

Come together: Taskforce visits Cymmer to #TalkValleys

The Ministerial Taskforce for the South Wales Valleys is holding a series of public meetings across the region to seek the views of local communities about priorities for their local areas.

Last month, the Minister for Lifelong Learning Alun Davies, who chairs the taskforce, met with pupils at Ferndale Community School and business leaders in Caerphilly to answer questions about the role of the taskforce and listen to suggestions for priority work areas.

Julie James will join other taskforce members to host a public engagement session at Croeserw Community Enterprise Centre on Thursday (February 2) and wants to hear from local residents about the challenges and opportunities for people living and working in the valleys.

She said:

“The taskforce has made some significant strides forward in recent weeks and it is clear that understanding and awareness of our work is growing.

“The engagement sessions we’ve held to date have been invaluable in helping to shape our priorities but it’s vital we continue to work with and listen to communities throughout the lifetime of the taskforce.

“From the discussions we’ve had with the public so far, some key themes have emerged. These include the importance of linking businesses with local schools to give young people the confidence and skills they need to enter into the world of work and the importance of linking infrastructure like industrial sites, schools, colleges and transport initiatives together, ensuring true connectivity for the valleys.

“I am sure more will continue to emerge in the coming weeks starting this week in Cymmer. I would urge anyone who feels passionately about where they live to come along and have their say. We’re here to listen and your views will help shape our shared vision for the valleys.”

The taskforce was set up by the Welsh Government in July and aims to build on work previously undertaken across the South Wales Valleys in a more coordinated and targeted way to meet the needs of valley communities.

This week’s session will follow a full meeting of the valleys taskforce which will take place in Llanhilleth Miners’ Institute and will focus on public

services.

To learn more about the work of the taskforce or to sign up to attend one of the public meetings, please visit the [Facebook](#) page.

“Reform is an essential part of the future” says Vaughan Gething

Speaking ahead of the conference, Vaughan Gething said:

“2016 was a tumultuous year for our country. A year of unprecedented political upheaval and uncertainty that will impact on society and public service delivery for many years to come.

“But despite that uncertainty and despite record demand, our NHS delivered better health care for people across Wales. Welsh Ambulance performance is now the best in the UK, cancer survival rates continue to improve faster in Wales than any other part of the UK and overall waiting times are down 20% on last year.

“Whatever services people use – hospitals, GPs, social care, mental health services – they expect good quality care in a timely manner. Above all else, delivering on that is our prime concern.

“Our staff have worked extremely hard this winter and we have seen diagnostic and planned care waiting times reduce dramatically over the past year. I want to thank them for their dedication and commitment to the values of the NHS and to providing high-quality care.

“I’m proud of our achievements, but I want us to be more ambitious for 2017. I want us to continue to reduce planned care and diagnostic waits. I want us to build a health service that meets and delivers on the needs of our patients and that is sustainable, in spite of the challenges.

“Reform is an essential part of the future. If we do not reform then we will not deliver the change and improvement that is needed.

“This is our mission. It won’t be easy but it will be worth it.

“It’s time good performance was recognised. I want to encourage the boards and trusts that are operating well, that are delivering for local people, and incentivise excellence in our health service. We will be exploring how we can best make that happen.”

Local Government Reform White Paper unveiled by Mark Drakeford

The White Paper, which is out for consultation until the beginning of April, is the result of months of discussions between the Welsh Government, local authorities and others on how to strengthen council services in the face of future challenges. It seeks views on proposals for mandatory regional working to deliver a range of services, address workforce issues, and implement electoral reform including allowing voting at 16. It also calls on members of the public to become active participants in local democracy and in the design and delivery of services.

Amongst the proposals are a mandatory economic development footprint that would also cover certain planning functions and transport.

Councils would have some flexibility over what footprint they use to share responsibilities for other mandated services including education improvement, social services, additional learning needs, public protection and promotion of the Welsh language.

Councillors would make up the membership of new, enhanced joint committees which would oversee these services and make decisions on behalf of their respective councils. Funding arrangements would work on the existing practice of pooled budgets.

The local government workforce is an essential part of these proposals and the Welsh Government will consider, through the Workforce Partnership Council, how to support the transition over to the new arrangements, using statutory guidance where necessary.

Councils would still have the option of merging under the new plans and, where there is local agreement for this, the Welsh Government would work with them to make it a reality.

The White Paper also calls for a different and more equal partnership between people and the public services they use. This would see the development of a new set of principles recognising people as the best experts in how to manage their own lives and putting in place small interventions earlier to resolve issues before they escalate further.

The proposals strike a new balance between clear and unavoidable objectives for local government with flexibility for councils to determine how those shared objectives are best delivered locally. Thus the White Paper proposals provide councils with powers to choose between operating a Cabinet or Committee system and to decide how the activities of councillors are best reported to the electorate. Similarly, views are invited on enabling local authorities to adopt either 'first past the post' or 'single transferable

vote' election systems. Following passage of the Wales Bill, further conversation will take place on a wider set of measures to reform electoral arrangements in Wales to improve both voter registration and turn out at elections.

In line with the new proposals, the Cabinet Secretary also announced that he would be considering how the wider local government finance system could be reformed – ensuring a fairer and more sustainable system to support local authorities in the future.

Setting out the proposals for consultation, the Local Government Secretary said:

“This White Paper is not about change for change’s sake. Our councils are working against a backdrop of extraordinary austerity and some services are facing a great deal of pressure. Local government reform is essential if we’re to make these services stronger and more resilient to cope with the demands of the future.

“The new regional arrangements will bring councils together to work more effectively in the interests of people and their communities.

“We want to see a new relationship between councils and their communities where public services support people to live independent lives and intervene only when necessary and only for as long as is required.

“We also want a new relationship between the Welsh Government and our councils; one that is based on mutual respect for the important, and different, roles we each play.

“Underpinning all of these new arrangements will be effective scrutiny and accountability, where councillors act as the champion, advocate and guide for people who elect them.

“I want to thank local authority leaders and others for their help in forming a serious and credible set of proposals. I look forward to working alongside them further following the local government elections in May.”

The consultation will close on 11th April 2017 and is available to view on the Welsh Government’s website: consultations.gov.wales.

New authority to oversee skills and the higher and further education sectors in Wales

The move comes after the Welsh Government accepted the [recommendations of an independent review carried out by Professor Ellen Hazelkorn](#), with a full consultation to follow in the spring.

Published in March 2016, it suggested:

- Establishing a single regulatory, oversight and co-ordinating authority for the post-compulsory education sector.
- The new body will be responsible for funding provision at all levels, ensuring quality and be the lead funder of research.
- Placing the needs of learners at the heart of the education system by establishing clear and flexible learning and career pathways.
- There should be equal value and support for vocational and academic pathways and connections between qualifications and the labour market need to be improved.

Kirsty Williams said:

“The boundaries between higher education and further education are now breaking down.

“Working lives are now longer, and change rapidly, and we need a system that makes it easier for people to learn and obtain the skills they need throughout their careers. This is happening against a backdrop of rapid change in other parts of the UK and Brexit.

“The various sectors and providers in Wales are regulated and funded in different ways by different bodies, resulting in competition, gaps and confusion for learners.

“Professor Hazelkorn concluded that the current system does not focus sufficiently on learners and does not fully achieve value for money. Her report emphasised the need for post-compulsory education and training to operate as a single sector.

“I have given these proposals careful consideration and the model she puts forward builds on what is tried and tested in successful education systems, and I want Wales to enjoy those same advantages.

“This is an opportunity to shape a system where institutions of all types are encouraged to work together to meet learners’ needs, allowing them to progress and building strong links with business and providing the skills our economy needs.”

Building Regulations Advisory Committee for Wales welcomes six new faces

Alan Jones, Bernadette Kinsella, Matthew Grey, Paul Williams, Steven Harris and Will Phillips all took up their posts on 1 January and have been appointed for a period of three years.

The Cabinet Secretary said:

“The Building Regulation Advisory Committee for Wales plays an important role in advising Welsh ministers on the making and amending of building regulations and other related matters.

“This period of appointment coincides with the Building Regulations Sustainability and Part L reviews. I am confident Alan, Bernadette, Matthew, Paul, Will and Steven will all bring a wide range of expertise and experience to the Committee.”

Members of the Building Regulations Advisory Committee for Wales are appointed on a voluntary independent basis to represent particular fields of expertise and experience.