

Welsh elections 2016 – Response from the Welsh Conservatives

Ahead of the 2016 Welsh elections, the Campaign for Science and Engineering (CaSE) wrote to the leaders of all political parties with at least one AM, inviting them to set out their party's policies on science and engineering.

Below is the response from the Welsh Conservatives

How would you encourage science and engineering industries to locate and remain in Wales?

Wales has so much to offer the science and engineering industries and it is vital that we work to support this sector and offer competitive support packages to attract those in the industry. Enterprise Zones can play a vital role in attracting businesses, however, at present no zone in Wales specifically supports the science or engineering sector, despite its fundamental importance to the developing Welsh economy. Scotland and England both have an Enterprise Zone that focuses and fosters growth in these industries which puts Wales at a competitive disadvantage. Many start-up firms could benefit from the public investment, support packages and growth incentives provided by Enterprise Zones.

What plan would you set for investment in research and development over the next five years?

The private sector is central to the advancement of cutting edge technologies, training and employment and as the party of business, we continue to encourage the scientific and engineering communities to invest in Wales, and recognise the critical role they play in our future. A Welsh Conservative Government would encourage collaboration across the sectors, so private investors are working with universities and research hubs to ensure that they can foster growth in engineering and sciences and increase the sector's maximum economic impact. We will ensure that investors receive aftercare once invested, to embed them in local economies and make best use of the surrounding supply chains and research facilities.

Given the reduction in HEFCW's budget, how would you protect the Quality Related (QR) budget for university research to allow talented researchers and good ideas will now have a better chance of thriving in Welsh universities?

Higher Education plays a central role in Welsh life, culture and the economy. Our nation needs a HE sector which offers appropriate, sustainable support to students; and helps our Universities fulfil their potential as global leaders in the field of academia. Welsh Conservatives will reform the way Higher Education is funded in Wales to ensure that Welsh universities retain the best and brightest talent. With world-class research facilities at our universities, our students, and academic institutions, are essential to cementing a long-lasting legacy for Life Sciences in Wales.

University science and engineering courses cost more to deliver than other subjects because of the practical element involved. To address this issue, would you review and address funding for the teaching of high-cost subjects to ensure there isn't a financial disincentive for universities delivering these courses?

Developing these skills are critical if Wales is to develop a robust, dynamic and innovative economy. In order to support these heavily practical courses, Welsh Conservatives would explore the establishment of university technical colleges, to bring learners, colleges, universities and businesses together - prioritising skills and improving the status of vocational qualifications. In the meantime, we will fund education institutions directly so they can have far greater control over their institutions funding arrangements.

What commitments will your party make to improve the use of scientific expertise to inform policy-making in government? What steps will you take to ensure that relevant evidence is gathered, assessed, and used to inform policy decisions?

Welsh Conservatives are steadfast on their commitment to better integrate industry knowledge in public policy. For too long has the Welsh Government failed to adequately engage with the industry, which is frustrating at best, and ill-informed at worst. Increasing the presence of industry knowledge will ensure that policy is relevant and more effective and representative of the people it is set to serve.

What steps will you take to ensure this process of gathering and assessing evidence related to policy decisions is transparent?

We will work with the industry to establish a group of elected industry leaders to chair the board for development and investment. Their expert industry knowledge will be used to advise Welsh Government economic policy, which will be completely open and transparent to the Welsh Assembly and general public.

What steps will you take to ensure that there will be appropriate support for scientific advice for government ministers?

Welsh Conservatives have continually highlighted that government does not always know best – and have announced a range of measures to ensure the voice of experience, and industry, is returned to policy-making. Scientific advice will be pivotal to this process.

Wales has a Chief Scientific Advisor and an Economy, Science and Transport Minister. Will you commit to retaining the Chief Scientific Advisor position? Will you confirm your support for science to remain in the Ministerial title or, preferably, to be recognised with a stand-alone Science Minister?

Welsh Conservatives would retain the Chief Scientific Advisor, and ensure that a Minister not only has clear responsibility in this area; but that issues specific to science are also considered across all portfolios of government.

What steps will you take to ensure that the Welsh Chief Scientific Advisor with the support of the Scientific Advisory Council for Wales will be consulted regarding policy decisions?

The next Welsh Government must be far more willing to embrace the expert advice of industry, including that of the Welsh Chief Scientific Advisor. Welsh Conservatives would ensure consultative mechanisms were fully reflective of this, as part of wider plans to devolve elements of decision-making away from Government Ministers, and ensure Wales utilises its broad pool of talent, including in the scientific field.