

[EU funding helps promote cutting-edge technology in Wales](#)

The £5.8m Centre for Photonics Expertise project will bring together expertise from across Wales and establish collaborative research projects to encourage industries to embrace photonics technology in the use of lasers, sensors and fibre-optics.

Led by Glyndwr University, the three-year project will be delivered in partnership with South Wales, Bangor and Aberystwyth universities, which will work with companies across West and North Wales and the South Wales Valleys in areas such as manufacturing, healthcare, telecommunications, energy and agriculture.

Announcing the funding, Professor Drakeford said:

“It is vital Welsh industry has access to the knowledge and expertise in our highly-acclaimed universities so we can drive innovation and put Wales on a global platform for success.

“This investment highlights the importance of securing replacement funding from the UK Government to support growth and jobs in Wales following our exit from the EU.”

Caroline Gray, director of Wrexham Glyndwr University’s OpTIC Technology Centre, said: “We are delighted to receive this funding and to be leading the project with our partners and other sectors in West Wales and the Valleys.

“The centre will bring together all areas of academic expertise across photonics technology, helping industry develop the next generation of processes and products while boosting business growth and efficiency for the Welsh economy and future generations.”

Photonics is the science of using light to generate energy, detect or transmit information and other forms of radiant energy whose quantum unit is the photon.

[High street retailers to get £2,500](#)

cut to their rates bills

The Welsh Government is investing £23.6 million to enhance and extend the high street rates relief scheme in 2019-20.

Around 15,000 businesses, including shops, restaurants, cafes and pubs will receive enhanced support to pay their rates bills from April 2019.

Professor Drakeford said:

“The high street is at the heart of local communities, providing a central hub for people to shop, eat and socialise.

“The current economic conditions and competition from the internet and out-of-town shopping centres, have hit some high street businesses hard.

“This enhanced high street rate relief scheme for 2019-20 will ensure more ratepayers across Wales receive support to pay their bills and can continue to provide much-needed services to their local communities.”

The Welsh Government set up the high street rates relief scheme in April 2017 to provide bespoke support to retailers affected by the 2017 revaluation by the independent Valuation Office Agency and by the growth in internet sales.

It was extended into 2018-19 to provide further support for high street businesses.

The enhanced scheme for 2019-20 will go further than in previous years providing eligible businesses with up to £2,500 off their non-domestic rates bills.

Some 15,000 retailers throughout Wales with a rateable value of up to £50,000 will benefit from the scheme and rates bills will be reduced to zero for properties with a rateable value of up to £9,100.

Local authorities will also receive an additional £2.4 million to provide discretionary rates relief allowing them to respond to specific local needs. This funding will be provided to councils through the revenue support grant in 2019-20.

Together, an extra £26 million will be made available to help small businesses pay their bills in 2019-20 – this is the full consequential Wales received in the UK Autumn Budget as a result of decisions made in relation to business rates in England.

The enhanced high streets rate relief scheme is in addition to the wide range of support, which the Welsh Government provides to small businesses in Wales.

Every year, it provides more than £210 million to help businesses pay their rates bills and last year the Welsh Government announced a £100 million programme of targeted regeneration investment to support businesses in areas which need it most and a £20 million town centre loans fund to help bring underused, empty or derelict sites in town centres back to life.

Professor Drakeford added:

“This extension to the high street rates relief scheme and the additional funding for discretionary rates relief, together with the permanent small business rates relief scheme, which has been in place since April 2018, combine to offer timely and targeted support for ratepayers across Wales.”

[£2m funding boost to help make Wales a play friendly country](#)

Wales was the first country in the world to legislate for play. Under the Children and Families (Wales) Measure 2010, local authorities have a duty to assess for and then secure sufficient play opportunities for children in their areas. This aims to ensure every child has a wide range of challenging and interesting opportunities to play and enjoy their leisure time.

The legislation also directs local authorities to consider the diverse needs of all children and young people in their area, including those with disabilities.

The funding, for the 2018-19 financial year, will help local authorities implement the actions identified in their 2018-19 play action plans, and deliver their 2019 play sufficiency assessments.

Projects awarded funding include:

- Small grants to community councils to enable them to provide play provision which meets the needs of the local community;
- Equipment for street play and road closure – high visibility jackets, cones, whistles, balls, etc;
- Inclusive after-school and holiday provision for children with complex needs;
- Pilot projects involving children aged 11-14 years, enabling them to access Welsh medium play provision during school holidays;
- Saturday play sessions for young carers aged 7 to 17;
- The renewal of playgroup surfaces to enable better access for all and the inclusion of sensory rooms in childcare and play settings;

- Outdoor and indoor play equipment for local schools, encouraging them to make the equipment available out of school hours.

Funding will also be available to provide play workers with bespoke training on how to recognise and support children and young people with substance misuse issues, child criminal exploitation, self-harm and suicide, and to support transgender young people.

Minister for Children, Huw Irranca-Davies said:

“In Wales, we’re proud that we lead the world on ensuring our children have the legal right to play. I am firmly committed to ensuring we continue to improve opportunities for all children and young people to play in safety and, in particular, to support improved access to play for children with disabilities.

“There’s increasing concern about the mental and physical health of children and young people. At the same time, we know playing makes a significant contribution to the fitness and well-being of children and improving perceptions of well-being amongst children and their families.

“I am therefore really pleased to make £2m of funding available to help our local authorities deliver sufficient play opportunities for children and young people in their areas. This will help ensure Wales truly is a play friendly country that meets the needs and rights of all our children.”

The Welsh Government recently hosted the 2018 Four Nations Play Symposium, which provided an opportunity for government ministers, officials, national play organisations and partners from across the four UK nations to share their learning and experiences of strategically providing for children’s play.

Huw Irranca-Davies added:

“I’m delighted Wales hosted this year’s Symposium. It was a productive and thought-provoking event that will inform our work to continue to make Wales a play friendly country.”

[£80m for Glastir and Sustainable](#)

Production Grant

The funding package will support the delivery of environmental outcomes including on agriculture pollution and provide support to farmers facing the considerable challenges of Brexit.

Funding of £62.9m will extend all Glastir Advanced agreements, including underlying Glastir Entry elements where they are in place, all current Glastir Commons agreements and all current Glastir Organics contracts to 2021. There will also be a further round of Glastir Small Grants. This will help to ensure ongoing environmental outcomes and a smooth transition to the new Public Goods Scheme.

A further £16m allocation will be made to the Sustainable Production Grant to help farmers prepare for the introduction of regulations to protect water quality from agricultural pollution and improve their nutrient management. The current Farm Business Grant will also continue and will support farmers to invest in equipment and machinery to increase their business sustainability and profitability.

The Cabinet Secretary said:

“I am pleased to be able to announce a significant package of support for farmers today through the Rural Development Programme. It will help the industry face the upcoming challenges of Brexit alongside the immediate and ongoing problems associated with agriculture pollution. Importantly as well, the funding will help farmers transition to our new Land Management Programme.

The extension of all Glastir Advanced, Commons and Organics agreements to 2021 will provide certainty for land managers and ensure the ongoing delivery of important environmental outcomes.

Last month I announced I will be introducing all-Wales regulations to help the industry tackle the unacceptable levels of agricultural pollution on our water. I have allocated £16m through the Sustainable Production Grant to support the industry in this work.

As we prepare to leave the EU in just over three months, it is more important than ever that we do all we can to improve the productivity of farm businesses across Wales – the continuation of the Farm business grant will do just that.

We want to see a strong future for farming in Wales after we leave the European Union and are doing all we can, working with the industry, to achieve this. This funding package will maintain the lasting benefits of the current RDP, help farmers adapt and help the agricultural sector thrive in a post-Brexit world.”

Buses and Taxis at the heart of new proposed Welsh Government legislation

Talking directly to passengers and key industry stakeholders – local authorities, bus and taxi companies and passenger groups – the consultation will seek views on proposed changes to the legislation which governs how bus services are planned and delivered, together with reform of the taxi and private hire vehicle licensing regime.

Transport Secretary Ken Skates said:

“Bus services across Wales provide important access to education, training, work, healthcare and simply enjoying a day out. They are a vital link between our communities and an important tool in supporting a vibrant economy.

“Wales’ bus network accounts for about 100 million passenger journeys each year compared with approximately 30 million annual rail journeys. Creation of a fully integrated transport system requires bus provision in Wales to meet the needs of passengers and to be integrated with rail and other transport services.

“Taxis and private hire vehicles also provide a vital public service, connecting people to places when alternative public transport services are not available or viable. The contribution that the sector makes to the night-time and tourism economy in many of our communities cannot be under-estimated and the industry is a vital component in our ambitions for public transport in Wales.

“We have listened to feedback from passengers, local authorities, bus operators, taxi drivers and interest groups about the current provision of public transport and taxi and private hire vehicle services. Everyone agrees change is needed.

“The proposals are aimed at providing better planning and solutions for delivery, putting passengers, local communities and people who currently do not consider public transport as the option to meet their transport needs, at the heart of the decision making.”

The proposed legislative changes are aimed at putting the necessary tools and standards in place to help us realise our ambition.

Ken Skates added:

“I see the integration of our transport network as a key priority –

we need to provide an integrated public transport system in Wales that is safe, reliable, punctual, environmentally-sustainable and accessible to all.”

“On a practical level, we want to bring a uniformity to our public transport and private hire vehicles that will protect passengers, and ensure efficient, clean services.

“Our aim is to increase the number of people using public transport and encourage travellers to switch from private car use, reducing pollution and congestion. We want to see more people using public transport to get them where they need and want to be efficiently and on time.”