

Minister visits Citizens Advice Swansea Neath Port Talbot to discuss Universal Credit

The Minister talked to staff who provide valuable information and advice to people across the Swansea and Neath Port Talbot area to learn about some of the concerns they have raised.

Rebecca Evans said:

“Citizens Advice provided advice and information to over 18,000 people last year – and they tell me that the largest number of enquiries were from people experiencing welfare benefit problems.

“Many vulnerable people across Wales are facing challenges as a result of the UK Government’s welfare reforms, including the introduction of Universal Credit, which have particularly hit low income earners, families and the poorest.

“The Welsh Government continues to fund Citizens Advice Swansea Neath Port Talbot, which enables the fantastic team here to help people make the most of their household income and to resolve problems with welfare benefit claims.

“The vital work done by this fantastic team working across Swansea and Neath Port Talbot makes a big difference to many people.

“However, I am deeply concerned about the fundamental flaws and complexities of Universal Credit. I am extremely disappointed that the UK Government is persisting with its roll-out, despite our calls on them to halt this and address the problems.

“There are still some claimants waiting more than six weeks for their first payment. I am seeking reassurance from Damian Hinds MP, the Minister for Employment that those claiming Universal Credit, including people living in Swansea, who will now have to claim it, will receive financial support over the Christmas period.

“The DWP’s solution to tackling the delays in payments is an advance of a claimant’s indicative award. This is not a robust solution for people who are struggling. This loan has the potential to push people into more debt and rent arrears.”

Finance Secretary announces new permanent small business rate relief scheme for Wales

The new permanent scheme will limit the number of properties eligible for small business rate relief to two per business in each local authority, preventing larger businesses and national chains from benefiting from the scheme.

This will allow relief to be targeted more effectively to support small and local businesses and release £7m every year to be re-invested to support small businesses.

In addition to providing more than £110m of support for small businesses in Wales every year, the new permanent small business rate relief (SBBR) scheme will also provide:

- Additional support for the childcare sector, increasing the upper threshold for rates relief for childcare providers from £12,000 to £20,500.
- Targeted support for small hydropower projects, in line with the Budget agreement with Plaid Cymru.
- £5m to extend the temporary high street rates relief scheme into 2018-19;
- An extra £1.3m for local authorities for 2018-19, for them to use their discretionary powers to provide targeted relief to support local businesses which would benefit most from additional assistance.

The Finance Secretary also announced today an extra £9m and £22m will be allocated in the final Budget in 2018-19 and 2019-20 respectively, to support the switch from RPI to CPI for business rates from April 2018.

Professor Drakeford said:

“I have previously set out my intention to introduce a permanent small business rates relief scheme from 1 April 2018.

“This will provide certainty and security for small businesses in Wales, delivering a tax cut to businesses drive long term economic growth. I am pleased to announce the details of the permanent scheme today.

“This year, we have provided small businesses with more than £110m of support to help them pay their bills. Our permanent scheme, which will be in place from 1 April, will maintain this level of support from the Welsh Government.

“In line with our tax principles, the permanent scheme will target

support more effectively towards those businesses which will benefit most – supporting jobs and growth and delivering wider benefits for our local communities.

“My intention is to take a progressive, fair and transparent approach towards local taxation in Wales, which continues to provide vital funding for local services.

“Delivering a permanent relief scheme for small businesses is a key step in delivering this.”

Changes to the SBRR scheme are being introduced following a public consultation on a permanent scheme in the autumn.

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Pupil Development Grant considered “invaluable” by schools, says new report

An independent evaluation of the Welsh Government’s Pupil Development Grant (PDG) has found that many schools consider the funding to be ‘invaluable’, with good progress being made on identifying and addressing the needs of disadvantaged learners.

The report by Ipsos Mori and the Wales Institute of Social & Economic Research, Data & Methods (WISERD) focuses on how schools are spending the PDG and teachers’ perceptions of the impact of the grant.

Many of the schools interviewed for the report acknowledged that the PDG has helped them to focus and raise the profile of tackling disadvantage across the school.

Schools said this had led to an increased focus on whole-school strategies to improve areas such as behaviour, attendance, family engagement and restorative approaches.

Substantial improvements were reported by schools in areas such as pupil well-being, confidence and self-esteem and an increased willingness from pupils to participate in classroom activities.

Schools also reported improvement in how learners who qualify for free school meals were supported as they progressed through school.

Welcoming the report's findings today, Education Secretary Kirsty Williams said:

"Reducing the attainment gap between pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds and their peers is at the heart of our national mission to raise standards.

"This report is further evidence that our £93 million PDG is delivering real progress in addressing this injustice and supporting pupils to reach their full potential.

"I'm proud that schools regard the PDG as invaluable and I applaud the way funding has been used to target our most disadvantaged learners.

"Earlier this year I announced that we would be extending the PDG, including doubling the financial support to early years learners in the Foundation Phase.

"To ensure schools can plan and make full use of the funding, we have already signalled our commitment to the PDG for the lifetime of this Assembly.

"Whilst the report published today is evidence of genuine strides forward, there is no room for complacency. That's why we will continue to focus on the PDG, alongside our other reforms, to ensure that all learners achieve their full potential."

Schools across Wales benefiting from the Pupil Development Grant include Pillgwenlly Primary School in Newport.

Kath Bevan, headteacher said:

"We use a significant proportion of our PDG monies to finance two Nurture Groups. These groups provide a stable and caring

environment for children who may be socially and emotionally vulnerable, helping to develop their self-esteem and self-belief and improving their levels of resilience.

“As a school, the PDG has also helped with an improvement in attendance, learning and application of key skills and the engagement of the wider family in school life.”

Heather Nicholas, former headteacher of Ferndale Community School and headteacher for the new 3-19 school in Tonyrefail said:

“The impact that the PDG has had on the community of Ferndale Community School is hugely significant. It has been instrumental in closing any gap in pupil experience and has accelerated the progress of pupils for whom disadvantage has limited progress and attainment.

“The impact of poverty manifests itself in many different ways across a school community and the PDG funding has allowed for the personalisation of support that ensures maximum outcomes for every individual.”

Rhian Morgan Ellis, headteacher of Ysgol Gyfun Cwm Rhondda said:

“The grant is of great benefit to us as it allows us to ensure equity and a level playing field for all students. For those who would disengage for financial reasons, it is a means of removing those barriers to learning. It allows us to ensure every student is included in our drive to provide them with the opportunity to be the best they can be.”

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