

Answers to Questions not reached in Plenary 13 October 2004

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

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

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Questions on Local Government to the Finance Minister

Council Tax Rebanding

Q10 Peter Black: Will the Minister make a statement on council tax rebanding? (OAQ38301)

The Finance Minister (Sue Essex): Every home in Wales should have received notification from the Valuation Office Agency of its proposed council tax band. Advice has also been provided on how to query valuation bandings, together with information about transitional arrangements and help available for those on a low or fixed income.

Improving Participation in the Democratic Process

Q11 Janet Ryder: Will the Minister make a statement on any plans that she is considering regarding improving participation in the democratic process? (OAQ38256)

Sue Essex: The Assembly Government does not have direct responsibility for elections in Wales. However, it does support the Electoral Commission and the Welsh Local Government Association in their efforts to raise voter awareness and voter participation.

The Role of Community Councils

Q12 Janice Gregory: Will the Minister make a statement on what the Welsh Assembly Government is doing to support the role played by community councils in Wales? (OAQ38264)

Sue Essex: The Welsh Assembly Government is committed to supporting the valuable role played by community and town councils and to assist in giving them opportunities to enhance their role. Our proposals are contained in the response issued in August to the research report undertaken by the University of Wales, Aberystwyth into the role, functions and future potential of community and town councils.

Priorities for Local Government Funding

Q13 Janet Ryder: Will the Minister make a statement on priorities for local government funding? (OAQ38248)

Sue Essex: I would refer you to the draft budget announcement made on Monday. I will be publishing the provisional local government settlement on 22 October.

The Effect of Council Tax Rebanding on Over-65s

Q14 Jenny Randerson: Will the Minister make a statement on the effect of council tax rebanding on the over 65s? (OAQ38282)

Sue Essex: The effect will vary according to the homes they occupy and the areas in which they live. It is important to remember that local authorities, and not the Assembly, set council tax. Help is available for those that need it and I strongly advise people to enquire about their eligibility.

The Modernisation of Local Government Services

Q15 David Lloyd: Will the Minister make a statement on modernisation of local government services? (OAQ38246)

Sue Essex: Local authorities are making good progress under the Wales programme for improvement, which is the foundation for continuous improvement in local government services.

Questions to the Minister for Education and Lifelong Learning

Educational Maintenance Allowances

Q8 Brian Gibbons: Will the Minister make a statement regarding progress on introducing educational maintenance allowances in Wales? (OAQ38332)

The Minister for Education and Lifelong Learning (Jane Davidson): Students in Wales have been able to apply for the Education Maintenance Allowance since mid September. Relevant staff at schools and colleges are currently being trained so they can play their part in the process. Payments to students, back dated to the beginning of term, will begin mid December.

Question 9 (OAQ38359) was answered in Plenary.

Foreign Language Teaching in Primary Schools

Q10 Val Lloyd: Can the Minister give an update report on the provision of modern foreign language teaching in primary schools across Wales? (OAQ38348)

Jane Davidson: Under 'Languages Count', our modern foreign languages strategy, we are piloting the teaching of modern foreign languages at key stage 2. The pilot commenced in September 2003 and some 105 primary schools across Wales are now participating. Initial feedback has been enthusiastically positive from both teachers and pupils

Sixth-form Courses

Q11 Janet Davies: Will the Minister make a statement on the effect of widening the numbers of sixth-form courses on the viability of established areas of study? (OAQ38329)

Jane Davidson: The development of Learning Pathways 14-19 is intended to promote wider participation in learning by offering a greater range of opportunities. Alongside this, Education and Learning Wales's new national planning and funding system will provide the means by which all provision can be tailored to meet the needs of learners and employers.

The Reconfiguration of Welsh Universities

Q12 Leighton Andrews: Will the Minister make a statement on the reconfiguration of Welsh universities? (OAQ38364)

Jane Davidson: Reconfiguration and enhanced collaboration are two of the important means by which Welsh universities can build on their strengths. We have made significant financial resources available so that changes identified by the sector can be put into effect.

The Role of Schools in their Communities

Q13 Carl Sargeant: Will the Minister make a statement on the role that schools play in their communities? (OAQ38333)

Jane Davidson: Schools are well placed to provide services for pupils, parents and the wider community, such as lifelong learning, childcare and family support, and many already do so. This has benefits for the school, enhancing the status of learning and improving pupil outcomes. Guidance on governing body powers to provide community services was issued in December 2003.

Parental Choice in Education

Q14 Alun Cairns: Will the Minister make a statement on her plans to introduce parental choice in education? (OAQ38314)

Jane Davidson: I have no such plans. Parents already have the right to express a preference for the school they wish their child to attend, including Welsh-medium or denominational schools. In Wales, most such preferences are met. Our aim is to provide local schools of consistently high standards to serve the local population.

School Meals

Q15 Lorraine Barrett: Will the Minister make a statement on school meals? (OAQ38368)

Jane Davidson: Responsibility for school meals rests with local education authorities and school governing bodies. They must provide lunches to pupils with a free entitlement and can make provision for other pupils. School lunches must comply with minimum nutritional standards set out in regulations. Guidance on these was issued in March 2003.