

First Minister opens new £22m college campus in Aberdare

More than 600 students will attend the new state-of-the-art campus, which was supported with £11m from the Welsh Government's 21st Century Schools and Education programme.

The 21st Century Schools programme is the largest investment in Welsh schools and colleges since the 1960s, which will see over £1.4bn being invested in the 5 years to 2019.

As well as offering courses in more traditional subjects such as computing and science, Coleg y Cymoedd offers practical courses including bricklaying, carpentry and joinery, electrical installation and plumbing that are designed to meet the demands of local employers.

First Minister of Wales, Carwyn Jones, said:

"I am proud the Welsh Government has supported this new college with £11m of funding. When you look around this fantastic site, you can see it has been money well spent.

"This new college provides students with an impressive learning environment and the very best resources to help them reach their full potential. As well as benefitting teachers and students, the college will be an invaluable community resource for the people of Aberdare to use and enjoy."

Judith Evans, principal of Coleg y Cymoedd, said:

"This is truly a day of celebration as we officially open the doors of the new campus to showcase the facility Aberdare has been waiting for. We believe that it is the right of all in Wales to have access to high quality education and training that leads to real employment paths.

"We are grateful to Welsh Government for joining us in our mission to ensure that our communities in Rhondda Cynon Taf and Caerphilly can access the facilities and opportunities they deserve. Our thanks also go to the businesses who work with us each year to allow our learners to gain the experience and job opportunities that will see them prosper."

The official opening was also attended by Aberdare-born Dr Lyn Evans, who flew home to Wales from the CERN site in Switzerland to talk about the importance of encouraging people to study science, technology, engineering

and mathematics.

Wales secures the highest number of finalists for WorldSkills UK competition

The WorldSkills UK finals will take place at Birmingham's NEC between 16 and 18 November as part of the NEC's annual Skills Show, the largest skills and careers event in the UK.

The competition is used to benchmark excellence across a range of vocational skills areas. It is also used as part of the selection process for WorldSkills, a global competition held every two years where the UK regions compete as one team. These finals are part of the selection process for WorldSkills 2019, which is being held in Kazan.

A total of 462 competitors are taking part in the WorldSkills UK finals, which consists of up to 60 national competitions where entrants battle it out for Gold, Silver and Bronze award recognition. Of that figure, 74 competitors are Welsh, which is 16% of the UK total and by far the highest regional representation.

In addition to the 74 Welsh finalists taking part in the national competitions, a further nineteen entrants will be representing Wales at the Skills Show in other competitions, bringing Wales' overall number of entrants to this year's Skills Show to 93.

The additional competitors are the 'Kazan cohort'; nine talented students who have already met the qualifying criteria for Kazan 2019 so will now be competing to for a place on WorldSkills' Team UK. Ten entrants are also taking part in the 'Inclusive Skills' competitions, which have been specifically designed for those with disabilities.

Welcoming the news, Skills and Science Minister Julie James said:

"That Wales has been recognised as the top region for entries in the whole of the UK is a reflection of our skills excellence and the huge collaborative effort from partners that we have here in Wales.

"Through Skills Competitions we are creating a highly skilled nation that will support our economy, safeguard our industries and

improve the prospects of Wales.

“I wish everyone taking part in next month’s competitions the very best of luck and would like to thank those who have supported them on their journey for all their hard work and dedication to help make this happen.”

Lifepoint Centre in Swansea opens thanks to £308,768 Welsh Government funding

The Lifepoint Centre has been refurbished and extended with the help of £308,768 with from the Welsh Government’s Community Facilities Programme matching the Church’s own contribution.

On a visit to the official opening of the Lifepoint Centre, Communities and Children’s Secretary, Carl Sargeant said:

“I’ve enjoyed meeting the staff and volunteers at the Lifepoint Centre and seeing the work that has been done with the grant from the Community Facilities Programme.

“The centre will now be well placed to provide access to vital services and to provide volunteering, education and training opportunities well into the future. The range of activities on offer will provide people of all ages with a chance to socialise and build new friendships.

“The Community Facilities Programme is not just about improving buildings. It’s also about empowering local people to get more involved with their community as a way of improving their daily lives.

“The programme has to date provided funding totalling over £16 million to 60 projects across Wales.”

Economy Secretary speaks to business about challenges of EU Exit

Earlier today the Economy Secretary chaired the first meeting of a working group made up from the Council for Economic Development which includes business representatives, Wales TUC and Wales Coop. The working group has been specifically established to focus on the impact that the UK's exit from the EU will have on the business sector in Wales.

Ken Skates said:

"I am pleased to be chairing this new working group which will facilitate joint working between the business sector and Government and help us to develop increased understanding of the challenges and opportunities presented by the UK's exit from the EU.

"We have been regularly discussing EU exit at the Council for Economic Development, and at other fora, but this new group will allow that joint working to evolve into practical interventions that can help and support businesses at this unprecedented time.

"Since the referendum we have been engaging widely with businesses right across Wales to understand the risks and opportunities of Brexit, and just this morning I was speaking to our Anchor Companies and our growing medium sized companies about this very issue.

"We recognise of course that businesses have concerns around the uncertainty ahead and about specific issues around access to the Single Market and tariff and non-tariff barriers. But there will also be potential opportunities presented by Brexit including around procurement and developing a really strong brand for Wales and it is important that we work together to explore those opportunities.

"This working group will also provide a useful opportunity for us to hear views on the sector's priorities for trade, post Brexit. We are working hard to protect our share of European trade during the Brexit negotiations and beyond, with an emphasis on full and unfettered access to the single markets and a smooth transition but we also want to focus on supporting businesses looking to enter new and expanding markets around the world.

"Just last week a trade mission of Welsh companies set off to Qatar and Kuwait with a view to expanding their share of markets in the Middle East. We will continue to work proactively with companies wishing to drive up their exports and to support them through the

Brexit transition period.”

A new budget for Wales

This budget is a significant milestone in Wales’ devolution journey as, from April 2018, Wales becomes responsible for raising a proportion of its own revenue – from Wales’ 2 new taxes, land transaction tax and landfill disposals tax– to spend on public services.

The outline draft Budget 2018-19 is being laid against a continued background of financial uncertainty. It is set against one of the longest periods of sustained and unnecessary austerity in living memory and ongoing ambiguity about the future of important European funding streams.

The Welsh Government is publishing 2-year revenue plans for 2018-19 and 2019-20 in a bid to provide certainty and stability for local government and the health service as they plan for the future. 3-year capital plans, worth almost £5bn, have been published, boosting infrastructure investment across Wales.

The capital plans make use of £375m of borrowing over three years to deliver large-scale strategic investments. Borrowing requirements will be reviewed every year.

The draft Budget includes the recently announced agreement with Plaid Cymru which will bring stability to Welsh public services and allow the £15bn budget to proceed. The Welsh Government’s revenue plans include:

- An additional £230m in 2018-19 and £220m in 2019-20 for NHS Wales
- Protection for social care and education
- No cuts to the Supporting People grant – an additional £10m will be allocated in each year to maintain 2017-18 levels
- Investing £70m over 2 years for the flagship childcare offer
- An extra £10m to tackle homelessness in each year.

Capital plans over the 3 years include:

- Releasing £340m, as part of our £1.4bn investment, towards the flagship commitment to build 20,000 affordable homes
- £50m to develop a new rail station and park and ride facility in Llanwern;
- An extra £40m to accelerate our 21st Century Schools programme;
- An extra £90m for the NHS Wales capital programme
- Capital funding will be ear-marked in reserves to buy new rolling stock for the new Wales and Borders franchise, subject to the outcome of the procurement process.

The Finance Secretary will today also announce new progressive rates and bands for land transaction tax (LTT) and landfill disposals tax (LDT), which will replace stamp duty land tax and landfill tax, respectively in Wales from April.

The new residential rates for LTT will see the average first-time buyer paying no tax at all and all buyers of residential properties costing up to £400,000 paying the same or less tax than they currently do.

The standard and lower rate of LDT will remain consistent with the tax rates for landfill tax for the first 2 years but a new unauthorised disposals rate will be introduced, set at 150% of the standard rate.

Professor Drakeford said:

“This is a new budget for Wales and marks another important milestone in our devolution journey as we prepare to take on new tax and borrowing powers from April.

“Rather than just setting out our revenue and capital spending priorities, this draft Budget is the first to outline the decisions we have taken to raise a proportion of our own revenue to support public services.

“Using these new powers, we have been able to introduce progressive and innovative tax plans, which will make a real difference to people’s lives, change behaviours and deliver improvements to all our communities.

“Last year, in the toughest of times, we laid a budget to provide stability and ambition for Welsh businesses, public services and citizens. Today, the economic context has darkened further.

“The UK government’s decision to plough on with its flawed policy of austerity means we continue to face cuts to our budget. By the end of the decade, it will have been cut in real terms by 7% since 2010 – £1.2bn less to spend on vital public services.

“On top of this, the UK government’s £3.5bn of unallocated cuts to public spending for 2019-20 continue to cast a shadow over our plans for the future – this could mean a further cut of up to £175m to the Welsh budget depending on where the unallocated cuts fall.

“Despite this, we have published two-year revenue plans to provide stability for public services so they can plan for the future and ambitious three-year capital proposals to build a more secure and prosperous Wales.

“Today we are announcing the high-level portfolio allocations with detailed spending plans being published in 3 weeks’ time.

“We have worked hard to protect our valued public services from the worst effects of austerity, and this year is no exception. Our spending plans, together with our progressive tax plans, demonstrate our commitment to Taking Wales Forward and delivering prosperity for all during these difficult times.”

A shortlist of 4 new Welsh tax ideas will also be published alongside today's outline draft Budget. Each of these ideas will be developed further over the course of this year and one new tax idea will be proposed to the UK Government in 2018 to test the Wales Act powers.

The 4 shortlisted ideas are:

- A levy to support social care
- Vacant land tax
- A disposable plastic tax
- Tourism tax

Ahead of the publication of the Draft Budget, the Finance Secretary visited the Glan Llyn housing development in Llanwern, Newport to see how Welsh Government investment is making a difference to people's lives. The latest phase, which has received more than £850,000 through the Welsh Government's Social Housing Grant and is led by Pobl Group, consists of 27 units, providing affordable homes in the city.

Kathryn Edwards, Director of Homes and Communities at Pobl Group said:

“Welsh Government grant funding has enabled us to deliver 27 new homes for social rent at Glan Llyn in Newport. Welsh Government support is also helping Pobl Group deliver 3000 new affordable homes in Wales, for rent or purchase, over the next 5 years.”