

Finance Secretary launches plan to end prison sentences for non payment of council tax

Regulations will be brought forward in early 2019 to prevent any more people being jailed for council tax debt in Wales, pending the outcome of a 12-week consultation.

Unlike other forms of civil debt, courts have the power to send people to prison for up to 3 months for non-payment of council tax. A recent judicial review, brought by a woman from Bridgend, highlighted the number of people being sent to prison for council tax debt, in some cases unlawfully.

Professor Drakeford said:

“My view is that getting into debt is not a crime. The sanction of imprisonment is an outdated and disproportionate response to a civil debt issue.

“There is significant additional cost to the public purse of imprisoning individuals and such action does nothing to address the reasons for the debt owed to the local authority or to reduce the debt. In many cases, it makes the situation worse.

“We must also consider the longer term impact on the wellbeing and future prospects of people who are committed to prison and the effect on their families. There is also a knock-on impact on other public services, as more support is often needed by someone who is committed to prison and their family.”

Cases of council tax debt have increased following the UK government’s decision to abolish council tax benefit in April 2013. In Wales, to mitigate the impact of this decision, the Welsh Government in partnership with local authorities, developed a national Council Tax Reduction Scheme (CTRS).

To increase uptake of CTRS by eligible households, the Welsh Government is running a campaign with local authorities and third sector organisations to raise awareness of the different types of support available to households.

Professor Drakeford added:

“The Welsh Government cannot take action in respect of the operation of the courts, as responsibility for this is not devolved.

“But we do have powers to amend the existing enforcement regime to

remove the power to commit people to prison in Wales for non-payment of council tax. I believe this is the right thing to do at this time.

“There are other, more appropriate enforcement actions which local authorities can use to seek payment of civil debts.”

The consultation about the removal of imprisonment for non-payment of council tax is the next step in the Welsh Government’s commitment to make council tax fairer.

[Removal of the sanction of imprisonment for non-payment of council tax](#)

[Paddington passengers peruse Welsh food and drink](#)

First Minister Carwyn Jones will call in to visit the eight Welsh food and drink companies who are showcasing their products at the station and offering passengers the opportunity to sample and buy a range of high quality Welsh produce.

Passengers will be able to savour the delights of products from across Wales, including award winning cheeses, preserves, cakes, ice cream and cured meats washed down with cider, ales and soft drinks.

It builds on previous events held at the station and is further recognition of the quality reputation of the Welsh food and drink sector in the UK.

Cabinet Secretary for Energy, Planning and Rural Affairs Lesley Griffiths said:

“Welsh food and drink has gained a growing and well-deserved reputation for uniqueness and high quality. We have ambitious targets to grow the industry by 30% to £7bn by 2020 and are very near to meeting this early.

“Today’s event is yet another opportunity for Welsh food and drink companies to showcase their products outside Wales and is further recognition of the regard the sector is held in.

“It is particularly timely as we prepare to leave the EU. The food and drinks industry is a key ‘foundation’ sector for us post-Brexit. We are determined to do all we can secure a resilient and thriving industry in Wales after leaving the EU.

“I hope passengers at Paddington enjoy savoring the Welsh delights on offer at the station and take the opportunity to snap up the high quality products on sale.”

[New £100m train depot to open in Taffs Well](#)

The Welsh Government will invest nearly £100m in the new Transport for Wales depot which will house and service 36 of the new Metro vehicles operating on the Taff Vale lines.

The depot will also become the base for 400 train crew, 35 Metro vehicle maintenance staff and a South Wales Metro integrated control centre employing 52 staff.

As part of the Welsh Government’s £194m investment in Wales wide station improvements, Taffs Well will also see its railway station being modernised, with a park and ride facility to improve commuter access to the South Wales Metro.

The new depot at Taffs Well will complement existing South Wales depots including the one in Canton, which will benefit from around a £5m investment to modernise maintenance facilities so it can support the new tri-mode rolling stock being introduced as part of the new rail service.

There will also be investment in enhanced stabling facilities in Treherbert and Rhymney, and an upgrade of the station at Rhymney to accommodate more and longer tri-mode rolling stock.

Ken Skates said:

“Public investment with a social purpose is right at the heart of our new approach to rail and in line with our Economic Action Plan, and we are determined to ensure that our £5bn investment in rail services maximises opportunities for Welsh business, stimulates the Welsh economy and develops the local skills base, creating and supporting as many local jobs as possible.

“The construction of the Taff’s Well depot presents one of the first opportunities for Welsh suppliers to directly benefit from our £738m investment in the South Wales Metro which will see us creating a sustainable and connected transport infrastructure. I am genuinely excited about the benefits of this public sector investment making a real and tangible difference to Welsh

businesses and communities.”

Clearance and construction work for the new depot is expected to start in 2019 and complete by mid 2022.

Transport for Wales will procure construction companies for the new depot through Sell2Wales and the Stride framework to ensure that economic benefits for Wales are maximised.

[Less reliance on hospitals & more care closer to home – Health Secretary outlines revolution in Wales’ health & social care](#)

The proposals are set out in the Welsh Government’s long-term plan for the future of health and social care in Wales, A Healthier Wales, which focuses on providing more joined-up services, in community settings – removing many of the current frustrations expressed by those both using and working within the system.

In the future people will only go to a general hospital when it is essential. The intention is to create even better care locally, with support and treatment available across a range of community-based services. This shift will mean that when hospital based care is needed it can be accessed more quickly,

The changes will begin immediately, with a £100million Transformation Fund to support the implementation of the plan. The funding will be targeted at resources to speed up the process, including the development of new integrated prevention services and activities in the community.

Vaughan Gething said:

“This year we are celebrating the 70th anniversary of the NHS, which was born here in Wales. We remain hugely proud of its achievements and all who work within it. However, it is clear that much has changed in those 70 years. With an increase in life expectancy and our continued public health challenges the service is facing increasing pressure.

“Today’s plan sets out our vision for the future – it looks at how we will adapt to meet these future challenges and transform the way

we deliver health and social care. We will deliver that change and remain true to the core values of the NHS to provide free healthcare for all.”

This is the first time Welsh Government has set out a shared plan for health and social care. The aim is to see a shift from healthcare which focuses on treating people when they become unwell, to one that provides services which support people to stay well, lead healthier lifestyles and live independently for as long as possible.

There will also be more focus on seamless services, which are designed to fit around the individual. Information will be shared between services and providers, allowing a smoother patient experience. This will also allow those with the greatest need to be treated first and make the most effective use of resources.

The plan also commits the Welsh Government to increasing investment in digital technologies and to support and develop the workforce, including unpaid carers and volunteers.

The Health Secretary added:

“The Parliamentary Review found that much of what we are doing in health and social care in Wales is right, but that change needs to be made to secure services for the future and to ensure people continue to get the best care.

“Today we are responding to that review. This will be a revolution from within the health service. We have to move on from the idea that the hospital is the first or best place for you to be when you are unwell. That isn’t always the case, especially when there are a range of local services that will allow you to remain safely at home.

“I recognise the challenge and this will take time, but change will begin immediately. By the time we celebrate the 80th anniversary of our NHS I expect to see a stronger, joined-up system between health and social care that will be fit to serve people for generations to come.”

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

“To respond effectively to our ageing population, we must re-evaluate the way we view social care. This is the first time Welsh Government has produced a joint plan for health and social services. It recognises the extremely important role social services play in promoting good health, keeping people independent for longer and reducing admissions to hospital. It makes sense to

view it in partnership with health services, with all parts of the system working together to deliver better outcomes for all.”

[Don't let Brexit chaos derail the Welsh economy](#)

First Minister Carwyn Jones has today issued a stark warning that economic opportunities post-Brexit are being undermined by uncertainty and a chaotic approach to negotiations by the UK Government.

Statistics released today show Welsh exports continue to rise, with businesses exporting £16.4 billion worth of goods in the year to March 2018 – an increase of £1.1 billion on the previous 12 months.

Welsh exports to EU countries increased by £649 million (7 per cent), while exports to non EU countries increased by £439 million (7.3 per cent) over the year.

The statistics also show exports to EU countries accounted for 60.6% of Wales' exports, in comparison with the UK figure of 49.6%. Taking into account the 70 plus countries with Free Trade Agreements that the UK has access to through its membership of the EU's Customs Union, nearly three in every four pounds earned by Welsh businesses from overseas sales depends on our relationship with our EU partners.

The First Minister is therefore calling on the UK Government to provide clarity to Welsh business on the UK's future relationship with Europe, so they can properly prepare and continue to grow.

Speaking on a visit to Concrete Canvas, a Pontypridd based manufacturing businesses that exports 85% of its goods, the First Minister said:

“Wales' export market continues to grow – and this £1.1 billion increase is really great news for the Welsh economy.

“Today's statistics are the result of a great deal of hard work and tenacity by our exporting companies, such as Concrete Canvas, who I have the pleasure of visiting today.

“I am delighted by the continued success of Welsh businesses who are succeeding in their efforts to increase their share of overseas markets, despite the looming threat of Brexit on the Horizon.

“It is vital this success continues. But, in order for this to happen, our businesses urgently need clarity on our future

relationship with Europe. The EU is already warning businesses in Europe to factor in the risk of a no deal Brexit and reduce reliance on components and products that are manufactured in the UK.

“Such uncertainty will have a direct impact on Welsh businesses and their ability to export. While the Welsh Government is working hard to support exporting companies, what they urgently need is clear direction from the UK Government.

“The UK Government needs to recognise that the approach they have taken so far simply isn’t working. The Prime Minister needs to go back to the drawing board, rub out the red lines and work with the EU27 to retain alignment with the Single Market and a new, durable Customs Union with the EU.

“This is the only way we will secure a Brexit that allows Welsh businesses to retain their existing trade partners, safeguard the economy and protects the jobs and incomes of the people of Wales.

“The country will survive a hard Brexit, but it will not continue to thrive. Exports figures such as the ones we are celebrating today will drop, there will be lower growth, lower investment, fewer jobs and smaller incomes. This isn’t remoaning, this isn’t Project Fear part 2, it what the Government’s own figures conclusively show.”