

Council tax payers in Wales continue to pay less than England

The Welsh Government release shows that average Band D council tax for Wales in 2017-18 stands at £1,420, £171 less than the average Band D in England, which stands at £1,591.

The average band D council tax rise in Wales is also lower than the figure for England based on estimates published by the Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy. The average increase in England in 2017-18 is 4.0% and the increase in Wales is 3.3%.

Through the Council Tax Reduction Scheme (CTRS), the Welsh Government has also maintained its support to almost 300,000 households who need assistance in meeting their council tax bills. Of these approximately 220,000 pay no council tax at all.

Welcoming today's figures, Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Local Government Mark Drakeford said:

"Councils here are facing some real financial challenges but these latest figures show we are protecting local government from the worst of the cuts handed down by Westminster and, in doing so, protecting the taxpayer; a situation that has not been replicated on the other side of the border.

"In 2017-18, we are increasing funding for local government by £10 million compared to 2016-17. Under the funding floor we introduced in the Local Government Settlement, no council will have to manage on less than 99.5% of the cash provided to them last year, and most will have more.

"While our Council Tax Reduction Scheme (CTRS) is playing a key role in tackling poverty in Wales we're currently looking at how we can make the system fairer for those who less able to contribute. We'll make a further announcement on our plans during the course of this Assembly term."

Independent recommendations will have

positive impact on the IPFR process says Vaughan Gething

The NHS Wales IPFR process is the mechanism used by all health boards in Wales to make decisions on access to treatments that are not routinely available for individual patients.

The review was established in July 2016 with a particular focus on considering the “clinical exceptionality” decision making criteria for IPFR and the scope to reduce the number of IPFR panels in Wales. Central to the review was the patient perspective.

The review’s comprehensive findings were published in January and are available [here](#).

Ahead of his Oral Statement in the Senedd this afternoon, Vaughan Gething said:

“My approach to this review has been to be open, inclusive and transparent from the outset involving all political parties, the public and the NHS in Wales.

“I’m pleased that the consensus is that this is a helpful piece of work that makes thoughtful and pragmatic recommendations that will help health boards deal with what are sensitive and very often complex decisions. I am particularly pleased that the patient voice has centre stage in the report.

“The good news from the report is that many aspects of the system are working well and the review group have made helpful recommendations to strengthen those and improve upon other aspects of the process.

“The review concluded that the principle for making decisions at an individual patient level about access to a treatment should be based upon the level of expected clinical benefit and whether the treatment offers reasonable value for money.

“With regards to reducing the number of IPFR panels, the review group have recommended it would not be the best way forward.

“The review has suggested improvements to the overall process to support health boards make these highly complex and sensitive decisions. This includes clarifying when it is appropriate to use the IPFR process, and strengthening quality assurance.

“I would like to thank the review group, once again, for their hard work and commitment in completing this complex piece of work. I would also like to express my gratitude to all of the patients who

have been involved in the review process. The evidence they've provided in the workshops that have taken place across Wales has been invaluable.

"I have written to all of the health boards to confirm the implementation of the recommendations by September.

"I believe the recommendations in this report, when implemented, will have a positive impact on the IPFR process. It will make the system more easily understandable and less prone to being misused. Something I'm sure the people of Wales will welcome."

Communities Secretary launches consultation on park home commission fees

The consultation follows a review of the sector commissioned by the Welsh Government. While the review made several recommendations to improve standards in the sector, barely a quarter of park home operators contributed detailed financial information to the review.

Announcing the consultation, the Cabinet Secretary said:

"The review into the industry rightly highlights that commission rates are a complex issue with the potential for significant consequences. I have therefore been considering the matter very carefully before deciding to hold a public consultation.

"I have concluded that we should examine further the level of the commission charged by site owners, but, in light of the very strong representations I have received I am currently of the view that there may be a case to reduce or even abolish the commission, though I will of course want to take full account of consultation responses before coming to a final view.

"The options I will consider will include reducing or even abolishing the commission rate, as well, of course, as retaining the status quo. I would therefore like to invite the park home owners to let me have the evidence which they believe would justify the latter option, but I sincerely hope all interested parties will take advantage of the opportunity this consultation will provide to submit further information and scrutinise the available evidence."

Informal engagement will begin immediately and the formal consultation will be published as soon as possible.

Welsh innovation receives global recognition for helping to save and improve lives

Backed by over £3m Welsh Government funding and run in collaboration with Innovate UK, the Small Business Research Initiative (SBRI) has gained interest from other UK devolved nations as well as attracting attention from Ireland, Sweden and Australia.

Launched in Wales in 2013, the SBRI offers businesses – many of which are small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs) – the opportunity to bid for research and development (R&D) funding to develop technology-driven solutions for specific challenges facing the public sector.

Run as competitions each challenge focusses on an area of public service where solutions either do not yet exist or where partial solutions might be improved.

Areas where solutions are already being progressed include the improvement of health and patient care, medical treatments, road safety, renewable energy generation and environmental management.

To date, 14 SBRI competitions have been run in Wales, resulting in 66 contracts valued at approximately £5m being awarded to companies to develop Welsh public sector solutions: 44 contracts at Phase 1 (developing the proposal) and 22 contracts at Phase 2 (creating a prototype with a view to bringing it to market).

One of the first SBRI challenges run in Wales was by Betsi Cadwaladr University Health Board (UHB) which wanted to develop a solution to improve patient care by helping nurses and carers reduce administration duties so they could spend more time with patients.

The target of this challenge was for nurses to spend 10% more time with patients. After two years of practical collaboration between the UHB's nurses and a small Bangor start up company, Elidir Health, a software solution has been developed which promises to increase nurses' time with patients not just by 10% but potentially up to 23%. Indeed this challenge has been so successful that Elidir Health is now working with Cwm Taf UHB as well as Betsi Cadwaladr UHB to explore how this software can be adopted across both health boards' pediatric units.

The Welsh Government's own Transport department has also made use of SBRI challenges to develop solutions to identified issues, for example improving road safety and reducing the number of motorcyclists killed or seriously injured on Welsh roads.

Of the bids submitted to this challenge two projects were selected, with the first example already complete.

Armourgel Ltd has developed a motorcycle helmet liner that will significantly reduce the impact to a rider's head during a collision. This can make the difference between a serious brain injury and a minor one.

The second project has developed a junction alert system which will soon be trialed on Welsh roads. The project will be able to test the system in peak motorcycling season and by September the company will have fully tested the system in all weather conditions and will report on its market potential.

Skills and Science Minister, Julie James is keen to point out that both these projects have the potential to save the lives of motorcyclists not just on Welsh roads but across the world, saying:

"The Small Business Research Initiative is a great example of how the public and private sector can work together to tackle societal challenges in innovative ways and deliver benefits to both public sector bodies and industry as well as the people they serve.

"My aim now is for our SBRI programme to become a mainstream tool in the Welsh public sector, promoting innovation and driving forward our technological potential.

"SBRI can open up huge opportunities for Welsh businesses and help solve some of the toughest challenges we will all face in the future and we plan to use it."

[New Transport for Wales Headquarters part of wider work to unleash the potential of Welsh regions](#)

The news comes ahead of a major speech by Ken Skates in which he will say that Wales must grow its regional economies and unleash their potential to drive balanced economic growth across the country.

The Economy Secretary will be addressing a business audience at Coleg y Cymoedd later today and will set out his vision for a prosperous and secure

Wales.

Speaking ahead of his speech, Economy Secretary Ken Skates said:

“I’m incredibly proud that during the last Assembly term the Welsh Government directly supported almost 150,000 jobs across the country, with many more in local supply chains.

“That has helped us secure a lower unemployment rate than England, Scotland and Northern Ireland and a faster rate of employment growth than the UK average.

“However as an economy we still face major challenges, particularly in addressing the regional differences in our economy and ensuring that the benefits of economic growth fall more fairly across Wales.

“Since 2010 our approach has focussed on developing key sectors of our economy on a national basis. This has resulted in some stunning successes, particularly in advanced manufacturing areas like aerospace and in the creative industries.

“However, the growth of those sectors and the skilled jobs they have created have not fallen equally across Wales and so now is the time to write the next chapter of Wales’ economic story.

“As we approach the challenges of the future I believe we need to take a new approach by developing the competitive edge of each region of Wales more fully. This will mean empowering each region to develop its own specialised sectors and more distinct economic identities.

“Allied to this we need to change our economic development structures in government to work in closer partnership with those regions, utilising drivers, such as skills, transport connectivity, procurement and digital infrastructure to accelerate economic growth in those areas.

“The way to address these regional differences is not to turn one area against another, but to work together to ensure the fruits of growth are shared by everyone. It’s a question of fairness and that’s why I want to grow the regional economies of Wales and unleash their potential to drive more balanced growth across the

whole of the country. Only that way can we make real our promise of better jobs closer to home and ensure every area of Wales becomes more resilient to the economic challenges we face over the next few years.

“Today I am delighted to announce that the new Transport for Wales headquarters will be located in Pontypridd bringing hundreds of high quality jobs to the area.

“This is great news for the town but it needs to be the start of something bigger. We need to work with partners in the local authority, the private sector as well as local colleges and universities to ensure this injection of jobs becomes a spark for wider local regeneration and prosperity.

“Later today I will meet young people training at the rail engineering centre at Coley y Cymoedd, a £3m partnership between Welsh Government and the college and a great example of the partnership working and forward thinking that is key to regional economic success.

“By looking ahead to the opportunities arising from the £1bn plus we will spend on electrification, Metro and rail infrastructure, we must work together to ensure more of the benefits of that spend remain in our local communities and benefit local supply chains.

“We face major economic challenges which will only be increased by our exit from the EU, global instability, welfare cuts and UK Government austerity.

“Our response must be to work together and to develop more resilient regional economies if we are to build a stronger and fairer economy for everyone in every area of Wales.