

Answers to Questions not reached in Plenary 7 March 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 Local Government to the Minister for Finance, Local Government and Communities

Housing Stock

Q8 Kirsty Williams: What plans does the Minister have to improve housing stock in Wales? (OAQ16133)

The Minister for Finance, Local Government and Communities (Edwina Hart): I set out wide ranging plans in the national housing strategy. This included our vision for the quality that we want for all housing in Wales by 2012. This has been incorporated into the Welsh housing quality standard.

Local Government Settlement

Q9 Mick Bates: What money has been included in the local government settlement in 2002-03 to meet new pressures as a result of the policies of the UK and Welsh Assembly Governments? (OAQ16141)

Edwina Hart: A sum of £78 million was added to the local government settlement for 2002-03 to enable local authorities to cope with new burdens. Details of the new burdens in question have been placed in the Assembly Library.

Merthyr Tydfil County Borough Council

Q10 Mick Bates: What lessons does the Minister think should be learnt from the present situation in Merthyr Tydfil County Borough Council? (OAQ16140)

Edwina Hart: I do not wish to comment on the lessons to be learnt when the High Court is about to consider the circumstances.

Meeting with Representatives from Community and Town Councils

Q11 Jonathan Morgan: What meeting has the Minister had with representatives from community and town councils in Wales? (OAQ15482)

Edwina Hart: I meet regularly with elected representatives at all levels.

Regeneration of Urban Areas in South Wales Central

Q12 Jonathan Morgan: What measures is the Minister taking to promote regeneration of urban areas in South Wales Central? (OAQ15483)

Edwina Hart: I am concerned that certain areas in South Wales Central suffer from significant levels of deprivation. Communities First aims to alleviate poverty in these areas by taking a partnership approach to regeneration. Under the programme, the Communities First partnerships will develop local solutions to local problems to help them regenerate their own areas.

In addition, the Assembly's local regeneration fund provides support for regeneration projects in South Wales Central. The Assembly also funds groundwork trusts and the Coalfields Regeneration Trust, which are actively involved in regeneration projects in the area.

Housing Conditions

Q13 Kirsty Williams: What support will the Minister give to local authorities to improve housing conditions in their area? (OAQ16134)

Edwina Hart: I am increasing overall housing capital budgets over the next three years and it is for local authorities to determine priorities for the use of the bulk of the resources, including the recently announced £52 million for local authorities to undertake strategic schemes in 2002-03.

Child Poverty

Q14 Helen Mary Jones: How does the Assembly measure the extent of child poverty in Wales? (OAQ16068)

Edwina Hart: Child poverty is measured for Wales by a set of indicators related to worklessness, low income, education, health and housing, and is outlined in the UK Government's annual report, 'Opportunity for All'.

At a more local level, the child poverty index, part of the Welsh index of multiple deprivation 2000, is used as a proxy for child poverty due to the lack of other reliable data at the electoral division level.

Regeneration of Urban Areas in South Wales Central

Q15 David Melding: What measures is the Minister taking to promote regeneration of urban areas in South Wales Central? (OAQ15485)

Edwina Hart: I am concerned that certain areas in South Wales Central suffer from significant levels of deprivation. Communities First aims to alleviate poverty in these areas by taking a partnership approach to regeneration. Under the programme, the Communities First partnerships will develop local solutions to local problems to help them regenerate their own areas.

In addition, the Assembly's local regeneration fund provides support for regeneration projects in South Wales Central. The Assembly also funds groundwork trusts and the Coalfields Regeneration Trust, which are actively involved in regeneration projects in the area.

Questions to the Minister for Environment

Planning Decisions regarding Windfarms

Q3 Kirsty Williams: What discussions has the Minister had with the Secretary of State for Wales regarding the devolving of all planning decisions regarding windfarms to the National Assembly? (OAQ16110) *Transferred for written answer.*

The Minister for Environment (Sue Essex): The First Minister has regular meetings with the Secretary of State for Wales, and the question of a transfer of functions under electricity legislation is one of a

number of issues that are discussed. Discussions are also taking place with the Department of Trade and Industry.

Questions 4 to 7 were answered in Plenary.

Traffic Flows on the A55

Q8 Ieuan Wyn Jones: Will the Minister make a statement on traffic flows on the A55 across Anglesey since the opening of the new road? (OAQ16103)

Sue Essex: Traffic has been flowing freely along the A55 across Anglesey, since permit to use was issued under the design, build, finance and operate contract in March 2001. Some sections of the new road were opened to traffic earlier than that date. The completion of this scheme has cut the travel times to and from Holyhead dramatically. It has also reduced traffic flows through the villages on the A5, significantly bringing relief to those communities.

Historic Buildings

Q9 Jonathan Morgan: Will the Minister make a statement on the role of the Assembly in promoting historic buildings in Wales as tourist attractions? (OAQ16094)

Sue Essex: Wales's historic monuments are recognised as a unique selling proposition in attracting tourists, and figure prominently in the publicity of the Wales Tourist Board. This is supplemented by CADW's marketing activities and the efforts of local and regional marketing consortia.

Unitary Development Plans

Q10 Elin Jones: Will the Minister make a statement on the role of unitary development plans? (OAQ16108)

Sue Essex: Development plans set out a local planning authority's policies for the development and use of land in its area. They must have regard to national policies and guidance issued by the National Assembly. Legislation requires that planning decisions should be in accordance with the development plan unless material considerations indicate otherwise.

Sustainable Renewable Energy

Q11 Dafydd Wigley: What is the Government doing to ensure that sustainable renewable energy, such as windfarming, is given adequate attention? (OAQ16101) *Transferred for answer by the Minister for Economic Development*

The Minister for Economic Development (Andrew Davies): The Welsh Assembly Government is committed to the development of a flourishing renewable energy industry in Wales, including energy from wind. A clean energy policy is a significant contributory factor to this. 'A Winning Wales', the national economic development strategy, commits us to secure the strongest possible economic policies, while its guiding principle on clean energy is to stimulate development where it is economically attractive and environmentally acceptable.

In the light of emerging UK and worldwide policies and targets, the Assembly Government is committed to driving forward renewable energy policy in Wales. The potential in Wales for offshore wind is substantial and we are taking full advantage of the opportunities that exist. We are participating in the next stages of the development of the performance and innovation unit's energy review report and the Economic Development Committee's review of energy will help to contribute to the response on that.

Planning Applications

Q12 Alun Cairns: Does the Minister have any plans to change the guidance provided to local authorities regarding planning applications for areas of land that are subject to public inquiry under the unitary development plans process? (OAQ16120)

Sue Essex: I have no current plans to change planning guidance on this matter. Local planning authorities must accept and consider a duly made planning application irrespective of whether its UDP is subject to a public inquiry process. In determining a planning application, section 54(a) of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990 requires that determination should be made in accordance with the development plan, unless material considerations indicate otherwise. Questions of prematurity may arise where a development plan is under preparation and proposals have been issued for consultation but not yet adopted. It is for the local planning authority to consider whether refusal on grounds of prematurity might be appropriate, for example, where the proposal might seriously prejudice the outcome of the plan process by predetermining a decision that should be taken in the development plan context. The stage that a plan has reached in the plan-making process may be a factor in this decision.

Community Transport

Q13 Janet Davies: Has the Minister authorised guidelines on the operation of community transport? (OAQ16104)

Sue Essex: No. Guidance has been issued concerning community transport generally. Guidance issued under the Assembly's local transport services grant scheme reinforces the importance of community transport, and requires local authorities to work with the sector to ensure that it is increasingly mainstreamed alongside other public transport modes. I am providing more than £300,000 over three years to the Community Transport Association in Wales to enable it to develop and expand its advisory network. The Welsh transport forum has established a sub-group that is investigating the provision of community transport in Wales, and the forum will consider the group's findings at its next meeting, in June. Following that, I will consider with relevant partner organisations, including local authorities and the voluntary sector, what further steps we should take to strengthen the role of community transport in Wales.

Rights of Access to Common Land

Q14 Gwenda Thomas: Will the Minister comment on whether the Countryside Access (Local Access Forums) (Wales) Regulations 2001 will allow for clear information to be made available to the public on the differing rights of access to different classes of common land? (OAQ16099)

Sue Essex: The key function of local access fora is set out in section 94(4) of the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000. That is, to advise the local highway authority and/or national park authority on the improvement of public access to land for the purposes of open-air recreation and enjoyment of the area. They do not have specific powers to advise or inform the public directly.

The new public right of access provided by the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000 will apply only to open country and registered common land, both of which are defined in section 1 of the Act and are currently being mapped by the Countryside Council for Wales. However, in the case of some other types of common land, section 15 of the Act has extended to the wider public any rights of access for open-air recreation previously only enjoyed by the inhabitants of the local community. The CCW intends to work closely with the local authorities and the national parks to ensure that the public understands the difference between the different types of access and how they can be best enjoyed.

Churches of Historical Interest

Q15 David Melding: What measures are being taken to support churches of historical interest in Cardiff?
(OAQ16097)

Sue Essex: Assembly grants are available for historic repairs to churches of outstanding architectural or historic interest, or for works that significantly enhance the appearance of a conservation area. The Assembly has a duty to list any building of special architectural or historic interest to ensure that its special character is considered in any planning process, and churches figure in the survey now underway.