

First Minister in the US and Canada to boost trade with Wales' most important business partner

The visit will focus on boosting trade and investment between Wales and the US.

The United States is Wales' largest inward investor, with 270 US-owned companies based in Wales employing almost 50,000 people. Last year, Wales secured investment from 24 American-owned companies that will create and safeguard nearly 1,500 Welsh jobs.

America is also one of Wales' top trading partners. The value of Welsh exports to the USA continues to rise and was worth £2.1bn to the Welsh economy in 2016.

Over the week, the First Minister will meet with US and Canadian companies with a presence in Wales and will discuss trade and business links with political representatives.

On Wednesday, the First Minister will address the United Nations about his commitment to advancing gender equality and women's rights. He will also meet with Hillary Clinton to discuss how they can strengthen links between Wales and the US.

The First Minister will host a St David's Day reception on Capitol Hill for key political figures and investors, and an event in New York – attended by actor Luke Evans – to promote Wales as a top tourist destination.

Speaking ahead of the visit, First Minister Carwyn Jones said:

“America is Wales' most important business partner and I want to build on the strong tradelinks that exist between our two countries as we leave the EU.

“While in the US, I want to gain a better understanding of the USA's position on future trading arrangements with the UK and will press the case for developing a free trade agreement between our countries.

“Exciting opportunities for trade with North America lie ahead and, in my discussions with American businesses and politicians, I will reaffirm our commitment to boosting trade between Wales and the USA.

“As Wales and the UK prepare to leave the EU, I want to reassure investors and visitors from the United States that Wales remains an outward looking and welcoming country.”

Time running out to have say on Third Menai Crossing plans

The consultation which started on 15 December 2017 looks at four options for increasing capacity across the Menai Strait for motorists, pedestrians and cyclists.

The options under consideration are:

Red Option:

- New bridge directly to the west of Britannia Bridge
- Improvements at A55 Junction 8A

Pink Option:

- Extension of Britannia Bridge / new bridge immediately east of existing bridge to provide extra traffic lanes
- Improvements at A55 Junction 8A

Orange Option:

- New bridge directly to the east of Britannia Bridge
- Improvements at A55 Junction 8A

Purple Option:

- New bridge to the east of Britannia Bridge
- Improvements at A55 Junctions 8 and 8A

Public Consultation Exhibitions also took place in Llanfairpwll and Parc Menai, Bangor during January where people could leave their comments and learn more about the options and bridge types under consideration.

Following the end of the consultation period, all responses will be considered carefully alongside the environmental, technical and economic appraisals before further scheme development. The aim is to announce a preferred route in summer 2018.

The £3m design and development stage of the third crossing is part of the 2-year budget agreed by the Welsh Government and Plaid Cymru.

Ken Skates said:

“The third Menai crossing is a significant development which will improve network resilience, provide better journey times and relieve traffic congestion in the area.

“This is a vital part of the Welsh Government’s investment plans in North Wales transport infrastructure over the coming years and the consultation provides an excellent opportunity for people to have their say on the options under consideration.

“Every response is vitally important in the development of the project and I urge all those with an interest to give their opinion before the closing date of 9 March.”

Further details of the plans and how to share your views can be found at: <https://consultations.gov.wales/consultations/a55-3rd-menai-crossing>

New EU funded project set to attract more visitors to Welsh and Irish coastal regions

The Celtic Routes project, backed by €1.6m of EU funds, aims to encourage visitors to explore new areas of Wales and Ireland en route to their final tourist destination.

As many Welsh rugby fans head to Dublin this weekend for the Wales Ireland Six Nations match, it is travellers such as these, as well as the many visitors who frequently travel to Wales for similar events, that the project will be targeting.

Led by Carmarthenshire County Council, the project will focus on the areas of Carmarthenshire, Pembrokeshire and Ceredigion in Wales and Waterford, Wicklow and Wexford in Ireland.

The Celtic Routes project aims to transform less well known areas from transit zones to new touring sites, increasing the time visitors spend in these regions and capitalising on the opportunities to boost local economies.

Minister for Culture, Tourism and Sport, Dafydd Elis-Thomas AM, said:

“Celtic Routes is a great example of EU funds being used to benefit cross border areas in Ireland and Wales by encouraging visitors to explore the local scenery, hospitality and culture of wider regions , and not just tourist hot spots. By helping to increase visitor numbers, the project will stimulate economic growth and both create and safeguard jobs in the cultural, heritage and tourism sectors.

“In light of Brexit it is more important than ever that we support

and celebrate the strong Celtic links between our two countries.”

The project will be developed through customer research, trade events and workshops as well as cross border visits by businesses in Ireland and Wales to bring together expertise and ideas.

The aim is to increase the visitor appeal of the targeted areas, including through the development of new trails linking local culture, heritage and the natural environment.

This exciting new initiative will complement The Wales Way, a ten-year strategic initiative launched to the international market last year, to celebrate a range of existing and planned routes and give visitors from around the world the confidence to explore more of Wales.

Irish Government Minister for Finance and Public Expenditure & Reform, Paschal Donohoe TD, said:

“Tourism is one of Ireland’s most important economic sectors and has significant potential to play a further role in Ireland’s economic renewal. On the weekend we welcome Welsh rugby fans to Lansdowne Road, the Celtic Routes project shows how EU funding can support tourism development in a cross-border context to the benefit of both countries.”

Cllr Peter Hughes Griffiths, executive board member for culture, sport and tourism for Carmarthenshire County Council, said:

“We have a fantastic opportunity to attract people who are passing through south Wales and Ireland as they travel to their final destination. We want people to stop and appreciate the amazing beauty of the countryside and coast, visit our vast array of attractions and stay, eat and enjoy as our guests before they travel on. Hopefully they will come back time and time again, and tell the world about what we have to offer.”

The Celtic Routes project is part-funded by the EU’s Ireland Wales Co-operation Programme, which supports collaboration between Ireland and Wales to address common economic and social challenges and opportunities.

Glastir and BPS 2017 payments processed quicker and earlier

Glastir payments started on 29 January and more than 77% of claims to farm businesses have been processed to date – a significant improvement compared with last year's day one payment performance.

In addition, 88% of Glastir capital works claims received have also been processed. Farm businesses are being urged to submit their capital works claims by the deadline of 28 February as late claims cannot be accepted.

The BPS payment window opened on 1 December and over 91% of claims were paid on the first day. Rural Payments Wales, once again, outperformed the Rural Payments Agency and other administrations, paying a higher percentage of BPS claims on day one.

In parallel with the improved Glastir payment performance, the BPS performance continues to progress with over 96% of claims paid to date. Over £223m has been paid into the bank accounts of over 15,000 Welsh farmers and businesses.

Lesley Griffiths said:

“I am pleased to see such significant progress in the processing of both Glastir and BPS payments this year. With the deadline for Glastir capital works claims closing on 28 February, I urge all farm businesses to ensure claims are completed and submitted ahead of this.

“As with previous years, not all farm businesses will have received their Glastir and BPS payments on day one. My officials are working hard to process the remaining claims as quickly as possible. I expect all but the most complex claims to be paid under both schemes by the end of April.

“I would like to thank everyone, including the industry, who have worked closely with us to continually develop RPW online and contribute towards the improved 2017 Glastir and BPS payment performance.”

£8.3m EU-backed investment to meet local business needs

The package will enable the development of new business premises to support local demand in existing ventures as well as creating new employment opportunities.

The £12.7m Kingsway scheme in Swansea, backed with £4.5m EU funds, will provide 850m² of office space targeted at the digital sector, paving the way for the development of a digital village in the city centre.

The space will accommodate existing technology businesses and new start-up companies growing out of the expanding higher education sector in Swansea and the surrounding area.

In Robertstown, Aberdare, a £3.9m scheme to construct 11 new business units will get underway to accommodate local demand. Made possible with £2.5m of EU funds, the units will be located on a brownfield site, formerly a goods yard, next to Aberdare train station and Coleg y Cymoedd.

In Caerphilly, £2m will be invested at the Lawns Industrial Estate, Rhymney, including EU funding of £1.3m to build 10 new units and associated infrastructure on the site where there are already 21 fully occupied industrial units and a substantial waiting list.

The development is aimed at meeting local demand for the expansion of this industrial estate in central Rhymney with close proximity to key local facilities and strategic road and rail links.

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance, Mark Drakeford, said:

“I’m delighted to see EU funds being invested in projects to support sustainable business growth and create employment opportunities where they are most needed. These projects are part of our wider commitment to making Wales a more prosperous and secure place to live and work”.

This announcement builds on the work of the Welsh Government’s Valleys Taskforce and the priorities highlighted in the Our Valleys, Our Future delivery plan, including a commitment to close the employment gap between the South Wales Valleys and the rest of Wales.

Councillor Sean Morgan, Caerphilly Council’s Deputy Leader said:

“This investment is excellent news for the economy of the Caerphilly county borough and, most importantly, it will bring much-needed employment opportunities to the Upper Rhymney Valley.

The council is committed to regenerating its local communities and these new industrial units will deliver quality premises where businesses will be able to thrive.”

Leader of Swansea Council, Rob Stewart, said:

“This is good news and a further vote of confidence in the city. The funding will help with delivery of our new city centre and also help with the delivery of the Digital District on the Kingsway which is a key Swansea specific city deal project.”

Councillor Robert Bevan, Rhondda Cynon Taf Council’s Cabinet Member for Enterprise, Development and Housing, said:

“I welcome this significant funding secured by the council from the European Regional Development Fund, which will help kick-start this strategic project in the Cynon Valley.”

The schemes will be delivered by the City and Council of Swansea, Rhondda Cynon Taf County Borough Council and Caerphilly County Borough Council who will also invest the remainder of the funding.