

Minutes

Date: Wednesday 23 January 2002
Time: 2.00pm to 4.50pm
Venue: Committee Room 2, National Assembly Building

In attendance

Members

Glyn Davies, Chair	Mid and West Wales
Mick Bates	Montgomery
Ron Davies	Caerphilly
Delyth Evans	Mid and West Wales
Carwyn Jones	Bridgend
Elin Jones	Ceredigion
Peter Rogers	North Wales
Janet Ryder	North Wales

Apologies

Jocelyn Davies	South Wales East
John Griffiths	Newport East

In attendance

Professor Mike Tedd (item 3)	
Tim Fletcher (item 4)	Powys County Council
Jeremy Wright (item 4)	Powys County Council

Officials (item 2)

Huw Brodie	Director, Agriculture Department
Rory O'Sullivan	Agriculture & Fisheries Policy Division
Mike Dunn	Food and Farming Development Division
Jasper Roberts	Rural Policy Division
Jim Norrie	Animal Health Division

Secretariat

Adrian Crompton	Committee Clerk
Menna Williams	Committee Assistant

Item 1: Introduction, apologies, substitutions and declarations of interest

1.1 The Chair declared an interest as a partner in a farming business, Peter Rogers as a farmer, Mick Bates as a partner in a farming business.

1.2 Apologies were received from John Griffiths and Jocelyn Davies.

1.3 The Chair explained that the Committee's work programme until Easter would concentrate on completion of the review of rural ICT and the scrutiny of Ministerial handling of foot and mouth. It was important for Members to identify their priorities for the summer term as the programme was already filling up. It was confirmed that the issue of foxhunting on Forestry Commission land would be handled in a future Minister's report.

Item 2: Minister's Report - ARD 02-02(p1)

Welsh Meat Industry

2.1 Support was expressed for the principle of integrating the marketing and promotion of Welsh meat. However, a number of concerns were raised:

- The proposed merger might threaten the existence of Welsh Lamb & Beef Promotions (WLBP) as an individual body with a clearly defined role;
- The consultation period was short;
- Members of WLBP might choose not to pay subscriptions now due.

2.2 In response the Minister explained that the new body was envisaged as a single company with 3 equal partners. Each would maintain its own identity and the right to withdraw if it wished. Details of precisely how the company would operate and the allocation of responsibilities would be finalised after the consultation. As WLPB would continue to have a separate identity and role there was no reason for members not to pay their subscriptions. The consultation period was relatively short as only key stakeholders would be approached and they were likely to be able to respond quickly. The consultation document would be published later in the week and the Committee would have the opportunity for fuller discussion at its next meeting.

Meat imports

2.3 Members welcomed the announcement that the UK had been declared Foot and Mouth free but expressed concern at the strength of controls in place to prevent the illegal importation of infected meat.

2.4 The Minister said that he had raised the issue in writing with the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and at the last meeting of UK agriculture Ministers. He wished to see strict enforcement at UK ports of entry, controls at an EU level to minimise the risk of illegal importation and for the EU to assist third countries where Foot and Mouth was endemic. Responsibility for the inspection of incoming containers lay with HM Customs and Excise. The Assembly was not represented on the interdepartmental group established to consider the further steps that could be taken to limit illegal imports as it did not have direct responsibility in this field. The Minister agreed, though, to provide a note on the work of the Group at a future meeting. The Minister said he would provide details at the next meeting of the penalties that could be applied to the illegal import of BSE infected meat.

Rural Recovery Plan

2.5 The Minister was asked to clarify the criteria governing the award of assistance under the Plan given that applications such as that made by the Brecon Jazz Festival had been refused.

2.6 The Committee noted that there were two main sources of funding to assist businesses and events – the Special Grant assistance administered by local authorities and a further fund managed by the WDA. The Minister agreed to provide details of the Brecon Jazz Festival application to the next meeting to allow Members to consider the general issue of the criteria being applied. The Minister confirmed that the figure in his report showing that £28 million had been spent to date included the £21 million transferred to local authorities as Special Grant. The Minister agreed to provide more up to date figures on the use of RRP funds in a future Report.

Woodland Forum

2.7 The Minister agreed to provide details to the Committee of the membership of the five working groups established at the Forum's first meeting. The working group Chairs would meet regularly to ensure co-ordination of activity.

Wildlife poisoning

2.8 The Minister was asked to clarify the data provided on poisoning incidents. A number of recent incidents involving peregrine falcons were known to have been reported but these did not appear to be reflected in the table. The Minister agreed to have the figures clarified and to provide, if possible, details of incidents reported but not investigated.

EU sheepmeat regime

2.9 The Committee noted that the Assembly was required to transpose EU Council Regulation EC2529/2001 into domestic legislation, in particular to give effect to the operation of the

national envelope in Wales. The drafting of the Assembly secondary legislation would take account of planned consultation with key industry interests about the detail of the national envelope scheme.

Secondary legislation

2.10 Members welcomed the information provided on forthcoming legislation. The Chair agreed to consider how the Committee could become more engaged in scrutiny of the policy underlying secondary legislation and to report back to the next meeting.

Other issues

2.11 The Minister was asked if he would be contributing to the European Parliament's inquiry into Foot and Mouth. He replied that this was a matter for the Parliament and he had not yet been contacted on the matter. It was pointed out that the Committee's own scrutiny of Ministerial handling of Foot and Mouth in Wales could feed into the European Parliament's work.

2.12 Members also raised the issue of designated collection centres for animals destined for export and the recovery of payments made to a farmer on Anglesey.

2.13 The Chair stressed to Members the need to provide notice, through him or the Clerk, of issues they wished to raise with the Minister. If issues were not covered in the Minister's written report, or prior notice was not given, it was unreasonable to expect the Minister to respond in Committee.

Action points

Future Minister's report to include progress report on the work of the inter-departmental committee established to consider controls on meat imports - **Minister, Animal Health Division**

Minister's report at next meeting to include details of penalties enforceable on those found to illegally import meat carrying risk of BSE - **Minister, Animal Health Division**

Future Minister's report to provide updated figures when available on use of Rural Recovery Plan funds - **Minister, Rural Policy Division**

Minister's report at next meeting to include details of the Brecon Jazz Festival RRP application and reasons for refusal - **Minister, Rural Policy Division**

Details of membership of the Woodland Forum to be distributed to Committee Members -
Minister, Forestry Commission

Clarification of figures on illegal pesticide and wildlife poisoning provided in Minister's report to provide information on reported cases not investigated - **Minister, Food & Farming Development division**

Chair to bring proposals to Committee on how it might take a more active role in the consideration of subordinate legislation - **Chair, secretariat**

Item 3: Review of rural ICT

3.1 Professor Mike Tedd outlined the key messages he felt the Committee should consider in its review:

- ICT is important for rural Wales;
- Computing and telecommunications are now intimately related;
- The telecommunications networks in rural Wales are actually better than one might expect;
- But they still need improving, and more access is needed to advanced facilities such as broadband. Support from public funds is essential;

- There is no single magic wand. Both sides of the market need to be addressed:
 - Demand side issues (awareness-raising, developing skills, demand aggregation)
 - Supply side issues (network improvement, ADSL enabling of exchanges, terrestrial and satellite radio).

- The WDA is developing a sensible strategy for broadband in Wales, addressing many of these issues;
- BT needs to be encouraged to invest in rural Wales. It is important to separate wholesale and retail issues;
- Regional representation on the new regulatory body, OFCOM, is vital.

In discussion, the following points were made:

3.2 The recently introduced lifelong learning network was a significant and useful step in terms of demand aggregation, offering broadband points of presence in every local authority area.

3.3 BT provided high-speed connections to all local exchanges in Wales. The remaining sticking point to wider usage was connection from exchange to individual locations coupled with issues related to BT's pricing policy. In particular, its retail prices were up to ten times higher than wholesale. Professor Tedd felt that BT should be urged to split the accounting of

their retail and wholesale businesses to aid transparency.

3.4 Raising awareness of the advantages of ICT was a slow process. Professor Tedd felt that encouraging pockets of awareness, through telecentres, for example, was an effective way of stimulating others.

3.5 Satellite provision was ideally suited to delivery in remote locations, However, costs were often prohibitive as the current capacity for tailored, dedicated services via satellite was extremely limited.

3.6 The size of the market in rural Wales meant that significant competition in infrastructure provision was unlikely to emerge. Professor Tedd favoured the encouragement and control of single infrastructure providers. With the network in place, service delivery competition would follow.

3.7 There were encouraging signs of take-up of ADSL in the ten rural towns networked through the Llwybr-Pathway project. Take-up was around 60% of that seen in urban areas in England at the same stage of development and was increasing by up to 20% each month.

3.8 A major bid for Objective 1 funding for network enhancements was likely to emerge. But there was a need for similar enhancement across rural Wales in non-Objective 1 areas

3.9 A Bill was expected later in the year to replace OFTEL with a new regulatory body, OFCOM. Professor Tedd said that regional representation on the new body was unlikely to be included in the Bill but the Assembly should press for this to ensure proper consideration of regional telecoms issues.

Item 4: Review of rural ICT

4.1 Tim Fletcher addressed the Committee on the subject of the telecentres scheme in Powys. The text of his presentation is included at Annex ????

4.2 In discussion, Tim Fletcher emphasised the need for public agencies to recognise the value of grassroots projects such as telecentres. By using them as nuclei of ICT activity and exploiting their potential as access points, duplication in the delivery of services across the public sector could be avoided.

4.3 Local ICT projects often required relatively low levels of financial support. They often did not lend themselves to accessing European structural funds as they lacked the expertise required to make an application and were not suited to the time-limited and strictly controlled conditions required. Rather, grassroots projects such as telecentres required flexible, long-term funding to enable projects to develop at their own pace and for local capacity to be built

slowly. Their often informal and unstructured nature did not fit well with the financial strictures required by public agencies. Members were sympathetic to the need for small-scale, flexible funding for projects of this kind and wished to see this reflected in the Committee's report. Jeremy Wright suggested that local authorities were the most suitable body to pilot such an approach.

Item 5: Minutes of previous meeting - ARD 01-01(min)

5.1 The Committee approved the minutes of the meeting held on 9 January.

Secretariat

January 2002