

Press release: A1 plans to improve Newcastle journeys

The plans to upgrade the road will improve safety while supporting economic growth in the region.

The Highways England plans will improve journeys through Newcastle by adding an extra lane along a 5-mile stretch of the existing dual carriageway from Scotswood, just after the River Tyne, up to North Brunton.

Around 750 people came along to the public information events, including residents, community groups, local businesses, and councillors.

Questionnaires were filled out by 272 people with 73% of respondents agreeing there is a need for improvements.

Highways England project manager Charlotte Taylor said:

This is an exciting scheme that will help improve motorists' journeys and cut congestion near Newcastle.

As part of this scheme we have held a number of public engagement events, including ones for residents living near Birchfield Gardens about the possibility of closing the access road and we have concluded that the access road will remain open.

There are a number of options for the design of the access road and these will now be developed along with the rest of the scheme and further engagement will take place next year.

The overall improvements will provide additional capacity, improve journey times and safety while supporting economic growth in the region.

Further information events will be held in autumn 2018 towards the end of preliminary design stage. Work is expected to start by March 2020.

For more information please [visit the scheme website](#), where a copy of the scheme announcement brochure can be found.

People who would like a hard copy of the announcement brochure can pick one up from reception at the following venues:

- Lemington Resource Centre
- Outer West Community Centre
- Blakelaw Community Centre
- Kingston Park Community Centre
- Fawdon Community Centre

- Team Valley Retail Park, Axis Building
- Washington Services
- Great Park Community Centre
- Gosforth Library and Learning Centre
- Denton Burn Community Association
- Scotswood Centre
- City Library, Charles Avison Building

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.

Press release: Pair guilty of illegal fishing in County Durham

The Environment Agency has prosecuted two County Durham men for poaching and using illegal fishing equipment.

Ian David Cook, 38, of The Grove, Consett, and Michael Fullerton, 22, of Surrey Crescent, also in Consett, were each given a 12 month conditional discharge by Newton Aycliffe Magistrates' Court on 6 December 2017 after pleading guilty to the offences. They were also each ordered to pay £420 costs.

Magistrates heard that on 30 November 2016 Environment Agency fisheries enforcement officers observed Cook and Fullerton shining torches into the upper River Browney near West Butsfield, during a targeted evening patrol.

The River Browney and its catchment is an important and improving area for migratory fish, especially sea trout. Recent improvements to aid fish passage and water quality and a robust approach to enforcement have led to an increase in returning fish but at present, stocks remain low and vulnerable.

After detaining the men they seized two torches and a landing net containing three dead sea trout, each at various stages of spawning. Under the Salmon & Freshwater Fisheries Act 1975, lights are prohibited, as are landing nets if used without an authorised rod and line. It is also illegal to fish during the close season for migratory fish.

During interview, Fullerton admitted to shining the torch into the river and

using the net to take fish but denied knowing it was illegal. He also denied knowing it was illegal to take fish during the close season. This was despite him holding a rod licence at the time, which spells out when and how legal fishing can be undertaken. Cook confirmed he understood that using a lamp to either take or assist in taking fish is an offence.

Kevin Summerson of the Environment Agency said:

This was a serious poaching incident using illegal instruments that could have had a severe impact on future stocks of sea trout in the River Browney. At this time of year sea trout are returning to rivers to spawn and protecting returning fish is vital to maintaining a healthy fish population.

That's why our fisheries enforcement officers work hard to target those people flouting the law and we won't hesitate to take action.

The conditional discharge will appear on Fullerton and Cook's criminal record. If either commits another crime within the next 12 months they can be sentenced for the first offence and the new offence.

Anyone witnessing illegal fishing incidents in progress can report it directly to the Environment Agency hotline on 0800 80 70 60. Information on illegal fishing and environmental crime can also be reported anonymously to Crime stoppers on 0800 555 111.

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Press release: Severn bridges transfer to public ownership draws closer

On Monday 8 January 2018 the responsibility for the operations, maintenance and vehicle charges for the bridges will be managed and run by Highways England, the Government-owned company which looks after England's strategic network of motorways and major A-roads.

At the same time all vehicle charges will be exempt from VAT, reducing the overall charge for individual crossings from £6.70 to £5.60.

Clive Perkin, Highways England Divisional Director of Strategy and Planning, explained:

We want to remind drivers that when Highways England takes over management of the bridges, prices will be reduced as they will no longer be subject to VAT.

This is good news for private vehicle drivers as this is the first step in the Government's commitment to abolishing the bridge tolls by the end of 2018. Today we are setting out how people can prepay for their crossings when the change takes place.

UK Government Secretary of State for Wales Alun Cairns said:

Our decision to abolish the Severn tolls sends a powerful message to businesses, commuters and tourists that the UK Government is committed to strengthening the Welsh economy.

By strengthening the links between communities in south Wales and south-west England, we will transform the joint economic prospects of both regions, creating a growth corridor stretching from Cardiff through Newport to Bristol.

I want to ensure that visitors and investors know what Wales has to offer and I want the world to know our nation is open for business.

Holders of TAGs – the prepayment system that allows regular travellers to cross without stopping to pay manually – have been informed of the new arrangements by letter this week.

Drivers paying by direct debit will not need to take any action – their accounts and balances will be transferred automatically and their payments adjusted to reflect the new charges.

Those who pay by top-up with a Trip TAG through online banking will need to update their payment details to Highways England's account from 8 January 2018. Account holders will still be able to pay through the website or phone.

After 8 January the crossings will operate as normal with just a few small changes to signs at the toll plazas.

Staff currently employed with Severn Crossing PLC have all been offered employment with Highways England.

Details of the changes and actions necessary are set out in the letters and are also available on the [Severn Bridges website](#). TAG holders with any queries can also contact the TAG helpline on 01454 633 522.

Background information

Severn Bridges (M4 and M48) monthly charges after 8 January 2018:

Category 1: £5.60, with the Season/Shared TAG at £98.56 (20% discount based on 22 trips per month).

Category 2: £11.20, with the Season/Shared TAG at £197.12 (20% discount based on 22 trips per month).

Category 3: £16.70, with the Season/Shared TAG at £330.66 (10% discount based on 22 trips per month).

Vehicle Category	Current daily toll charges	Daily charges after 8 January 2018
Category 1 (Cars and other vehicles up to 9 seats)	£6.70	£5.60
Category 2 (Goods vehicles up to 3.5 tonnes, small buses)	£13.40	£11.20
Category 3 (Goods vehicles over 3.5 tonnes, large buses)	£20.00	£16.70

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[News story: Chinese Vice Premier attends UK/China People to People Dialogue](#)

As part of her four day visit to the UK for the 2017 UK-China People to People Dialogue (P2P), Chinese Vice Premier Madame Liu arrived in London on Tuesday 5th December. Mme Liu arrived in London from Edinburgh, where she met First Minister Nicola Sturgeon and received an honorary degree from Edinburgh University.

Madame Liu participated in a variety of events in London, including a meeting with Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson, a drop-in meeting with Prime Minister

Theresa May and an Audience with HRH The Princess Royal.

The P2P promotes UK-China collaboration on issues that are important to people in both our countries, including health, education and culture. The high level engagement between Mme Liu and UK figures will further deepen Britain's relationship with China and lay the ground for future collaboration.

On Tuesday 5th December, Mme Liu Yandong met Prime Minister Theresa May. Secretary of State for Health Jeremy Hunt hosted the meeting in Downing Street. The Prime Minister and Vice Premier Liu discussed various topics including the UK-China relationship, women's empowerment and education.

On the morning of Wednesday 6th December, HRH The Princess Royal hosted Chinese Vice-Premier Mme Liu Yandong for an Audience at Buckingham Palace. The pair established a firm friendship in July when HRH The Princess Royal visited Beijing on her tour of China.

On Wednesday 6th December, Mme Liu visited Oxford where she delivered a speech to Oxford University students at the Sheldonian Theatre. In her speech, Mme Liu discussed the Golden Era of UK-China relations.

On Thursday 7th December, Mme Liu Co-Chaired the 5th Plenary Session of the UK-China People to People Dialogue with Secretary of State for Health Jeremy Hunt. During the plenary session, Mme Liu and SoS Hunt celebrated our achievements throughout the 5 years of P2P, including advancements in women's equality and educational exchange.

On Thursday 7th December, Mme Liu met the Foreign Secretary in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. During the meeting, the pair discussed their vision for the UK-China relationship, the Middle East peace process and tackling the Illegal Wildlife Trade.