

Welsh Government support following snow storms

The extreme weather conditions resulted in additional capital and revenue costs for local authorities. Today's announcement will see funding directed to offset a major part of these costs including those incurred for highway authorities' gritting and snow clearance operations and salt purchasing.

Whilst local authorities are responsible for planning for significant weather events and are expected to budget accordingly, the Welsh Government is providing additional investment in recognition of the significant costs incurred.

Economy and Transport Secretary, Ken Skates said:

"As much of the country was blanketed with snow recently, authority staff and contractors worked tirelessly in supporting the travelling public and ensuring our road network remained open as much as possible. Their professionalism and commitment was evident as ever and I would like to thank them once again for their efforts.

"The extreme weather did have an impact however and with that came inevitable financial consequences. I am pleased therefore the funding I am announcing today will be a boost in helping offset the considerable costs incurred by local authorities as a result of the conditions."

Councillor Andrew Morgan (Rhondda Cynon Taf), WLGA Spokesperson for Transport, the Environment and Sustainability said:

"I welcome this funding by Welsh Government in recognition of the significant costs incurred by authorities in responding to the recent extreme weather event. Although all councils will have planned well in advance for such a weather event, the sheer intensity of the weather meant that additional costs were unavoidable."

"I am incredibly proud of the response efforts of councils across Wales, with council staff going above and beyond to help residents in their communities. Our staff members' efforts highlighted public service at its finest, and demonstrated the true value of local government."

Welsh Government agrees deal on Brexit Bill that respects devolution

Welsh Ministers have come to an agreement with the UK Government on their proposed EU (Withdrawal) Bill that mean areas already devolved remain devolved.

The Bill, as originally drafted, would have allowed the UK Government to take control of devolved policy areas, such as farming and fishing, after Brexit.

After months of intensive talks, a compromise agreement has now been reached, meaning that the Welsh Government will be able to recommend that the National Assembly gives its consent to the Bill.

Changes to the Bill will be brought forward in the House of Lords tomorrow.

The agreement includes:

- Devolved areas remain devolved, but there are some limited areas where there is a need to agree UK wide rules to replace the current EU wide rules.
- All devolved powers and policy areas rest in Cardiff and Edinburgh, unless specified to be temporarily held by the UK Government. These will be areas where there is a need for common, UK-wide rules.
- The UK Government will seek the consent of the devolved legislatures as to which areas of current EU law will be 'frozen' while common UK-wide rules -known as frameworks – are agreed.
- The new amendments to the Bill include 'sunset' clauses that now guarantee the 'freezing' of these powers will be temporary, while the power to put things 'in the freezer' is also limited.
- Any such regulations made by the UK Government on policy areas they temporarily hold would expire after five years, after which the Assembly and the Welsh Ministers would be free to legislate.

The Cabinet Secretary for Finance said:

"This is a deal we can work with which has required compromise on both sides. Our aim throughout these talks has been to protect devolution and make sure laws and policy in areas which are currently devolved remain devolved and this we have achieved.

"We have always recognised the need for UK-wide frameworks where the EU rule book will no longer apply.

"The original draft Bill meant powers already devolved would have been clawed back by the UK Government post-Brexit and only

Ministers in London would have had the right to decide if and when they were passed back to the devolved parliaments. This was totally unacceptable and went against the will of the people of Wales who voted for devolution in two referendums.

“We are now in a different place. London has changed its position so that all powers and policy areas rest in Cardiff and Edinburgh, unless specified to be temporarily held by the UK Government. These will be areas where we all agree common, UK-wide rules are needed for a functioning UK internal market.

“London’s willingness to listen to our concerns and enter serious negotiations has been welcome. In a devolved UK the respective governments need to deal with each other as equals and this agreement is a step in the right direction. This approach must now continue as we prepare for leaving the EU and the next phase of talks with Brussels.

“Make no mistake; the Welsh Government will continue to make sure Wales’ voice is heard loud and clear so we can secure a Brexit that protects devolution, jobs and our economy.”

£20m Air Quality Fund among new measures to improve air quality in Wales

Among the measures will be a new £20m fund to reduce emissions and improve the environment in Wales. The Air Quality Fund, which will run until 2021, will support local authorities to comply with nitrogen dioxide limits and improve air quality in their areas.

Speaking during a plenary debate, the Minister announced a consultation will be launched tomorrow on plans for Clean Air Zones, designated areas where action is taken to reduce public and environmental exposure to airborne pollutants.

The proposals include stopping or restricting access for the most polluting vehicles entering a Clean Air Zone, thereby reducing road congestion and emissions within the Clean Air Zones and neighbouring areas.

A consultation will open tomorrow on plans to reduce concentrations of nitrogen dioxide, as part of the wider UK plan to tackle roadside NO₂ concentrations.

The Minister also confirmed immediate measures, including temporary speed limits, will come into force within the next two months to reduce nitrogen dioxide (NO₂) levels on roads where levels are currently above legal limits. Among the restrictions will be the introduction of 50 mph speed limits over the short length of the exceedance at five locations:

- A494 at Deeside
- A483 at Wrexham
- M4 between Junctions 41 & 42 (Port Talbot)
- M4 between junctions 25 & 26 (Newport)
- A470 between Upper Boat & Pontypridd

The measures are expected to deliver immediate improvements to air quality at the key locations, with 50mph speed limits expected to reduce emissions by up to 18%.

A new Air Quality in Wales website will also be launched, enabling people to check live air quality information for their area. The website will provide local data on current and forecasted air pollution levels, as well as historical data. It will also include educational materials, games and tools for schools and improved health advice.

Minister for Environment Hannah Blythyn said:

“I am delighted to announce a package of measures to improve air quality in Wales, including a £20 million fund to help local authorities put arrangements in place to reduce air pollution in their areas.

“We will encourage local authorities to introduce Clean Air Zones, where evidence suggests they are needed to reduce harmful emissions, as well as launching a new website which allows people to check the air quality in their area.

“Delivering clean air in Wales is one of my key priorities. I am committed to taking action to reduce air pollution in Wales to support a healthier future for our communities and protect our natural environment.

“I am confident the measures I am announcing today will help support the changes we need to make in Wales to deliver cleaner air.

Kirsty Williams outlines 'mixed economy' education vision

As part of this, she will preview a consultation asking whether sixth form provision should be added to the remit of the new authority for post-16 education and training, which will also include further and higher education.

Setting out the Welsh Government's commitment to raising standards for all in a non-selective comprehensive system, the Education Secretary will emphasise the benefits of the "mixed economy" of schools, colleges and universities in Wales.

In addition, she will set out the direction of travel on:

- A reformed school accountability system which values the progress of all learners
- Greater freedom for schools on curriculum indicators within performance measures
- Improved measures on post-16 performance across 6th form and FE sector

On the issue of the relationship between sixth forms, FE colleges and the new Tertiary Education and Research Commission for Wales, the Education Secretary will say:

"I am and always will be a supporter of sixth forms. I also firmly believe in a good mix of provision when it comes to post-16 education and training.

"We need much more consistency when it comes to supporting our learners through this vital stage of their education and on to whichever route they decide is best for them.

"Including sixth forms within the remit of the new authority would not only give us a better picture of how the sector is performing in the round, but would also be instrumental in helping providers to work together, thereby reducing duplication and competition."

On her commitment to an equitable and excellent system, she will say:

"We don't write off anyone, or anywhere. We have high expectations, with the right support, at the right time, for all students, schools and settings.

"By believing in a non-selective comprehensive system, I admit that we are setting ourselves a challenge, when compared to other systems. But it is a challenge with a moral conviction. As a small country, we can't leave anyone behind.

“We may not spend most of our time and energy discussing structures, as happens across the border – but that doesn’t mean we prescribe the same solution for all. A progressive comprehensive system is a system that suits each and every learner’s needs and requirements in their education journey.”

Review of affordable housing supply in Wales announced by Minister

The review will examine whether more can be done to increase the supply of affordable housing in Wales, maximising the resources available, and will be chaired by Lynn Pamment, Cardiff Senior Partner and Government & Public Services Lead at PwC. Lynn has many years’ experience of providing financial advice to public and private sector bodies, including working with housing associations and others in the affordable housing sector.

The review will:

- examine the scope for increasing match funding to build more affordable homes, to maximise the number of homes created by the Welsh Government’s contribution to social housing
- review the arrangements governing partnership working between local authorities and housing associations
- consider the implications of moving to deliver zero carbon homes by 2020, including the role of off-site manufacture and modern methods of construction
- review the standards governing affordable housing and advise on whether they require updating
- make recommendations regarding a sustainable rent policy that will both allow long term affordability for tenants and allow viability of existing and new housing developments.

The review will be expected to issue a report and make recommendations to the Minister by the end of April 2019.

Rebecca Evans said:

“We have made a clear commitment to deliver 20,000 affordable homes during this term of Government and this development in Pontardawe demonstrates how we are delivering on this.

“I want this review to ensure we are getting the best value for money in our investments and policy, including how we plan for a zero carbon future and the way in which the sector operates.

“We know that many more people in Wales want to access affordable housing.

The sector in Wales have called on us to look at our policy, and we want to work closely with all stakeholders involved in housing supply to ensure we are building as many homes as possible.

“Lynn Pamment has a great deal of experience in working with the public and private sector on financing projects, and I look forward to reading the results of her review next year.”

Stuart Ropke, Chief Executive of Community Housing Cymru said:

“Housing associations in Wales have ambitions to build a minimum of 75,000 affordable homes in Wales over the next twenty years – doubling the current delivery rate. In November 2017 we launched ‘Housing Horizons’, our sector vision to make good housing a basic right for all. This far reaching ambition cannot be achieved without a full analysis of Welsh housing policy and how this is put into practice, so we are delighted the Minister has backed our call for a review.

“Through the review we can establish the most effective policy environment to meet our affordable home delivery ambition and build a solid foundation for current and future generations. If we get this review right, it will be a big step towards solving the housing crisis.”

Matt Dicks, Director of the Chartered Institute of Housing Cymru said:

“We welcome today’s announcement of a review into housing policy in Wales. It rightly looks at what kind of homes we need in the future and how we can sustain longer-term investment whilst maintaining the affordability of our housing. Over the lifespan of the one-year review we look forward to engaging fully, bringing to life the experiences of housing professionals from across the sector in Wales to provide timely insight and real-life expertise.”