

INDUSTRIAL COMMUNITIES CROSS PARTY GROUP

Note of Meeting Held on Tuesday 11th August 2020 at 2.00pm via Microsoft Teams

1. Joining the Meeting

Vikki Howells MS, Chair; Jeremy Miles MS, Counsel General and Minister for European Transition; Cllr David White, Bridgend CBC & ICA Wales Chair; Joan Dixon, ICA; Peter Slater, ICA; Robin Lewis, Office of Vikki Howells MS; Cllr Graham Thomas, Rhondda Cynon Taf CBC; Cllr Jayne Brencher, Rhondda Cynon Taf CBC; Cllr Gareth Jones, Rhondda Cynon Taf CBC; Cllr Geraint Thomas, Merthyr Tydfil CBC; Cllr Sean Morgan, Caerphilly CBC; Paul Hudson, Caerphilly CBC; Alun Taylor, CRT; Mike Hedges MS; Huw Irranca-Davies MS; Liz Lalley, Welsh Government; Lauren Stamp, Welsh Government; Phillippa Richards, Office of Bethan Sayed MS; Stephen Hughes, Office of Lee Waters MS; Alex Still, Office of Hefin David MS; Sion Jones, Office of Helen Mary Jones MS; Ellie Fry, Blaenau Gwent CBC; Delyth Jewell MS; Ieuan Sherwood, Bridgend CBC; Julie Davies Neath Port Talbot CBC.

2. Apologies

Apologies were received from Suzy Davies MS and Joyce Watson MS.

3. Welcome

Vikki Howells MS (Chair) welcomed everyone to the meeting and explained that the aim of the session was to explore how Wales would begin its recovery in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic. Referring to reports from the Senedd's Equality, Local Government and Communities Committee, the Centre for Towns and the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, she went on to describe how the pandemic was impacting disproportionately on industrial towns and communities with pre-existing economic weaknesses.

Jeremy Miles MS, Counsel General and Minister for European Transition, was welcomed to the meeting in his capacity as coordinator of the Welsh Government's COVID recovery plan.

4. Jeremy Miles MS, Counsel General and Minister for European Transition: Post- COVID Economic Recovery in Wales

The Minister began his contribution by emphasizing that the immediate priority was to protect household incomes using a combination of Welsh Government and UK Government interventions, adding that the crisis had also provided the opportunity to assess what support the economy needed and how the nature of work might change in the future. He went on to describe how the exact impact of the crisis

remained uncertain, although it was expected that unemployment would rise to levels likely to be in the upper ranges of previous recessions.

Continuing with his analysis of the situation the Minister acknowledged that assessing the spatial impact of the economic downturn was more problematical than identifying the effect on specific groups in society. In this respect, reference was made to the fact that young people in particular had been disproportionately affected, and actions were needed to enhance their job prospects and skill levels to prevent unemployment becoming a lifetime feature.

Describing how the COVID crisis had also exacerbated the challenges presented by climate change, the shortfall in skills, social and economic inequalities and the impact of leaving the EU, the Minister stressed that the Welsh Government would be looking to identify long-term solutions through a 'values-led recovery'. He went on to highlight some of the actions taken to date, including: using the Economic Contract more assertively to deliver the benefits of fair work and training; repurposing the Houses into Homes scheme with a focus on green housing; using the Transforming Towns initiative to address the needs of businesses and town centres; investing in advanced manufacturing and supporting local supply chains.

The Minister concluded with a reference to the round table discussions convened with stakeholders on how to address the task in hand, together with the invitation extended to the public across Wales to contribute their views through the 'ourfuturewales.gov.wales' initiative on how we should support the recovery.

The Chair thanked the Minister for his contribution and there followed a wide-ranging question and answer session on many aspects of the recovery and how it can be supported. These included: the need to address those who were 'digitally excluded' and the added impact of the earlier flooding on town centres, such as Pontypridd (Cllr Jayne Brencher); the role of place-based communities and delivering the 'Better Jobs Closer to Home' agenda (Huw Irranca-Davies MS); and reducing the need for commuting through the development of small-scale digital hubs (Mike Hedges MS). Responding, the Minister agreed that there was an urgent need to equip everyone with the necessary digital skills to access the labour market and public services, adding that it was a particular challenge for the over 50s. He also called on the UK Government to provide significant support for the retail sector, which together with the Transforming Towns Fund would help to secure the future of town centres. He also commented on the potential of remote working hubs to reduce commuting, stressing at the same time that Wales had fewer people able to work from home and that the lower paid and lower skilled often worked in face to face roles.

The discussion continued with references to the role of City Deal in addressing the loss of jobs at the Ford Plant at Bridgend and elsewhere (Cllr David White), the need to invest in skills and infrastructure to address the decline in manufacturing and de-skilling over many decades (Cllr Graham Thomas) and the revitalization of town centres as places to live (Cllr Geraint Thomas). In response, the Minister referred to the need for a regional approach to incorporate developments such as advanced manufacturing, re-shoring and the opportunities presented by a green recovery.

The meeting concluded with a series of points on the role of a dedicated strategy to support young people in education and work (Peter Slater), dealing with the worst case scenario of economic collapse (Cllr Sean Morgan), the use of smaller contracts to expand the procurement opportunities for SMEs (Mike Hedges MS) and the need for improved east-west public transport links across the HOV (Cllr Gareth Jones). The Minister confirmed that the priority for Welsh Government was to keep as many young people in education as possible, whilst also maximizing the opportunities to gain work experience through measures such as Jobs Growth Wales and apprenticeships. On the wider issue of supporting the economy, he referred to the actions of Welsh Government in providing help in the form of business and skills support and procurement policy for those sectors and people that had been particularly hard hit. He added that the Welsh Government was also investing in education and infrastructure, but it was unable to bring about significant changes to the tax and wider UK expenditure base. On the issue of public transport, reference was made to the substantial package of support put in place for bus operators by the Welsh Government together with the intention to secure more control over routes and timetabling.

The Chair closed the meeting at 15.10, and thanked the Minister and those participating for their contributions to what had been a very open and informative discussion.

Peter Slater

Secretary, Industrial Communities Cross Party Group

13/08/2020

