

£3.7 million to improve community facilities in deprived areas of Wales

Thirteen projects will share the funding during 2017/18 from the Welsh Government's Community Facilities programme.

The programme provides capital grants of up to £500,000, to develop and improve facilities for communities, aimed at tackling poverty and its effects.

The 13 projects to receive funding all provide access to services and activities which increase opportunity and help prevent or alleviate poverty, such as sporting facilities, hostel accommodation for homeless young people and library facilities. Seven of the projects are in Communities First areas.

Announcing the funding on a visit to the ASK Centre in Rhyl a previous beneficiary of the scheme, Cabinet Secretary Carl Sargeant said:

“This funding is not simply about improving buildings. In applying for these grants community organisations have had to demonstrate how the facilities they offer provide vital community services which help prevent or tackle poverty. For example, activities for Communities First or Families First; operating a food bank, hosting advice services or saving a service which would otherwise be lost to the community such as a shop or library.

“Previous funding under this scheme has had a beneficial impact upon Welsh communities and the day to day lives of local people. While this is the last round of awards under the current funding arrangements a revised scheme will reopen this summer.”

New code sets out presumption against rural school closures

The Welsh Government is changing the School Organisation Code that guides decisions about schools.

The Education Secretary has launched a consultation on the changes, which include:

- Proposers having to consider whether a rural school will be closed by referring to a ‘rural school’ list

- Proposals to close a rural school must identify clear and specific reasons for closure, set out the alternatives that have been identified, with an assessment of these including likely education benefits, impact on the community and the likely effect on travelling arrangements and explain why the closure is the most appropriate course of action.
- Federation to be considered as an alternative in all cases.
- Consideration of alternatives to be a two-stage process with the proposer having to consider other alternatives that emerge during the consultation process.
- Any consultations on closures to be published on a school day and the local community made aware.
- The code will be revised to better reflect that addressing surplus places does not necessarily mean closing schools and alternatives to closure should be considered.

Kirsty Williams has also announced that the Welsh Government will establish the first ever designation of rural schools and develop a list of rural schools for the purposes of the presumption against closure of rural schools.

Kirsty Williams said:

“Rural schools face unique issues and I want to ensure that pupils that attend them have the same opportunities as children in other areas.

“These proposals strengthen the School Organisation Code to make sure that councils and other proposers do everything they can to keep a rural school open before deciding to consult on closure.

“Talking and engaging with the local community is vital. If there is a consultation to close a school, all options and suggestions that emerge from this must be considered before a decision is made. This might include federation with other schools or increasing the community use of school buildings to make the school more viable.

“Rural schools are at the heart of community life. I therefore want to make sure these schools get a fair hearing when their future is being considered. These plans will play a key part in our national mission to raise standards and offer opportunities to all our young people.”

Last year Kirsty Williams announced a new £2.5m a year small and rural schools grant to encourage innovation and support school to school working Councils submitted their proposals to the Welsh Government at the end of May and these are currently being assessed.

€1.5m EU investment helps Welsh company fight global infections

The investment will see IMSPEX Diagnostics Ltd, which is based in Abercynon, team up with leading manufacturers and clinical trial specialists in Germany and Ireland and with the University of Warwick and South Wales-based RedKnight Consultancy Ltd.

The €2.4m project aims to develop a rapid, non-invasive device called BreathSpec, which can diagnose bacterial or viral infections through ultra-high sensitivity breath analysis and will help combat the global challenge of antimicrobial resistance (AMR).

The funding has been secured through the European Union's largest research and innovation programme, Horizon 2020, which supports breakthroughs in science and technology and the development of world-class products and services.

Welcoming the news, Finance Secretary Mark Drakeford said:

"I'm delighted IMSPEX has secured this funding, which will enable research and innovation with such exciting potential to take place in Wales over the coming years.

"Through Horizon 2020, Welsh businesses and universities are benefiting from significant investment and opportunities to collaborate with leading organisations across Europe.

"It is vital ongoing access to this programme – and its successors – is retained as part of any new relationship between the UK and EU in the future."

The BreathSpec device will help alleviate the growing problem of antimicrobial resistance by helping to minimise the misuse and overuse of antibiotics through the improved diagnosis of infections.

Santi Dominguez, chief executive of IMSPEX Diagnostics Ltd, said:

"We are very excited by this funding, which will enable our organisation to collaborate with a first-class team and address the major social challenge of anti-microbial resistance with our new device.

"We have a vision of providing primary healthcare with a reliable, fast and simple solution for identifying bacterial or viral infection, optimising patient care and minimising antibiotic consumption.

"As a result of this project, we hope to be able to assist GPs and healthcare providers on a global scale. I congratulate the whole consortium on the success of this bid and would also like to thank the Welsh Government for its support with the bid preparation."

The investment in IMSPEX follows the publication of new data, which shows Welsh businesses and universities have won €76m of Horizon 2020 funding for research and innovation projects since the EU programme was launched nearly three years ago.

Professor Drakeford added:

"The Welsh Government financially backed IMSPEX's application for Horizon 2020 funds and we will continue to support Welsh businesses and universities to access this important research and innovation programme and collaborate with leading organisations across Europe and beyond."

To help increase Wales' research and innovation opportunities through Horizon 2020 funding, the Welsh Government offers financial support for bid writing and travel costs to Welsh organisations interested in developing Horizon 2020 projects.

For more information about Horizon 2020 and the Welsh Government's SCoRE Cymru fund email horizon2020@wales.gsi.gov.uk .

Alcohol-related deaths falling in Wales

The Welsh Government's Annual Statement of Progress for Liver Disease shows that in 2015, 807 people died from liver disease, an increase of 131 deaths (19.4%) over the past five years. Alcohol-related liver disease accounts for over a third of liver disease deaths.

However, the report shows a fall in alcohol-related deaths, from 504 in 2012 to 463 in 2015.

The report also shows:

- **Reduced alcohol consumption:** Over the past five years, there has been a reduction in the number of adults reporting alcohol consumption above the former recommended daily guidelines, from 44% in 2010 to 40% in 2015 – however far too many people report drinking above the former recommended guidelines and this will continue to be a focus for NHS

Wales.

- **Increased expenditure on liver disease:** Spending on gastrointestinal problems (which include liver disease) has increased from £339.3 million in 2014-15 to £362.6 million in 2015-16.
- **Improved access to treatment for hepatitis C infection:** There is no restriction on access to treatment for hepatitis C infection in Wales, making Wales the only country in the UK, and one of the few in the world, to not place such a restriction. All of the patients with hepatitis C that are known to services in Wales and who are still accessing care have now been treated. During 2016-17, 772 individuals were treated for the hepatitis C infection in Wales with a cure rate of around 95%.

Health Secretary, Vaughan Gething said:

"In Wales, we want to reduce the number of people getting and dying from liver disease. We want to ensure people – whatever their age – value good liver health, and are aware of the dangers of excess alcohol, obesity and blood borne viral hepatitis. We want everyone to take personal responsibility for their lifestyle choices and reduce the risk of acquiring preventable liver disease."

"During 2015-16 there has been continued progress in the care of patients with liver disease in Wales. We've seen a reduction in the number of alcohol-related deaths over recent years, but we know there's much more to do."

"Services are improving throughout Wales, despite dealing with complex demand. The service needs to continue to undergo change if it is to cope with patients and their needs."

Heritage sector worth over £900m to Wales

The report, which collects data from 18 of Wales' premier Heritage organisations, and highlights an increase of 4.4% in the number of visits to sites in the last seven years has been welcomed by Economy Secretary Ken Skates.

He said:

"This report captures the crucial role of the heritage sector in Wales, which has helped inspire and define our nation."

"It's fantastic to see the sector going from strength to strength. Heritage in Wales is now worth over £960m and supports over 40,500 jobs with membership of heritage bodies in Wales now standing just short of 440,000.

"The sector is increasingly ready and willing to innovate and embrace different ways for the public to engage with and enjoy our rich heritage. Indeed many of our magnificent sites have played a central role in the successes of our recent Year of Legends and Year of Adventure tourism campaigns.

"In Wales we have a unique, diverse heritage which is the envy of many and a source of great pride to us all. We will continue to work closely with the sector to support them in ensuring that these positive trends continue."