



Eich cyf/Your ref: MJ/JF0227
Ein cyf/Our ref: FM -/00652/18

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National Assembly for Wales

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3 September 2018

Dear Janet

I am writing in response to your letter of 9 August regarding the business survey conducted in Aberconwy.

While the results are similar to those you highlighted in the recent research with the Association of Convenience stores that I have asked officials to explore further before responding, please find the following response specifically in relation to the Aberconwy survey.

Business Advice and Broadband

Since April 2015, which is the beginning of the latest EU Programme period for Business Wales, we have supported 853 individuals and businesses to start or grow their business. The Business Wales service supports individuals and companies across a variety of different areas, including those that the survey identified requiring access to finance, superfast exploitation and recruitment (including the skills gateway support for businesses).

Business Wales has been marketing itself across various different channels for the past few years including online advertising, local and Regional press, Radio, train stations and buses as well as engaging in local networks to promote the service and can be accessed through the website (www.businesswales.gov.wales), our helpline based in Llandudno Junction (03000 6 03000) or by visiting the Business Centre in St Asaph Business Park.

In regards the findings on broadband, the Superfast Cymru project has overseen investment of over £14m for the provision of access to superfast broadband connectivity to 49,300 business and residential premises across Aberconwy.

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Rydym yn croesawu derbyn gohebiaeth yn Gymraeg. Byddwn yn ateb gohebiaeth a dderbynnir yn Gymraeg yn Gymraeg ac ni fydd gohebu yn Gymraeg yn arwain at oedi.

We welcome receiving correspondence in Welsh. Any correspondence received in Welsh will be answered in Welsh and corresponding in Welsh will not lead to a delay in responding.

This intervention has seen the delivery of average spends of 73Mbps with take up sitting at just over 43%.

Supporting the physical infrastructure the Superfast Business Wales programme provides free support to businesses to understand, adopt and exploit the benefits of superfast broadband and online technology. Over 180 businesses in Conwy have accessed this programme to date. Five of those businesses have been the subject of case studies demonstrating the positive impact of the programme and can be viewed on the Superfast Business Wales website.

Clearly, awareness of how to access the service requires ongoing efforts to ensure as many entrepreneurs as possible access support. If you feel this would be beneficial I can ask officials to provide you with a document promoting the service, which could be passed on to recipients of the survey? It would also be interesting to hear more behind the survey's findings relating to 57% of businesses being unable to upgrade to a superfast broadband connection? Officials would be happy to follow up specific enquiries you may have.

Skills for work

In response to your question regarding what measures Welsh Government is taking to ensure pupils are graduating with relevant skills for work, we have introduced a number of initiatives including reforming the GCSE in English language to ensure young people have the knowledge and the skills employers are saying they need.

The new English Language GCSE was designed with greater emphasis in assessment on spelling, punctuation and grammar. It supports our drive to improve standards, with greater focus on our National Mission to ensure that we continue to focus on literacy standards. Literacy and numeracy along with digital competence will be cross-curricular responsibilities within the new curriculum.

Last July, we launched the National Network for Excellence in Mathematics (NNEM). The £3.2 million investment in the network demonstrates our commitment to driving up standards in maths in our schools and colleges. The Network for Excellence provides extra support to develop leadership in maths and help schools work together in support of higher standards. It will ensure that our learners are equipped with the skills they need to function effectively in everyday life and employment.

The Welsh Baccalaureate Qualification, introduced in September 2015 was developed in line with recommendations made by the Review of Qualifications, which considered a large body of evidence from education stakeholders, employers and experts from across the UK. The central focus of the Welsh Baccalaureate is to provide a vehicle for learners to consolidate and develop essential and employability skills. The qualification will help learners to prepare for their future by developing skills, attributes and behaviours valued by post-16 educators and potential employers.

The emphasis in the Welsh Baccalaureate is on applied learning i.e. acquiring and applying a range of transferable skills. Learners develop skills in the context of purposeful tasks and appropriate knowledge and understanding. It encourages learners to value skills development as a key aspect of education and life-long learning. Offering a learning experience relevant to the needs and demands of the workplace, which develops learners' confidence, drive and initiative, preparing them to enter, succeed and progress in the world of work.

Business Rates

Non-domestic rates contribute more than £1 billion to fund vital local government and police services in Wales – services that all businesses benefit from. To maintain the stability and sustainability of this funding, it is right that ratepayers who are able to, contribute their fair share.

In 2018-19 we will be providing around £210 million of mandatory and discretionary rates relief to support businesses and other ratepayers providing benefit to more than three-quarters of ratepayers in Wales.

The permanent Small Business Rates Relief scheme (SBRR) was introduced in April 2018 and provides over £100m of relief to small businesses, supporting more than 70,000 ratepayers. More than half of small businesses pay no rates at all.

In order to support small businesses further, the non-domestic rating multiplier for Wales for 2018-19 has been set using CPI measure rather than RPI. For 2018-19, this means the multiplier is 0.514 instead of 0.518. The change means the bill for a typical property in Wales with a rateable value of £15,000 will be £60 lower than it would have been. The total saving to non-domestic ratepayers across Wales in 2018-19 is estimated at £9m.

We have also extended the High Street Rates Relief Scheme into 2018-19. This £5 million scheme is aimed at high street retailers in Wales, including those retailers, which saw their rates increase as a result of the 2017 revaluation undertaken by the Valuation Office Agency. This scheme will support around 13,000 small and medium-sized businesses across the country in 2018-19.

We continue to examine options for longer term reform of local taxes and to develop the SBRR scheme to ensure the relief remains targeted to best meet the needs of Wales. Our intention is to take a progressive, fair and transparent approach towards local taxation in Wales, which continues to provide vital funding for local services.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Carwyn Jones', written in a cursive style.

CARWYN JONES