

News story: Minister holds inaugural Electoral Summit

The Summit brought together expert members from around the United Kingdom, including representatives from SOLACE, Electoral Commission, Association of Electoral Administrators and the Scottish Assessors Association, to provide additional impetus to the democratic engagement agenda.

This forum discussed a range of electoral matters, focusing in particular on how the government and the electoral community can best work together to promote democratic engagement, tackle electoral fraud and further modernise the electoral system.

The Minister for the Constitution, Chris Skidmore said:

Our partners in the electoral community play a vital role in identifying opportunities for engaging under-registered and vulnerable groups. I am delighted to launch the first Electoral Summit as part of our commitment to engaging with these key organisations.

This is imperative to help realise our ambitious aim of making the General Election in 2022 the most inclusive to date.

This work is guided by Sir Eric Pickles' comprehensive review, which made a number of recommendations for strengthening the integrity of the electoral process.

Press release: Santa backs Highways England's call to motorists to check their vehicles this Christmas

Santa Claus checks his sleigh to make sure it doesn't break down as he prepares to deliver presents to children the world over.

And the company responsible for motorways and main A-roads is urging people driving this Christmas to make sure their vehicles are also ready for seasonal travel.

Santa can be seen carrying out the vital checks on his sleigh in a special fun animation below – and he's got a little help from his festive friends

including Rudolph!

[See our animation](#)

These checks include:

- checking that Santa has plenty of grip on his sledge – motorists should check their tyre tread to make sure it is within the legal limit
- making sure Rudolph's nose is shining bright – always make sure lights on the vehicle are working correctly before setting off
- making sure he feeds his reindeer before travelling – make sure that you always keep your tank at least one quarter full to avoid running out of fuel on your journey

Highways England's customer service director, Melanie Clarke, said:

This is a timely reminder from Santa and his festive friends that you should always check your vehicle before setting off.

But there is a serious point to this, too. Safety is our top imperative and we know from experience that almost half of breakdowns are avoidable and these can easily be averted with simple checks.

Christmas is always a busy period on the road network and we'd urge all motorists to make sure they do their bit to check their vehicle is roadworthy before setting off over the festive period.

She also highlighted that 99 per cent of motorways and strategic A roads will be roadworks-free in time for Christmas, meaning hauliers and motorists alike can enjoy last-minute shopping and delivery journeys with as little disruption as possible.

Latest statistics from Highways England show almost half of all breakdowns are caused by simple mechanical problems which could be avoided with basic checks. Nearly a quarter are caused by tyre problems; meanwhile, 450 people were injured in incidents involving vehicles that weren't roadworthy over the course of a year.

And around 20 motorists break down every day because they have run out of fuel. There were 7,419 cases nationwide of vehicle breakdowns on the strategic road network due to lack of fuel.

The RAC is also backing the campaign and says that motorists should check their vehicle this Christmas, even if their journey is likely to be a short one.

RAC spokesman, Rod Dennis, said:

Just like Santa, millions of drivers can't afford a breakdown

getting in the way of them reaching their destinations this Christmas.

So we're backing Highways England's call for drivers to give their vehicles a bit of 'TLC' before they set out on any long journey. Simply checking things like the condition of tyres could be the key to not wasting valuable time in the cold and wet this December, broken down at the side of the road.

Then, should the unexpected happen, motorists can be reassured by the fact that our patrols will be working tirelessly throughout the festive period to get them back on the move again as quickly as possible.

To help keep people moving this Christmas, Highways England has also produced a [handy pdf](#) showing people how to conduct basic vehicle checks before setting off this Christmas.

Those travelling over Christmas are also being reminded to make sure that they are prepared for an emergency by:

- charging a mobile phone and taking it with them in case they run into difficulty and need to use it in emergency circumstances
- taking warm clothing in the car with them in case of breakdowns
- taking food and drink in the car in case of any extreme weather

Motorists can head online to the [Think website](#) where they can watch bespoke videos showing how to carry out basic vehicle checks. Alternatively, follow Highways England on social media channels for more information.

Those wishing to find out more about driving on smart motorways can [view our webpage](#) for further information.

Drivers planning to use the Dartford Crossing are reminded to pay Dart Charge in advance or by midnight the day after crossing.

More information can be found on our website or by calling our information line (0300 123 5000) they can keep up to date with conditions on the roads.

General enquiries

Members of the public should contact the Highways England customer contact centre on 0300 123 5000.

Media enquiries

Journalists should contact the Highways England press office on 0844 693 1448 and use the menu to speak to the most appropriate press officer.

News story: Landmark for English Channel electricity link project

Updated: Added further explanation of the milestone following feedback

The Marine Management Organisation (MMO) has issued a comprehensive decision for the IFA2 (Interconnexion France-Angleterre) project under the TEN-E Regulations, after it attained all of the required statutory consents in UK consenting regime.

The IFA2 interconnector is a 1,000mw high voltage direct current (HVDC) link, which will run from Normandy in France to Hampshire in England. The project is being carried out by National Grid IFA2 Ltd and RTE.



MMO Senior Marine Licensing Manager Matthew Kinmond said:

This is the first comprehensive decision from the MMO under the TEN-E Regulations and the first in the UK for a cross-border and multiple consenting regime interconnector project. It represents a major milestone for the IFA2 project.

Dave Luetchford Head of IFA2 from National Grid said:

Enhancing Great Britain's energy connection to France will bring a number of benefits, including increasing security of electricity supplies for both countries and providing opportunities for shared use of renewable energy.

Find out more about the [IFA2 project](#)

Find out more about [TEN-E Regulations](#)

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Find out more about the [IFA2 project](#)

Find out more about [TEN-E Regulations](#)

Press release: Environment Secretary publishes bill to strengthen animal welfare

A new law will ensure animal abusers are jailed for up to 5 years and animal sentience is reflected in domestic law, under plans published by the Environment Secretary today.

The Government has published a draft bill which would increase the maximum prison sentence for animal cruelty tenfold, from six months to five years, in England and Wales. The draft bill also sets out that the government “must have regard to the welfare needs of animals as sentient beings in formulating and implementing government policy”. Subject to consultation on the draft bill, the government will legislate to deliver both aims.

The plans underline the government’s commitment to raising animal welfare standards, ensuring there will be enhanced protections for animals as we leave the EU.

Environment Secretary Michael Gove said:

As we leave the EU we will deliver a Green Brexit, not only maintaining but enhancing animal welfare standards.

Animals are sentient beings who feel pain and suffering, so we are writing that principle into law and ensuring that we protect their welfare.

Our plans will also increase sentences for those who commit the most heinous acts of animal cruelty to five years in jail.

We are a nation of animal lovers so we will make Brexit work not just for citizens but for the animals we love and cherish too.

The plans to increase maximum sentences follows a number of recent shocking cases where courts have said they would have handed down longer sentences had they been available, including a case last year when a man trained dogs to ruthlessly torture other animals, including trapping a fox and a terrier dog in a cage to brutally attack each other.

The move has been strongly welcomed by animal welfare groups and follows dedicated campaigning from Battersea Dogs & Cats Home.

Battersea Dogs & Cats Home’s Chief Executive Claire Horton said:

Battersea is greatly encouraged by the Government’s willingness to

see sentences for the most shocking cases of animal cruelty increase from six months to five years and today's Defra announcement takes a significant step in that direction.

Battersea is very much at the front line of animal welfare and it's heart-breaking to see truly shocking cases of animal cruelty and neglect come through our doors, where dogs and cats have clearly had to endure so much suffering.

The current maximum cruelty sentence of six months in England and Wales is neither a punishment nor a deterrent but Battersea believes today's publication of a draft Bill could help to achieve both.

The draft Bill is part of a wider programme of reform to cement the UK's position as a global leader on animal welfare. Earlier in the year, we announced plans to make CCTV mandatory in all slaughterhouses and we have committed to taking steps to control the export of live farm animals for slaughter as we leave the EU.

1. Cases of extreme cruelty are rare – while on average about 1,150 people per year are convicted for animal cruelty, fewer than five of them receive the current maximum sentence. The change in law will ensure that offenders are properly punished in those rare but shocking cases.
2. Under the government's plans, courts will retain the ability to hand out an unlimited fine and ban an offender from owning animals in the future, but crucially they will also have the ability to sentence the worst cases appropriately. The move will bring maximum sentences for animal cruelty in England into line with other countries such as Australia, Canada and the Republic of Ireland.
3. Some of the recent shocking cases in which courts commented they would have handed down longer prison sentences had the law allowed them include:
 - A man who systematically abused and killed several puppies by beating, choking and stabbing them, sentenced to the maximum six months' imprisonment and banned from owning animals.
 - A man who kicked his girlfriend's dog to death, given a custodial sentence of just over five months, fined £1,000 and banned from owning animals.
 - A man who fed his dog aspirin and paracetamol to try to kill her, before beating her to death with a shovel, sentenced to four months in prison and banned from owning animals.