

ENVIRONMENT PLANNING AND TRANSPORT COMMITTEE

Wednesday 31 January 2001

Date:

Time: 2.00 to 5.30 pm

Venue: Committee Room 2, National Assembly Building

REPORT BY MINISTER FOR ENVIRONMENT

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Towards a Sustainable Wales

Following the decision made at Plenary on 16 November 2000, the National Assembly intends to put forward a bid under the new European "Innovative Actions" programme by the end of May 2001 to fund up to four Welsh projects. The Assembly's sustainable development scheme, 'Learning to Live Differently', will be used as the basis for application to the European Commission. A consultation paper entitled "Towards a Sustainable Wales" was launched on the Assembly's website on 22 January, and it invites outline project bids, or comments on the proposed way forward, by 12 March 2001.

Under the programme, there is scope to fund experimental two-year projects which:

- use skills, flair, ingenuity and regional identity to promote sustainable development and thus create a sustainable society in Wales;
- use innovation and technology to achieve sustainable success in the new knowledge-based economy; and
- exploit information and communications technology (ICT) to improve effectiveness and competitiveness and help reduce the demands on natural resources and bridge any

'digital' divides.

A steering committee will be formed in March to finalise the programme bid for up to 3 million euros; the steering committee will also oversee the programme implementation in conjunction with WEFO, who will formally administer the programme. In parallel with the consultation exercise, the Assembly's Sustainable Development Unit is working with WEC to develop an associated European regional network bid.

Further information is available on the website at the following addresses:

http://www.wales.gov.uk/polinifo/industry/indust_e.htm

http://www.cymru.gov.uk/polinifo/industry/indust_w.htm

PLANNING

Review of Call in Procedures

We have been looking afresh at the procedures we adopt when considering requests to call in planning applications. Following discussions with the Planning Inspectorate, a sample of local planning authorities, the Planning Officers Society for Wales and a selection of the Assembly's consultees, we have decided on some preliminary conclusions about changes that ought to be made. These are set out in the attached Annex 1. In particular there is a need to improve our standards of communication with local planning authorities and others. It is also considered that the decision to call in could be taken very much earlier in the process. I intend to consult interested parties about the proposals fairly soon.

TRANSPORT

Sustrans

In accordance with Standing Order 19.6, the Committee will wish to note that I have approved, with the agreement of the Finance Secretary, a virement of £50,000 between the Transport Directorate's SEGs and BELs to fund the setting up of a Wales office for Sustrans. Sustrans is a registered charity which has been operating for twenty years, working on practical projects to reduce car dependency by encouraging people to walk and cycle more

The main expenditure group is Transport, Planning and Environment and the subgroup the Trunk Roads, Motorways and Transport Services. The virement is from the Industrial Access Roads BEL to the Programme Support Promotion and Ancillary Activities BEL.

Parking - increased penalty charge levels

We are shortly to engage in a consultation exercise (as DETR has in England) on the proposed increase in Penalty Charge Levels for parking contraventions in areas where a decriminalised parking regime operates. There is only one in Wales, so far. The adjustment is not expected to be controversial since the new rates will reflect the Fixed Penalty Notice increases already brought in. The change can be accomplished by circular.

Review of Community Transport

As members will recall I have announced a review of community transport with the aim of it being planned as an integral part of the Welsh transport system.

One of the difficulties in moving forward on the development of Community Transport within our wider spatial plans is capturing the nature and diversity of the current role it plays in our communities. We have some evidence, which emerged from our review of Bus Subsidy Grant and Local Transport Plans, but I am keen that we have a thorough picture to influence our policy making.

On that basis, I have asked the Welsh Transport Forum, working through a small subgroup and with the assistance of consultants, to take forward a comprehensive study of Community Transport. It should capture the diversity of the current role of Community Transport, and lead to some firm recommendations which we can feed into our own policy, and into the guidance we will give to local authorities about funding and transport planning for this field.

I have asked the Welsh Transport Forum to report to us on this review by the end of July, in order to be able to feed into the review of public transport which this Committee is conducting.

Transport Forum

The third meeting of the Transport Forum took place when the Draft Transport Framework was considered. The Framework will be issued for consultation in March. I will make sure that EPT members have a copy of the Consultation Document and the? set of maps which have been prepared and collated. The Forum has set up a further working party to look at strategic bus routes.

Noise Payments to the Owners of Movable Homes Affected by Road Schemes

I refer to the report for the last meeting about new regulations which enable payments to be made by highway authorities to the owners of movable homes, caravans and houseboats, who are affected by noise from new or altered highways. The draft Welsh statutory instrument was referred to the Business Committee earlier this month. It is anticipated that the Regulations should be put to plenary late February.

Sue Essex

Minister for Environment

Annex 1

Review of the National Assembly for Wales Call-in Procedures

Officials have recently conducted an internal review of the Assembly's procedures for calling in planning applications for its own determination. The aim of the review was to examine how the current call-in system is operating and to identify areas for improvement and make recommendations. As part of the process views were sought from external interested parties including the Planning Inspectorate, Newport and Swansea local planning authorities (LPAs), the Planning Officers Society for Wales and three Assembly consultees, namely Cadw; the Countryside Council for Wales; and the Farming and Rural Conservation Agency.

One of the main conclusions reached is the need to improve communications between the Assembly and all other parties involved in the call-in process. It is evident that basic knowledge gaps exist outside the Assembly, including the criteria used for assessing requests to call in

planning applications, the progress of the determination of the call-in requests, and the status of the planning application once it has been called in. The solutions proposed to address the problems identified rely primarily on the use of the internet to provide an easily accessible source of information, backed up with more traditional forms of communication. Examples of the proposals include:

- Including a list of the call-in criteria in standard responses to call-in requests;
- Providing on the Assembly web-site a weekly list of applications under consideration and their status;
- Providing on the web-site a flow-diagram and narrative explanation of the call-in procedures followed by the Assembly;
- Sending progress letters to all parties every eight weeks after an application has been called in; and
- Posting copies of call-in letters and decision letters issued by the Planning Decision Committee on the Assembly web-site.

Another issue causing concern is that of perceived late decisions by the Assembly. This is caused in part by the Assembly's practice of waiting for the receipt of the LPA Planning Officer's report before a decision is taken on the call-in. The report is required to be available not less than three days before the Planning Committee date. The preferred solution would be to require Councils to provide their report earlier than the three days, but this would require primary legislation and may not always be possible in all cases. The draft report recommends an informal arrangement between the Assembly and the LPA to provide the report as early as possible in advance of the Planning Committee meeting. However this proposal was discussed at a recent meeting with Chief Planning Officers and the general opinion was expressed that the timing of call-in decisions should not be reliant upon the receipt of the Officers Report. It was suggested that a decision should be taken much earlier in the process. Options on how this might be achieved will be set out in the Report.

Other report recommendations include:

- Clarification of the call-in criteria;
- A revision of the Departure and Shopping Directions;
- The inclusion in the call-in decision letter of the reasons why a planning application has been called in; and
- The provision of fuller and more informative responses to those requesting call-in.

The initial findings of the review will now be subject to wider consultation.