



**Cynulliad Cenedlaethol Cymru
The National Assembly for Wales**

**Y Pwyllgor Deisebau
The Petitions Committee**

**Dydd Llun, 1 Chwefror 2010
Monday, 1 February 2010**

Cynnwys
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Cofnodir y trafodion hyn yn yr iaith y llefarwyd hwy ynndi yn y pwyllgor. Yn ogystal, cynhwysir cyfieithiad Saesneg o gyfraniadau yn y Gymraeg. Mae hon yn fersiwn ddrafft o'r cofnod. Cyhoeddir fersiwn derfynol ymhen pum diwrnod gwaith.

These proceedings are reported in the language in which they were spoken in the committee. In addition, an English translation of Welsh speeches is included. This is a draft version of the record. The final version will be published within five working days.

Aelodau'r pwyllgor yn bresennol
Committee members in attendance

Christine Chapman	Llafur (Cadeirydd y Pwyllgor) Labour (Committee Chair)
Andrew R.T. Davies	Ceidwadwyr Cymreig Welsh Conservatives
Michael German	Democratiaid Rhyddfrydol Cymru Welsh Liberal Democrats
Janet Ryder	Plaid Cymru (yn dirprwyo ar ran Bethan Jenkins) The Party of Wales (substitute for Bethan Jenkins)

Eraill yn bresennol
Others in attendance

Carrie Harper	Cyngor Pobl Gogledd Cymru People's Council for North Wales
Marc Jones	Cyngor Pobl Gogledd Cymru People's Council for North Wales
Denis Knowles	Cadeirydd, Cynghair Mersi a'r Ddyfrdwy Chair, Mersey Dee Alliance
Trefor Owen	Cyfarwyddwr, Comisiwn Coedwigaeth Cymru Director, Forestry Commission Wales
Aled Roberts	Cynghair Mersi a'r Ddyfrdwy Mersey Dee Alliance
Tony Sharps	Is-gadeirydd, Cynghair Mersi a'r Ddyfrdwy Vice-chair, Mersey Dee Alliance
Pol Wong	Cyngor Pobl Gogledd Cymru People's Council for North Wales

Swyddogion Cynulliad Cenedlaethol Cymru yn bresennol
National Assembly for Wales officials in attendance

Joanest Jackson	Cynghorydd Cyfreithiol Legal Adviser
Andrew Minnis	Dirprwy Glerc Deputy Clerk
Naomi Stocks	Clerc Clerk

Cynhaliwyd y cyfarfod yng Nghanolfan Catrin Finch, Prifysgol Glyndŵr, Wrexham.
The meeting was held in the Catrin Finch Centre, Glyndŵr University, Wrexham.

Dechreuodd y cyfarfod am 9.33 a.m.
The meeting began at 9.33 a.m.

Cyflwyniad, Ymddiheuriadau a Dirprwyon
Introduction, Apologies and Substitutions

[1] **Christine Chapman:** Good morning. I am Christine Chapman, the Chair of the National Assembly for Wales Petitions Committee. I welcome everyone to the meeting. Participants are welcome to speak in Welsh or English. As you can see, headsets are available for translation and amplification of the sound. I remind everyone to switch off mobile phones. If the fire alarms sound, the ushers will tell everyone what to do and, if necessary, will direct

you to the fire exits.

[2] We have received apologies for absence from Bethan Jenkins. Janet Ryder is here as a substitute.

[3] **Janet Ryder:** At this point, I would like to declare an interest in the first item for debate on the petition about the sub-regional plan. I am very well acquainted with a number of members of the campaign group. Although I am not a member of that group, I have worked with it in the past. Also, one of the people giving evidence today is in my employ.

[4] **Christine Chapman:** Okay. Thank you, Janet.

9.34 a.m.

Sesiwn Dystiolaeth: P-03-243 Tynnu'n Ôl Yn Ffurfiol o Strategaeth Is-ranbarthol Gorllewin Caer/Gogledd-Ddwyrain Cymru
Evidence Session: P-03-243 Withdraw From the West Cheshire/North-East Wales Sub-regional Strategy

[5] **Christine Chapman:** For our first item, I welcome Cyngor Pobl Gogledd Cymru. I welcome Mr Pol Wong, councillor Carrie Harper and Mr Marc Jones. We have read your petition and your papers, and I would like you to present your evidence. You have up to 15 minutes in which to do that, and it is up to you to decide who speaks on this. However, I would like to hear the evidence. Thank you.

[6] **Mr Jones:** I will kick off, and then we will go from there. I am here as a Wrexham councillor and someone who believes that the Assembly should represent the whole of Wales. What concerns me most about this sub-regional plan is that, although it is non-statutory, it underpins a great deal of official thinking that is statutory. For example, housing projections in the sub-regional strategy feed into the Wales spatial plan for north-east Wales. This spatial plan for this part of Wales is the only one that includes a part of England. This is at a time when councils in north Wales are being asked by the Welsh Assembly Government to work more closely and strategically across north Wales. Having the west Cheshire sub-regional strategy pulling us in another direction is a recipe for disaster and impacts directly on Welsh Assembly Government policies.

[7] The Welsh Assembly Government is committed to developing north-south transport links within Wales, whereas this strategy explicitly promotes west-east links. Given that the strategy underpins the spatial plan, it also undermines the Welsh Assembly Government's aims. When we asked for concrete examples of how the strategy works, we were told that an improved rail link from Wrexham to Deeside would help the local economy and improve job prospects for people living in those areas. I agree that that is a link that the Welsh Assembly Government could and should identify as a priority, rather than wait for the bigger and costlier Wrexham-to-Bidston project.

[8] Some of the reactions to the proposals to abandon the sub-regional strategy have been emotional in the extreme. We have been accused of wanting to brick-up the A483. On a personal level, my mother grew up in Liverpool and I am an Everton fan, therefore, like many people, I have my own cross-border links already. Therefore, I do not want the A483 bricked-up at the border, but, equally, I want the future of north-east Wales, in respect of housing, economic development, transport and the wider issues of environment, society, culture and language, dictated by a strategy that has not been subjected to the same kind of scrutiny that our local development plan has undergone.

[9] This is very much a twentieth-century strategy; it is very corporate and top-down. A plan for north-east Wales in the twenty-first century should be different and based on sustainable communities, protecting the environment and marrying jobs, services and housing to local need. In a wider context, the Welsh Assembly Government has ambitious targets for reducing carbon emissions, but how does a plan promoting a commuter lifestyle link in with that? If you ask local people what they think of their environment, they will say that building commuter estates has not worked in this area. These estates stand apart from existing communities and impose a burden on existing services and infrastructure, particularly on schools and roads. The results are stark: overcrowded classrooms and congested roads. Therefore, if we are looking to build a sustainable economy and cohesive communities, we must question the idea of a strategy based largely on cross-border commuting. The Welsh Assembly Government is in danger of being dragged back by this strategy, when its own plans point in a different direction.

[10] A local housing market assessment was carried out in 2008 that acknowledged the pressures being put on Wrexham, Denbighshire and Flintshire, which make up the core study area mentioned in the following quote. The assessment states:

[11] 'In line with the national market house prices within the Core Study Area have risen exponentially over recent years, the average house price within the area has risen from £74,753 to £155,032 between 2001 and 2006. This has followed wider national trends but has also been driven through market pressures exerted from across the border in particular in relation to the housing market in Chester.'

[12] Those are not my words, but the words of the official local housing market assessment.

[13] Cheshire County Council has been unwilling to build on the green belt surrounding Chester, and, in some way, that is understandable and commendable, because that authority has clear priorities to safeguard and protect what it sees as important. However, as a result, adjoining councils in Wales have had to take on that overspill. Chester is now planning to increase its housing allocation, yet councils in north-east Wales are not seeing a corresponding drop in the number of houses that they are expected to build. Instead, they are expected to maintain the absurd levels of growth that we have seen in recent years. Underpinning that push for growth is this strategy, which explicitly seeks to tie in north-east Wales with the demand for housing land from across the border.

[14] North-east Wales is in a delicate situation, economically and socially. I am passionate about ensuring the best for the area and the people, wherever they are from. By throwing out the existing sub-regional strategy, we can press ahead with a new north-east Wales strategy. There is no problem in identifying the needs of local communities and unashamedly promoting Welsh identity, rather than following this current plan, which blandly states that it is detrimental to the Welsh language and Welsh culture. As I said at the start, I support an Assembly that represents the whole of Wales, and we need the Assembly to show a lead where local councils have failed. So, I urge you to support the petition.

9.40 a.m.

[15] **Ms Harper:** Bore da. Five minutes is not a lot of time in which to go into detail on such a wide-ranging issue. I know that you have received detailed and comprehensive written evidence, so I will try to go over a few of the key issues and concerns about this plan, and possibly some information that you might not have had as yet.

[16] This plan is about development: housing development, economic development and transport links. It is about the creation of a new sub-region encompassing north-east Wales

and north-west England, with its own distinct identity. You can trace the idea for this new sub-region back to something called the ‘Mersey Belt Study’, which was published back in 2002. It recommended the formation of a new sub-region between north-east Wales and north-west England to address, as it says on page 30, paragraph 3.27, ‘future land supply’ issues. It also discusses specific development sites to be located in Wales that could be perceived by investors as a Chester location.

[17] As for the housing to be provided in Wales, you have only to look at the Liverpool city region housing strategy. Paragraph 4.25 lists as a priority the promotion of growth and development in the north-east Wales/west Cheshire sub-region as a key driver for the Liverpool city region. The point that I am illustrating is that the origin of this idea for a sub-region comes from north-west England, and the motivation behind it and, subsequently the west Cheshire/north-east Wales sub-regional strategy, was not to produce any benefits for north-east Wales.

[18] The housing situation in north-east Wales is well documented, and Mark has already referred to some of the independent documents that acknowledge that. Wrexham Council itself says that the town has had

[19] ‘major regeneration...promoting inward migration, resulting in population growth of over three times the Welsh average’.

[20] House prices in recent years have gone through the roof, and there is a crisis in affordable housing because the previously high levels of development have left us with a shortage of land within the settlement limit on which to build—and that is even if there were the will to do it. Wrexham’s planning committee will meet tonight to decide whether to send the new local development plan out to deposit. Even that now acknowledges a damage to Welsh identity because of the levels of development proposed in the west Cheshire plan. It states that the plan’s overall strategy of consolidation is in accordance with the Wales spatial plan and the west Cheshire/north-east Wales sub-regional strategy, but it recognises that an excessive level of population household growth with high levels of in-migration could have a detrimental effect on Welsh language and culture.

[21] How could we end up with excessive population increases and high levels of in-migration? It is because of population projections. These figures are sent from the Welsh Assembly Government to local authorities and are then converted to the housing figures that we see in our local development plans. The problem with these figures is that they are based 50 per cent on past in-migration trends. The other 50 per cent is supposedly based on indigenous need but, unfortunately, key issues such as affordability are not taken into account. What we end up with is local development plans that build thousands of houses that bear no relation to the needs of the county. Instead, they are aimed at attracting in-migration. That is exactly what has happened in north-east Wales. The west Cheshire plan bases its evidence for a sub-region on an artificial housing market. That policy severely disadvantages the local population. Now, it is being used as an evidence base to continue with this type of unsustainable development—and all this is done under the guise of cross-border links.

[22] The plan says that local authorities are responsible for mitigating the damage caused by the high levels of development implemented—damage to Welsh identity and to the environment. All this should be done through the local development plan process. I am on the planning policy panel in Wrexham, which is responsible for the preparation of the upcoming local development plan, and I have raised the issue with the panel, but nobody believed me. They had never even heard of the plan, let alone that they were responsible for mitigating the damage that it would cause. What levels of mitigation do we now have in our local development plan? None.

[23] A key issue raised in the supporting evidence is the erosion of Welsh identity. Is Welsh identity being eroded in north-east Wales? Let us look at the evidence. The labour force survey data looking at Welsh identity clearly show a downward trend. I have some examples from some of the north-east counties. In Flintshire, 43 per cent of people identified with being Welsh in 2001. In 2008, that had gone down to 38 per cent. In Denbighshire, in 2001, 50 per cent of people identified with being Welsh. In 2008, that had gone down to 48 per cent. In Wrexham, in 2001, 67 per cent of people identified with being Welsh, but, in 2008, that had gone down to 61 per cent. So, what are the benefits of this plan? Local people cannot afford the houses, so we know that that is not one of them.

[24] What about the transport improvements? Marc has already mentioned the electrification of the Wrexham to Bidston line. Why does the line need to go to Bidston if the jobs that we need access to are in Deeside, in north Wales? Merseyside council answered that question for us in some of its documents, in which it said that it is to allow access into north Wales for areas of high unemployment in the Wirral. The same development is also listed in the west Cheshire plan in relation to damage to Welsh identity and language. It says that

[25] ‘economic growth may bring with it an influx of national businesses and chain retail services which could dilute existing Welsh culture. Furthermore, patterns of migration and commuting across the English-Welsh border between the principal strategic centres (e.g. Wrexham-Chester improvements, Wrexham-Bidston rail improvements) may also lead to a dilution of Welsh speaking. Increased housing development along North Wales coast may also result in similar effects’.

[26] So, this plan is not about any form of natural migration or cross-border links—we all welcome those; the west Cheshire plan is about building 20,000 houses across north-east Wales that local people cannot afford. It is about economic expansion into Wales because there are land-supply issues in north-west England. It is about transport links, not for the benefit of north-east Wales but for ease of access to development opportunities. This economic plan is purely about economic benefits for north-west England; there are no benefits for north-east Wales.

[27] **Christine Chapman:** Thank you, councillor Harper. Mr Wong, would you like to conclude?

[28] **Mr Wong:** Diolch yn fawr i bawb am ddod i ogledd Cymru heddiw. Rhaid imi ymddiheuro, oherwydd nid oes digon o amser i siarad yn ddwyieithog, felly byddaf yn siarad yn Saesneg yn unig. **Mr Wong:** I thank everyone for coming to north Wales today. I have to apologise, as there is not enough time for me to speak bilingually, and therefore I will be speaking in English only.

[29] Thank you for coming to north Wales, to Wrexham, to hear what we have to say. You will be aware that there is strong feeling here about this plan and its effects. We are talking about a far-reaching concept, which has a massive impact. So, it is difficult to sum it up in a few minutes. We feel that we have already provided comprehensive evidence, and today we have tried to highlight a few of the issues.

[30] Having said that, it is fair to say that everything that we are saying is widely acknowledged—even in the plan itself. The plan itself states that it will damage Welsh identity. We did not make that up; we have just repeated it. It does say that there will be environmental issues. We did not make that up either. Apart from that, many of the things that we have issue with are also widely acknowledged. Carrie has just given some figures about Welsh identity. Without being alarmist—and, again, we are using Assembly figures—in *sir y Fflint*, the fact that the percentage of people who identify themselves as Welsh has gone down to less than 40 per cent is strong evidence that Welsh identity is being eroded. Across the

counties of north-east Wales, we see a similar downward trend. So, that is acknowledged.

[31] As it is such a far-reaching issue and there is so much that needs to be talked about—and we have been looking at this for five or so years, now—we are here today to ask you to help us. Nobody seems to want to listen to us. We are in a position of wanting someone to talk to about this openly and genuinely, without restriction.

9.50 p.m.

[32] **Christine Chapman:** Mr Wong, do you mind if I stop you there? We have had the 15 minutes, and I am sure that we can tease out some of these issues with our questions. We will have a further discussion on that, so thank you for that. I will start with some broad questions, and it is entirely up to you who gives the answers. How did you come to be aware of the strategy and its impact?

[33] **Mr Wong:** It came about because of a development that was happening in Wrexham on National Trust land at Erddig. A new commuter village was being built just up the road in Rhostyllen, and we were trying to work out and understand the reason behind the development and the issues associated with it. It was then that we started looking into this, and we came across the sub-regional strategy as part of that research online.

[34] **Christine Chapman:** How do you feel withdrawal from the strategy would address the concerns that you have raised?

[35] **Mr Wong:** That is a very good question, and we would really like to have time to talk about that. For a start, to say simply that the Assembly and our councils agree that the plan is bad would not really do much. As has been said, the plan is non-statutory, so it is not that important, in a way. However, what is important is that it is in the Wales spatial plan. So, without changing the spatial plan, it would be a waste of time. It has informed and guided our local development plans, so they would need to be adjusted accordingly. Having said that, one thing that we have to talk about is that the people of north Wales feel really let down and abandoned, to a certain extent, by the Assembly because this plan has gone ahead and been implemented. A lot of the damage has already been done. To withdraw from the plan would boost the confidence of the people of north Wales and possibly bring back a bit of trust in the National Assembly or the Welsh Assembly Government. We feel very let down that this has happened.

[36] **Christine Chapman:** Thank you, Mr Wong. I am going to hand over to other Members now, because I know that they are anxious to ask certain questions.

[37] **Andrew R.T. Davies:** Thank you for coming in to give oral evidence today, and thank you in particular for the detailed evidence that you provided in advance. It was very informative of the situation in Wrexham, particularly for me as I come from south Wales. There is quite a bit in the evidence about jurisdiction, and about the rights of individuals and groups in Wales, but, on the other side of the coin, it strikes me that the organisations that oversee and drive the plan forward are all democratic organisations, such as councils and the Welsh Assembly Government. These proposals have not just come into the public domain; they have been around for a considerable time. You mentioned that you have been campaigning on this front for five or six years now. So, if there is this groundswell of opposition to the plan because of the detrimental effect on the local environment as you see it, why are people not speaking through these democratic organisations? Why are you not more successful, shall we say, at the ballot box, which would give you a voice within the organisation to put a stop to this?

[38] **Mr Jones:** You would think that such an important plan would have been openly

discussed and debated, would you not? As a relatively new councillor on Wrexham council, I can say confidently that, of the 52 councillors, the number who knew anything about this was in single figures, despite its supposedly being an open plan. When we raised this at council level, people did not know about it. If councillors do not know about it, how can you expect the ordinary Joe on the street to know about it? That has been the concern. The size of the petition, which included 20,000 names—not an easy task in any field—reflects people's concern that they have been bypassed.

[39] **Andrew R.T. Davies:** We will have the opportunity later to discuss that democratic engagement with other bodies. Taking it on to the next stage, the logical point to make is that you say that it goes against the 'One Wales' agreement of north-south, rather than east-west, development. Again, the figures for delivering that north-south, rather than east-west, development cover the Government's four-year term in Cardiff. Why do you feel so let down by the Welsh Assembly Government, given that there is obviously an obligation on local authorities? Andrew Davies's letter on the spatial plan, when he was up here in Wrexham, talks about working collaboratively and locally to develop that local economic impact and local engine to drive prosperity. You have the two components, have you not? There is the obligation on the local authority to drive prosperity within the local confines, but then you have the national deliverer of the 'One Wales' agreement, which the Welsh Assembly Government is working to at the moment. How do you see those two drivers being reconciled?

[40] **Mr Jones:** I do not think that it is my job to reconcile either of them. What I tried to say in my presentation was that the idea promoted by this strategy—which is very much what is happening in north-east Wales, where, increasingly, commuter estates are being created—is not compatible with the kind of goals that we have, whether it is at Assembly or council level, to promote sustainable and cohesive communities and to protect the environment. If you are basing—as I believe this does—the strategy on a commuter lifestyle and cross-border travel, that does not sit very easily at all with what we are trying to promote as a better Wales or a better north-east Wales.

[41] We have not mentioned Bodelwyddan, which is a classic example of what happens when this policy is implemented. You have a village of 800 houses in which the council is now looking to build 1,700 extra houses. It is, basically, creating a commuter town where there was previously a village. There are no jobs in that area, so people will inevitably have to travel if they are going to work. That, to me, is not joined-up thinking. If governments and councils are about anything, they should be about joined-up thinking, and this is not.

[42] **Janet Ryder:** You have talked about your experience with other councillors in Wrexham County Borough Council. Have you discussed this with councillors in other counties that are affected in this area, and what has their reaction been?

[43] **Ms Harper:** I have spoken to several councillors from Denbighshire. Some of them had heard bits about this plan; they had heard about transport or one aspect of it, but they had no idea of the implications with regard to housing, or certainly any of the information that is outlined in the sustainability appraisal that accompanies this plan on the warnings about the damage to Welsh identity, culture and the environment. It is very similar to the situation that we have in Wrexham. There is a very limited amount of knowledge. To go back to a point that was made earlier, that boils down to the level of consultation on this plan. I read in the response from the Minister, Jane Hutt, that there had been a full public consultation about this plan. I have seen the list of consultees and we need to be clear about what is meant by public consultation. Those consultees included key stakeholders, which included developers, a few environmental agencies and certain people from the local authorities. That consultation was very limited, which reflects the level of knowledge that councillors across the three north-east Wales counties have had about this plan.

[44] **Janet Ryder:** Therefore, is it fair to say that, from what you know, the public and groups representing the public in north-east Wales know nothing about this plan and were not consulted on it, in the way that they are consulted on local authority development plans?

[45] **Ms Harper:** I would say that that is a very accurate description, yes.

[46] **Janet Ryder:** I will go on then. If this plan is rescinded, what would you like to see it replaced with?

10.00 a.m.

[47] **Mr Wong:** Again, it is very difficult to sum up such a big question. What we would like to see is something along the lines of what Mark was describing—sustainable communities. One of the key points in this plan is regeneration. On the surface, regeneration sounds fine; however, unfortunately, that has not meant the regeneration of existing communities, but the creation of commuter belts. That is not sustainable. We would like to see truly sustainable development where local people get improved opportunities and can afford to buy a house in their own communities—that would be nice—and where the identity of the villages right across north-east Wales, and further across north Wales, are protected and not turned into commuter belts, which are bland, lifeless places, or dormitory areas. We would like a place where we can truly not regenerate our communities, but give our communities better opportunities. We were watching *Doctor Who* last night and regeneration to me is exactly that, as shown on the programme; we do not need regeneration, we need opportunities. Regeneration stifles our opportunities, as has been shown so far.

[48] **Janet Ryder:** I accept everything that you have said, but given the close proximity of the border, the close working relationships with industry, and the transport links that already exist, are you saying that you would stop that discussion if this strategy were to be withdrawn, or would you say that something needs to come forward to take its place that would give a different perspective on development?

[49] **Mr Jones:** As I tried to make clear, there are already links. No-one is trying to stop or break those links. The reality is that people do travel back and forth—we are 10 miles from the border and it would be nonsense not to do so—but, equally, people travel back and forth to Shropshire. Shropshire is not part of the MDA. Do we want to expand it to include Shropshire? We manage to cross the border to Shropshire without having a plan or a strategy. I am concerned that we seem to be counterpoising this as all or nothing, because we are not; we are actually saying that people already manage to find their way to work in Chester and this plan will not stop that.

[50] **Christine Chapman:** I am going to take one final question from Mike German. We did have other questions to ask, but I suggest that the clerk writes to you and we would like you to respond to those questions in writing. So, we have one final question from Mike German.

[51] **Michael German:** I am afraid that I have to split it into two, because I need an answer to the first question before I can ask the second one.

[52] This is about social engineering, which you allege is a consequence of this plan. Any guidance given in a plan of this sort, in things like jobs, transport, the economy and housing, is bound to be some sort of social engineering, is it not? It is just that this plan is one that you do not like. Would I be right in saying that a plan of this sort, if it is to exist, is a form of social engineering in the way that you describe it?

[53] **Mr Wong:** I think that it is. You described it very well. When we are talking about those sorts of things, there will always be inadvertent social engineering to an extent. That is true. However, there are a few things that are particularly important: one is that it is a national border, which has been touted, for example, in Denbighshire County Borough Council. It is promoting the border as being invisible, that it does not mean anything and that it is just a line on a piece of paper. That is not really a very respectful thing to say, for a start. It is a national border and I have a list of human rights here in front of me—

[54] **Michael German:** I wanted to ask you, therefore, whether the plan that you have, which you are suggesting, is a form of social engineering in its own right. Yes or no.

[55] **Mr Wong:** I do not want to limit myself to that. At the end of the day, it is a social engineering plan, considering the national border. Of course, there are the aspects of inadvertent social engineering that you are talking about, but here, we are talking about a plan to move a population and change the demography of an area. That is on another level.

[56] **Michael German:** My substantive question is about people who move for jobs. Currently, the number of people who move from the three counties to England for jobs every day is 37,400, while the number of English people who come to these three counties for jobs is 21,900. So, more go out than come in. How would you plan for that?

[57] **Mr Wong:** For a start, let us look at those figures. They are rather misleading. What you see is a balance of outward commuting from north-east Wales to England, and that is exactly what we are talking about. That is exactly the problem.

[58] **Michael German:** I asked how you plan for that.

[59] **Mr Wong:** The point is that there have always been cross-border links, as Marc said. We have always been able to find our way across the border, and we welcome this. We are saying that it is a different kettle of fish when you start to plan to move a population, making this area a dormitory area, which is basically what the plan is. The point is this: we need to get away from this idea that it is economic development. Earlier on, somebody asked what we want. We want the Assembly to focus on us as people, and not us as a part of an economic plan. We want the Assembly to treat us like people, to give us an opportunity to thrive and prosper. However, this kind of development does not give us those chances; it puts us further out of the picture and marginalises us.

[60] **Christine Chapman:** On that point, I thank you for your evidence. Time does not allow us to take any more. I thank you all for attending today's meeting. We will now move to the next witnesses. We are happy for you to sit and listen. We will be considering your evidence. Thank you. [*Applause.*]

10.08 a.m.

**Sesiwn Dystiolaeth: P-03-243 Tynnu'n ôl yn ffurfiol o Strategaeth Is-ranbarthol
Gorllewin Caer/Gogledd-ddwyrain Cymru—Tystiolaeth gan Gynghrair Mersi
a'r Ddyfrdwy**

**Evidence Session: P-03-243 Withdraw from the West Cheshire/North-east Wales
Sub-regional Strategy—Evidence from the Mersey Dee Alliance**

[61] **Christine Chapman:** We invite evidence from the Mersey Dee Alliance, because of its role in implementing the sub-regional study. I welcome its representatives: councillor Dennis Knowles, MDA chairperson; councillor Tony Sharps, MDA vice-chairperson; and councillor Aled Roberts, MDA board member. Welcome to this meeting of the Petitions

Committee. You have not provided a paper for this meeting, so please present us with your views on this matter.

[62] **Mr Knowles:** Thank you. As you have already stated, I am councillor Denis Knowles, and I am the recently elected chairperson of the Mersey Dee Alliance, and I am very pleased to provide a short statement to committee. We will be talking about the MDA and the north-east Wales/west Cheshire sub-regional spatial strategy.

[63] The Mersey Dee Alliance is a partnership that was officially reconstituted in April 2007, building on work undertaken by former partnerships, which included the production of the strategy. The MDA is led by the local authorities of Flintshire, Wrexham, Denbighshire, Wirral, and Cheshire West and Chester, the Welsh Assembly Government, the Northwest Regional Development Agency, and Merseytravel. The MDA is bound by the terms of its former partnership agreement, and it is administered by Cheshire West and Chester Council as the accountable body. The MDA's governance structure has a board that includes elected members from each authority, and a strategy group of key officers who are supported, as appropriate, by a number of task and finish groups.

[64] Cross-border working in north-east Wales, west Cheshire and Wirral is about sharing information and improving communication between the key agencies in order to provide seamless services, continuing economic prosperity and wellbeing for the area's people, be they in north Wales or in north-west England, as well as for businesses and communities. This has no implications whatsoever for the border or territorial integrity of England or Wales.

10.10 a.m.

[65] This north-east Wales/west Cheshire border area is unique along the Welsh-English border, being made up of relatively densely populated urban communities. The Wales spatial plan recognises that Deeside and Wrexham are the drivers of prosperity in north-east Wales, and outlines an approach to working with neighbouring areas to ensure continuing sustainable economic development. The Mersey Dee Alliance and the sub-regional spatial strategy provide a framework within which this can be achieved without compromising the individual partners' territorial integrity, statutory obligations and provisions, including the case of the Welsh Assembly Government in its 'One Wales' priorities.

[66] Our strategy was produced jointly by the local authorities of Denbighshire, Wrexham, Flintshire, and Ellesmere Port, Neston and Chester, which is now Cheshire West and Chester Council, as well as other key partners, in response to a collective recognition of the area as a key social economic sub-region, where people regularly cross the border in both directions for jobs, services, leisure and retail. The study was completed independently in 2004, and provided numerous statistics that recognised these patterns. The production of the strategy was the first major step forward in agreeing a broad common vision to support the ways in which people live their lives in this area. The points addressed in the strategy include supporting the strategic hubs of Wrexham, Deeside and Chester, enhancing links between the areas of opportunity and the needs of the area, focusing on areas in need of regeneration, promoting sustainable development, identifying potential scales and distribution of housing development within the sub-region, up to and including 2021.

[67] The strategy was signed up to by the partner organisations through their own democratic processes in 2006. It won a Royal Town Planning Institute award, and it provides a sound basis for the update of the Wales spatial plan, and, in England, the north-west regional spatial strategy. It was through that strategy that housing pressures in the area were recognised, which led to increased housing allocations for west Cheshire within the north-west regional spatial strategy.

[68] It has been recognised that 83 per cent of all journeys begin and end within the core cross-border area, and, for major industries and global companies, such as Vauxhall, Toyota, Airbus UK, and Bank of America, the workforce is split across this cross-border area. Commuting is a proxy measure for the integration of the economies on both sides of the border. There are high levels of commuting in both directions, and there is a net outflow of commuters from Wrexham, Flintshire and Denbighshire across the border. WAG has provided statistics on commuting in Wales in 2008.

[69] In Wrexham, as our friend Mr German mentioned before, 11,300 residents commute across the border each day, with 7,800 commuters travelling across the border to Wrexham, with a net outflow of 3,500. The figures are similar in Flintshire—20,700 residents commute across the border each day, while 13,400 commuters travel across the border to Flintshire, which is a net outflow of 7,300. In Denbighshire, 3,400 residents commute across the border each day, while 700 commuters travel into Denbighshire, which is a net outflow of 2,700.

[70] The strategy is non-statutory, as has already been mentioned, and is regarded as one of a large number of sources of evidence in the preparation of the local development plans by local authorities in north-east Wales. The strategy cannot be adopted, as it has no formal status. It was approved and agreed by the Cabinets of each of the local authorities and other partner organisations.

[71] As planning is a devolved competence, all planning decisions are taken by local authorities within the context of planning policy issued by the Welsh Assembly Government. As we are discussing matters in relation to Wales, the evidence we are giving relates purely to Wales. All local development plans are and will be subject to examination in public.

[72] Planning authorities are bound to adopt the independent inspector's recommendations. A key test of soundness is that land use has regard to other relevant plans, policies and strategies relating to the area or to adjoining areas. All local development plans will be subject to that test and it will have to be demonstrated to an inspector so that they are satisfied that this will be the case for Wrexham and Flintshire with regard to English authorities, thus, joint working will be central. That does not imply a joint plan or an administrative takeover.

[73] In Wales, the local development plan process includes several stages of public consultation, including the publication of a community involvement scheme, which proposes how the council will engage stakeholders in preparing, reviewing and amending the local development plan. Public consultation of the pre-deposition and the deposition stages and examination in public are highly important.

[74] The strategy and the Wales spatial plan updates both underwent public consultation. The strategy underwent a full public consultation process, including Welsh Assembly Government officials. I have been informed by the Welsh Assembly Government that the 2008 update of the Wales spatial plan was subject to a 12-week public consultation, which included a number of events across Wales that over 800 people attended. The official position of housing policy in Wales can be found in the planning policy for Wales 2002, ministerial interim planning policy and the technical advice notes. These include advice on housing and affordable housing provision; relationships with official population projections; local housing market assessments and affordable housing delivery statements; as well as advice on the sustainability of the Welsh language; conserving landscape and heritage; and maintaining the distinctive character of a place.

[75] The housing figures contained in the strategy for the Welsh authorities broadly aligned with the completion rates at the time of writing the strategy, and included a range of 17,000 to 20,000 suggested new homes in the three north-east Wales authorities, between

2006 and 2021. Included in these figures was a non-statutory document that does not compromise the local development plan process at a local level. This is a further piece of evidence that has been tested by a transparent examination that is open to the public. The local development plan places a great emphasis on robust evidence, on making this available as early as possible in the process, and on maximising the ability of participants to comment on the evidence. This applies to the local planning authority, opponents who are critical of the plan and/or suggestions for alternative arrangements.

[76] The petition has criticised the use of population projections in planning strategies. I will now attempt to outline the facts behind the projections. Population projections provide estimates on the size of the future population, based on assumptions about births, deaths and migration. They are not forecasts. They indicate what may happen should recent trends continue. Local authorities are not expected to adhere to these projections in planning services, but the projections provide a consistent basis for assumptions by all local authorities. Local authorities have access to the data and methodologies utilised and are able to redefine specific information. If local authorities have information to suggest alternative levels of provision to those indicated by these projections, that is perfectly acceptable as long as the evidence base to support any deviation is robust and transparent.

[77] **Christine Chapman:** You have a few minutes to conclude.

[78] **Mr Knowles:** Let me finish by saying that the strategy was initially formulated as a road-map looking at economic growth, supported by transport infrastructure improvements, and is adaptable. Collaboration between all stakeholders has always been high on the agenda.

10.20 a.m.

[79] A sense of place, supporting the devolved powers of WAG, is important and the strategy of the Mersey Dee Alliance cannot and will not attempt to change the identity, culture or language issues that the objectors highlight; neither do we support those differences. We need to continue with collaboration and negotiations and move forward together for the benefit, not only of the people of England but also of the people of Wales. The whole idea of the strategy is to bring it in line for the benefit of people in both areas through the technology and knowledge corridor that runs right through the area.

[80] **Christine Chapman:** Thank you for that evidence. I will start with some fairly broad questions. I know that you have covered some of this. Other Members will then want to ask questions. The Wales spatial plan states that the Mersey Dee Alliance will play a key role in delivering the spatial strategy. Can you describe the alliance's role? Also, what do you consider to be the main benefits of the strategy for north-east Wales?

[81] **Mr Roberts:** First, it is important to recognise that the four counties partnership was in place even before the Wales spatial strategy existed, which involved the counties of Wrexham and Flintshire, together with Ellesmere Port and Neston, Chester and Cheshire. This organisation has developed over the last four years and has mainly concentrated on economic development drivers within the strategy and on transport. I can honestly say that I have been to every meeting apart from one. The only discussion with regard to housing has been an attempt, which was successful, to engage with the English authorities to ask them to assume greater responsibility with regard to housing development within the area. That has led to a situation where the housing allocations within the area covered by Cheshire West and Chester Council will increase by 23 per cent in the new plan.

[82] It is also important to say that, as far as I am concerned—and I am sure that Tony will say similarly from Flintshire's point of view—and as far as the main criticism of the plan on housing projections and housing allocations on this side of the border is concerned, although

we have regard to housing need within the area, that will be a decision that is taken locally. It was not outlined to you during the presentation that, in Wrexham, for example, the steer given to planning officers in 2006, which was around the same time as the alliance was created, was that the level of development within the unitary development plan period was not sustainable. Accordingly the plan has been developed looking at housing development dropping from 11,000 homes, which were allowed during the UDP period, to 6,300 homes. We will have an interesting debate tonight, because an amendment is being suggested to the planning committee this evening that would allow the development of 8,000 homes during the planning period. The reason for that is because we have increased the need for local affordable housing within the plan. The reason why the plan is looking to increase from 6,300 to 8,000 homes is because, within the 6,300 confines, we would be unable to deliver the 2,000 affordable homes during the period of the plan. Therefore, as far as I am concerned, the main drivers remain local in respect of housing development.

[83] **Michael German:** The two principal criticisms laid against the plan are, first, that the implications of a no-border strategy is that it will lead to a lack of local identity—and in this case, Welsh culture has been raised—and your sustainability appraisal warns of that. The second one is about the level of consultation and taking people with you on the overall plan. How would you answer both of those criticisms?

[84] **Mr Sharps:** I am quite amazed why we are here. I am a Welshman and I am proud to be a Welshman. I have two sons and two grandchildren who are fluent in Welsh. I have no problem with living in Wales or with Welsh or English people.

[85] This is the first inquiry that I have ever attended, so I am not sure what I am supposed to say and what I am not supposed to say. So, what I will say is what I firmly believe in, which is that industry knows no boundaries. I say that because of what we went through in Flintshire, with the biggest steel closure in Europe, followed by the closure of the Courtaulds works, and the deprivation, the suicides and everything else that went with that. So, I have a deep passion for attracting industry into Flintshire and to north Wales as a whole, and into England for that matter because I have many friends living in England. That is why I say that industry knows no boundaries. Another old saying is that parochialism is the enemy of prosperity. However, Mr German's question seemed to come back to the unitary development plan and to housing. If I knew that that question was going to be asked, and if I had read my notes properly, I would have been able to give you an exact figure on the number of consultation responses, but I believe that we had between 15,000 and 17,000 on our UDP. A few were in favour and a few were strongly against, and some builders who responded were in competition with other builders. So, there was a good cross-section of answers to the UDP.

[86] We are now ready to start our local development plan, and, with a bit of luck, it will be accepted in a fortnight's time. However, going back to what has been said for many years, there is a need to ensure affordable homes and homes for first-time buyers. This has been on the political agenda for years in Wales, but no-one has picked it up with a strong political will. I am pleased to say that Flintshire now has a strong political will to pick it up and we will strive to get these kids a home, either in the rented sector or in the new system for starter homes that we are introducing, which Sue Essex knows all about, under which people will be able to buy their homes cheaply and return life to local rural villages. Our villages are dying because of their lack of population, and we are closing rural schools. This cannot be allowed to happen, otherwise rural areas will die and, as a consequence, the Welsh language will die.

[87] **Christine Chapman:** Mike, is there another part to your question?

[88] **Michael German:** I think that councillor Roberts indicated that he wanted to speak.

[89] **Mr Roberts:** I want to deal with the loss of Welsh identity and the lack of

consultation. The loss of Welsh identity has not become an issue since the inception of the spatial strategy or, in fact, since the development of the Mersey Dee Alliance. The loss of Welsh identity in this area has been an issue for the past century or so. The decline of the Welsh language, certainly in the urban villages around Wrexham, has been a cause of some concern. To talk of migration as being the reason for that decline is to simplify the issue. My community, which is still 47 per cent Welsh speaking, has relatively little inward migration, but, in reality, a large percentage of the past two generations decided not to bring up their children to be bilingual. Hopefully, because of the strategies that the Assembly has in place, which are supported by the local authorities, that tide will start to turn. So, it is not a new issue for us here on the border; we have faced it for very many years.

[90] The need to strengthen strategies was identified in the local development plan. The local development plan in this area for the first time requires language assessments on all development over a certain threshold in any of the villages that currently have a larger percentage of Welsh speakers than the national average of some 20 per cent.

10.30 a.m.

[91] I will now turn to the issue of consultation. Consultation does not mean that a public body will adopt a strategy, or that every individual will understand it. That may be a deficiency in our democratic system. The reality is that the plan was debated in open session at the executive board, was placed before the council before the last election and, subsequently, a motion was put before one of our scrutiny committees proposing that Wrexham withdraw from the Mersey Dee Alliance. That proposal was supported by only one member of the scrutiny committee. The reality is that, although there are concerns, which I have identified, the democratic will of the councillors in Wrexham at the moment is to use those concerns to develop policies that will allow us to develop sustainable communities in Wrexham. Given the cross-border economic drivers, that means close working with authorities on the English side.

[92] **Christine Chapman:** We only have about five minutes left, and there are a few more questions, so I ask Members and witnesses to be concise so that we can cover as much ground as possible.

[93] **Janet Ryder:** The Mersey Dee Alliance states that one of its aims is to ensure closer collaboration that will bring forward the most appropriate sites for development based on their merits, rather than having regard to administrative boundaries and local allocation targets. That does not square with the answers that you have given today, telling us that local allocations would be the main driver. Do you adhere to what the Mersey Dee Alliance says or to the local targets? There would seem to be a conflict there.

[94] **Mr Roberts:** I will answer because this involves the Welsh side rather than the English. It is certainly the local targets as far as we are concerned. A 20,000 target for Welsh authorities has been mentioned within the 37,000 target for the MDA area. There has been no discussion whatsoever with regard to the allocation of targets across the area, and, as far as I am concerned, I have not had any discussions with either Flintshire or Denbighshire regarding the mix that we have. We had a debate in Wrexham at the commencement of the local development plan, but that was around the strategy that we were looking at—whether we went for the strategy that Denbighshire has adopted, which was a concentration of new builds in one area, or whether we looked for dispersal. Our dispersal policy means that, in effect, all our development will be on brownfield sites, apart from rural exception sites in the green barrier.

[95] **Janet Ryder:** Given that answer, why are you still signed up to an alliance that aims to override local targets?

[96] **Mr Roberts:** I am committed to the alliance because it is the main driver as far as both transport and economic development investment is concerned. If you look at the Wrexham-Bidston line, for example, whereas it was suggested that—*[Interruption.]*

[97] I am answering the question, actually. Just because you do not like the answer—

[98] **Christine Chapman:** Please address the committee.

[99] **Mr Roberts:** If you look at the suggestion that we could ask the Assembly Government to invest in the line from Wrexham to Deeside, the problem that we have is that Network Rail is suggesting that the investment goes in the line from Bidston to Deeside. It is as part of the alliance that we, as six authorities together, press the Welsh Assembly Government to provide investment on both sides of the border rather than one. That is the main driver as far as the alliance is concerned.

[100] **Janet Ryder:** Are you saying that you expect the Assembly Government to invest over the border?

[101] **Mr Roberts:** No. I expect the Assembly Government to work jointly with the English part of Network Rail to ensure that the whole line is developed rather than half of the line.

[102] **Janet Ryder:** Would that not be happening with the dualling of the line between Wrexham and Chester? Which would be your priority?

[103] **Mr Roberts:** On the dualling of the line between Wrexham and Chester, until the Minister received representations from the Mersey Dee Alliance and the three authorities on the Welsh side of the border as part of that alliance, there were no plans to provide any investment. I am sure that if you look at correspondence between the authorities and the Welsh Assembly Government, you would find that to be the case.

[104] **Christine Chapman:** We have one minute left, and I will give the final question to Andrew R.T. Davies. Again, there may be further questions, therefore we will ask the clerk to write to you with those, and we would be grateful if you could respond in writing.

[105] **Andrew R.T. Davies:** Thank you for your evidence and the oral presentation this morning. Obviously, we have received evidence from two sides. From the point of view of someone coming to this afresh, the evidence seems to indicate that there is a drive for residential housing development rather than a mix of development that would keep people in their communities through employment as well as because they live in the area. Bear in mind the comments of the previous Minister with responsibility for the spatial plan, Andrew Davies, that this is a long-term objective and that it needs to be reviewed on an ongoing basis. Given the concerns that we have heard, and which I am sure you, as elected members, hear regularly, how do you constantly monitor, and perhaps change and develop the plan to allow for these tensions that develop over time because of a feeling that the plan is going too far one way, towards residential development, meaning that, as the figures bear out, people commute out of the area for employment opportunities and then back in? Surely, that is not a sustainable mix of economic development.

[106] **Mr Sharps:** We go out to consultation. I cannot remember what the exact number of people we consulted on this was. It was either 15,000 or 17,000, but I can let you know later. We listen to what the people in our towns and villages say they want. They want good hospitals, good shopping and so on, nice housing and housing that is suitable for children and so on. We consult on all those issues. We also consult our industrialists and, at the moment,

Mr Davies, they are complaining in our part of Wales. I do not know whether Wrexham and Merseyside councils are getting the same complaints as us, but they are complaining that there are not enough workers to go around. Things are really taking off, particularly in our area. Brian Fleet of Airbus is constantly moaning that he cannot get enough staff. He employs about 13,000 people at the moment, and he still cannot get enough staff, and he is only one employer. I have a list here of other employers that are crying out for good technical labour. How are we going to get it?

[107] **Andrew R.T. Davies:** Thank you. You have answered my question to a point. That would indicate to me that the thinking in the plan is to create more residential development because there are not enough people living in the area to meet the need of the communities that you represent. That is what your answer is telling me.

[108] **Mr Sharps:** The quick answer, Mr Davies, is 'yes'. That is what we need to keep the rural areas alive and to keep the economy vibrant.

[109] **Christine Chapman:** Thank you. I am going to draw these questions to a close because of time. We have other items on our agenda. Thank you for attending today. We will now have a short discussion on the evidence given, so I invite you to leave the table now. Thank you for your evidence.

[110] Members have heard the evidence given today. As you know, we have invited the Welsh Assembly Government to come to a future Petitions Committee meeting. We need to clarify the date of that. Do committee members have any views or comments on further action we might need to take?

[111] **Michael German:** There is some information that I think would be of help to us. The question of how far this plan is used in housing terms has been answered, but I think that we could do with some evidence to demonstrate the answers that we have been given, because we do not have any paper evidence before us—just the oral evidence given this morning. I would like to understand more about the cultural identity issue. We received a substantive answer from councillor Roberts, and I would like to understand whether that is shared by the Welsh Assembly Government as well. Perhaps we could write to the Minister responsible to see whether that is also his understanding of the decline in the use of the Welsh language. I know that there is evidence around.

[112] The third area is to understand the link between the plans, the UDP and the LDP, to see whether there is any evidence that the UDP is being used to influence those two key areas of housing and cultural identity. That seems to be at the heart of what we are talking about. There is a genuine question about the way in which consultation is executed. We need some evidence on what that consultation was, whether it was adequate, and whether the people who carried out the consultation think that it could have been done in a better way. In the past we have identified where consultation needs to be improved and could be improved, and as a result we have made recommendations that have been taken up by various bodies and organisations in Wales.

10.40 a.m.

[113] **Christine Chapman:** On the consultation, who do you—

[114] **Michael German:** We have to ask the Mersey Dee Alliance and the Welsh Assembly Government, as they are the ones asking for this to be put into practice. So, we need to ask both.

[115] **Janet Ryder:** It is the democratic deficit that is coming across clearly. Nobody is

sure about the exact status of the plan, and yet the implication is that it is driving a lot of local plans. In order to be fair to people who have raised these questions, we need to do what we can to find out what the status of it is, and how it arrived at that status. We have heard that it has been discussed among executives on councils, but they are small in number, and we have heard that in Wrexham before the previous election it was discussed at a meeting of the whole council. I would like to see what those discussions were, what happened in the other north Wales counties that are signed up to this, to what extent officers who are now developing the local development plans are aware of the strategy, and how far it is colouring their thinking. I am concerned that we seem to be being told two different things. We are being told that there are things that councils are signed up to, and that there is an aim that they will, if necessary, override local targets. Yet we are also being told that they very much take account of their local communities. I want to know to what extent local communities are made aware of the plan and its implications as councillors go out and consult on their LDPs.

[116] **Andrew R.T. Davies:** I concur with my colleagues. The final, very important part of the evidence will be that received from the Minister, Jane Hutt, who has overall responsibility for the spatial plan. The Welsh Assembly Government is a partner body within the organisation, as the papers identify. Therefore, trying to make firm recommendations on the basis of the evidence today would mean that we were trying to do something with the gun only half cocked, as it were. We need to see what the Welsh Assembly Government is putting into it, and the accountability of the local authorities and other public bodies that were involved in amassing this weighty document, which has been around for some time—the paper states that the initial project began in 2001. Interestingly, that is clearly in the devolved era, so people cannot say that a lot of the work was done before devolution. When we get WAG's appraisal and input on this, we will have the whole picture. We will then be able to give firm recommendations on the way in which we believe that this can move forward.

[117] **Christine Chapman:** I concur with Members. We have a meeting with the Minister on 23 February, I believe. Are we trying to clarify that?

[118] **Ms Stocks:** We have not yet had confirmation from the Minister, but we are waiting—

[119] **Christine Chapman:** We will try to arrange that meeting, and, on top of that, we will possibly need to write to other appropriate WAG Ministers and local authorities. The evidence today has been interesting and has given us food for thought. So, thank you.

10.45 a.m.

**Sesiwn Dystiolaeth: P-03-234 Mae ar Gymru Angen Mwy o Goed Brodorol
Evidence Session: P-03-234 Wales Needs More Native Trees**

[120] **Christine Chapman:** The next item is on petition P-03-234, which states that Wales needs native trees.

[121] **Michael German:** It says 'more' native trees—'needs native trees' implies that we do not have any. [*Laughter.*]

[122] **Christine Chapman:** Sorry. It is called 'Wales needs more native trees'.

[123] I welcome Mr Trefor Owen, the director of Forestry Commission Wales. You are invited to speak for up to 15 minutes and then Members will put questions to you.

[124] **Mr Owen:** Thank you very much. As you are aware, we have submitted written evidence, so I will restrict myself, if it is acceptable, to brief introductory remarks. That will

then allow the committee members to put their questions to me.

[125] The Forestry Commission Wales welcomes this petition. It welcomes the Woodland Trust's advocacy for woodland creation in Wales. This is in line with the Welsh Assembly Government's 'Woodlands for Wales' strategy, which was published in March 2009.

[126] The 'Woodlands for Wales' strategy highlights the fact that Welsh woodlands need to become much more diverse and resilient in the future in order to face the challenge of a changing climate. Therefore, much of the evidence that Coed Cadw has presented to the committee is as equally applicable to new mixed productive woodlands as it is to native woodlands.

[127] **Christine Chapman:** I will start with the questions, Mr Owen. First, what monitoring is in place to ensure that the target to plant 1,500 ha will be met by 2012?

[128] **Mr Owen:** The target of 1,500 ha over a three-year period is a target that the Forestry Commission has. It is reviewed on a regular basis through the management board of the Forestry Commission. The management board, in turn, reports to the Forestry Commission Wales national committee. At the end of every year, this particular target is reported against our suite of performance measures and is published in our annual accounts and reports to the National Assembly for Wales.

[129] **Christine Chapman:** In your paper, you note that there is further work to be done on agreeing a longer-term target for woodland cover. What work is needed, and when would you envisage it being completed?

[130] **Mr Owen:** The Welsh Assembly Government deliberately did not set a target for woodland creation at the time of preparing the 'Woodlands for Wales' strategy. That was in recognition of the fact that woodland creation has to be considered within a wider picture of integrated land use and a measured response to a change in climate. I am delighted to say that Forestry Commission Wales is engaged in the scheme design of Glastir, the new agri-environment scheme. That will obviously present new opportunities for woodland creation in Wales. Forestry Commission Wales has also been a part of the Minister's land use and climate change group, which I know will be presenting its evidence and recommendations to the Minister for Environment, Sustainability and Housing and the Minister for Rural Affairs shortly. It will then be a matter for Ministers to decide what target, if any, should be considered for the medium to long term in Wales.

[131] **Michael German:** My question is on the very issue of targets. You will have seen Coed Cadw's position on doubling woodland cover by 2050. Its view is that 2,500 ha are needed per year in order to reach that target. There is an extensive analysis in its paper, which outlines how it reached that figure. Do you agree that, in order to double the amount of woodland cover by 2050, there needs to be 2,500 ha per year, on average, of additional cover in order to meet the target?

[132] **Mr Owen:** Taking a slightly lower baseline than has been presented in Coed Cadw's figures, of around 110,000 ha of native woodland in 1997, we believe that we would need to operate at around 2,700 ha per annum over that period to double the area of native woodland.

[133] **Michael German:** Just to be clear, you are saying that you need more hectares than Coed Cadw states, are you?

[134] **Mr Owen:** Slightly more, yes.

[135] **Michael German:** I am sure that it would not mind.

[136] **Mr Owen:** That is just based on the arithmetic.

[137] **Michael German:** Okay. Do you think that you could start cranking up to 2,700 ha a little earlier?

10.50 a.m.

[138] **Mr Owen:** There is no reason why it would not be possible to pursue the target, as you suggest, a little earlier. As I said earlier, the matter of setting medium to long-term targets, beyond my corporate plan period, is for Ministers to decide. That is also dependent on what I said earlier about incorporating woodland creation into an integrated approach to land use and ensuring that the resource base is available to support that.

[139] **Michael German:** The logic, of course, is that if you keep leaving it until later, then it will be much more difficult to achieve that target. Would you say, therefore, that you will need to crank up the 1,500 ha that you are planning well beyond 2012 so that you know that you will start to meet that target of doubling native woodland?

[140] **Mr Owen:** As I mentioned in the evidence, the doubling figure is a Coed Cadw/Woodland Trust ambition; it is not a Government target at this stage.

[141] **Michael German:** I thought that it was part of the UK habitat action plan. Is that not the case?

[142] **Mr Owen:** The target set in the petition has been set by Coed Cadw. I cannot comment on what it is based on, but there is no medium to long-term target for doubling the area of native woodland in Wales.

[143] **Michael German:** So, it is not a Welsh Assembly Government target.

[144] **Mr Owen:** No.

[145] **Janet Ryder:** Some new woodland is created through the provision of grant aid to farmers, in particular, and the 'Better Woodlands for Wales' scheme is such a grant. What percentage of woodland creation has been the result of the 'Better Woodlands for Wales' scheme?

[146] **Mr Owen:** I cannot give you a precise figure here today, but I will be able to do so through correspondence. However, I can tell you that the proportion of new woodland created as a percentage of the woodlands that have been entered into the 'Better Woodlands for Wales' scheme is relatively low. The majority of woodlands entered into that scheme are existing woodlands.

[147] **Janet Ryder:** Has that been for better husbandry and not for increase in size?

[148] **Mr Owen:** Sorry, I do not understand the question.

[149] **Janet Ryder:** Has that been granted to support a better husbandry of those woodlands and their rejuvenation rather than to increase them in size?

[150] **Mr Owen:** The grant aid has been used to buy, effectively, public benefits from those existing woodlands, whether that is access, opportunities for learning, or biodiversity. Part of that process will involve regenerating those woodlands. So, some woodlands will be felled or thinned and regenerated. The majority of grant aid to date has been spent on, and will be

allocated over the next two to three years to, the management of existing woodlands. A lesser amount is allocated to the creation of new woodlands.

[151] **Andrew R.T. Davies:** Thank you, Trefor, for your evidence this morning and for coming along to speak to us. One thing that constrains an increase in hectareage, which the petition calls for almost straight away, is, I presume, the fact that all the grants are tied up by the rural development plan, which is a seven-year project. In essence, the work that this committee is doing could inform deliberations on the new plan that comes out in 2014. So, if there were to be an acceptance of the principle to greatly increase the hectareage to promote native woodlands, would the Forestry Commission have the capacity to step up to the plate and administer and support those aspirations? If you take the petition at face value, you are talking about a significant increase in activity on the ground to meet its aspiration, are you not?

[152] **Mr Owen:** The Forestry Commission is already engaged, and will be engaged, as part of the core group that will look at the mid-term review of the current rural development plan, which will be a stepping stone, effectively, for preparation for the next rural development plan, as you say, from 2014. By being part of that core group, we will be very well placed to influence the options that will be developed for the next rural development plan, but, again, it will be for Ministers to decide on allocations for priorities in the next rural development plan.

[153] **Andrew R.T. Davies:** Assuming that you continued with your present model, even though the aspiration was to achieve these quite ambitious targets, with the assets that you have available, both human and physical, you would not have the resources to deliver such an increase in the development of activity on the ground—not in providing information to farmers, landowners and local authorities, and monitoring the planting, or in supporting the grant applications. There are a lot of other implications if you step up to the mark and meet this rather large increase in acreage.

[154] **Mr Owen:** There are obviously economies of scale. In some respects, the areas of woodland are not particularly important; it is the number and complexity of the applications that need to be considered. We certainly have the capability and capacity to support a larger programme than we currently have in Forestry Commission Wales—there is no doubt about that—and we would welcome even more applications for Better Woodlands for Wales. In the longer term, we are going to be looking at an integrated approach to land use in Wales and that will allow us to explore opportunities for working with others on the delivery of grant aid, so that we do not have to do it all, so to speak.

[155] **Michael German:** You have led very carefully into my next question, which is about the integration of funding, because clearly that is crucial. Without giving a huge amount of detail, could you tell us who manages the other sources of funding that are not under your direct control that you would want to see integrated? How would you see that working with Glastir and your own funding streams? Where would that decision need to come from in order to get them together?

[156] **Mr Owen:** You have mentioned Glastir and we have touched on it, so I will say no more about it, apart from the fact that I think that it is potentially a very important vehicle for woodland protection and also woodland creation on agricultural land in Wales.

[157] We have to remember that there are a number of environmental non-governmental organisations, such as Coed Cadw, that undertake tree planting currently without Forestry Commission grant aid. We should not forget that. The biggest opportunity beyond the rural development plan, which we have touched on, is something that I mentioned in my paper to the committee, namely forest carbon projects or offsetting, to use a simple term. We believe

that there is significant interest in the corporate social responsibility sector. Private industry, companies and high street shops are looking for verifiable and secure schemes to be able to offset their carbon emissions. The problem at the moment is that there is insufficient confidence in the sector, because there are no verifiable standards to give the corporate sector and their shareholders confidence that any investment will support sustainable woodland management. Forestry Commission Wales, working with our colleagues in England and Scotland, is currently developing a UK code of good practice that will establish verifiable standards and therefore provide confidence for private investment—in other words, not grant aid, but private investment in woodland creation from the market.

[158] **Michael German:** What is the timescale for the production of your verification tool?

[159] **Mr Owen:** The consultation is open currently and will be closing shortly. We will be offering options to Ministers, in the three countries, before the summer.

[160] **Janet Ryder:** May I just take this issue a little further? You are going to develop a carbon emission offsetting tool for tree planting, but it has been said that it will only make a positive contribution to tackling climate change if it is located in the right place. So, has any assessment been made of the amount of suitable land available for planting woodland in Wales that would meet the criteria?

[161] **Mr Owen:** I mentioned earlier that we have been part of the Minister's land use and climate change group. That group has considered types of land that would be suitable for woodland creation.

11.00 a.m.

[162] Dealing with the trade-offs of food security and biodiversity, the immediate areas that spring to mind would include bracken land. I believe that we have over 60,000 ha of bracken-infested land, which is on good soil and producing very little food and limited biodiversity—I will not say 'nil', because there are some biodiversity interests associated with bracken. At the other end of the spectrum are some of our acid grasslands, which require high levels of nitrogen and other inputs to be sustained. There is evidence in Wales that some of that land is struggling to be maintained, perhaps at a high cost. Those sorts of areas offer potential opportunities for woodland creation. Those are two examples.

[163] **Christine Chapman:** Thank you, Mr Owen, for that evidence. I will now invite the Members to have a brief discussion of what further action needs to be taken. Thank you for taking the time to come here today.

11.02 a.m.

Trafod y Dystiolaeth Discussion of Evidence

[164] **Christine Chapman:** I ask Members for their views on further action.

[165] **Andrew R.T. Davies:** Having sat in on the previous evidence-taking session a fortnight ago, there are two or three points that I will bring up. One thing that I would like to understand a bit more is the tax incentives or concessions to public limited companies to plant trees. I am aware that various incentives are in place at the moment, and I can think of plantations in my region that have been planted on that basis. I would like a better understanding of what is currently available, given the evidence that we have heard this morning, that a consultation on expanding that is ongoing.

[166] Secondly, this petition is a piece of work that will, hopefully, inform the rural development plan as it is fermented for the next stage. The seven-year plan currently in place has been approved by the EU and is a piece of work that is unfolding as we speak. The evidence that we have gathered certainly needs to be presented to the Sustainability Committee and then passed on to the ministerial group for its consideration of what we have managed to pull together here to inform the opinion that it might form on any resources required in this regard. In the first piece of evidence that we gathered, there was an issue with the administrative logjam that some felt was in the Better Woodlands scheme that acted as a roadblock to people who wanted to access the scheme.

[167] **Michael German:** We perhaps need a response from the Government on its attitude to the target of doubling of native woodland cover by 2050. Elin's letter to us on 19 October did not mention that, and I suspect that we will concentrate on the first part of the petition—the 2012 area; the next three years. We need to get some sense of that.

[168] On the issue of carbon offsetting, by the summer we will have a verification tool to take to Ministers. I think that we will have to hold on to this petition until such time as that becomes available, so that we can see whether we can scrutinise it or, in fact, we can influence it in some way. It may be that examining whether the proposal for carbon offsetting and the verification tool and the land that it can be used on and all the other issues, either by us or by the Sustainability Committee, would be an appropriate next step in inquiring into this petition.

[169] **Christine Chapman:** Thanks. Do the other Members agree on that point? I see that you do. Janet, do you have anything that you wish to say?

[170] **Janet Ryder:** It is very difficult, having not heard the evidence in the previous session. However, more information is needed before you can take a decision on the areas of land that will be identified, if not already identified. Certainly, I agree with what other people have said about getting further information first.

[171] **Christine Chapman:** Thanks. The action, then, is to seek further information from the appropriate Minister and a briefing from the Members' research service on the point about tax incentives that Andrew made.

[172] **Andrew R.T. Davies:** I would just add something about alerting the Sustainability Committee to the evidence that we have gathered. It might well decide to hold a short inquiry into it, because it periodically looks at the rural development plan and how it is developing. This could be a piece of work to which it would give consideration.

[173] **Christine Chapman:** Thanks; that is great.

11.05 a.m.

Deiseb Newydd New Petition

[174] **Christine Chapman:** This is petition P-03-276, Motion for Women from Sustrans. You have had the petition from Sustrans regarding women's safety while cycling. What are your views on further action?

[175] **Michael German:** Normally, we would see the Minister's response before we proceeded, and we may subsequently want to see Sustrans. I think that we should wait until we have received the Minister's response.

[176] **Christine Chapman:** Is everyone happy with that? I see that you are.

11.06 a.m.

Y Wybodaeth Ddiweddaraf am Ddeisebau Blaenorol Updates to Previous Petitions

[177] **Christine Chapman:** The first update is on petition P-03-092 on the A465 relief road to Tafarnaubach. What further action needs to be taken on this petition?

[178] **Michael German:** We have engaged in a whole lot of correspondence in this regard, and in the last letter—which is the one that tells us what is going to happen—the Deputy First Minister says that he has passed it on to Blaenau Gwent County Borough Council but has not heard from it about what it proposes to do. Can we take on board what the Deputy First Minister said to us, and also look at Safe Routes in Communities funding, which is another source from where they can get the funding to implement one of the various proposals which has been put to them by Assembly officials?

[179] **Andrew R.T. Davies:** I concur with that. The committee undertook quite a bit of work on this, including a site visit. At that juncture, we felt as if we were ping-ponging between the council and the Welsh Assembly Government, so a revision of what is going on is timely.

[180] **Christine Chapman:** The second update is on petition P-03-099 on the multi-user pathway at Talybont-on-Usk. What are your views?

[181] **Andrew R.T. Davies:** This petition has been with us for quite some time, and it has been considered in various project board reports that have been passed to Ministers. I note the Minister's observation in the letter of 4 January that it has been put back in the pot for consideration; that will be available to the Minister by early March for his decision on whether it is applicable for funding. So, I suggest that we ask the Minister to inform us of his deliberations, particularly on whether there has been any criteria change in this consideration over previous considerations, so that we can liaise with the petitioners and inform them of the decision.

[182] **Michael German:** Can we have a copy of the multi-user pathway report as well from the Minister?

[183] **Christine Chapman:** Okay. The next update is on petition P-03-172 on restoring the Swansea-Cork ferry. Are there any views on that?

[184] **Michael German:** We have received assurances that the service will start on 1 March. The Deputy First Minister has identified the level of the funding gap, and we are hopeful that the service will begin. However, these things have a habit of falling at the very last hurdle when all the pieces of the jigsaw are in place. The Deputy First Minister held meetings over the Christmas period, so can we ask him how his meetings with the Irish Prime Minister, Visit Wales and Fáilte Ireland went? We should also ask a further question about the funding gap, which is about £0.5 million—considerably smaller than where it started.

[185] **Andrew R.T. Davies:** The Deputy First Minister's letter of 12 January indicates all the meetings that took place before Christmas. One would have hoped that, if the ministerial letter was written in the middle of January, it would have given us the information about the meetings. The letter clearly states that these meetings have taken place, so I think that there has been a bit of slippage in the correspondence. We would have been far better informed on this petition if this letter had been more up to date, given that the meetings had supposedly

already taken place.

11.10 a.m.

[186] **Christine Chapman:** Okay, we will note that. The next petition is P-03-187, on abolishing the Severn bridge tolls.

[187] **Michael German:** Before we close the petition, there is one further step we could take. This has been the subject of a debate and discussion in the National Assembly. It was made clear in the debate that we now have until 2016 to come up with a position in the National Assembly for Wales on whether tolls should be abolished. Whether one should wait until 2015 to decide is another matter, but it would be useful to know whether the Minister believes that it is timely to start the discussions now on the advantages and disadvantages of having no tolls on the Severn bridges. If there were to be no tolls, the decision would have to be backed up by an evidence base, and I do not know whether the Minister believes that now is the time to start gathering the sort of evidence necessary so that, when the change comes, as his letter indicates, we will be ready to argue that matter with the Government in London. No-one could give me an answer in the debate, although the Minister was not present at the time, but it is my view that if you are going to mount an argument, you need to start getting your information upfront and quickly. So, I think that we could usefully ask the Minister that.

[188] **Andrew R.T. Davies:** I concur with the point about having an evidence base. The sting in the tail in the Minister's letter of 14 January is the information that the Act allows the Highways Agency to continue levying a toll for a further five years, I presume to establish a form of endowment fund for the future maintenance of the two Severn bridges. That could be critical. Would such tolls be levied at the same rate as they are at the moment? They are currently set at a level that will pay off the capital cost of the bridge build. Would a maintenance budget require such high tolls? Could it be decided within those five years to levy the toll for only two or three years more? This is a big drag on the south Wales economy, and I think that people would welcome a clear understanding of the degree of negotiation that would be possible on that. Above all, we need to know about those five years. We are looking at 2016, but there is a further five-year period during which we could have to pay tolls in order to create some sort of future maintenance fund.

[189] **Michael German:** To put it in context, the bridges collect roughly £70 million per year in tolls, and the maintenance cost is about £3 million per year.

[190] **Christine Chapman:** Janet, are you also happy for us to write to the Minister about some of these points?

[191] **Janet Ryder:** Yes.

[192] **Christine Chapman:** The next petition is P-03-189 on the Paul Sartori Foundation. What are Members' views?

[193] **Andrew R.T. Davies:** I think that the letter that we had from the foundation indicates that there has been movement on the funding stream, and I think that it is therefore appropriate to close the petition. If I am not reading too much into the letter, the petitions process has brought about a satisfactory answer.

[194] **Christine Chapman:** I see that Members are in agreement. The next petition is P-03-204 on public accountability and consultation in higher education.

[195] **Michael German:** Chair, we have received a very detailed response from the petitioner to the Minister's response. It is so detailed that it would now be useful to have the

Minister's response to the petitioner's response.

[196] **Christine Chapman:** I see that Members are happy with that. The next petition is P-03-217 on Saturday opening at the National Library of Wales.

[197] **Michael German:** Once again, the petition is beginning to have an effect. We just need to know from the Minister when the library will start opening on Saturdays and whether all or only some of its doors will be open—what the level of service will be.

[198] **Christine Chapman:** I see that we are all agreed. The next one is P-03-219 on pharmacies in Barry. Are there any views on this?

[199] **Andrew R.T. Davies:** The Minister has sent a letter identifying the task and finish group that she has set up to look into this. Obviously, there are clear regulations governing pharmacies and pharmacy network development. In her previous correspondence, the Minister highlighted certain dates by which reports would be arriving with her and the task and finish group would be pulling its work together. Perhaps it would now be possible for the Minister to share with the Petitions Committee the evidence and information and, it is to be hoped, the decision that she has made to take the work forward.

[200] **Christine Chapman:** Do Members agree? I see that they do. The next petition is P-03-220, on lowering the speed limit on the A40 near Abergavenny.

[201] **Michael German:** The letter of 15 December from the Minister says,

[202] 'I am pleased to report that the necessary funding has been allocated to allow the scheme to progress',

[203] and then, a month later, the Minister says the he will write to us again in due course regarding the funding. I think that we need to know when it will happen.

[204] **Christine Chapman:** I see that you are all agreed on that. The next one is P-03-224, on the Stepping Stones Nursery. Do Members have any views?

[205] **Michael German:** We now know how the consultation on the strategy took place, but we need to know when the audit will be completed, and we need to be updated with the findings of that audit as well as the results of the consultation.

[206] **Christine Chapman:** Are you all happy with that? I see that you are. The next petition is P-03-231, on the proximity of wind turbines to residential dwellings.

[207] **Andrew R.T. Davies:** The Minister sent us a letter explaining the viewpoint of the Government on the various regulations regarding this, along with evidence that has been gathered over a period of time. It will hopefully inform the petitioners of the direction that the regulations will take and, above all, regarding the public perception of this issue, it is interesting to note that this was covered on the radio last week, via a conference. May I suggest that this letter, which we have received relatively recently, is sent to the petitioners, so that they can respond accordingly as to whether their reservations have been taken on board? At that juncture, we could put the two together and see which way we need to go as a committee.

[208] **Christine Chapman:** I see that we are all agreed on that. The next one is P-03-240 on improvements to the A40 in Llanddewi Velfrey.

[209] **Michael German:** You will be familiar with this one, Chair, as I am. As I understand

it, this is about the temporary measures to be put in place before the Assembly Government-funded bypass is built. We just need answers to some specific questions for the petitioners. When will the speed limit be reviewed? When will a decision be made on widening the footpath? Will any evaluation be undertaken of the effectiveness of the traffic-calming measures that they are intent on introducing in the short term? It might also be worth while asking the Minister when he intends to build the bypass, given the length of the relevant inquiry in the National Assembly.

[210] **Christine Chapman:** Is everyone else happy with that? I see that you are. We will, therefore, move on to P-03-255, on special needs educational provision in mainstream schools.

[211] **Andrew R.T. Davies:** The Minister has written to us identifying various funding streams that the Welsh Assembly Government has made available for this aspect of education. Some of the pots are quite substantial, and others are future funding pots. I know that the Enterprise and Learning Committee has done a piece of work on a previous petition as well, so I think that there is a weight of evidence. If the petitioners could have sight of that formal response, they could give us their views on the direction the Government is taking, especially in light of the Enterprise and Learning Committee's report into this matter.

[212] **Christine Chapman:** I see that Members are content. The next petition is P-03-256, on additional trains to Fishguard.

[213] **Michael German:** May I begin with the work of the Enterprise and Learning Committee on this matter? I have seen the extract from the transcript of that committee's meeting on 23 November, where it was clear that the committee had not been given the answer to the question 'Will this mean more capacity on the trains?'. We therefore need to do two things. First, we need to identify what the Enterprise and Learning Committee had to say about this issue in its recent report on rail infrastructure in Wales and whether it made any specific recommendations on Fishguard. Secondly, we need to look at the barriers to getting more trains to Fishguard, like the dualling issue at Gowerton and Loughor. Can you say 'dualling' when you are talking about rail, or is it 'doubling'? It is having two lines, so it is the same thing. Would the Deputy First Minister envisage reviewing the decision to provide funding for additional trains?

11.20 a.m.

[214] **Andrew R.T. Davies:** The response that we have received from the Deputy First Minister may not quite be the response that the petitioners would have sought, but it has brought clarity as to the thinking around the overall strategic investment into the rail network in west Wales. While it is heartening, up to a point, to note that the Deputy First Minister has not ruled out the possibility of increased train frequency on the Fishguard line, it does not seem as if the resource is available to commission such work within the current package of investment/money that is available. However, I support Mike's sentiments on this and think that we should keep the petitioners informed.

[215] **Christine Chapman:** The next petition is P-03-265, entitled 'Include leaving home information and education in the National Curriculum' from Shelter Cymru. Do you have any views on this?

[216] **Michael German:** I would like to hear from the petitioners on this. We should ask them to come to give evidence to us and inform them of what the Minister has said already about personal and social education. When we see the petitioners, it would help us to be aware of when the Minister will complete the evaluation of the HouseMark project.

[217] **Christine Chapman:** Are you happy with that? I see that you are.

[218] The next petition is P-03-267, on the blood borne viral hepatitis action plan for Wales.

[219] **Michael German:** This is a victory for the committee. The committee has done its job and what the petition called for has happened, so we can close the petition, pat ourselves on the back and thank the petitioners for bringing it to our attention.

[220] **Christine Chapman:** The next petition is P-03-271, on business rates in Narberth. We received a letter recently on that. Do you have any views?

[221] **Andrew R.T. Davies:** While the letter from the Minister, Carl Sargeant, certainly would not please the petitioners, it clearly outlines how the Government looks at it and the actions that the Government have taken. There is a piece of work to be done to check with the WLGA that the levels of alternative support and programmes that are in place are available to all councils across Wales, so that we can get a picture of what is going on in various councils through corresponding with the WLGA. Therefore, I recommend that we liaise with the association.

[222] **Christine Chapman:** Are you all content with that? I see that you are. That closes the meeting. I thank all Members for their attendance today. Our next meeting will be held three weeks to tomorrow back in Cardiff, because of the recess.

*Daeth y cyfarfod i ben am 11.23 a.m.
The meeting ended at 11.23 a.m.*