

Written Questions answered between 5 and 22 January 2004

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

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

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Questions to the First Minister

The Government's Spending Priorities

Nick Bourne: Will the First Minister make a statement on the Government's spending priorities for the next six months? (WAQ31079)

The First Minister (Rhodri Morgan): Our spending priorities for the current financial year were outlined when the budget for 2003-04 was put to the Assembly on 26 March 2003. Our future spending priorities are set out in 'Wales: A Better Country' and are reflected in the recent final budget.

The Proposed Purchase of Land Adjacent to the New Assembly Building Site

Peter Law: What involvement has the Welsh Assembly Government had with land purchase proposals adjacent to the Assembly debating chamber site? (WAQ31214)

The First Minister: The Welsh Assembly Government has had no involvement with the land purchase proposals adjacent to the site of the new Assembly building. This is a matter for the House Committee.

The Acquisition of Land Adjacent to the New Assembly Building Site

Glyn Davies: When did the First Minister last have any discussions about the acquisition of land adjacent to the new Assembly building (which is currently the subject of discussions between Associated British Ports and the National Assembly) with the owner of the land? (WAQ31241)

The First Minister: On no occasion.

Questions to the Minister for Culture, Welsh Language and Sport

Dance Projects

Lisa Francis: Will the Minister make a statement on dance projects in mid and west Wales? (WAQ31091)

The Minister for Culture, Welsh Language and Sport (Alun Pugh): The Assembly Government supports a wide range of dance projects and activity in mid and west Wales.

(i) Dance in mid and west Wales is particularly strong in the community field, with three community dance organisations in the region: Powys Dance, Dawns TAN (Swansea and area) and Dawns Dyfed, which will receive over £148,000 of revenue funding from the Arts Council of Wales.

(ii) Diversions Dance Company also pays regular visits to venues in mid and west Wales and offers very good workshops to schools in the area.

(iii) Theatr Brycheiniog, Taliesin Arts Centre and Aberystwyth Arts Centre all present strong dance programmes and have developed good dance audiences, and the Arts Council of Wales is committed to developing audiences for dance generally in mid and west Wales.

(iv) The Arts Council of Wales is holding a regional open meeting on dance on 23 January at Aberystwyth Arts Centre, looking at how the profile of dance can be improved generally in this area and how representation on the National Youth Dance Wales can be increased.

The Arts outside Cardiff

Lisa Francis: Will the Minister make a statement on the arts outside Cardiff? (WAQ31092)

Alun Pugh: I refer you to my statement in Plenary on 1 October. In 2004-05, I will make £250,000 available, rising to £1 million in 2005-06 and building up to the full £2 million allocation in 2006-07.

National Lottery Grants

Peter Black: Will the Minister make a statement on whether there are any proposals to change the way that national lottery grants are paid out in Wales? (WAQ31093)

Alun Pugh: In July 2003, the Department for Culture, Media and Sport issued 'National Lottery Funding: Decision Document' which set out a number of proposals for changes to the way in which lottery funding is distributed across the UK.

Transport to and from Cultural and Sporting Events

William Graham: Will the Minister make a statement concerning meetings that he has held with transport companies to co-ordinate the availability of transport to and from cultural and sporting events held within Wales? (WAQ31094)

Alun Pugh: I have not had any discussions with transport companies but the Minister for Economic Development and Transport has regular meetings with transport operators and Network Rail.

National Lottery Funding Bodies

Peter Black: Will the Minister make a statement on any discussions he has had regarding the reorganisation of national lottery funding bodies for Wales? (WAQ31095)

Alun Pugh: I have had a number of discussions with Cabinet colleagues and UK Government Ministers about future lottery distribution arrangements in Wales.

Free-to-View Television via Satellite

David Davies: Has the Minister had any discussions with the Department for Culture, Media and Sport regarding the situation with free-to-view television via satellite, particularly in relation to rural areas of Wales? (WAQ31096)

Alun Pugh: Broadcasting is not devolved to the National Assembly for Wales. The Assembly Government is, however, in regular contact with the UK Government's Department for Culture, Media and Sport and appropriate bodies such as the Office of Communications, regarding broadcasting issues, and this includes the availability of free-to-view public service broadcast channels on digital satellite in rural areas of Wales.

You may be aware that an interim solution has been found to this issue. Following negotiations between ITV, Channel 4, Five and BSkyB, viewers will now be able to continue to receive these channels without having to subscribe to BSkyB by purchasing a new card for £23.50. The cards will be available until 31 January 2004 and will last until BSkyB carry out another card swap programme or for at least two years if the next swap is sooner than that.

Discoveries of National Historic Importance to Wales

William Graham: Will the Minister outline the financial resources that the Assembly Government has set aside to fund the preservation of future discoveries within Wales that are of national historic importance? (WAQ31216) [R]

Alun Pugh: I refer you to the answer that I gave to your question (OAQ30980) on 14 January.

Culturenet Cymru's 100 Welsh Heroes

Glyn Davies: What public funding has been made available to Culturenet Cymru for the running of the competition to identify the all-time greatest Welsh hero? (WAQ31258)

Alun Pugh: I have already provided this answer to your friend and colleague Nick Bourne. The total cost of the project will be £154,000.

Questions to the Minister for Economic Development and Transport

Pathway to Prosperity and the Local Regeneration Fund

Michael German: What has been the budgeted, committed and actual levels of match funding provided to Objective 1 projects in the years 2001-02, 2002-03 and 2003-04 through the local regeneration fund and Pathway to Prosperity funds? (WAQ28600)

Substantive answer following holding reply issued on 10 October 2003.

The Minister for Economic Development and Transport (Andrew Davies): Expenditure on both the local regeneration fund and Pathway to Prosperity is governed by claims made against previously agreed offers, and is totally dependent on the progress made by those projects. When allocating budget provisions during the budget planning process, an estimate of the likely expenditure during the forthcoming financial year was made for the local regeneration fund and Pathway to Prosperity. For the local regeneration fund, local authority match funding takes account of the indicative allocations given to local authorities for each year. In-year, the expenditure in these pots is monitored and the level of provision adjusted to match actual expenditure against eligible claims. It would be totally inappropriate therefore to consider these initial allocations as budgets for the funding pots concerned.

With regard to commitment and expenditure up to end November 2003 on Objective 1 projects, the details are as follows:

The local regeneration fund: community and voluntary sector

	2001-02 (£ million)	2002-03 (£ million)	2003-04 (£ million)
Committed	0.537	0.840	1.799
Actual spend	0.268	0.497	0.672

The local regeneration fund: local authority

	2001-02 (£ million)	2002-03 (£ million)	2003-04 (£ million)
Committed	12.263	12.370	23.057
Actual spend	9.584	7.479	1.382

Pathway to Prosperity match funding

	2001-02 (£ million)	2002-03 (£ million)	2003-04 (£ million)
Committed	30.369	22.023	14.474
Actual spend	9.818	16.714	17.034

Tourism

John Griffiths: Will the Minister make a statement on the Assembly Government strategy to further develop tourism in Wales? (WAQ31080)

Andrew Davies: The Assembly Government's economic development strategy, 'A Winning Wales', sets out a range of priorities, actions and targets that is helping to increase tourism spend and development in Wales. This is being achieved largely through implementation of Wales's national tourism strategy 'Achieving our Potential'.

The Wales Tourist Board's implementation of 'Achieving our Potential' measures has enabled Wales's tourism industry to outperform all other regions of the UK in the past year. The latest figures from the United Kingdom Tourism Survey (comparing January to September 2003 with the same period in 2002) show that expenditure by tourists has increased by some 17 per cent to almost £1.5 billion, and the number of nights spent in Wales by tourists has risen by some 18 per cent to 37.6 million.

The board's remit letter for 2004-05 will continue to focus on 'Achieving our Potential' and will reflect 'Wales: A Better Country'.

The Former KTH Factory

Glyn Davies: On what date was the Symonds Group Ltd given instructions to seek planning permission for the construction of a building for D1 and B2-B8 together with engineering works on the site of the former KTH factory in Llanidloes by the Welsh Development Agency? (WAQ31238)

Andrew Davies: Following a meeting of the Llanidloes Task Force on 17 November 2003 and its decision to redevelop the KTH site, the Symonds Group Ltd was requested to submit a planning application on 25 November 2003.

Benji and Co. of Llanidloes

Glyn Davies: What steps had the Minister taken before the end of 2003 to ensure that agencies sponsored by his department assisted the expansion of Benji and Co. of Llanidloes? (WAQ31239)

Andrew Davies: The Welsh Development Agency, Llanidloes Task Force representatives and officials of Powys County Council planning department met with Benji and Co. in 2003 to discuss its plans.

Questions to the Minister for Education and Lifelong Learning

Assembly Learning Grants

Jenny Randerson: What has been the percentage take-up of Assembly learning grants by students in further education in 2003-04? (WAQ31220)

The Minister for Education and Lifelong Learning (Jane Davidson): Full data are not yet available. However, initial reports from local education authorities suggested that, by the end of October, the number of further education applications received were only slightly lower than the total number of FE applications received for the whole of the 2002-03 academic year, and were considerably up on the number received in October last year.

It is far too early to judge how many applications we will receive over the remainder of the academic year. A statistical return covering all applications received during the Christmas term will be submitted by

the end of February. This will give a better indication, and I will write to you again once this information has been collated. Final data will not be available until the end of the academic year.

Skilled Professions

Brynle Williams: What steps is the Minister taking to encourage men and women into skilled professions such as plumbers, electricians and mechanics? (WAQ31223)

Jane Davidson: I shall be working with, and looking to, the new network of sector skills councils in Wales to develop and provide good quality advice and information to Careers Wales, Jobcentre Plus and other employment agencies on job opportunities and career pathways to enable individuals of all ages, gender and ethnicity to make informed career choices.

I shall also be looking to the councils to help to stimulate the level of engagement by employers in Wales in providing appropriate learning opportunities, particularly in craft and technician occupations through programmes such as our all-age modern apprenticeships.

The Future of Sixth Forms

Peter Black: What will be the role of local education authorities in future decision-making on the future of sixth forms in Wales? (WAQ31249)

Jane Davidson: The role of local education authorities in future decision-making on sixth forms in Wales will continue to be a crucial one. Local education authorities will retain their existing powers and responsibilities over sixth form provision, including the power to propose alterations to such provision. In addition to this, under draft regulations issued for consultation on 8 December 2003, the National Council for Education and Training for Wales (Education and Learning Wales) will be given a power in respect of sixth forms corresponding to that exercised by local education authorities, which it will exercise as set out in these regulations. I expect that ELWa will exercise this power in consultation and close collaboration with local education authorities.

The Repair and Maintenance of School Buildings

Mark Isherwood: Will the Minister make a statement on repairs and maintenance of school buildings since devolution in Wales? (WAQ31250)

Jane Davidson: Since 1999, funding for routine repairs and maintenance issues has been included in schools' delegated budgets in accordance with the Financing of Maintained Schools Regulations 1999.

Capital investment is the responsibility of local authorities, or governing bodies in the case of voluntary aided schools. The commitment to have all schools in Wales in good physical shape and properly maintained remains a key objective for the Welsh Assembly Government, as set out in 'Wales: A Better Country'. Assembly funding of capital investment in schools has increased from £66 million in 1999-2000 to £107 million in 2004-05.

We are beginning to see the results of this investment in schools across Wales, but there is still a considerable way to go to reverse 20 years of underinvestment prior to that. With the completion of asset management plans, which local authorities are due to have in place by April 2004, they will be in a better position to prioritise the use of resources.

Free School Breakfasts in Primary Schools

David Davies: What is the estimated cost of providing free school breakfasts in primary schools? (WAQ31252)

Jane Davidson: Provisional funding during 2004-05 of £1.5 million has already been secured from end-year flexibility. Costs for 2005-06 and for 2006-07 will be fed into the spending review.

Tourism Skills Training Provision

Lisa Francis: Will the Minister make a statement on the importance of tourism skills training provision in Wales? (WAQ31253)

Jane Davidson: The Assembly Government recognises the importance of the hospitality and tourism sector to the economy of Wales, and is committed to ensuring that the skill needs are properly identified and addressed.

I am looking to People 1st, the new sector skills council for the hospitality, leisure, travel and tourism industries, and its partner in Wales, the Tourism Training Forum for Wales, to consult widely with employers and others and draw up a comprehensive five-year workforce development plan. I will also expect People 1st to work in close collaboration with employers, ELWa, the WDA, Careers Wales, Jobcentre Plus, the Qualifications Curriculum and Assessment Authority for Wales and the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales to deliver the agreed plan.

Further Education Training

Lisa Francis: Will the Minister make a statement on the availability of further education training in mid and west Wales? (WAQ31254)

Jane Davidson: Provision is available from nine colleges that have a total of 17 sites throughout the mid and south-west Wales ELWa regions, and which offer full, part-time, open or distance learning and work-based learning opportunities for learners. The type of support available is various and ranges from basic adult literacy to post-graduate degree level, as well as work-based learning. There are opportunities to learn through the medium of Welsh and ELWa is working to strengthen these.

Colleges' provision, as with all providers of post-16 learning, will evolve over time in line with the policy endorsed by the Assembly in February 2000 for implementing the education and training action plan. In part, that will be stimulated by ELWa's new arrangements for funding, which will begin to take effect from August 2005. Fairer, more transparent funding will support increased partnership and collaboration between providers. I have no doubt that colleges will be able to take advantage of these new arrangements to play a full part in the delivery of high quality cost-effective provision, and thereby contribute to realising our ambitions for a learning country.

Reducing Class Sizes in Schools

Nick Bourne: What action is the Minister taking to reduce class sizes in schools? (WAQ31255)

Jane Davidson: A statutory class size limit of 30 pupils has applied to all infant classes in Wales since September 2001. Since that date, funding for infant class size reduction has been included within the local government revenue settlement, and infant classes remain at an historically low level.

In September 2003, only 0.4 per cent of infant classes failed to comply with the statutory requirements. Those breaches have been followed up.

In each of the last three financial years, additional funding has been made available to authorities for the reduction of junior school classes to 30 pupils. Substantial progress has been made. The percentage of junior pupils in classes larger than 30 pupils reduced from 29 per cent in September 2000 to 13 per cent in September 2003. Local education authorities have allocated more than £39 million for this purpose, out of additional funding provided by the Assembly for school improvement measures totalling £77 million. Additional revenue funding grant of £31.5 million will be provided in 2004-05 and the special grant

report is due to be considered in Plenary on 2 March. The grant conditions will be tightened to ensure that local authorities focus grants provided for junior class size reduction more closely so that the target of removing classes of over 30 pupils can be achieved.

Higher Education

Owen John Thomas: What steps has the Minister taken to assess the potential demand within Wales for higher education? (WAQ31256)

Jane Davidson: I wrote to HEFCW in June 2003 setting out the widening access targets associated with ‘Reaching Higher’. We have not adopted the English 50 per cent participation target, but are focusing on increasing representation from underrepresented communities. I have subsequently asked HEFCW to undertake work to estimate what provision we need to make to achieve those targets. Officials have also been working on demographic trends over the coming 10 years, which will feed into this process. In addition, I will continue to review the impact on the HE market of funding reforms introduced in England.

Techniquest

Glyn Davies: What funding has been available to Techniquest by the Assembly Government or any of its agencies over each of the last five years? (WAQ31259)

Jane Davidson: The table below sets out the funding made available to Techniquest from April 1999 to date.

Year	Amount	Notes
1999-2000	£1,046,893	This includes £100,000 to fund a national co-ordinator post for ‘Maths Year 2000’ in Wales and to meet the cost of related activities throughout the period of the campaign. Also includes £188,000 for co-ordinating Wales science year.
2000-01	£889,607	Includes £48,500 for Wales science year.
2001-02	£975,000	Includes £50,000 for the continued promotion of mathematics—‘Math Cymru’.
2002-03	£1,413,800	Includes £92,000 for ‘Math Cymru’ and £371,800 for Wales science year.
2003-04	£1,823,000	To December 2003. This includes the development and opening of Techniquest @NEWI in Bangor and £100,000 for ‘Math Cymru’.

This table excludes income generated from visitors to Techniquest, the worldwide activity of its trading subsidiary and other sources, the total of which is significantly higher.

The Assembly Government supports Techniquest to deliver an educational programme in support of teaching and learning. It has provided educational programmes to more than 500,000 school pupils in support of the national curriculum, received visits from more than 90 per cent of all primary and secondary schools in south Wales, and provided in-service training for more than 2,000 teachers. Almost 2 million people have visited Techniquest.

Secondary School Reorganisation

John Marek: Will the Minister give the dates of meetings with representatives of Wrexham County Borough Council to discuss the present secondary school reorganisation, and will she give the name of the representative on each date? (WAQ31261)

Jane Davidson: I have not met representatives of Wrexham County Borough Council to discuss the secondary school reorganisation in Wrexham. The published information on the proposals was given to me in the course of a visit to Yale College. In view of my potential role in determining statutory proposals, if objections were received, I did not enter into discussions of its plans with the authority.

My decision letter on the statutory proposals, issued on 31 October 2002, set out the considerations that I took into account in deciding to give approval. This was based on written information submitted by the authority and material contained in the objections.

The Welsh Baccalaureate

Peter Black: What changes are being considered to the Welsh baccalaureate in relation to exams on key skills? (WAQ31314)

Jane Davidson: My decision to remove the requirement for external tests as part of the assessment for the key skills qualifications in communication, application of number and information technology has no direct implications for the Welsh baccalaureate.

I have decided that, as from September 2004, the key skills qualifications will be assessed only by a portfolio of evidence of students' ability to apply the skills. This decision is based on evidence from research by ACCAC, which showed that the tests add nothing to the rigour of the assessment of key skills qualifications. It also confirmed widespread agreement that portfolio evidence is the most valid form of assessment for key skills.

As part of the package of measures stemming from the review of key skills, conducted by the regulatory authorities, portfolio evidence will be strengthened and the regulatory authorities are working with awarding bodies to develop better example materials. As a result, all students studying key skills, regardless of whether they are involved in the Welsh baccalaureate pilot, will have better resources available to them and their teachers.

A further positive outcome of the review of key skills is the agreement that the wider key skills—problem solving, working with others, and improving own learning and performance—can be piloted as accredited qualifications for the first time. The wider key skills are also required as part of the Welsh baccalaureate core, so this is good news for the Welsh baccalaureate.

Combining a Roman Catholic and a Church in Wales Secondary School in Wrexham

John Marek: When will the Minister announce a decision on the future of a Christian secondary school in Wrexham? (WAQ31434)

Jane Davidson: I understand that consultation has been under way for some time on a proposal to establish a combined Roman Catholic and Church in Wales secondary school on the site of St Joseph's Roman Catholic voluntary aided secondary school in Wrexham. The proposal would require the publication of statutory notices by the governing body of the school and by the appropriate diocesan authorities. None has been published to date. Only if there were objections would the decision fall to me to make.

The two diocesan education authorities of St Asaph and Wrexham have submitted a joint bid for funding from the voluntary aided capital grant programme, to expand and develop St Joseph's buildings to accommodate this scheme. I will be considering this and other bids shortly. Any approval of this bid would be given in principle and without prejudice to any decision that I had to make on statutory proposals.

Questions to the Minister for Environment, Planning and Countryside

The Maximum Permitted Height for Hedges

Helen Mary Jones: Will the Minister clarify the maximum permitted height for hedges between neighbouring households, and will he make a statement on any forthcoming changes to this legislation in Wales? (WAQ31206)

The Minister for Environment, Planning and Countryside (Carwyn Jones): There is currently no maximum permitted height for hedges between neighbouring households, nor are there any proposals to introduce one.

The Anti-Social Behaviour Act 2003 contains provisions for the introduction of a complaints system in relation to nuisance hedges. Once these provisions are brought into effect, local authorities will be able to consider complaints, which are expected to be mainly about the height of hedges and the effect that that has on the amenity of affected houses. The questions of whether the height of the hedge should be reduced and, if so, by how much will depend entirely on the facts and circumstances of each case.

In Wales, the complaints system cannot be brought into effect until the Assembly has made regulations setting out the procedures to be followed for appeals that may arise out of the system, and the fee that local authorities may charge for handling complaints. I intend to bring forward, in the next few months, draft regulations and draft guidance for users of the system for consultation purposes.

Hectares of Woodland

Helen Mary Jones: How many hectares of woodland have been replanted annually on the Assembly's forestry estate since 1999? (WAQ31211)

Carwyn Jones: The following areas have been replanted annually on the Assembly's forestry estate since 1999.

1 April 1999 to 31 March 2000	1,795 ha
1 April 2000 to 31 March 2001	1,433 ha
1 April 2001 to 31 March 2002	1,132 ha
1 April 2002 to 31 March 2003	1,184 ha
Total	5,544 ha

The figures are in hectares and include areas of natural regeneration that contain sufficient tree cover to be classed as woodland. I have not included the amount for 2003-04 as planting is done in the spring of each year, and these figures are therefore not yet available.

The Assembly's Forestry Estate

Helen Mary Jones: Does the Minister have any plans to sell land currently within the Assembly's forestry estate? (WAQ31213)

Carwyn Jones: The Forestry Commission continues to identify buildings and small areas of land in non-forest use that are no longer required for operational purposes, and are thus surplus to requirements. In addition, the commission is currently identifying limited areas of leasehold and freehold woodlands that provide either little or no net public benefit. A proportion of the sales proceeds arising will be reinvested in the acquisition and establishment of new community woodlands in areas of Wales where greater public benefits will accrue.

Red Squirrels in the Dulais Valley

Glyn Davies: What evidence exists of the presence of red squirrels in the Dulais valley and surrounding areas? (WAQ31226)

Carwyn Jones: I am advised by the Countryside Council for Wales and Forest Enterprise that there is no evidence of the presence of red squirrels in the Dulais valley and surrounding areas.

Red Squirrels in the Rheola Forest

Glyn Davies: What evidence exists of the presence of red squirrels in the Rheola forest and surrounding areas? (WAQ31227)

Carwyn Jones: Forest Enterprise advises me that its last positive sighting was in 1996. Over the last five years, the Rheola squirrel group has not found conclusive evidence that red squirrels are still present in the area.

Red Squirrels in the Onllwyn Valley

Glyn Davies: What evidence exists of the presence of red squirrels in the Onllwyn valley and surrounding areas? (WAQ31228)

Carwyn Jones: I am advised by the Countryside Council for Wales and Forest Enterprise that there is no evidence of the presence of red squirrels in the Onllwyn valley and surrounding areas.

Skylarks and Yellowhammers

Glyn Davies: Is the population of skylarks and yellowhammers in a declining state or increasing in Wales and what steps are being taken to increase the numbers of these birds? (WAQ31229)

Carwyn Jones: The breeding bird survey data show a decrease of 31 per cent for yellowhammer and 11 per cent for skylark between the period 1994-2002. The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds considers the data for yellowhammer to be statistically significant. Various conservation initiatives are taking place, which should help to reverse these trends, for example, the Tir Gofal agri-environment scheme, the CCW species challenge fund and the RSPB Objective 1 farmland bird project.

Confirmed Cases of Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy

Glyn Davies: How many confirmed cases of BSE have there been in Wales for each of the last five years? (WAQ31235)

Carwyn Jones: The information is as follows:

1999	157
2000	97
2001	109
2002	123
2003	76 (NB some cases are still pending confirmation)

Adeiladau Masnachol Gwag

Alun Ffred Jones: A wnaiff y Gweinidog sylw ar y goblygiadau i Gymru yn sgîl datganiad Canghellor y Trysorlys yn ei araith cyn-gyllideb ynglŷn â 'fast track planning' wrth gyfeirio at adeiladau masnachol gwag? (WAQ31268) [W]

Carwyn Jones: Mae datganiad cyn-gyllideb Canghellor y Trysorlys yn cyfeirio at roi ‘ar y trywydd cyflym’ (‘fast-tracking’) yn y system gynllunio, ond yn achos datblygiadau newydd yn unig. Nid oedd cyfeiriad at ddefnyddio hyn yn achos adeiladau masnachol gwag.

Yr oedd paragraff 3.106 o’r datganiad yn cyfeirio at gynllunio trefol a datblygu codau trefol wrth drafod gyda grwpiau cymunedol, cyn i’r datblygiad ddechrau. Wedi i’r awdurdod lleol gymeradwyo’r cynllun, byddai’r adeiladau a oedd wedi eu hadeiladu yn unol â’r cod yn cael eu rhoi ar y trywydd cyflym drwy’r system gynllunio. Byddwn yn ystyried a ddylid cyflwyno’r ddarpariaeth hon yng Nghymru.

Vacant Commercial Premises

Alun Ffred Jones: Will the Minister make a statement on the implications to Wales of the Chancellor of the Exchequer’s statement in his pre-budget speech regarding ‘fast track planning’ in relation to vacant commercial premises? (WAQ31268) [W]

Carwyn Jones: The Chancellor of the Exchequer’s pre-budget statement contains a reference to ‘fast-tracking’ in the planning system, but only in relation to new development. There was no reference to this applying to vacant commercial premises.

Paragraph 3.106 of the statement referred to urban design and development of urban codes in discussion with community groups before development takes place. Once approved by the local authority, this would allow buildings constructed in compliance with the code to be fast-tracked through the planning system. Consideration will be given as to whether or not to introduce this provision in Wales.

Questions to the Finance Minister

Council Tax Rises

David Davies: What is the Minister doing to prevent council tax rises in Wales? (WAQ31082)

The Finance Minister (Sue Essex): The level of council tax is a matter for each individual local authority, not the Assembly. Councils are currently considering their budgets and council tax levels for next year.

The local government settlement for 2004-05 is a fair and reasonable one in a tight financial year. It builds on recent years of growth in the funding of local government.

Local government will receive over £3.1 billion through the settlement, which represents an increase of 5.2 per cent, or £155 million, on what authorities received last year. This should be sufficient to meet our assessment of the costs of pay and price pressures identified by local government, as well as providing £33 million to meet the anticipated costs of implementing the teachers workload agreement.

Authorities will also receive £50 million through additional non-hypothecated funding in the form of deprivation grant and performance incentive grant.

Current estimates indicate that authorities will receive approximately £540 million in hypothecated funding to address key areas including carers, schools and waste management. This represents an increase of over 6 per cent on the 2003-04 figure.

The Reduction of Council Taxes

David Davies: What funding is available to the Minister to reduce council taxes in Wales? (WAQ31083)

Sue Essex: I refer the Member to the statement that I made in the Assembly's Plenary Session on 14 January about additional resources for local authorities in Wales. However, as I have explained on many occasions, it is for individual local authorities to determine the level of council tax required to deliver services to meet local circumstances.

Council Tax Increases

Brynle Williams: Will the Minister make a statement on the additional moneys promised by the Chancellor to help prevent large council tax increases in Wales in 2004-05? (WAQ31087)

Sue Essex: I refer to the statement that I made in the Assembly's Plenary session on 14 January.

Local Authority Budgets

Glyn Davies: What decisions have been taken by the Assembly Government since the last Assembly elections which have an impact on local authority budgets? (WAQ31230)

Sue Essex: The most significant decision has been the approval of the local government revenue settlement for 2004-05 on 10 December 2003. Published with the overall allocations were details of new responsibilities for local government funded through the settlement. I also published a list of the wide variety of specific and special grants that the Assembly has decided to provide to local government in 2004-05

Questions to the Minister for Health and Social Services

Chronic Fatigue Syndrome/ME

Lisa Francis: Does the Minister have a timescale for developing a strategy to employ a researcher to review the literature available on chronic fatigue syndrome/myalgic encephalomyelitis? (WAQ29152)

Lisa Francis: Does the Welsh Assembly Government intend to employ a researcher to review the literature available on chronic fatigue syndrome/myalgic encephalomyelitis? (WAQ29151)

Substantive reply following holding reply issued on 8 December 2003.

The Minister for Health and Social Services (Jane Hutt): In relation to WAQ29151, we are developing proposals to take forward work in the area of chronic fatigue syndrome/myalgic encephalomyelitis. We understand the need for more research on a wide range of aspects of this condition, and officials are taking account of the broad strategy for advancing biomedical and health services research on chronic fatigue syndrome/ME produced by the Medical Research Council this year. Commissioning specific research into this condition and employing a researcher to review the literature is being considered as part of the current scoping work.

We are looking to establish a formal collaborative arrangement with England and Scotland to ensure that we build on their expertise and contribute to future proposals for CFS/ME. Baseline work is also under way to help identify current service provision and needs across Wales, and officials have been working with local health boards on this.

Regarding WAQ29152, commissioning specific research into CFS/ME and employing a researcher to review the literature is being considered as part of the current scoping work being undertaken by officials. It is difficult at this stage to put an exact time frame on these possible developments.

Consultant Therapists

Rhodri Glyn Thomas: How many consultant therapists currently work in Wales? (WAQ30816)

Substantive reply following holding reply issued on 29 December 2003.

Jane Hutt: The approval process for new consultant posts within the allied health professions is managed on behalf of the Welsh Assembly Government by Health Professions Wales. It is anticipated that the first consultant posts for Wales will be approved early in 2004. I therefore anticipate that the first consultant will be in post by the middle of 2004.

Emphysema

Brynle Williams: Will the Minister make a statement on why emphysema is not classed as a terminal illness? (WAQ31192)

Jane Hutt: Emphysema, which strictly is not an illness but a description of the condition of the lungs following the destruction of alveoli, is not in itself a terminal condition.

Health Education Projects

Leighton Andrews: Will the Minister make a statement on health education projects within the Rhondda Cynon Taff Local Health Board area? (WAQ31193)

Jane Hutt: There are a range of health education projects within the Rhondda Cynon Taff Local Health Board area. These include:

- the heart attack project, which targets those at risk of coronary heart disease in the most deprived communities of Rhondda Cynon Taff. This is a partnership project with the local authority and includes the food for living, food for life and active living programmes;
- 'SafeStart', which aims to reduce unintentional injury to children aged under four through education and the provision of subsidised and low-cost equipment;
- a range of sexual health projects, including advice and information services for young people, the condom card scheme and Strides—a programme targeted at young men and delivered by the Family Planning Association Cymru;
- the healthy schools project, which has recently been extended through Cymorth funding to take forward the priorities of children's mental health and wellbeing, nutrition and physical activity as identified by the Children's Partnership.

I also refer you to the answer given in response to WAQ26248 about health promotion in the Rhondda Cynon Taff area.

General Medical Services

Peter Black: What is the projected impact on general practice services of the new general medical services contract after 1 April 2004? (WAQ31194)

Jane Hutt: The new general medical services contract is an important step in modernising and reforming primary care. It will provide new mechanisms to allow practices greater flexibility to tailor services to meet the needs of patients. Core funding will be delivered via a new formula that will reflect health need and workload. GP practices will be rewarded for delivering clinical and organisational quality, through an evidence-based quality framework. The contract will be accompanied by significant new investment that will allow the expansion of primary care and the provision of a wider range of services delivered locally.

HIV/AIDS Respite Facilities

Mark Isherwood: Would the Minister make a statement on the provision of HIV/AIDS respite facilities in Wales? (WAQ31195)

Jane Hutt: I announced a three-year match funding scheme to support the palliative care strategy at the level of £2 million/£3 million/£5 million for the financial years 2003-04 to 2005-06. Bids were invited from voluntary organisations involved in supporting or providing palliative care services in Wales and Tyddyn Bach, an HIV/AIDS respite facility in Conwy, received £130,000 to enable it to purchase and refurbish its current premises.

Children's Health Facilities

Mark Isherwood: Would the Minister make a statement on children's health facilities in north Wales? (WAQ31196)

Jane Hutt: A full range of primary and secondary children and family health services are provided by the three NHS trusts in north Wales, the Countess of Chester NHS Trust and the general medical services and general dental services contractors. These, together with the specialist children health services, are commissioned by the six north Wales local health boards in conjunction with Health Commission Wales and in accordance with local health plans agreed with local authority partners, the Welsh Assembly Government and health and children policies.

Osteoporosis Service

David Davies: Would the Minister make a statement on the osteoporosis service in Monmouthshire? (WAQ31197)

Jane Hutt: I refer you to the answer that I gave to you in WAQ30059 on 20 November 2003.

NHS Equality of Human Rights Unit

David Davies: Would the Minister make a statement on the estimated annual running costs of the NHS equality of human rights unit? (WAQ31198)

Jane Hutt: The estimated annual running costs attached to the NHS Wales centre for human rights and equality unit is £320,000.

GP Out-of-Hours Cover

Lisa Francis: Will the Minister make a statement on GP out-of-hours cover in mid and west Wales? (WAQ31199)

Jane Hutt: Local health boards are considering a range of models for out-of-hours provision under the new GMS contract. Final plans have to be submitted by 31 January 2004. By December 2004, all local health boards should have taken full responsibility for out-of-hours provision. During the intervening period, the Assembly is monitoring local health boards' performance and will offer support and advice where necessary. These new arrangements remove the responsibility of providing 24-hour care from individual GPs and practices, which is seen as a positive help to recruitment and retention in rural areas in particular.

The Health and Social Services Committee

Jonathan Morgan: What progress has the Minister made to honour her commitment made to the Health and Social Services Committee that 18-month waits for NHS treatment would be eradicated by April 2004? (WAQ31203)

Jonathan Morgan: What progress has the Minister made towards her achieving her commitment made to the Health and Social Services Committee on eradicating 18-month waits by April 2004? (WAQ31245)

Jane Hutt: I am determined to reduce the number of people experiencing long waits in Wales. In November 2003, I announced the development of the second offer scheme, which will begin on 1 April 2004. This will guarantee every patient in Wales a second offer of treatment, so that they will wait no longer than 18 months for surgery. Further, on 14 January, I announced in the Health and Social Services Committee an additional £5 million to be used prior to 31 March, to make a significant impact on those currently waiting over 18 months. By the time the first waiting lists statistics of 2004-05 are published at the end of May (end of April figures), all potential long-waiting patients will have received a second offer, though they may not have had their surgery.

NHS Operations

Rhodri Glyn Thomas: Further to WAQ30872, will the Minister detail the increased cost to the NHS in Wales of using private providers to perform NHS operations in comparison to the same operations carried out by the NHS? (WAQ31207)

Jane Hutt: Information to allow such a calculation is not held centrally.

Pain Relief Clinic

Helen Mary Jones: What is the current waiting time for a first appointment at a pain relief clinic at each NHS trust in Wales? (WAQ31208)

Jane Hutt: Information held centrally on waiting times for a first out-patient appointment in the pain management speciality as at 30 November 2003 (the latest for which information is available) is in the following table:

Trust	Total	Over three months	Over six months	Over 12 months	Over 18 months
Carmarthenshire NHS Trust	417	322	258	168	77
Conwy and Denbighshire NHS Trust	282	180	124	53	0
North West Wales NHS Trust	130	12	1	0	0
Pembrokeshire and Derwen NHS Trust	136	65	23	0	0
Powys Healthcare NHS Trust	65	16	0	0	0
Total	1,030	595	406	221	77

Confirmed Cases of Variant Creutzfeldt-Jakob Disease

Glyn Davies: How many confirmed cases of variant Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease have there been in Wales for each of the last five years? (WAQ31236)

Jane Hutt: The following deaths associated with vCJD occurred in Wales from 1999 to 2003:

1999	1
2000	1
2001	1
2002	1
2003	0

Figures supplied by the vCJD Surveillance Unit, Edinburgh.

The Cost of an Average Bed Day

Jonathan Morgan: What is the cost of an average bed day for NHS Wales? (WAQ31246)

Jane Hutt: The average bed day cost for NHS Wales during 2002-03 was £280 (and £261 in 2001-02). The figures are for the average cost across specialties for in-patient and day case treatment. The figures do not include out-patient and community services activity.

Cancelled Operations

Jonathan Morgan: How many bed days have been lost in the last three years due to cancelled operations in Wales? (WAQ31247)

Jane Hutt: The information that you requested is not held centrally.

Alzheimer's Disease (Treatment and Related Therapies)

Jonathan Morgan: What is the average spend per head on Alzheimer's treatment and related therapies in Wales? (WAQ31248)

Jane Hutt: This information is not held centrally.

Questions to the Minister for Social Justice and Regeneration

All-Wales Picture of Housing Needs

Janet Ryder: In light of the response to WAQ29939, could the Minister tell me how she intends to build up an all-Wales picture of housing needs and, without this picture, how will the all-Wales spatial plan be informed? (WAQ31222)

The Minister for Social Justice and Regeneration (Edwina Hart): An all-Wales picture of future housing requirements (housing needs and housing demands) is provided through the Assembly Government's household projections. The current 1998-based projections provide figures at a regional level. The Assembly Government is considering producing a 2002-based series. These projections will inform the housing dimensions of the spatial plan.

Additional Policing Pilot in Communities First Areas

Leighton Andrews: How and in what way is the Assembly supporting the South Wales Police pilot of additional policing in Communities First areas? (WAQ31265)

Edwina Hart: The funding for the South Wales Police pilot is from the force's own resources. However, Assembly officials are in regular contact with South Wales Police officers to discuss the progress being made and any good practice or problems that occur. A one-day seminar was held in December 2002, which was attended by officers of South Wales Police and Assembly officials.

The Chair of the Voluntary Sector Review Panel

David Davies: Can the Minister make a statement on the basis on which Simon Jones was appointed to chair the voluntary sector review panel, and what her relationship with Mr Jones was prior to this appointment? (WAQ31438)

Edwina Hart: Like all members of the independent commission to review the voluntary-sector scheme, Mr Jones was appointed on the basis of his knowledge and expertise. I announced the establishment and membership of the commission to Plenary on 30 September 2003. Mr Jones, like many people serving in Wales in various capacities, has been known to me personally for a number of years.

Policies to Tackle Deprivation

Nick Bourne: Will the Minister update us on her policies to tackle deprivation in Wales? (WAQ31465)

Edwina Hart: I have implemented two significant programmes aimed at tackling deprivation in Wales, the Communities First programme and the Community Facilities and Activities programme.

Under the Communities First programme, which specifically targets the most deprived communities in Wales, 86 embryonic partnerships have been established to drive forward the programme and others are in the process of being set up. From a budget of £98.4 million, over £31 million has been allocated for the three-year period 2003–06 to support regeneration at the local level.

The Community Facilities and Activities programme is an all-Wales programme aimed at helping community and voluntary organisations to provide facilities or carry out activities that will promote the regeneration of communities. It has existing commitments of over £10 million for the period 2003-06.

Regenerating Deprived Communities

John Griffiths: Will the Minister make a statement on progress in regenerating the most deprived communities in Wales? (WAQ31466)

Edwina Hart: Under the Communities First programme, which specifically targets the most deprived communities in Wales, 86 embryonic partnerships have been established to drive forward the programme and others are in the process of being set up. From a budget of £98.4 million, over £31 million has been allocated for the three-year period 2003-06 to support regeneration at the local level.

The Community Facilities and Activities Programme is an all-Wales programme aimed at helping community and voluntary organisations to provide facilities or carry out activities that will promote the regeneration of communities. It has existing commitments of over £10 million for the period 2003-06.

The Communities First Fund

Lisa Francis: What are the criteria that applicants need to fulfil in order to gain a grant from the Communities First fund? (WAQ31487) [R]

Edwina Hart: The eligibility criteria for the Communities First trust fund can be obtained from the Wales Council for Voluntary Action. This is available on its website www.wcva.org.uk or from its helpdesk on 0870 607 1666.

Questions to the House Committee

Car Parking Provision

Glyn Davies: What plans are under discussion to increase the car-parking provision available to employees of the National Assembly? (WAQ31243)

The Deputy Presiding Officer (John Marek): The House Committee is responsible for car parking provision only at Cardiff bay. In addition to the current on-site car parking, we have access to 150 spaces at the nearby Queensgate car park. Under the terms of its planning consent, this latter site is expected to close during 2006. The House Committee has asked officials to identify and explore for its future consideration the possible options for responding to this reduction in car-parking provision.

Constructing an Additional Assembly Building

Nick Bourne: What is the estimated cost of constructing an additional Assembly building alongside the new Assembly debating chamber currently under construction? (WAQ31484)

The Deputy Presiding Officer: Any such estimate would be pure conjecture. Negotiations with respect to the possible purchase of the site are not yet complete, and the House Committee has yet to take a view on the outcome of them.