

Cross-Party Group on Small Shops: Supporting Entrepreneurship Inquiry

Minutes of the evidence session held at 12:00pm on 6th December 2017

Conference Room A, Ground Floor, Ty Hywel

PRESENT:

Janet Finch-Saunders AM	Chair
Hannah Moscrop	Office of Janet Finch Saunders AM
Steve Dowling	Association of Convenience Stores
Robin Lewis	Office of Vikki Howells AM
Helen Walbey	Recycle Scooters
Gareth Jones	Town Square Spaces
Rob Cooper	Little Man Coffee
Elgan Morgan	South Wales Chamber of Commerce
Amy Bainton	Federation of Small Businesses Wales
Jenna Williams	Federation of Small Businesses Wales
Keith Richards	National Federation of Subpostmasters

APOLOGIES:

Vikki Howells AM	Vice Chair
Mark Isherwood AM	Member
Edward Woodall	Association of Convenience Stores

1. Welcome and Introductions

JFS opened the meeting and welcomed delegates. She introduced the terms of reference to the Supporting Entrepreneurship Inquiry and highlighted changes to the services provided on high streets in Wales in response to changing consumer demands.

2. Entrepreneurs Panel

The panellists introduced their business backgrounds. HW detailed her experiences as an employer, GJ spoke of his work to support entrepreneurial activity on high streets, and RC detailed his motivations to become a business owner.

People

Business Wales provides a wide range of services and is valuable as a one-stop portal for entrepreneurs. However, it is not user friendly and often contains out of date information. Business Wales could usefully provide additional support for entrepreneurs with English as their second language and guidance on sector-specific services and initiatives. The panel recommended a business-led working group to update business support services with the Welsh Government.

The Welsh Government is overly focused on access to finance for growing businesses, despite most businesses on high streets not having growth aspirations. The Welsh Government provides a diverse range of business support, which should be evaluated for their impact on organic business growth and not business displacement. Businesses are confused about potential eligibility for the Accelerated Growth Programme and Business Wales services.

The Welsh Government should review its delivery of existing business support services. This should include the Business Mentoring Programme to ensure quality standards are met and awareness amongst business owners is improved.

The panel highlighted the need to develop entrepreneurial skills in Wales, especially communication and digital skills and for the apprenticeships system to work effectively for employers of all sizes. The panel agreed that most business owners do not associate with the term 'entrepreneur', due to its portrayal in the media and focus on technology sectors.

Places

Broadband and mobile coverage were highlighted as crucial to attract people to modern high streets and improve productivity for business owners. Poor broadband can undermine customer service for high street businesses. One panel member is involved in a pilot study for superfast broadband, which has dramatically improved online productivity for business functions. The panel called for a national strategy to ensure suitable broadband delivery to all Welsh businesses, including through incentives for private businesses to install broadband infrastructure and investment in 5G.

The panel emphasised the importance of Small Business Rate Relief to support business growth. It was agreed that the business rates system should actively incentivise investment from small businesses. The panel also called for greater financial penalties for landlords of empty properties in town centres.

The panel encouraged the Welsh Government to conduct further research on how policy can support entrepreneurship for local places. New co-working spaces in town centres were also noted for supporting business growth by facilitating networking and mentorship.

3. Policy Panel

Wales' economic recovery since the recession has been driven by a rise in genuine self-employment, not the gig economy. The Welsh Government should recognise and celebrate the economic contribution of self-employment.

The panel welcomed a permanent Small Business Rate Relief scheme and called for more frequent revaluations so that rates bills more closely link to economic circumstances. The rollout of apprenticeships reforms in Wales has been more successful than in England, but should support apprenticeship opportunities across sectors and levels.

Some businesses are using their online sales to supplement their high street presence. The panel said that high streets should be viable, attractive commercial and social hubs for local people and business.

4. Close

JFS thanked delegates and closed the meeting.