

European collaboration is vital to Welsh universities

Housing and Regeneration Minister Rebecca Evans, who is the lead Minister for the Welsh Government on the Ministerial Forum on EU negotiations, met Professor Colin Riordan, who sits on the Welsh Government's European Advisory Group and Vice-Chancellor of Cardiff University and Pro Vice-Chancellor for Research, Innovation and Enterprise, Professor Kim Graham.

Rebecca Evans said:

"We heard from Professor Riordan and Professor Graham how much they value collaboration with partner universities and how vital it is that the UK continues to participate in the Erasmus+ and Horizon programmes.

"We share this view, which is why we have consistently lobbied the UK Government on the continued participation. Since 2014 Wales has received over €40m from Erasmus+, supporting more than 200 projects across a range of sectors. In addition Wales has secured more than €98m from the Horizon 2020 programme.

"While the investment is important in demonstrating the value of participation, our involvement goes much further by raising the quality of research and innovation and extending Wales' global reach."

Cabinet Secretary for Education Kirsty Williams, who is also attending the Brexit meeting, said:

"A no deal Brexit would be extremely damaging for our higher education sector. Not only would it deny our students and institutions access to vital opportunities but would also jeopardise those academic links that universities in Wales have worked so hard to establish over the past 31 years.

"We want Wales to continue to be a global and outward looking nation but you can't do this in isolation. That's why a programme like Erasmus+ is so beneficial because it means that staff, pupils and students can learn from what their peers are doing across Europe and bring that knowledge, expertise and international outlook back with them. These benefits reach across our schools, FE and HE institutions, training providers and adult education and youth organisations.

"We have also repeatedly and strenuously raised the need for the UK Government to share information and operational plans with us as we

work with our institutions on planning post-Brexit.”

Communities for Work shows our commitment to address unemployment and support those furthest from the labour market – Eluned Morgan

Committed to getting more people into work, the Minister for Welsh Language and Lifelong Learning visited Rhyl to meet some of the people helped into employment thanks to the Communities for Work programme.

The programme is a key part of the Welsh Government’s Employability Plan to educate, train and prepare people for work, and remove barriers to employment.

Almost 6000 people across Wales have been helped into employment through Communities for Work which will provide a total of £70.5million of support by 2020.

The programme sees community based professionals work with young adults not in education, employment, or training (NEET) and unemployed or economically inactive adults to understand their individual complex barriers to employment and help them gain the skills, training and experience they need. Targeted groups include those from jobless households and/or Black Minority Ethnic groups, and those with barriers to employment such as limited or no skills, disabilities or work limiting health conditions, and care or childcare responsibilities.

The Minister said:

“It’s really encouraging to see a rise in employment, but unemployment and economic inactivity are still issues in Wales. Programmes such as Communities for Work and the Parents, Childcare and Employment programme (PaCE) show our commitment to tackling these issues.

“There’s strong evidence that employment provides the most sustainable route out of poverty. Communities for Work engages with people in our most deprived areas, to provide support for those who need it most and ensure everyone, regardless of background, has the opportunity to contribute to our society.”

Funding to help third sector prepare for Brexit

Cabinet Secretary for Local Government and Public Services Alun Davies today announced £150,000 has been made available from the European Transition Fund (ETF) to fund research into how the Brexit process could impact on community services in Wales and help the sector plan for all eventualities.

The research will help community groups ensure any contingency planning and preparations are proportionate, as well as act to reassure both to the sector and to communities that benefit from these services.

Alun Davies, who announced we would be working with the Wales Council for Voluntary Action (WCVA) to deliver the project said,

“Whatever form of Brexit we end up with, leaving the EU will cause disruption. That is why we have been working hard to plan for all possible outcomes.

“As we approach Brexit, third sector bodies will also need to think carefully about how they respond to emerging changes and deliver vital services to our communities. We all want to ensure public services in Wales continue to deliver the highest possible standards to the people of Wales after we leave the EU and this funding can go some way towards that end.”

Ruth Marks, Chief Executive of the WVCA said,

“We’re really pleased to have secured this funding. There are lots of uncertainties around Brexit and the potential implications it presents for Wales’ most vulnerable groups and communities. This funding will help us better understand Wales’ reliance on the third sector to deliver essential community services and how withdrawing from the EU may impact on the services delivered to those communities most in need.”

The Welsh Government has been seeking innovative ways to support partner organisations through the Brexit process, and considering what advice, guidance and financial support we can provide to help them deal with this change.

The ETF was announced in January as part of our Brexit plans to directly help

businesses and public services for the significant changes ahead. The ETF will provide a combination of financial support and loan funding, and will support the provision of technical, commercial, export-related and sectoral-specific advice for businesses and public sector bodies in Wales.

£2.5m boost for student entrepreneurship in Wales

The Youth Entrepreneurship grant will see students benefit from £2.5m of Welsh Government funding over the next three years, enabling Universities and Colleges to accelerate student entrepreneurship and strengthen connections, particularly with partners to support students on the journey to starting a business. It's in addition to the range of support available through Business Wales and Big Ideas Wales for younger entrepreneurs in Wales to engage with higher and further education institutions.

Economy and Transport Secretary Ken Skates explained:

“The Economic Action Plan makes clear our commitment to developing a strong entrepreneurial culture in Wales, working with key partners to develop a connected ecosystem to encourage business start-up and growth.

“Our Colleges and Universities play a vital role as regional and global leaders in research and innovation and to ensure our future generations are provided with the right skills for this changing world. To ensure this happens, it's vital that we look at all ways of working to create the right connections between academia, government, entrepreneurs, our corporates and risk capital groups. We all our part to play in creating a positive environment for entrepreneurship to thrive. This is an approach amplified by the Be The Spark movement and one that resonates with me as I so often hear about the positive impact of collaboration between our Welsh institutions and the business community.

“Through the Economic Action Plan, I have highlighted our ambition to prepare students for entrepreneurship and establish targets for the number of school, college and university leavers starting a business as a call to action. This targeted £2.5 million is a further commitment towards this goal, enabling our institutions to encourage a spirit of enterprise, build the network of entrepreneurship champions to drive connectivity with partners and support learners into the business world.

“This is an exciting time to be an entrepreneur in Wales, and I

look forward to seeing our Universities, colleges and students leading the way as we look to develop and support the next wave of entrepreneurial talent.”

Last year, Jack Thompson, 21 a young entrepreneur studying in Aberystwyth designed a fare splitting app that solves the problem of dividing petrol costs between friends when one person is the ‘designated driver’. Jack credits the support he had to develop his entrepreneurial ambitions. After participating in the University Entrepreneurship Society he attended the Boot camp to business, ran by Big Ideas Wales.

Jack said:

“Boot camp was amazing. I left feeling so inspired and found myself constantly thinking of new business ideas. I’d encourage anyone with even the start of a business idea to get involved, as it will give you the information and tools you need to get your business off the ground.”

“Loneliness and social isolation is a growing threat to public health: We must tackle it together”– Huw Irranca-Davies

The Welsh Government is today launching a national conversation on what can be done to combat loneliness and social isolation in Wales.

The National Survey for Wales 2016-17 found that 17% of the population of Wales, around 440,000 people, reported being lonely, while younger people were more likely to be lonely than older people: 20% of 16-24 year olds were lonely, compared with 10% of those aged 75 or over.

Loneliness and social isolation can result in a number of physical and psychological problems including premature death, sleep problems, high blood pressure, poor quality of life, increased risk of heart attack and stroke, depression and suicide. Research demonstrates that loneliness has an effect on mortality that is equivalent to smoking 15 cigarettes a day.

The economic consequences of loneliness and isolation can also be significant. The Eden Project found the cost of social isolation and disconnected communities in Wales could reach £2.6bn a year.

The Welsh Government's Programme for Government, Taking Wales Forward includes a commitment to develop a nationwide and cross-government strategy to address these issues. The strategy will cover people of all ages and all backgrounds.

The Welsh Government's proposed approach to tackling the issues is to focus on intervening early to prevent chronic loneliness, given its wider effects on health and well-being, and resultant pressure on NHS and social care services. However, there is also a need to ensure that support is available for those who are, or who become, chronically lonely.

The Welsh Government has identified some areas where action can make a significant contribution to reducing loneliness and social isolation:

- Early years – Improving an individual's experiences in childhood will play a significant part in shaping their future, including developing strong and positive relationships later in life;
- Housing – Ensuring people live in safe and secure neighbourhoods, in the right accommodation;
- Social Care – Providing compassionate, dignified care plays a critical role in ensuring people can be healthy and remain independent for longer;
- Mental Health – Ensuring people maintain good mental health is crucial in maintaining good health, well-being and independence, with access to appropriate support services when necessary;
- Skills and employability – Ensuring people have the right skills to secure decent, sustainable employment opportunities.

Minister for Children, Older People and Social Care, Huw Irranca-Davies said:

“Loneliness and social isolation are growing problems not just here in Wales but across the UK and beyond – and with 1 in every 5 people now experiencing loneliness and/or social isolation. More of us now understand these can affect anyone, at any age, for a wide variety of reasons. They can, and do, have a significant impact on people's physical and mental health. It risks becoming a major public health crisis unless we act now, and work together to tackle the problem.

“As a government, we are committed to securing the best possible health, well-being and quality of life for all people in Wales. Preventing people from becoming lonely and isolated must be a national priority for us, because it will not only improve people's lives, but it will also help reduce demand for health and social services in the future.

“However, neither the Welsh Government nor one agency on its own can combat these issues. As a government, we need to be able to foster the right environment and create the right conditions for others to design and deliver solutions that best meet their needs.

“I am keen to hear from people living in all parts of Wales as part of this consultation process. Working together, we can ensure our communities and the social fabric that binds them together, are as resilient as they can be.”