

ENVIRONMENT, PLANNING AND TRANSPORT COMMITTEE

Date: Thursday 21 June 2001
Time: 2:00 pm to 5:00 pm
Venue: Committee Room 3, National Assembly for Wales

Attendance:

EPT Committee Members:

Richard Edwards, Chair	Preseli Pembrokeshire
Mick Bates	Montgomeryshire
David Davies	Monmouth
Sue Essex, Minister for Environment	Cardiff North
Helen Mary Jones	Llanelli
Tom Middlehurst	Alyn and Deeside
Karen Sinclair	Clwyd South
Rhodri Glyn Thomas	Carmarthen East and Dinefwr

In Attendance:

Caerwyn Roberts	Chair, Welsh Group of National Park Authorities (Chair, Snowdonia National Park)
Iwan Huws	Secretary, Welsh Group of National Park Authorities and Welsh National Park Officers Group (Chief Executive, Snowdonia National Park)
Chris Gledhill	Chief Executive, Brecon Beacons National Park

Nic Wheeler	Chief Executive, Pembrokeshire Coast National Park
Roger Thomas	Director, Environment Agency Wales
Andrew Harvey	Corporate Planning Manager, Environment Agency Wales
John Lloyd Jones	Chair, Countryside Council for Wales
Paul Loveluck	Chief Executive, Countryside Council for Wales
Secretariat:	
Siwan Davies	Committee Clerk
Vaughan Watkin	Deputy Committee Clerk

Opening Remarks from Chair

0.1 The Chair welcomed members, officials and members of the public to the meeting, and informed members of a change to the work programme - the Minister would be seeking their views on mapping regulations for the Countryside and Rights of Way Act at the next meeting on 27 June.

Item 1: Apologies, substitutions and declaration of interests

1. Apologies had been received from Geraint Davies and John Griffiths.

1.2 The Chair invited members to declare any interests under Standing Order 4.5. Mick Bates declared that he was a partner in a farming business.

Item 2: Work Programmes of Countryside Council for Wales, Environment Agency Wales and the Welsh National Parks

EPT-11-01 (p 1) - Countryside Council for Wales: proposed Corporate Plan 2002-05

EPT-11-01 (p 2) - Environment Agency Wales: Forward Look

EPT-11-01 (p 3) - Welsh National Parks: Corporate Programme 2002-05

2.1 The Chair welcomed attendees to the meeting, and congratulated Chris Gledhill on his recent appointment as Chief Executive of Brecon Beacons National Park.

2.2 Presentations were made by each organisation setting out their vision, priorities for the coming year and beyond, and requests for additional funding. Presenters also highlighted how their organisation's objectives contributed to the objectives of the National Assembly, and how they were working together to meet shared targets.

2.3 The following were the main points covered in questions from members:

National Park Authorities

- Planning – National Parks were often perceived to be stricter than other local planning authorities. This was not the case, and last year the National Parks had approved 92% of planning applications. The composition of planning committees reflected the need to assess local applications against all-Wales guidance;
- Access – the National Parks had worked in partnership with farmers and landowners in opening up local paths. The Minister had encouraged local authorities to open up the countryside to the public, and it was anticipated that footpaths outside foot and mouth infected areas would be open by the end of June;
- Additional funding – this was sought to take forward the delivery of national priorities at local level, and was over and above the provisional increase agreed by the National Assembly;
- Office accommodation at Brecon - the current accommodation did not meet Health and Safety standards or comply with the Disability Discrimination Act. The National Park considered that a purchase offered better value for money in the longer term than leasing. The Minister would investigate lower cost options with the National Park;
- Europarc conference – it was suggested that the National Assembly share ownership of the event, the first to be hosted by a Welsh National Park. Members suggested that the costs be met from delegates' fees.

Countryside Council for Wales (CCW)

- Work delayed - staff prevented from undertaking field work by the foot and mouth outbreak had been diverted to desk work, such as drawing up management statements for Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs). There were no financial savings to be carried forward from staffing, but savings had been achieved by reduced travelling and use of video conferencing facilities;
- Mapping rights of way – difficulties had arisen because of restrictions, but draft maps were currently being prepared from existing vegetation maps, which would be supplemented by information collected in the field in due course;
- Partnerships – CCW had expertise in advising on and managing the distribution of grants to partners. Targets were set for each partnership and the projects were monitored by CCW to ensure that they delivered value for money;
- Sustainable Development - a joint study group had been established with the National Parks, National Trust, Environment Agency and the Welsh Development Agency;
- Advice – CCW had not undertaken any environment impact assessments prior to providing their advice to the National Assembly on proposed test sites for Genetically Modified crops. The National Assembly had not requested that any assessments be undertaken, and that CCW did not consider it appropriate to do so without a direction.

Environment Agency

- Vision – the vision was for the environment as a whole, not the Agency. It would be achieved by working in partnership with other organisations;
- Challenges and themes – the majority of the Agency's challenges related to regulatory work, which contributed to the themes, all aimed at providing a better quality environment;
- England and Wales pressures – preparatory work for EC schemes could not be funded from charging, and grant in aid was sought to cover the cost of work the Agency in Wales was taking forward with colleagues in England. "Wales only" pressures had been identified by the State of the Environment Report and included developing and supporting the waste strategy;
- Public perception - efforts were being made to change public perception of the Agency,

which was sometimes negative. The public were often unclear about the remit and responsibility of various organisations working on environmental matters. Difficulties can arise because planning permissions had been granted before environmental licensing had been sought, ideally both should have been considered at the same time;

- Planning – the Agency had objected to less than 1% of planning applications submitted for its consideration. Of these, permission had subsequently been granted for half, primarily for developments along the North Wales flood plain;
- Equal opportunities – the Agency was working with the Equal Opportunities Commission on guidance for applicants seeking funding under Objective 1.

Cross-cutting issues

- Cross-cutting functions – members were keen to see the functions of the organisations mapped out, so that any common areas could be identified. A matrix was currently being prepared as part of the stage two report on the quinquennial review of CCW, and would be presented to the committee in the Autumn;
- Improving service delivery – efficiency savings could be delivered by centralising functions to one organisation, but a single large body would not necessarily offer better value for money than several smaller bodies. Any organisation would need to be able to deliver national priorities at local levels. Decision making process should continue to be democratic and transparent;
- Equal Opportunities – only one organisation had highlighted work being done to promote equality of opportunity. Whilst work was being taken forward by each organisation, it was suggested that a higher priority be given to its presentation in future.

2.4 The committee recorded their thanks to the Chief Executive of the Countryside Council for Wales, Paul Loveluck, who would be retiring early in 2002 and congratulated Roger Thomas on his selection as Paul's successor.

Date of next meeting

3.1 The next meeting of the committee would be at 2.00 pm on Wednesday 27 June at the National Assembly for Wales.