

Welsh food & drink exports up by almost 20%

This compares to a 9.5% increase for the UK as a whole over the same period.

Provisional data for the year ending December 2016 shows the value of food and drinks exports from Wales rose to £337.3million, a 19.8% rise on the same period in the previous year.

While the EU still remains the largest importer of Welsh food and drink, accounting for 72.4% of exports, there have been major increases in exports to the Middle East and North Africa.

The top Welsh food and drink export for the year was meat and meat preparations, accounting for almost 22% of all food and drink exports.

The latest data follows a push by the Welsh Government to raise Wales' global profile. This includes support for Welsh food and drink producers to take part in a number of trade visits during 2016 and 2017 to key markets including Ireland, Spain, Netherlands, Belgium, Italy, Denmark, Norway, Canada and the United Arab Emirates, with further visits planned for the remainder of the year to Germany, the USA and France.

It also follows the recent TasteWales event, organised by the Welsh Government, which brought together Welsh food and drink producers, global buyers and food industry professionals in the largest ever showcase of Welsh food and drink.

Welcoming the figures, the Cabinet Secretary for Environment and Rural Affairs, Lesley Griffiths said:

“We are extremely proud of our high-quality food and drink and recognise the enormous value it brings to our economy. These figures are further testament to the reputation our food and drink is gaining around the world.

“I am delighted we are continuing to support the sector to expand its reach to new markets. Following our successful TasteWales event some of our producers are pursuing interest from buyers from all over the world.

“There are undoubtedly challenging times ahead. The EU remains our biggest export destination by quite a stretch. It is further proof of the threat a hard Brexit poses to our economy, which is why we continue to push the UK Government to priorities full and unfettered access to the single market and to avoid any new barriers which impede Welsh food and drink businesses from operating effectively.

“However, the increase in exports to markets outside of the EU is encouraging and with the quality of products we can boast in Wales I am confident we can continue to make excellent progress in new markets.”

Minister sets out Valleys taskforce priorities

Speaking a year after the Ministerial Taskforce for the South Wales Valleys was launched, the Minister said the taskforce’s plan – Our Valleys, Our Future – will be published on July 20.

The taskforce was set up to work with communities and local businesses across the South Wales Valleys and aims to deliver lasting economic change; create good-quality jobs closer to people’s homes, improve skill levels and bring prosperity to all.

The taskforce has spent the year taking evidence and listening to people living and working in the Valleys – these #TalkValleys conversations have helped to shape the taskforce’s priorities for the future and Our Valleys, Our Future.

The upcoming plan will build upon infrastructure investments already announced for South Wales, including the Metro, affordable housing and M4 relief road.

In a statement in the Senedd today the Minister set out some of the taskforce’s priorities, ahead of the plan’s publication next week;

- Closing the employment gap between the South Wales Valleys and the rest of Wales by getting an additional 7,000 people into work by 2021, and creating thousands of new, fair, secure and sustainable jobs;
- Creating new strategic hubs in six areas across the Valleys, including the new automotive technology business park for Ebbw Vale, announced by Ken Skates last month;
- Exploring the concept of a Valleys Landscape Park, to help local communities build on their many natural assets, including the potential for community energy generation and tourism.

Mr Davies said:

“We are launching Our Valleys, Our Future at a time of unprecedented infrastructure investment in South Wales – the South Wales Metro, the two city deals, our commitment to invest in

affordable housing and the M4 relief road all offer opportunities for people living in the Valleys. These are opportunities which we must, and will, maximise.

“I am determined the taskforce will make a positive difference to Valleys communities and we must now work together to turn this vision into action. This is the beginning of a longer-term journey, which is being shaped by people working and living in the Valleys.

“I am excited to be part of this work in this region, which is so close to my heart, where I was born and brought up. I am hopeful that together we can make transformational, long-lasting change through this approach.”

Third of students eligible for maximum grant under new support system

From 2018/19, Wales will be the first country in Europe to introduce equivalent maintenance support across full-time and part-time undergraduates, as well as post-graduates.

Government estimates show that a third of full-time students will receive the maximum grant, which is £8,100 for a student living away from home.

The average household income for a student in the current system is around £25,000. Under the new system such a student will receive around £7,000 a year in non-repayable grant.

Part-time students will receive parity of support for maintenance costs on a pro-rata basis. Students will be supported through a mix of grants and loans equivalent to the National Living Wage.

Speaking in the Assembly chamber, the Cabinet Secretary also confirmed that in 2018/19 there will be a return to the pre-2012 policy of an inflation-linked maximum tuition fee level. This will be in place for the next three academic years. This follows Universities Wales’s confirmation that all Welsh universities will become Real Living Wage employers. They have also confirmed that they will sign-up to the Government’s Code of practice: Ethical employment in supply chains.’’

Kirsty Williams said:

“It is now widely recognised that high living costs are the greatest barrier to young people studying at university. Our new progressive system is a fundamental shift in the way we support

students and our institutions.

“By investing in the success of full-time, part-time and post-graduate students, Wales will be the only country in Europe to have taken this huge step forward.

“Having confirmed that students will receive support equivalent to the National Living Wage, I welcome Universities Wales’ announcement that all Welsh universities will become living wage employers. We can be proud that Wales’ sector will be the first in the UK to achieve this.”

Commenting on fee levels, Kirsty Williams said:

“Welsh higher education operates in a UK-wide and international context. We are leading the way with our shift to support living costs. But policy in England also has a direct knock-on effect.

“Wales needs a stable and sustainable higher education sector that delivers for our communities and economy. Our universities must be able to compete domestically and internationally. Jobs, prosperity and national well-being depend on it.

“We will address the real-terms reduction in the value of fee levels by once again linking them to inflation for the next three years. I can confirm that they will continue to be paid for through a publicly supported loan system and only repaid after graduation, linked to income-levels.”

Reviewing the current system, the Diamond Report recommended a shift to maintenance support, it said:

“There is a strong consensus, particularly amongst students, students’ representative bodies, support staff and widening participation professionals, that the level of maintenance support available is inadequate to cover actual costs incurred by students and that this is a bigger issue for students than the level of tuition fees and tuition fee support. There is also a view that students from middle-income households, in particular, are inadequately catered for under current arrangements.”

'Organ donation figures moving in right direction' – Vaughan Gething

Organ Donation and Transplantation Activity Data for 2016-2017 published by NHS Blood and Transplant (NHSBT) shows in Wales:

- the number of donors after brain stem death increasing by four, from 36 in 2015-16 to 40 in 2016-17
- an increase of one in the number of patients residing in Wales receiving cardiac transplants
- an increase of five in the number of patients residing in Wales receiving a live Kidney transplant
- an increase in the overall consent/authorisation rate for organ donation from 59% in 2015-16 to 64% in 2016-17
- a decrease of 18.5% in patients who died whilst on the waiting list for their transplant – from 27 in 2015-16 to 22 in 2016-17.

Welcoming the data, Vaughan Gething said:

“These figures are encouraging, but while there are people dying while on a waiting list for their transplant we must work harder.

“I want to encourage everyone across Wales to talk with their loved ones about their organ donation decision. While we know awareness and understanding is increasing, it’s really important the Welsh public share their decision with their family.

“It’s good to see the data for Wales is moving in the right direction and the number of people in the UK known to be alive thanks to organ transplants has broken the 50,000 mark. It was also positive to see Organ Donation and Transplantation data for Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic being published by NHSBT as a supplementary report.

“I was pleased to hear the recent news that England are considering following our and Scotland’s lead by introducing a soft opt out system of organ and tissue donation.

“We were proud, back in 2015, to be the first country in the UK to do this and are pleased with what we’ve achieved so far. We believe the benefits of a soft opt out organ donation system to those needing a transplant are literally, life changing.”

Ambitious plans to almost double the number of Welsh speakers launched

Cymraeg 2050 – a million Welsh speakers sets an ambitious direction for the language and acknowledges the need for systematic planning if we are to realise this vision.

Concerted action is required now to grow Welsh-medium education. Our aim in doing so is to provide people with the skills to be able to use the language with their families, in their communities and the workplace. And to enable those things to happen, we need to create an environment where people can and want to use the language.

The strategy sets two overarching targets:

- The number of Welsh speakers to reach 1 million by 2050;
- The percentage of the population that speak Welsh daily, and can speak more than just a few words of Welsh to increase from 10 per cent to 20 per cent by 2050.

To achieve these targets, we will be looking to drive the following transformational changes across three themes:

Theme 1 – Increasing the number of Welsh speakers

- Make rapid progress to expand Welsh-medium early years provision by 150 nursery groups over the next decade to facilitate a seamless transition into Welsh-medium education;
- Increase the proportion of each school year group receiving Welsh-medium education from 22% (based on 7,700 7 year old learners in 2015/16) to 30% (about 10,500 in each year group) by 2031, and then 40% (about 14,000 in each year group) by 2050;
- Transform how we teach Welsh to all learners in order that at least 70% of those learners report by 2050 that they can speak Welsh by the time they leave school;
- Increase the number of primary teachers who can teach in Welsh from 2,900 to 3,900 by 2031 and 5,200 by 2050; increase the number of secondary teachers who can teach Welsh from 500 to 900 by 2031 and 1,200 by 2050; and increase the number of secondary teachers who can teach through the medium of Welsh from 1,800 to 3,200 by 2031 and 4,200 by 2050;
- Reform post-16 Welsh-medium education and skills offer to ensure that young people have the opportunity to continue developing bilingual skills to support a prosperous economy.

Theme 2 – Increasing the use of Welsh

- Review the legislation which underpins the Welsh language to ensure it offers a strong foundation for promoting and facilitating the use of

Welsh.

- Ensure that Welsh Government leads by example by promoting and facilitating increased use of Welsh by our own workforce.

Theme 3 – Creating favourable conditions

- Develop a new regional focus to economic development to help all parts of Wales to benefit from prosperity and support each area to develop its own distinctive identity
- Transform the Welsh language digital landscape with particular focus on language Technologies
- Develop a national programme to increase understanding of bilingualism

These themes are interdependent, as are many of the aims identified under each theme. For example, increasing the number of children going to a Welsh-medium school is not enough in isolation – those children must also be given opportunities to learn and speak the language outside of the school gates.

We will publish work programmes at regular intervals during the lifetime of the Strategy which will detail what action is required to achieve our goal. The first of these for the period 2017-21 (also published today), will outline our detailed key priorities for the initial phase of the new Strategy.

We are very clear that it is our responsibility as a Government to set the direction and provide leadership for this work. However, everyone has a part to play, and we want everyone to contribute to realising the ambition.

The First Minister, Carwyn Jones, said:

“Welsh is one of our treasures, and is part of what defines us as a nation – whether we speak the language or not.”

“Reaching a million speakers is a deliberately ambitious target to so that the Welsh language thrives for future generations. There are challenges ahead, but we can undoubtedly face those in the knowledge that we are building from a position of strength.

“If we are to succeed, we need the whole nation to take ownership of the language. Politicians can’t impose that, but politicians can lead. By raising our expectations and adopting an ambitious vision, we have the potential to change the future outlook for the language”

Minister for Lifelong Learning and Welsh Language, Alun Davies said:

“It was an honour to be given the important role of developing the vision of reaching a million Welsh speakers by the First Minister and I am proud to be launching the Cymraeg 2050 strategy today. I am confident it will put us on the right path towards facilitating

an increase not only in the number of speakers but also in the use of the language within our communities, workplaces and families.

“We know that language policy needs to be rooted in consensus and democratic strength. Together, by renewing our energy, adapting to an ever changing landscape, we can enable the Welsh language to grow – a living language for all that unites us as a nation.”