

Abolition of the Right to Buy moves a step closer

The Bill aims to protect the stock of social housing in Wales from further reduction, ensuring it is available to provide safe, secure and affordable housing for people who are unable to buy or rent a home of their own. It complements other actions being taken by the Welsh Government to increase the supply of housing.

Proposing the motion to agree the general principles of the Bill, Communities and Children Secretary Carl Sargeant said:

“This Bill aims to protect the supply of social housing from further erosion in the face of a high level of demand and a shortage of supply.

“Between 1981 and 2016, over 139,000 local authority and housing association homes were sold under these schemes. This has resulted in people in housing need, many of whom are vulnerable, waiting longer to access a home they can afford.

“By abolishing the Right to Buy and Right to Acquire, the Bill will also encourage social landlords to invest in new social housing safe in the knowledge that it won't be at risk of having to be sold after only a few years.”

Following the agreement of the general principles of the Bill, a [consultation on the information document](#) that will be issued to tenants is intended to be launched tomorrow. A series of tenant engagement events hosted by the Tenant Participation Advisory Service Cymru will form a key element of the consultation. The consultation will also focus on best practice for tenant engagement and will inform advice to be provided to social landlords on disseminating the information.

UK's first Development Bank to open in October in Wales

The Development Bank of Wales will provide the necessary growth finance and business support to attract, and retain micro businesses and SMEs within Wales.

It will seek to generate more than a billion pounds of investment to the Welsh economy over the next five years and, as the first of its kind in the UK, will provide Wales with a competitive business edge over the rest of the UK.

And today the Economy Secretary has confirmed that a further £35m of EU funding will be added to the £136m Wales Business Fund that was announced last year to support both start-up and existing small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs) across Wales.

This takes the new total of the fund to £171m and the Economy Secretary signalled that further funding for the Development Bank would be announced later in the year.

Ken Skates said:

“I am delighted to confirm that following Welsh Government approval of the business case, the Development Bank of Wales is set to be up and running by October.

“The Development Bank will be the first of its kind in the UK, addressing current market failures within business finance and providing focussed support for micro, small start ups and innovative businesses across Wales enabling them to become fitter, bigger and stronger.

“It will increase the availability of funding to SMEs to £80m per annum within five years and we anticipate that taking into account private sector leverage this will have a potentially transformational impact on the Welsh economy of over £170m per annum by 2021/22.

“To support the Bank we are extending the Wales Business Fund by a further £35m with EU funding. This will take the total of the fund to £171m, and we will have news of more money to support the Bank’s work later this year.

“The Development Bank will have its headquarter in North Wales with a strong presence across the whole of Wales and I look forward to the formal launch in October.”

Giles Thorley said:

“The creation of a development bank is innovative in approach and represents a significant step change in the way Government backed funding is delivered in Wales. It will be built on the solid foundations of the skills and experience already in place within the team.

“A thriving SME population across the whole of Wales is critical to

ensuring a prosperous economy. We are proud to have worked with some fantastic, ambitious businesses and entrepreneurs over the last 15 years and look forward to supporting even more as we transition to the new organisation.”

The Development Bank is a key part of the Welsh Government’s strategy to deliver a more prosperous and secure Wales. It will differ from Finance Wales not only in terms of the increased scale of funding available but also in the way it develops new products. This will be informed through the creation of an intelligence unit tasked with conducting research into the needs of Welsh businesses, ultimately enabling an improved response to changes in supply and demand in the market.

It will increasingly become self funding with the business model assuming that it will no longer need grant support for operational costs from next year onwards.

Local Government Secretary announces major shake up of council elections and details of new Local Government Bill

The proposals, which form part of a 12 week consultation on electoral reform, are designed to make it easier to vote and easier to be entitled to vote. If enacted, they would amount to the biggest change to the Welsh electoral system since 1970 – when the voting age was lowered to 18.

Under proposals set out in the consultation, 16 and 17 year olds in Wales would be given the right to vote in council elections – under powers transferred to the National Assembly for Wales under the Wales Act.

The consultation also looks ahead to when the UK is due to leave the EU in 2019 and asks whether all foreign citizens normally resident in Wales should have the right to vote in local elections.

Different options to make it easier for people to vote and modernising the voting system are also laid out in the consultation. These include electronic voting at polling stations and remotely, mobile polling stations and voting at places other than polling stations such as supermarkets, local libraries, leisure centres and railway stations.

The consultation also asks whether voting could take place on other days of the week rather than just Thursdays.

Changes would also be made to the voting system itself, with each council being given the option of using a First-Past-the-Post or Single Transferable Vote system. Councils would have to consult with local residents before deciding which system to use.

Following on from a White Paper earlier this year, the Cabinet Secretary has also announced details of a Local Government Bill that would see mandatory regional working between Wales' 22 councils on areas such as economic development, strategic land use planning and strategic transport.

These services will all be undertaken in three large regions: North Wales, Central and South West Wales and South East Wales. There will be scope for sub-regional working as part of these larger groupings.

Councils would also be required to work regionally on other services like education improvement, social services, additional learning needs and other aspects of land-use planning but have more flexibility on the footprint in which they work together.

Certain specific functions would have to be undertaken regionally, for example, social services being aligned with the local health board boundaries.

Joint Governance Committees, comprising elected members of each constituent local authority, would be set up for each of the 3 regional areas and would oversee the services.

As part of a new, more transparent relationship between people and their councils, it will also become mandatory for local authorities to broadcast their meetings.

In addition to the above there will also be a root and branch review of town and community councils. The evidence-based review will be conducted by a panel chaired by former Assembly Members, Gwenda Thomas and Rhodri Glyn-Thomas. The review will consider what needs to change so that the most local level of government works well and delivers results. The review is expected to start this summer and will take a year.

Cabinet Secretary for Local Government, Mark Drakeford, today joined a workshop to encourage young people to vote held at Llamau's Learning 4 Life in Bridgend. Llamau is the homelessness charity for the most vulnerable Young People and Women in Wales.

Mark Drakeford said:

"Today I'm announcing a Bill and a wholesale package of reforms that will change the way councils work and the way they are elected. We want to make it easier to vote and easier to be entitled to vote.

"There's no reason why 16 and 17 year olds can marry, pay taxes and join the army but can't vote in our elections. There's no reason

why, in the twenty-first century, we can carry out all sorts of daily transactions online but can't, as of yet, vote online. That's why we're setting out a number of different ideas to modernise the electoral system and putting out a call for the public to share their ideas with us too.

"More broadly, if we're to achieve real and lasting change in our councils then we have to change the way they work. I have spoken to and consulted widely with councils on how best to do this and we now have a Local Government Bill that will strengthen services through systematic and mandatory regional working and build a new relationship between citizens and their councils.

"I look forward to working with local government on the Bill and I urge everyone to have their say on this bold and pioneering package of electoral reforms we're setting out today."

Director of the Electoral Reform Society Cymru, Jess Blair said:

"The time is right to have this conversation on how we do things differently when it comes to voting and engaging people around politics. This consultation on electoral reform is a welcome step forward and covers a huge amount of things that we believe could genuinely improve the way politics works in Wales.

"The inclusion of votes at 16 in this debate is about what kind of democracy we want to be – one which engages our young people in their futures, and secures a fair franchise.

"And we know it works. Sixteen and 17 year olds threw themselves wholeheartedly into the Scottish referendum, with 75% voting and 97% saying they would vote in future elections.

"Last week we launched our project, Missing Voices, which is looking at the barriers to voting in Wales. Therefore, we are delighted this is happening and believe this is a significant opportunity to have a debate about how we create a healthier democracy."

Chief Executive of Llamau, Frances Beecher said:

"We're excited about the proposals from Welsh Government about revitalising the democratic process in Wales and extending the vote to 16 and 17 year olds.

"We work with homeless young people and vulnerable women across Wales. Homeless young people are among the people who are most affected by government policy, but often the most forgotten about. It's vitally important to us that we make sure that they are able

to express their opinion to change the things that are important to them.

“It is only through listening to and counting the views and the opinions of the most vulnerable people in Wales that we can make significant and real change for them. The turnout of 18-25 year olds at the recent general election shows us that young people really are interested in shaping the policies of their country and we need to pay attention to that.”

[Investment boost for green clean tech firm will create jobs and boost global exports](#)

Econotherm UK Ltd design and manufacture heat pipes and heat pipe exchangers for use in diverse industrial sectors to recover waste heat from furnaces, boilers, ovens, thermal oxidisers, engines and incinerator exhausts.

The recovered heat is converted to usable hot water, air or thermal oil for use in process, space heating and electrical generation to significantly reduce clients' fuel costs and CO2 emissions.

It supplies blue chip clients worldwide and the investment in two 25 ton gantry cranes will help speed up production, increase competitiveness and enable them to handle these large orders more effectively.

Backed by £50,000 from the Welsh Government's Business Finance Scheme it will create 10 new jobs and safeguard a further 12 jobs.

Economy Secretary Ken Skates said:

“Econotherm operates in the growing green clean tech sector and its technically advanced products are exported around the world – boosting Welsh exports while helping to reduce CO2 emissions and cut fuel costs.

“The technology it has developed in Wales was recognised early on with Green technology awards from both Shell Oil and UK Carbon Trust and I am pleased the Welsh Government is supporting this expansion project that will deliver business benefits and create new jobs.”

Econotherm's patent protected technology means it can recover waste heat from

aggressive environments such as highly acidic or very dirty particulate matter exhausts. Its products can deal with a wide temperature range, from -50 to 1000C; with the ability to extract up to 25% more waste heat energy than conventional heat exchangers and in aggressive environments where conventional equipment is considered unsuitable.

MD Mark Boocok said:

“After 10 years of hard work, mostly during abnormal global economic conditions, the company is now recognised globally for its technology and can list some of the largest companies on the planet as customers.

“From the outset Econotherm was supported very effectively by the Welsh Government in the form of grants and equity investment from Finance Wales. This continued support to increase capacity is very timely and will ensure more efficient production of new orders in the pipeline.”

Since established in 2007 the company has delivered custom built solutions, ranging in size from a few kilowatts to several megawatts, to businesses operating across almost all industrial sectors.

More recently its products have been recognised by major petro chemical organisations including Dow Chemical and China National Offshore Corporation who have bought and successfully deployed Econotherm heat recovery equipment and have placed orders for larger equipment.

It has also recently been appointed as the only approved heat pipe air pre-heater supplier to Exxon Mobil where it is currently working towards securing orders for refineries in Asia and the USA.

Its customers range from QinetiQ and Toyoda to Spirax Sarco, Ideal Standard and Saint Gobain. It has recently secured an order for a unit to be deployed on a US Navy Vessel adding to previous units delivered to the military in the UK and USA. It has a global network of distributors and exports to North America, the Middle East, India, Europe, Scandinavia and Mongolia, with recent orders from Uruguay and India.

[Superfast growth afoot for Ammanford](#)

sock maker

During a visit to Corgi Hosiery today, Minister for Skills and Science Julie James heard how the arrival of superfast broadband has played a vital role in helping the company develop its worldwide exports.

Originally established in 1892 as a sock maker for local miners in the area, Corgi now has a reputation as the go-to luxury sock brand with its customers including the Royal Family.

Since connecting to superfast broadband, Corgi's ecommerce business has really taken off making it a significant exporter, with new major distributors in South Korea, China, Japan and Australia.

The superfast connection has seen the company's website www.corgisocks.com, and internet retail business flourish. Corgi is now able to diagnose and resolve faults in factory machinery remotely, as soon as they occur. Staff can also speak face to face with client distributors around the world without having to leave the comfort of their own office in South Wales.

Minister for Skills and Science, Julie James said:

"It's been great to see the positive effect superfast broadband has had on Corgi Hosiery.

"Superfast Cymru is making a real difference in delivering superfast broadband infrastructure throughout Wales, enabling businesses which choose to access the technology to deliver a better quality service and succeed in a global market. Corgi is a great example of this.

"Across Wales over 645,000 premises can now access superfast broadband thanks to the programme, and many more will be added before the end of the year. Thanks to Superfast Cymru, Wales has the best availability of superfast broadband among the devolved nations, with more than eight out of ten premises with access."

Corgi's joint managing director, Chris Jones, said:

"As soon as the fibre broadband rollout programme came within reach of our premises, we signed up, and we haven't looked back.

"Having access to better connections is helping our company grow and improve our efficiency. We had identified the potential for increasing trade in global markets via our e-commerce business. But we knew we needed faster and more reliable connections to attract, interact and support new international clients and provide them with the highest quality of customer service and care.

“Fibre broadband has helped transform the way we run our business and we’re much more efficient now. Our orders, invoices, accounts and stock control system are always available, so our staff can access what they need whenever they need it.”

Ed Hunt, Superfast Cymru programme director for Openreach, said:

“High-speed connectivity is having an enormous impact on the way we work, live, learn and play.

“Engineers from Openreach, the local network business which is part of BT Group are working hard to roll-out superfast broadband across Carmarthenshire and Wales as quickly as possible and it’s fantastic to see a company like Corgi embracing this new technology and reaping the benefits.

“Thousands of homes and businesses in Carmarthenshire can do the same as Corgi and connect to their best ever broadband speeds when they sign up with a service provider, and we’d encourage local people to check out their options.

“It’s a highly competitive market, so people could potentially be surfing at much higher speeds at a similar cost to their current service. Once you’ve made the switch to superfast, like the team at Corgi, we’re confident you’ll never look back.”

Superfast Cymru is the partnership between the Welsh Government, BT, UK Government and European Regional Development Fund, bringing faster broadband to areas which would otherwise not receive it.

The Welsh Government also runs the Access Broadband Cymru scheme, which can offer assistance to those not able to access superfast broadband by providing grant aid to help them receive it through other technologies. Further details are available on www.gov.wales/broadband