

Written Questions answered between 29 April and 6 May 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

Holding a Referendum on the Transfer of Further Powers

William Graham: Will the First Minister make a statement concerning discussions he has held with the Westminster Government on the transfer of further powers to hold a referendum in Wales? (WAQ34295)

The First Minister (Rhodri Morgan): I have had no such discussions. In any event, holding a referendum in any part of the UK requires primary legislation, so there are no powers that could transfer.

Questions to the Minister for Education and Lifelong Learning

Average Level of Debt Among University Students

Nick Bourne: What is the average level of debt among university students in Wales year on year since 1997? (WAQ34670)

The Minister for Education and Lifelong Learning (Jane Davidson): General measures relating to student finance have not yet been devolved. The latest data issued by the Department for Education and Skills, from the student income and expenditure survey, revealed that the average anticipated student debt from all sources for students graduating in 2002-03 was £8,666 compared with £3,150—£3,465 in real terms—in 1998-99. The previous survey was in 1995-96. There are no separate figures for Welsh students or students studying at Welsh institutions.

Application of the £30 Education Maintenance Allowance

Nick Bourne: How will the £30 education maintenance allowance be applied in Wales? (WAQ34677)

Jane Davidson: In the first year of the scheme, education maintenance allowances will be available to eligible students aged 16 who are undertaking at least 12 hours a week guided learning on further education courses. In the second year, the scheme will be extended to include 17-year-old students, and to students aged 18 in the third year of the scheme.

The £30 weekly entitlement will be available to students in households with an income of up to £19,630, £20 to those in the £19,031 to £24,030 income band and £10 for those in households with incomes of up to £30,000.

Questions to the Finance Minister

Homeworking

Nick Bourne: Will the Minister indicate whether any furniture for homeworking is to be made available to Assembly Members and, if so, how much? (WAQ35058) *Transferred for answer by the House Committee.*

The Deputy Presiding Officer (John Marek): There are no plans to do so. Members can claim against their office costs allowance for permissible items of expenditure.

Questions to the Minister for Health and Social Services

Commissioner for Older People

Kirsty Williams: As the creation of a commissioner for older people in Wales will require primary legislation in Westminster, has a time slot for this to be passed been negotiated with the UK Government? (WAQ34785)

The Minister for Health and Social Services (Jane Hutt): It would only be appropriate to discuss the detailed timing of a Bill to establish a statutory commissioner once it has been announced in a Queen's Speech. That is not yet the case with a Bill to establish a commissioner for older people in Wales.

Questions to the House Committee

The Assembly Internet and Intranet Sites

Brian Gibbons: Has the committee considered any timescale to improve the operation of the Assembly internet and intranet sites, especially its search engine facility? (WAQ34212)

The Deputy Presiding Officer (John Marek): The House Committee does not have overall responsibility for the current internet and intranet sites for the Assembly, as it contains a mixture of matters of relevance to the Government and to the Assembly as a whole. A new home page for the Assembly internet site has been introduced this week. The new home page is intended to differentiate more clearly between those areas that are the responsibility of the National Assembly and those that are the responsibility of the Welsh Assembly Government.

The new home page is the first stage of a development that will result in two separate sites: one for the Assembly and one for the Welsh Assembly Government. The provision of a robust search facility will be a key requirement in the specification for the new Assembly site.

Traffic Congestion

Brian Gibbons: Has the House Committee given any consideration to staggering the Assembly timetable to alleviate traffic congestion? (WAQ34213)

The Deputy Presiding Officer: This is not a matter for the House Committee. From time to time, a motion proposing an outline timetable of Assembly business is tabled by the Business Minister, under Standing Order No. 5.1, having regard to any advice offered by the Business Committee, and is subsequently debated in Plenary.

In accordance with Standing Orders, the Business Minister tables such motions with regard to the family and constituency or electoral region responsibilities of Members and their likely travel arrangements and seeks to avoid timetabling business before 9.00 a.m. or after 5.30 p.m. on any working day.

Assembly Members' Allowances

Nick Bourne: When will the National Assembly publish full details of how much Assembly Members claimed each year in allowances? (WAQ34577)

The Deputy Presiding Officer: At its meeting on 18 March, the House Committee agreed that details of Members' allowances should form part of the House Committee's annual report, which will be published later this year.

06/05/2004

Discussions with the Information Commissioner (Assembly Members' Allowances)

Nick Bourne: What discussions have taken place with the information commissioner regarding the publication of Assembly Members' allowances? (WAQ34578)

John Marek: Officials of the Assembly Parliamentary Service and I have met the Assistant Information Commissioner for Wales and officials of the information commissioner's office to discuss this matter.