

Wales leads the way in helping people access crucial council tax discount

The Welsh Government has been working to tackle low rates of awareness and take-up of the Council Tax Reduction Scheme and the various council tax discounts and exemptions which are available to support households.

It has been working jointly with MoneySavingExpert.com – the UK's biggest consumer website – over the last 6 months – to develop simple and consistent advice to ensure all households in Wales have access to information about their council tax entitlements.

MoneySavingExpert.com has an ongoing campaign to make sure people diagnosed as 'severely mentally impaired' and who are eligible for certain benefits receive the correct discounts on their council tax.

The Welsh Government has dedicated web pages and a simple guide that summarises the key information about the council tax support households can receive. It has also worked with MoneySavingExpert.com to improve communication, particularly about entitlements available to those diagnosed as 'severely mentally impaired'.

MoneySavingExpert.com is now calling on the rest of the UK to follow Wales' lead following an investigation it conducted across England, Scotland and Wales last year, which raised concerns about the inconsistent messages households receive on council tax discounts.

Finance Secretary Mark Drakeford said:

"Ensuring every household in Wales receives what they are entitled to in terms of council tax support is an important part of the Welsh Government's commitment to making council tax fairer.

"Our guide brings together all the relevant information and puts it in one place. I am grateful to MoneySavingExpert.com – and local councils – for helping us to develop this important and useful guide.

"We will continue to work with councils to encourage and ensure consistency in approaches to administering discounts and exemptions, not just for those with a severe mental impairment, but for everyone who is eligible."

Martin Lewis, founder of MoneySavingExpert.com, said:

"What should happen is those diagnosed as 'severely mentally impaired' and their carers should be informed of and offered the

'SMI' discount. Yet disgracefully, our investigation showed the majority of councils gave out the wrong information. Some staff in our cold-calling exercise even told people the discount doesn't exist, meaning there are huge differences in take-up across the country. That simply isn't right. We should be looking to help some of society's most vulnerable, not hinder.

"Plaudits to the Welsh Government for listening to our call and taking on the cause of those with a 'severe mental impairment'. Proper communication and education of staff is a great start.

"The hope is now that we can point to Wales as an example, the rest of the UK will follow suit. We'll continue to make sure the changes made by the Welsh Government have actually worked for those trying to start a claim and suggest improvements if we come up with any."

A full list of eligibility criteria is available on the [Welsh Government website](#) or [this leaflet](#).

"Ambition is critical for Wales' historic past and future" – Lord Elis-Thomas

Priorities for the Historic Environment of Wales sets out how Wales' historic sites can make a contribution which extends beyond their value to society and to our knowledge of the past.

The vision is based on four interdependent themes:

- Caring for our historic environment – to build on the great strides that we have made in recent years in caring for our irreplaceable historic sites
- Making skills matter – so that we have the skills across the sector to support their conservation
- Cherishing and enjoying our historic environment – to encourage greater access and more active participation in looking after our heritage
- Making our historic environment work for our economic well-being – to fully unleash the contribution the historic environment can make to Wales' economy

Lord Elis-Thomas will tell Assembly Members:

"The historic environment sits at the very centre of our cultural

identity as a nation. It tells the story of Wales' place in the world, from its early beginnings to its role at the heart of the making of the modern world. It's a precious inheritance that we must care for and pass on to our children to love, cherish and enjoy.

Many observers, both inside and outside Wales, have hailed us for having the most progressive legislation for the protection and management of the historic environment anywhere in the United Kingdom. I am very proud of that.

We now have a real opportunity for our outstanding heritage to be positioned at the centre of our future well-being. Heritage contributes so much to so many of our goals: a healthy and active lifestyle, our economic vitality, opportunities for lifelong learning and skills and a sustainable environment.

The historic environment is at the heart of our sense of pride as a nation – let's now unlock its potential to form the backbone of local economies, both rural and urban".

New Brexit Portal to support business

The new Business Wales Brexit Portal has been designed to provide companies in Wales with up-to-date information and advice on a range of crucial issues including international trading and workforce planning.

It also includes a diagnostic tool that helps businesses to identify how prepared they are for Brexit, recommends actions they should take to increase their resilience and signposts them to additional sources of support.

The new Brexit portal builds on the advice and guidance that has been provided to Welsh companies by both the Welsh Government and Business Wales since the referendum.

It has been designed to make it as easy as possible for business to access the most up to date information and support that they need.

Economy Secretary, Ken Skates said:

"With just over six months to go until we leave the EU, the UK Government's approach to Brexit means businesses in Wales are still left with far too many unanswered questions about what the future holds.

As Economy Secretary I am committed to doing all I can to help

companies in Wales prepare for the uncertainties and challenges ahead. This week we have announced multi million pound support for Advanced Manufacturing through our EU Transition Fund to help some of our largest companies up-skill and prepare for a post-Brexit world and I will be shortly announcing details of a further £1m to support SMEs to do the same.

The Business Wales Brexit Portal is another example of our proactive approach. It will build on the advice we have provided to businesses ever since the result of the referendum and make it easy as possible for them to access the support and guidance they need.

With advice on exporting, workforce planning, strategy, innovation, finance and people management, the Brexit portal is a practical and comprehensive resource that will also link to information that the UK Government is supplying in case of No Deal – which really would be a worst case scenario for Welsh business and something we are urging the UK Government to do everything possible to avoid.

These are challenging times but I hope the Brexit Portal will genuinely help businesses as they navigate the challenges of the months and years ahead.”

Commenting on the launch of the Business Wales Brexit Portal, Ben Francis, FSB Wales Policy Chair, said:

“The new portal will be a key tool to help SMEs navigate Brexit.

The portal will be a valuable tool in finding advice and providing a health check for businesses. Recent FSB research demonstrated that Welsh businesses are unprepared for a no-deal Brexit in particular, with only 15% of Welsh businesses having taken steps to prepare for this scenario. Therefore, a tool that aids businesses understanding of how they can prepare their business for Brexit is crucial for SMEs in Wales.

We welcome that Welsh Government has listened to our calls to launch the portal, and we would urge SMEs to take advantage of the opportunities to further understand the potential impact of Brexit on their business. We look forward to working with Business Wales, the wider business support services and fellow business organisations to publicise the arrival of the portal so that as many businesses in Wales as possible can take advantage of the Brexit Portal.”

The Welsh Government has also developed an app to support Welsh food and drink businesses to prepare for Brexit. This will be launched by the Cabinet Secretary for Energy, Planning and Rural Affairs Lesley Griffiths later today.

[Pay rise for doctors and dentists in Wales](#)

Mr Gething has confirmed that the Welsh Government has agreed in full the recommendations of the Review Body on Doctors' and Dentists' Remuneration (DDRB):

- a 2% base increase for salaried doctors and dentists, salaried General Medical Practitioners (GMPs) and independent contractor GMPs and General Dental Practitioners (GDPs)
- an additional 2% for independent contractor GMPs, salaried GMPs and to the GMP trainers' grant and the GMP appraisers' rate
- an additional 1.5% for Specialty and Associate Specialist (SAS) doctors.

Health Secretary, Vaughan Gething said:

"I am pleased to announce today that I have been able to implement the recommendations of the DDRB in full.

This pay rise, which will be backdated to 1 April 2018, recognises the value and dedication of hardworking doctors and dentists and their key contribution to the NHS in Wales. This deal goes beyond what was agreed for doctors and dentists over the border and is yet another reason why Wales is a great place to train, work and live."

Mr Gething added:

"Following years of austerity, imposed by the UK Government, we have committed additional funding to fulfil the DDRB recommendations. The reality remains, however, that our budgets are limited and so meeting a pay deal resulting from the lifting of the UK Government's pay cap without appropriate funding to follow presents a risk to the future funding of NHS Wales.

"I am also very happy that BMA Cymru Wales have agreed work in partnership with the Welsh Government and NHS employers to deliver the ambitions set out in A Healthier Wales, around the long term sustainability of the workforce, and delivery of the Primary Care Model for Wales.

"Together with our recent agreement on a pay rise for the rest of the NHS Wales workforce, this shows we are committed to investing

in staff to ensure they can continue to deliver excellent health and social care. Together with recruitment campaigns like Train, Work, Live this will help us create a workforce that can deliver our long-term vision for the NHS in Wales.”

Changes to the valuation of in-calf cattle for TB compensation announced

Animal owners are paid compensation for cattle slaughtered because of TB, based on the market value of the cattle concerned.

The valuation determines the market value of an animal based on the price the animal might reasonably obtain if it was for sale in the open market and was not affected or exposed to TB.

Following concerns that some cattle were potentially being valued as being in calf when they were not, a 12 month evidence gathering exercise was carried out by the Animal and Plant Health Agency (APHA) and the Food Standards Agency (FSA).

A total of 7,418 cattle, that were declared by their owner as being in calf were examined post mortem, of which 2,817 animals were found not to be in calf following slaughter. The total amount of extra compensation paid for those not to be in calf is estimated as in excess of £459,000 over a 12 month period.

The Cabinet Secretary has therefore announced from 1 November 2018, written proof of Pregnancy Diagnosis (PD) will now be requested at valuation stage.

Cattle owners will be allowed to request PD evidence, in an agreed format, from their veterinarian that can be presented at valuation stage, provided the PD has been carried out within the previous three months (90 days) of the date of valuation. This will allow the cattle owner to arrange for their animals to be examined before the TB test is due to minimise any disruption to normal farming routines.

The Cabinet Secretary said:

“Cattle owners are rightly paid compensation for cattle slaughtered because of TB. However, we had concerns that some cattle were potentially being valued as in calf when they were not.

“The study by APHA and FSA shows that this is a real issue and that is why I am introducing changes to the valuation and payment of in-calf cattle, with written proof of Pregnancy Diagnosis now being

required at valuation stage.

“These changes will come into force from 1 November this year. I urge all cattle owners to familiarise themselves with the new measures in advance of the changes being implemented and to contact their Official Veterinarian to arrange Pregnancy Diagnosis if appropriate.”