

[Economy Secretary visits Ford in Bridgend](#)

While at the site, the Economy Secretary met management, workers and trade unions and discussed the opportunities and challenges facing the industry in the years ahead.

Production of the new Dragon Engine is scheduled to begin in 2018.

Speaking after the visit, Cabinet Secretary for Economy and Infrastructure Ken Skates said:

“It was good to visit the Ford Engine Plant in Bridgend this morning and see the progress being made in preparing for the new Dragon engine production. Welsh Government support has helped bring this exciting project to the plant and it was great to see the precision manufacturing and world class skills that go into its development.

“During my visit I also got to talk to workers, management and unions about the challenges facing the automotive industry in the coming years. Electrification and the move to innovative battery technology means there is a need to secure new products for the plant to manufacture at the site from 2020.

“I made clear that the Welsh Government will do everything in it’s power to work in social partnership and meet those challenges head on in order to secure a sustainable future for the Bridgend Engine Plant that can keep jobs and production in the community.”

The Welsh Government supported Ford Bridgend in winning a share of the global Dragon Engine production with a £14.6m grant offer, to safeguard a predicted 772 jobs on the site. The facility will initially be producing 125k engines, safeguarding an estimated 550 jobs but has capacity to add further lines to increase production and jobs created in the future.

[Maximum tuition fee in Wales will remain £9,000 – Kirsty Williams](#)

The Welsh Government is securing a stable, progressive and sustainable funding system, whilst also responding to the many unscheduled changes

announced in England.

The Education Secretary has also confirmed an increase in the repayment threshold for undergraduate loans from £21,000 to £25,000, subject to the successful conclusion of discussions with Her Majesty's Treasury.

Kirsty Williams said:

"I will not allow the political turmoil and uncertainty in England to knock us off course from delivering on a stable and sustainable higher education system in Wales.

"Our sector does not operate in isolation and we must provide stability for our institutions to compete both domestically and internationally.

"Given the uncertain political climate in England I have carefully considered our future plans for tuition fee levels. After consulting with our Universities and the National Union of Students, the maximum tuition fee will remain at £9,000. We are also on track to deliver the most equitable and progressive student support system in the UK, starting next academic year.

"Unlike the Government across the border, we are delivering investment to support both students and universities as part of these changes.

"I also remain concerned about the rate of interest charged to students whilst they study and I will continue to discuss this with counterparts in Whitehall."

To help universities and students from Wales, the Education Secretary has announced:

- An additional £10m will be made available to HEFCW to deal with any immediate issues arising from the tuition fee changes.
- Additional £6m to HEFCW in this financial year to deal with the short-term implications of demographic change, as well allowing them to start preparing for the implications of Brexit.
- A further £5m will be allocated to HEFCW in both 2018-19 and 2019-20 to allow our institutions to provide bursaries and grants to postgraduate students, prior to full implementation of the new package of postgraduate support in 2019/20. This will help incentivise student progress and for Welsh Students to return to Wales to study, in line with our response to the Diamond Review.

The Welsh Government will continue with their plans to introduce the most progressive student support system in the UK where all students will receive support of around £9,000 in their pocket to help with day to day costs and will provide a parity of support across all levels and modes of study.

[We must continue to tackle Hate Crime – Cab Sec](#)

Speaking in the Chamber during Hate Crime Awareness week, and as newly published figures show that 2,941 hate crimes were reported in Wales during 2016-17, which is an a 22.3% increase on 2015-16, the Cabinet Secretary said:

“Much of this increase is likely to be due to an increase in the rates of reporting. This is a positive sign that victims are reporting incidences of hate crime and have confidence that they will be dealt with. Between 2012 and 2015 only 48% of hate crime victims were reporting them. Since then, a lot of work has been done to increase awareness and the confidence of victims in coming forward.

“Nevertheless, there is real concern amongst the Police, the third sector and other partners at the rising number of hate crimes committed last year. We have therefore been working closely with them to maximise the impact of our work and build communities where hate crime is not tolerated and victims are supported to the utmost.

“Abuse or discrimination against people because of their race or faith, nationality, age, disability, sexuality, gender or gender identity, is wrong. Nobody should think that they have any license to abuse people. We continue to tackle this behaviour head on. Nobody should suffer hostility, bullying or prejudice. This is why we are taking a clear stand on this issue and why we must continue our work to counter hate and build cohesion in Wales.”

[Consultation opens on appeals process for non-domestic rates in Wales](#)

A consultation opens today on improving and modernising the long established system to make sure that it's fair and works as well as it can.

All the non-domestic rates revenue raised in Wales is redistributed to local government and policing bodies in Wales.

This helps to pay for the services – education, social care, waste management, transport, housing, public protection, leisure and environmental amenities and more – on which we all rely.

The consultation sets out how the appeals system could better reflect changing circumstances and make the best use of current technology.

Also included are specific aspects such as when information should be provided during the appeals process, the potential introduction of fees for unsuccessful appeals, new civil penalties for providing false information and the requirement to make appeals in a responsible and accountable manner.

Launching the consultation today, Local Government Secretary Mark Drakeford said:

“Non-domestic rates provide £1 billion in funding for our public services so it is essential that all eligible ratepayers make a contribution.

“However, in return, we need to make sure that the system in place for dealing with appeals is as fair and transparent as it can possibly be.

“One of the key features of the rates system in Wales is that each ratepayer has a right to appeal their rates valuation if they believe it to be incorrect.

“It is important that ratepayers are paying the right amount of rates and, if this is not the case, that corrections are made as quickly as possible.

“It is equally important that every ratepayer acts responsibly in using the appeals system.

“Today marks the start of 12 weeks of consultation with ratepayers, industry representatives, other taxpayers and local authorities.

“We are very keen to hear their views as we look to make the non-domestic rates appeals system fit for the future and responsive to the needs of Welsh businesses.”

[Mark Drakeford in Brussels to meet Guy Verhofstadt MEP](#)

Over the two days, the Cabinet Secretary will meet Sir Tim Barrow, the UK

Permanent Representative to the EU and key figures from the European Parliament. He will also take part in a European Policy Centre and Wales Governance Centre *Cross Nations Panel on Brexit* alongside the Scottish Government's Brexit Minister Mike Russell.

During the meetings, the Finance Secretary will highlight the Welsh Government's priorities for Brexit – including the importance of full and unfettered access to the single market, a sensible approach to migration which protects the Welsh economy and a transition period to avoid falling off a cliff edge.

The meetings are an opportunity to continue to build a direct relationship between the Welsh Government and EU leaders and gain a greater understanding of the EU's negotiating position.

Speaking ahead of the visit, Mark Drakeford said:

“Leaving the EU is the biggest challenge of our lifetime – the decisions made today will affect Wales for decades to come.

“Today's visit is therefore very timely, coming on the back of the latest round of Brexit talks and ahead of a crucial decision this week by the European Council on whether these can progress to discuss trade arrangements.

“This is an opportunity for me to set out our priorities for a deal that works for Wales, the UK and the rest of the EU 27.

“We're hearing alarming noises suggesting a no deal is a viable outcome. This is a deeply dangerous fallacy. Walking away from talks would be a catastrophic failure which would have dire economic, security and social consequences.

“It is more important than ever for transition discussions between the UK and the EU 27 to commence as soon as possible. Business confidence is already suffering due to the uncertainty.

“The UK Government has a responsibility to follow up the positive overtures from the Florence speech with detailed proposals on withdrawal issues. Two years is the absolute minimum viable period to resolve all the outstanding issues if we are to protect the needs of businesses and citizens and avoid falling off a cliff edge.

“As a government, we will always want the best outcome for Wales and the Welsh economy. In the short, medium and long-term, we believe the only way of achieving this is by securing the closest possible relationship with the single market.

“We also continue to call on the UK government to provide firm evidence on why being outside a customs union with the EU would be of advantage to the UK in the longer term.

“Europe is one of our biggest trading partners, they are our closest neighbour and we share a border with them. Our economic ties cannot be severed on the day we leave the EU. It is essential all parts of the UK and the EU work together to agree a way forward that meets all our needs.”