

Ken Skates keen to see further A55 improvements as resilience study under way

With the Welsh Government's A55 resilience study well underway, Mr Skates re-iterated his commitment to look afresh at all potential options to improve journey times, reliability and resilience on the A55 and A494.

Economy Secretary Ken Skates said:

"The A55/ A494 corridor which was built decades ago was never designed to cope with over 70,000 vehicles. In its current state, is far from the ideal modern gateway to supporting the people and economy of North Wales.

"Recent years and months have seen the Welsh Government investing millions of pounds in bringing various aspects of the road up to modern standards. From improvement work to tunnels and road surfacing, to flood alleviation projects and maintenance, I've made ensuring the A55 performs to the best of its ability an absolute priority.

"New sections of road to compliment the existing network will of course form part of future improvements, and we hope to see the planned £200m Deeside Corridor, for example, play a significant role in an improved infrastructure. Alongside this I have been clear that further improvements can and should be made wherever possible so we can maximise the performance of this vital road.

"It's for this reason that I commissioned a comprehensive resilience study in April to explore what more could be done to improve journey times, reliability and resilience. That study is now reaching completion and is on schedule to be finalised in the Autumn.

"Following my receipt of the study, I will act quickly to put in place a comprehensive programme of work to further help deliver a road that better serves the thousands of road users that travel on it daily, whilst seeking to keep disruption to a minimum.

"An improved A55 is absolutely vital to the wider economy of North Wales and is something we must continue to work to deliver as quickly as we can."

Lesley Griffiths wishes pollinator scheme Hap-bee Birthday

The Bee Friendly scheme, thought to be the first of its kind anywhere in the world, is aimed at communities and community groups, schools, public bodies, businesses, universities and colleges, places of worship and aims to reduce and reverse the decline in numbers of pollinator species like bees and butterflies.

The Cabinet Secretary visited St Peter's Community Gardens in Cardiff, to present them with a Bee Friendly certificate to acknowledge the important work that they are doing to help pollinators. 22 Bee Friendly Certificates have been handed out since the scheme was launched last year.

Wales was the first country in the UK to have an Action Plan for Pollinators, stating our ambition to reduce and reverse the decline in pollinators. This is helping us to achieve our aim of becoming the first Pollinator-Friendly nation in the world.

Lesley Griffiths said,

"We want the natural environment to be managed so that it continues to provide us with the environmental, economic, and social benefits now and in the future. By encouraging more community groups like St Peter's to join the Bee Friendly scheme we can protect pollinators and create thriving environments for local communities to enjoy.

"I am delighted Cardiff University is now Bee Friendly and I have been really impressed with the work it has done as part of its Pharma Bees project. This is a really unique project and shows how important our pollinators are to all walks of life.

"I hope others follow the lead of Cardiff University and St Peter's Community Gardens to help make Cardiff the first Bee Friendly capital city in the world!"

In 2016 Cardiff University School of Pharmacy provided St Peters with its first bee hive and the funds to enable community volunteers to be trained as beekeepers. The hive will provide the pharmabees team with an excellent source of honey for testing from a wonderful variety of wildflowers, vegetables and fruit trees planted at the gardens.

Welsh and Scottish First Ministers to meet

First Minister of Wales Carwyn Jones and First Minister of Scotland Nicola Sturgeon will meet today in Edinburgh to discuss how the 2 governments can work together to protect devolution from a “Westminster power grab”.

First Minister Carwyn Jones said:

“Our position is clear and unequivocal – the Withdrawal Bill flies in the face of devolution and we cannot accept it in its current form. It is quite simply a blatant power grab from Whitehall which is not in the interest of people in Wales and the other devolved administrations.

“We have been equally clear that we are prepared to come to the table, to work constructively with the UK government to try and reach agreement on future arrangements. Based on their behaviour over the last few months, we have seen no real desire to take up this invitation and unless we see a completely different approach we will not be recommending the Assembly gives its consent to this bill.

“I am looking forward to discussing with Nicola Sturgeon our shared concerns regarding the bill and wider Brexit issues which affects both our countries. By speaking with one voice, we will make it clear that the UK government cannot simply impose its will on the other constituent parts of the UK.”

First Minister Nicola Sturgeon said:

“Both during and after the EU referendum, new powers were promised to Holyrood but instead the UK government is planning to impose new restrictions on the Scottish Parliament.

“The UK government’s EU (Withdrawal) Bill returns powers, even in devolved policy areas, solely to Westminster. Both the Scottish and the Welsh Governments have been clear that this power grab cannot be allowed to take place.

“I am looking forward to discussing with Carwyn Jones how we can work together to change the bill so that devolution and the interests of the people of Scotland and Wales can be protected. As it stands it is inconceivable that we would recommend that the Scottish Parliament gives its consent to the legislation.

“We have said repeatedly that we are willing to talk constructively

with the UK government on future arrangements. But this has to be on the basis of agreement and partnership not imposition.

“The Scottish Government is doing all we can to prevent an extreme Brexit, keep the UK in the Single Market and protect devolution.”

Safer Down's test for pregnant women to be introduced in Wales

Public Health Minister Rebecca Evans has confirmed the Welsh Government has agreed to the introduction of non-invasive prenatal testing (NIPT) within the antenatal screening programme in Wales.

NIPT, a blood sample analysed in a laboratory, will be added to the screening pathway as an additional option for women who accept current primary screening and are assessed as being at higher chance of Down's, Edwards' and Patau's syndrome.

The current antenatal screening programme offers pregnant women a number of different primary screening tests to detect some of the conditions that may affect either the woman or their baby. One of these screening tests shows the chance of having a baby with Down's syndrome. If this is equal to or higher than 1 in 150, women are considered higher chance but are currently only offered the option of an invasive test to confirm the diagnosis. These invasive diagnostic tests carry a small risk of miscarriage.

NIPT will be offered as an additional option to these invasive tests and for women who receive a negative result, no further tests will be required. It is expected that 1 to 2 babies per year in Wales will be saved from miscarriage as a result of the introduction of NIPT.

NIPT will be rolled out as soon as practicable during 2018. Work is already underway with the other UK nations and charities on the development of health professional training and patient information, designed to ensure women are supported to make a fully informed decision.

Public Health Minister, Rebecca Evans said:

“We want to ensure every expectant mother in Wales receives the information, advice and support they need throughout their pregnancy. Our antenatal screening programme plays an important role in this.

“The Welsh Government has accepted the recommendations made by the UK National Screening Committee and the Wales Screening Committee

to introduce Non-Invasive Prenatal Testing (NIPT) as an additional option for women identified as higher chance for Down's, and to add screening for Edwards' and Patau's syndrome and screening in twin pregnancies within the screening pathway in Wales.

"NIPT is more accurate than the current primary tests. A negative NIPT result will offer pregnant women the reassurance they need, without the need for a further invasive diagnostic test – reducing the unnecessary harm from miscarriage that can be caused through the use of these tests."

The introduction of NIPT will be evaluated over the next 3 years, in line with recommendations made by the UK National Screening Committee and the Wales Screening Committee.

National priorities announced in Natural Resources Policy

The policy sets out three national priorities for the management of our natural resources which will drive delivery across all our wellbeing goals to benefit communities and our economy, as well as improving the environment

The priorities are:

- the delivery of nature-based solutions
- increasing renewable energy and resource efficiency; and
- taking a place-based approach.

The Cabinet Secretary said that focusing efforts on key areas will allow us to directly address the challenges affecting our natural resources and realise the many benefits they provide for our well-being and prosperity as a nation, which is now all the more important as we define a new place for Wales in the world post-Brexit.

Lesley Griffiths said:

"Everyone has a stake in our natural resources and a role to play in ensuring these resources are sustainably managed. In Wales, with our abundant natural resources and beautiful landscapes, we are fortunate. At the heart of our wellbeing, they support our health, our livelihoods and our vibrant culture. But we cannot take this for granted. Climate change, the decline of biodiversity and our ecosystems and other factors are already driving change, with very real consequences for our communities.

“Working with nature and being more efficient with our natural resources has crucial benefits – less pollution, less waste and less impact. Managing them to best effect can play an important role in supporting our communities and future competitiveness, creating jobs and new business opportunities in Wales.

“Ultimately, it is only by working together that we can implement the national priorities in the context of local needs and opportunities.”

The Natural Resources Policy will drive action across the whole of government. The Cabinet Secretary will be undertaking a range of visits this week that demonstrate the breadth of application of the NRP and its priorities across farming, energy production and marine and fisheries.