

ENVIRONMENT, PLANNING AND TRANSPORT COMMITTEE

Date: Wednesday 29 November 2000
Time: 12.30 to 4.00 pm
Title: **REPORT BY MINISTER FOR ENVIRONMENT**

ENVIRONMENT

Flooding in North Wales

We are keeping in regular contact with the main affected local authorities. I have written to LAs in Wales making it clear that if there are issues where either the Assembly or central government can play a role during the recovery phase then they should contact us. I have also encouraged LAs to establish co-ordinated recovery arrangements which many of them clearly are doing in line with recent guidance from the Home Office. We are maintaining contact too with the UK Government led task force which is focusing on the recovery phase, and officials are regularly attending meetings of the group.

We will need to take stock not just of our approach to providing flood defence but also how we respond to such incidents. I say that without in any way suggesting that the response from those who are working extremely hard in the affected communities have been doing anything other than an extremely effective job. The issue has been put on the agenda of the Partnership Council which is to meet next month.

We shall be bringing forward shortly proposals on additional expenditure and on how we take forward reviews on flood defence arrangements that I have referred to in plenary sessions.

Packaging Waste

Following consultations across GB in May and August, DETR - in line with its responsibilities for ensuring EC obligations are met - is introducing amendments to the 1997 Packaging Waste Regulations on an England and Wales basis. These are to increase recovery and recycling targets for obligated businesses which will enable the UK to attain the recovery and recycling targets in the EC Directive on Packaging and Packaging Waste, and to introduce from 1

January 2001 one flat registration fee per year of £460 for members of compliance schemes.

Contaminated land

I have written to all members of the Committee, as part of a wider consultation on new Regulations and Statutory Guidance on the management and remediation of contaminated land. The Regulations will clarify responsibilities for remediating contaminated land to avoid harm to the environment or to human beings. The consultation period will last until 16 February. Following that I will seek the Assembly's approval to implementing the new Regulations.

Water Bill

I met the Environment Agency Wales on 23 November for a regular quarterly meeting.

PLANNING

Effect of Human Rights Act on Planning System

There are legal judgements imminent that will help to clarify the requirements of the planning system with regard to the Human Rights Act. We will need to take account of the judgements in due course. In the meantime, I am pressing on with a review of planning procedures and will put proposals for change before the Committee shortly.

Marine Aggregates

Assembly Members and representatives of local authorities have received a presentation on 4 years of research in the Bristol Channel looking at marine aggregate resources and the constraints on their removal. The study is a welcome and significant contribution to a complex issue, and provides us with a unique and comprehensive set of data and information.

We will develop a policy framework on the back of this work, adopting an open and inclusive process - the culmination of which will be a consultation draft off-shore "development plan", which I hope to have ready before the Spring of 2001.

Slate Waste research project

We have recently let a research project to investigate the potential use of slate waste in Gwynedd as a source of secondary aggregate. This is in line with our sustainable development obligations and is consistent with our draft Minerals Planning Policy for Wales. Work will commence on 1st December and be completed by the summer of 2001. The results will be disseminated widely.

TRANSPORT

Rail Franchise Bidders

ARRIVA plc and Connex Transport UK Limited announced on 10th November that they are bidding jointly for the Wales and Borders franchise, and also for the Thameslink franchise. The two companies will continue to bid separately for other franchises including Trans-Pennine Express. This proposal has been discussed with the shadow Strategic Rail Authority (sSRA), which has given its approval to the joint arrangement, and which informed the Assembly of this change.

GB Rail has informed the Stock Exchange of expected cash flow problems. We understand that this results from loss of revenue following the disruption to the operations of its Anglia franchise due to the National Track Recovery programme and severe weather. The company has not yet been able to take account of the compensation, which may come from Railtrack. We understand from the sSRA that they have indicated their continuing commitment to the Wales and Borders franchise exercise. The sSRA require all bidders to provide information as to their latest financial standing and to indicate how they propose to source the funding they require to deliver their proposals, so will continue to keep this under review.

Assembly officials have now met all franchise prequalifiers, with the exception of VIA GTI, who have not approached either us or the sSRA.

Noise Payments to Mobile Homes Affected by Road Schemes

On 23rd November new regulations came into force in England to enable payments to be made by highway authorities to the owners of movable homes, caravans and houseboats, who are affected by noise from new or altered highways. The Welsh statutory instrument is in the final stages of preparation and should be introduced early in the New Year.

Sue Essex

Minister for Environment