing a rail-based system for delivering bulk milk from West Wales to creameries out of the region. Locations for a terminal at Haverfordwest and Whitland are being considered.
- Consultants consider that it may not be practical to consider West Wales rail development to serve growth in Irish freight market. However, they identified potential out of the study area for useful terminals at Swansea and Neath-Port Talbot, and so have started a second study to explore these possibilities further. The report should be available within the next month."

Transport Forum

The Transport Forum met on 26th March. There was a presentation by Sustrans on Walking and Cycling Strategy and an update on the work of the sub groups looking into long distance coaches and community transport. We agreed that a subgroup of the Forum would do further work on the Walking and Cycling Strategy.

Parking - Increased Penalty Charge Levels

We are shortly to engage in a consultation exercise (as DETR have in England) on the proposed increase in Penalty Charge Levels for parking contraventions in areas where a decriminalised parking regime operates (only one in Wales, so far). The adjustment is not expected to be controversial since the new rates will reflect the Fixed Penalty Notice increases already brought in. The change can be accomplished by circular.

Local Authorities which have taken Decriminalised Parking Enforcement Powers under the

Road Traffic Act 1991 and taken over parking enforcement from the police receive the resulting **penalty charges** to finance the new system.

In Wales, only one Local Authority has taken up such powers although others have expressed an interest.

The **increase in penalty charge levels** is being brought in by DETR in England and is justified by the increase, in November last year, of the **fixed penalty** for non-endorsable parking offences.

A joint DETR/Welsh Office circular issued in 1995 to local authorities, entitled "Guidance on decriminalised parking enforcement outside London", sets out that the level of penalty charge, after taking into account the 50% discount for early payment, **should be in line** with the level of fixed penalty for non-endorsable parking offences.

The level of fixed penalty **increased from £20 to £30**. It is proposed that the maximum penalty charge level apply, should be **increased from £40 to £60 (£30 if paid within 14 days)**.

The adjustment can be made by amending the circular. There will be a consultation but the new rates (and wheel clamping release fees) are expected to be welcomed by local authorities.

Transport Framework

I launched the Transport Framework Consultation Paper on 23 March at a turf-cutting ceremony for the Brackla Park and Ride scheme. There has been a wide distribution of the Paper, and I hope that those with an interest in helping to create a better co-ordinated and sustainable transport system in Wales will respond with positive and constructive responses by the closing date of 18 May.

Concessionary Fares

On Thursday 29 March I launched officially in Swansea the new scheme that will provide free bus passes and discounts of at least 50% on buses for pensioners and disabled people in Wales. The Assembly is funding local authorities through the general revenue settlement to help them to meet the new standard in 2001-02.

Additionally, during 2001-02 I will be bringing forward legislation that will - from April 2002 - require local authorities to guarantee free bus passes and free travel on buses for pensioners and disabled people, along with specified companions.

I have welcomed the Deputy Prime Minister's recent announcement that primary legislation will be introduced in due course to equalise the ages at which men and women become eligible for

concessions at 60 years. I have confirmed that this measure will apply in Wales.

Traffic and Parking Issues and the Millennium Stadium

I met with Chief Superintendent Gerry Toms and Jenny Randerson AM on Tuesday 27 March, to discuss the issues relating to traffic and parking when large scale events are held at the Millennium Stadium.

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Minister for Environment