

Press release: Environment Agency flood scheme for Starcross and Cockwood officially opened

Today (5 April 2019) has seen the official opening of Starcross and Cockwood's £4.8 million flood defence scheme.

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The new coastal defences include 4 new flood gates, newly raised ground, slipway improvements and nearly 600 metres of raised and refurbished flood walls.

Alongside the project's flood defence benefits, the project has included work to enhance habitats for local wildlife and to improve walkways for residents around Cockwood Harbour.

The scheme significantly reduces the risk of tidal flooding to the communities of Starcross and Cockwood, taking into account the impacts of climate change and rising sea levels until 2050.

Sir James Bevan, Chief Executive of the Environment Agency, said:

I am delighted to see this important project completed. These new flood defences will see 650 homes and businesses in Starcross and Cockwood better protected from coastal flooding and the effects of climate change for decades to come.

We have worked closely with the local community to design and build a scheme which blends into the local environment whilst also creating additional habitats for marine wildlife and improving walkways along the seafront.

The scheme was officially opened today by Philip Rees, Chair of the South West Flood and Coastal Committee, in a ceremony with local representatives. He said:

It is an honour to cut the ribbon on this new scheme, that sees over 600 properties better protected from the worst effects of flooding. This is a unique location and it is very satisfying to see that the character of the area has been maintained whilst bringing peace of mind to many residents.

The scheme also includes a unique contingency plan. In the event that all usual forms of communication fail, the 18th and 19th-century bells in St Paul's Church will be used to alert residents to flood risk.

The chances of tried and tested traditional electronic methods failing are remote but every flood plan has a contingency so the Environment Agency worked with Starcross Flood Group, St Paul's Church and flood wardens on this unique solution. The bells were restored earlier this year thanks to community fundraisers and funding from the Environment Agency.

The local community also identified a need for improvements to pedestrian and road safety around Cockwood Harbour. The Environment Agency included these improvements in addition to the direct flood risk benefits of the scheme. Other features include habitat niches on the harbour wall, improved public amenity, surface water drainage and landscape finishes.

The Environment Agency is making a number of improvements to increase the level of flood protection in the local area. Across England the Environment Agency is investing £2.6 billion in flood and coastal defence schemes between 2015-2021 to better protect 300,000 homes from flooding.

Press release: Joint Statement on Fighting Near Gharyan, Libya

The following statement on Libya was released by the Governments of France, Italy, the United Arab Emirates, the United Kingdom and the United States

Press release: Government launches £3 million scheme to regenerate village halls

A £3 million fund to improve village halls and better connect rural

communities across the country is being launched today (5 April 2019) by the government.

With more than 10,000 village halls across the country, these spaces provide vital hubs for communities to connect, collaborate and celebrate.

Village hall committees are now able to apply for grants of up to £75,000 towards refurbishment and alteration of their buildings, from improvement works on existing facilities through to new meeting rooms.

The new scheme, which will help around 100 community building projects to get on site and start work, will be opened by [Rural Affairs Minister Lord Gardiner](#) and [Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury, Robert Jenrick](#) at the Oxton Village Hall in Nottinghamshire.

Speaking at the launch, hosted by the [Rural Community Action Nottinghamshire](#), Minister for Rural Affairs Lord Gardiner will say:

Village halls are the cornerstone of our rural communities. They provide vital spaces and facilities for people across the country – from fitness and social activity through to healthcare and education.

I am delighted to launch officially this £3 million grant scheme for village halls, supporting these important hubs for our local communities.

Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury, Robert Jenrick will say:

Village halls are the heart of rural communities. This £3 million will help ensure that people living in villages across the country will be able to enjoy these important assets for many years to come.

Many village halls were built as memorials to local people who lost their lives in the first world war and this funding is part of our national commemoration of the centenary of the armistice.

Over the past few years, village halls across the country have spent money on substantial projects funded by grants. In Nottinghamshire, where the new scheme is being launched, Oxton Village Hall has refurbished the kitchen and toilets, and installed double glazing throughout the hall, while East Bridgford Village Hall has invested in a new heating system and installed energy efficiency lighting.

The new funding will cover 20% of the total costs of a project. The remaining funding comes from a combination of charity reserves, fundraising, local authority funding and other grants such as the [National Lottery Community Fund](#)

The application must be a village hall or similar rural community building and a registered charity. New build projects will not be eligible to apply to the fund due to their high costs and long timescales.

Applications will be assessed by a panel including Defra officials and [Action with Communities in Rural England \(ACRE\)](#) staff with extensive experience of halls and grant schemes.

The grant funding will be managed by ACRE on behalf of Defra and advice and support to potential applicants will be provided through the ACRE network. [Applicants can apply for grants by following this link.](#)

News story: Universities urged to review 'unacceptable' admissions practices

A full review of university admissions is required to end 'unacceptable' practices some universities use to lure students into accepting higher education places, the Education Secretary said today (5 April).

Damian Hinds is calling for a review of admissions practices after the extent that 'conditional unconditional' offers are used by institutions was revealed by UCAS last year.

A 'conditional unconditional' offer from a university informs students that they are guaranteed a place, but only if they put the university as their first option. This could breach laws designed to protect consumers from entering into a transaction they otherwise wouldn't have.

In letters to the 23 universities using this recruitment technique, Mr Hinds will call on them to end this practice. He will say they are 'backing students into a corner' to accept a place at their institution – trapping them from exploring other options that could be more suitable. A small number of institutions have recently decided to end this practice, and now Mr Hinds is calling for other universities to follow suit.

Education Secretary Damian Hinds said:

It is simply unacceptable for universities to adopt pressure-selling tactics, which are harming students' grades in order to fill places. It is not what I expect to see from our world-class higher education institutions.

'Conditional unconditional' offers are damaging the reputation of

the institutions involved and our world-leading sector as a whole. That is why I will be writing to 23 universities, urging them to stamp out this unethical practice.

But I am concerned about the wider picture of how some universities are getting students through their doors, so I am asking the OfS to look at how well current admissions practices serve students and how they can be improved, so we can protect the integrity of our higher education system.

‘Conditional unconditional’ offers are a subset of all offers with an ‘unconditional’ component, which have risen drastically across subjects in recent years.

The Education Secretary’s concerns over admissions is the final in a series of interventions in the higher education sector, following announcements made around essay writing services and grade inflation in recent weeks.

In 2018, 34.4 per cent of 18-year-olds from England, Northern Ireland and Wales received a form of unconditional offer whereas in 2013, this figure was just 1.1 per cent. This means 87,540 applicants were given some form of offer with an unconditional component before they sat their final exams at school or college.

In 2018, the University of Roehampton made 1,940 conditional unconditional offers to 18-year-olds from England, Northern Ireland and Wales, representing 65.8% of all their offers made to this group. Nottingham Trent University made 8,380 ‘conditional unconditional’ offers, representing 39.9% of all offers.

UCAS data published last year also shows that students who accept unconditional offers, whether conditions are applied or not, are proportionally 7 per cent more likely to miss their predicted A levels by two grades than students with conditional offers.

Universities Minister Chris Skidmore said:

This excessive use of conditional unconditional offers is not in the best interests of students – and it is worrying to see such a major rise in their use across all subjects.

I know there is a place for unconditional offers, but I expect universities to use them responsibly. They must not be used to place students in a position where they are forced to make choices before they know their respective options. Where institutions are not acting in the best interests of students the Office for Students should use their full range of powers to take action.

The review of admissions practices will be an important moment for the sector to ensure the system works in the interests of students, and provides a truly accurate measure of performance for

universities going forwards.

The Education Secretary will be asking the OfS to take a comprehensive look at university admissions procedures, in guidance sent to the regulator setting out his priorities for the financial year.

The scope of the review would be developed in due course. But the Education Secretary would like the OfS to look at ways of improving current practices, including greater access and participation for students from underrepresented groups and disadvantaged backgrounds.