

Ken Skates demands £700m from UK Government for scrapping electrification across South Wales

Proposals for powers over rail infrastructure to be devolved to Welsh ministers should now also be progressed with immediate effect, Economy Secretary Ken Skates has said.

In a letter to UK Transport Secretary, Chris Grayling MP, Mr Skates described the decision as “extremely disappointing” and demanded answers on how and when Welsh communities would see the money promised for electrification of the mainline to Swansea.

Ken Skates wrote:

“Funding and delivery of electrification to Swansea was announced in 2012, and restated in 2014 by the Prime Minister David Cameron. There was a commitment for £105m for the delivery of the Cardiff-Bridgend section of the Main Line electrification scheme, part of a wider investment estimated at £700m to electrify the line to Swansea.

“The scheme would have delivered important journey time, reliability, efficiency and emissions benefits, promoting economic growth across South Wales. For the UK Government to announce the cancellation of this scheme at this stage and through the press, with no prior warning, was hugely disappointing.

“Yesterday’s announcement did not describe how the £105m promised would be allocated to the Welsh Government now that the Cardiff-Swansea scheme has been cancelled. Neither did it address the hugely damaging historic underspend in Wales over recent years.

“Passengers across Wales experience poor network reliability, low speeds, and capacity constraints which results in a much smaller proportion of people choosing to travel by train than in England and Scotland. It is imperative that our rail infrastructure gets the urgent funding it needs to deliver the fast, reliable and frequent services needed to support our communities and businesses, and to grow our economy.”

Mr Skates pointed out that although the Wales route area has around 11 per cent of the railway track, since 2011 it has only benefited from around 1.5 per cent of the money spent by the UK Government on rail enhancements.

He added:

“This is damaging to our economy and to our communities and either urgent investment is needed to correct this historical under-investment and the £700m shortfall, or the long awaited proposals to devolve powers to Welsh Ministers over rail infrastructure should be progressed with immediate effect, alongside a fair and proportionate funding settlement.

“I would welcome a commitment from you to ensure the estimated £700m funding that would have been provided to deliver electrification to Swansea is instead ring-fenced for projects in Wales. This must be in addition to a fair proportion of funding allocated to Wales for other rail enhancements in the future.”

[Have your say on a new small business rates relief scheme for Wales](#)

In 2017-18, the Welsh Government is providing more than £110 million of rates relief for small businesses. The new permanent scheme will maintain this level of investment.

A consultation opens today looking at whether the scheme could provide more support to the small businesses that need it the most.

This could involve redirecting relief from certain businesses, such as national chains which occupy multiple small premises across Wales, to support businesses which are more likely to benefit.

Funding would then be reinvested in making the scheme more generous for small businesses like local shops, cafes and restaurants which might only operate from one or two premises.

In considering how the scheme could be made more generous, the consultation also looks at whether the different thresholds for relief could be increased, how much this would cost and whether, as a result, more businesses would benefit.

The consultation also looks at whether any additional types of businesses should be excepted from the scheme. Current exceptions include non-domestic properties like car parks and phone masts, as well as those occupied by councils, police and crime commissioners or the Crown.

In addition to the above, the consultation asks how the permanent scheme could be used to support certain industries or sectors, such as childcare , should there be a robust evidence base to do so.

The Welsh Government is also asking for any other views from ratepayers about how the permanent SBRR scheme could continue to be developed in the future to ensure it is responsive to business needs. Questions include whether support should be permanent or time-limited and whether it should be focused on businesses that are in line with Welsh Government priorities – whether social, economic or environmental.

Launching the consultation today, Mark Drakeford said:

“We want to provide as much certainty and security for small businesses as we possibly can. One of the best ways we can do this is by confirming that we will be introducing a £110m permanent SBRR scheme in 2018 and, in doing so, extending a tax cut that will help boost long-term economic growth for Wales.

“Today marks the start of an extensive consultation with ratepayers, business representatives, other taxpayers and local authorities. Their views are absolutely essential to making this scheme a success and we want to work with them closely, constructively and attentively. I urge everyone to have their say before the consultation closes on Friday 13th October.”

Purnima Tanuku OBE, Chief Executive of National Day Nurseries Association (NDNA) said:

“We wholly welcome this consultation. Relief on Business Rates would make a huge difference to a childcare sector beset by underfunding and rising costs. Nurseries are so important to the economy, employing many thousands of people and allowing parents to work. Business Rates have been increasing at a time when settings just cannot afford to pay more, impacting on fees to parents and relief would help to balance nursery books and keep costs to families affordable.”

[Warm Homes Nest – Report reveals benefits for homes and businesses](#)

[Welsh Government Warm Homes Nest](#) (external link) provides all householders in Wales with access to advice and support to help them reduce their energy bills. This includes a referral for eligible householders for a package of free home energy efficiency measures such as a new boiler, central heating system, loft or cavity wall insulation, or renewable technologies.

In 2016/17, the Welsh Government provided £19.5m for Nest and a further £3.9m has been levered in through the GB-wide Energy Company Obligation.

- Over 5,500 households received free energy efficiency measures.
- Average energy bill savings for households who had measures installed are estimated at £410 per year.
- 264 households benefited from new or additional benefits, with an average increase in household income of over £1,800 per household per year. This equates to a £482,500 potential increase in benefit take up this year.
- 382 households benefited from a Warm Home Discount rebate worth £140 off their electricity bill; this represents a total saving on energy bills of over £53,400.
- 77 households benefited from receiving support from their water companies. HelpU and Water Direct. They are collectively estimated to make direct savings of £14,300.

Since 2011, 190 opportunities have been created by Nest including jobs, apprenticeships and training. All installations have been carried out by Wales-based small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs).

One company that has directly benefited from its involvement in Nest is QRL Radiator Group, based in Newport. QRL have been supplying radiators to Nest since January 2014, all made from steel produced by TATA steel. Over 153,000 QRL radiators have been installed through Nest.

Speaking during a visit to QRL yesterday Lesley Griffiths said:

“Today’s report shows Nest continues to contribute impressively to job creation and growth in Wales. Since the scheme started in 2011, all installations have been carried out by Wales-based enterprises and over 190 opportunities have been created in the process.

“We should rightly be proud of Nest’s impact, both economically and environmentally. There is, though, no room for complacency. Tackling fuel poverty in Wales remains a significant challenge. That is why I am investing over £104 million in Welsh Government Warm Homes schemes over the next four years to improve a further 25,000 homes.

“I am confident Nest will continue its success in 2017/18. I look forward to seeing many more households who have been struggling to heat their homes benefit from the help the scheme provides”.

AMs trumpet musical instrument amnesty

The Welsh Government and National Assembly for Wales joined forces to ask Assembly Members and all staff to bring in any unwanted musical instruments so they can be provided for use in Welsh schools, who are in need.

The pilot is ahead of a national musical instrument amnesty in November.

Llywydd Elin Jones and Cabinet Secretary for Education, Kirsty Williams both reaffirmed their commitment to ensure that all people across Wales are able to participate in and experience arts and culture, including music.

Kirsty Williams said:

“I am committed to the idea that if a child is inspired to pick up an instrument, whatever instrument it may be, that they have the ability to access one and develop their performance and playing skills.

“That is why I am delighted with the first Welsh Government and National Assembly for Wales Musical Instrument Amnesty. Whether it’s an unused ukulele or forgotten French horn, we want to help get these instruments into the hands of those young people who would give them a new lease of life.”

Presiding Officer Elin Jones AM said:

“I recently took part in a Ceredigion Schools Music Service orchestra for people who are learning an instrument for the first time; I played the maracas.

“Music is an important part of life; it lifts our mood, energises us and gives us a way to express ourselves, which is why it is crucial to overcome barriers to young people playing. Learning how to play an instrument can be a challenge, and having access to a good quality instrument is so important.”

The Welsh Government/National Assembly for Wales Musical Instrument Amnesty Week took place between 12-19 July.

The national amnesty will happen in November and will be coordinated through the Welsh Local Government Association. So if you can donate any good quality unwanted instruments you may have tucked away in your lofts and cupboards, then keep your eyes peeled for details.

'Iron Ring' sculpture unveiled as part of £630k project at Flint Castle

The winning design was selected by a panel from the Welsh Government and sponsored body, Arts Council for Wales, following a nation-wide competition to obtain proposals for an artwork concept celebrating Wales' Year of Legends.

Begun in 1277, Flint was one of the first castles to be built in Wales by Edward I. The King later moved on to construct the north Wales castles of Beaumaris, Conwy, Caernarfon and Harlech, which today form a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

The £395k monumental Iron Ring sculpture, plans for which have been unveiled today by Ken Skates, Cabinet Secretary for Economy and Infrastructure, could potentially measure up to seven metres high and 30 metres wide, and symbolises a giant rusted crown representing the relationship between the medieval monarchies of Europe and the castles they built.

The installation will be engraved with carefully chosen associated words and sayings to be developed with the local community.

When opened in 2018, visitors will be able to walk along the sculpture and enjoy elevated views across the estuary and of the castle.

Its location at Flint marks the event where the crown was famously transferred from one medieval dynasty to another, as described in Shakespeare's Richard II. Flint Castle was the setting as Richard II surrendered the crown to Henry IV – a momentous event impacting the history of Britain and Europe.

“The sculpture will take a balanced form, some buried beneath the ground, the remainder projecting into the air, to demonstrate the unstable nature of the crown,”

said George King, from George King Architects Ltd – the architects behind the ambitious design.

“The sculpture has been carefully designed to work at many scales. From afar its striking, iconic form resembles a giant ancient artefact, washed up on the shore of the Dee Estuary.

“Its scale and dynamic appearance means that it will become an instantly recognisable landmark for the area.

“However, as you approach the sculpture it becomes obvious that the piece is more than just a sculpture.”

The engravings will celebrate local landmarks, historic towns and their links with Flint Castle, as well as content about the flora and fauna of the Dee estuary.

The sculpture is part of planned wider developments outlined in a newly-commissioned regeneration strategy for Flint foreshore, aimed at greatly enhancing the visitor experience at Flint Castle, strengthening and building on community relations within the town and helping with the regeneration of this unique area.

Ken Skates said:

“It gives me great pleasure to announce plans to help improve the visitor experience at this fascinating site steeped in history during Wales’ Year of Legends.

“Throughout 2017 we are celebrating the incredible people from our past, captivating places and stories that have shaped Wales’ rich heritage and culture.

“In its prime, Flint Castle played a pivotal role in not only shaping the future of Wales but that of the UK and Europe. The Iron Ring sculpture is a perfect way of marking this significance while attracting more people to visit the site, bringing positive economic benefits to the area.”

Further improvements to the castle include the installation of a stainless-steel spiral staircase within the north-east tower and a masterplan to consider the wider regeneration of the Flint Foreshore.

The £217k staircase has been fitted in the same position as the original masonry staircase, allowing visitors access to the tower and an opportunity to enjoy magnificent views from a new platform installed at the top of the stairs.

The regeneration approach is in its early stages, but will look at options for the improvement to the current facilities along the shore. This will include working with Flint’s RNLi, rugby club and football club to improve current facilities, and working with partners such as the Local Authority to develop visitor services at Flint Castle.