

Minister for Welsh Language and Lifelong Learning Statement: Update on the Ministerial Taskforce for the South Wales Valleys

I'm pleased that you have the opportunity to listen to me again, and I'm very pleased to have this opportunity to discuss the work of the ministerial taskforce for the south Wales Valleys. Members will be aware that we set up the taskforce a year ago to work with communities and local businesses across the south Wales Valleys to ensure that we can deliver lasting economic change in the region and create good-quality jobs closer to people's homes, improve skill levels, and bring prosperity to all in the Valleys.

I would like to place on record, Deputy Presiding Officer, my gratitude to the taskforce for its work over the last 12 months. I want to thank my own colleagues in government—Ken Skates, the Cabinet Secretary for the Economy and Infrastructure, and Julie James, the Minister for Skills and Science. The membership of the taskforce has been extended over the course of the year, and new members include Fiona Jones, from the Department for Work and Pensions, and Gaynor Richards, from Neath Port Talbot Council for Voluntary Service.

The first year has been fast-paced. We have met with, talked with, and listened to people living and working in the Valleys. These conversations have been lively, insightful and challenging. They, together with the evidence the taskforce has taken over the course of the last year, have helped to shape our priorities for the future. Deputy Presiding Officer, we're not simply creating a plan for the Valleys; it is a plan from the Valleys. We know we need to work differently to, and learn from, previous initiatives and programmes that have focused on the Valleys. This cannot and will not be another top-down approach towards regeneration and economic renewal. We will continue to work with communities across the south Wales Valleys. The taskforce will make sure that we use existing resources in a co-ordinated way and will focus on the priorities that have been identified by those communities. These priorities will be set out in 'Our Valleys, Our Future', our high-level plan for action, which will be published on 20 July in Ferndale.

Deputy Presiding Officer, as a result of the feedback we received from people living and working in the Valleys, we have developed the plan and the actions we will take over the coming years around three themes: good-quality jobs and the skills to do them, better public services, and the local community and environment. At the same time, the issue of transport was raised by people across the whole region, and this is something we will also address in the coming months. The need for good-quality jobs and access to skills training was a clear priority for the people and businesses with whom we have spoken. People told us that there are just not enough job opportunities within reach of their local communities and too often the jobs that are available are on zero-hours contracts or they are temporary or agency work. It is the taskforce's ambition that by 2021 we will have closed the employment gap between the south Wales Valleys and the rest of Wales.

This means helping an additional 7,000 people into work and creating thousands of new, fair, secure and sustainable jobs in the Valleys. It is timely that the Minister for Skills and Science is today setting out the Welsh Government's new agenda for employability. This work will help to widen our efforts to support people who are out of work into jobs and create better conditions for work. The taskforce will help to ensure the new employability agenda will deliver maximum benefits for our Valleys communities.

Deputy Presiding Officer, the taskforce will also target investment to secure new strategic hubs in six areas across the Valleys. These will be areas where we seek to focus public investment in order to create new jobs and further opportunities to attract private sector investment. We will work with local communities, local authorities and businesses to ensure the focus of each hub will reflect the opportunities and demands of each area and their aspirations for the future. One of these hubs will be the new automotive technology business park for Ebbw Vale, which the economy Secretary announced last month. This will be backed with £100 million over 10 years and will support jobs and investment across the Heads of the Valleys.

We will look to maximise job opportunities in the local economy—the foundational economy—businesses we use every day and see all around us, such as retail, care and the food industry. We will also encourage and provide support for existing and potential entrepreneurs. I have seen how this can work in my own constituency and would like to see this happening across the whole of the Valleys. Each area of the Valleys is unique, but each community has a rich heritage and culture. The Valleys are also home to some of the most breathtaking but underappreciated and underused natural landscapes in Wales. We heard frequently in public meetings and discussion groups that we need to do more to celebrate and capitalise on the Valleys' natural environment.

The taskforce will therefore explore the concept of a Valleys landscape park to help local communities build on their many natural assets, including the potential for community energy generation and tourism. We have also heard from many people about the fabric of our towns and communities and how we need to invest in the future of our Valleys towns. At the same time, people spoke with a passion about the litter and fly-tipping that disfigures too much of our local environment. All of these are issues that we will address over the coming few months.

We are launching 'Our Valleys, Our Future' at a time of unprecedented infrastructure investment in south Wales. The south Wales metro, the two city deals, the Welsh Government's commitment to invest in affordable housing, and the M4 relief road, all offer opportunities for people living in the Valleys. These are opportunities that we must, and will, maximise.

I am determined the taskforce will make a real difference to Valleys communities over the course of this Assembly term. This is the beginning of a longer-term journey, which is being shaped by people working and living in the Valleys. We must now work together to turn this vision into action on the

ground. Once the plan is launched, we will continue to talk with people to make sure that these actions are shaped by people living in the Valleys. Drawing on those views, we will also develop a delivery plan with targets and outcome measures. This plan will be published in the autumn. This will have a clear timetable for delivery.

We will have a structure in place to ensure there is accountability for this work. We have a cross-Government board that will ensure and provide oversight and accountability for the progress made against our commitments. It will be supported by a number of different work streams and I will be asking members of the taskforce to lead work on these different work streams.

Deputy Presiding Officer, I am excited to be part of this work in the Valleys. This is a part of Wales that is close to my heart. It is where I was born and brought up, and it's where I represent today. The taskforce will build on the lessons learned from previous regeneration schemes, shaped by the feedback we have received from communities across the Valleys of south Wales. 'Our Valleys, Our Future' offers hope for a brighter future. People living and working in the Valleys deserve nothing less.