

Press release: Preferred candidate for Chair of Office for Students announced

The Department for Education has today (7 February 2017) announced that Sir Michael Barber is the preferred candidate to become Chair of the Office for Students (OfS).

Sir Michael was selected for the role following an open and transparent recruitment process, overseen by the office of [The Commissioner for Public Appointments](#).

The Office for Students is a new public body being established in law by the [Higher Education and Research Bill](#). It will combine the existing regulatory functions of the [Higher Education Funding Council for England](#) (HEFCE) and the [Office for Fair Access](#) (OFFA), and will create and oversee a regulatory environment in higher education which puts the interests of students at the heart of the system, focusing on choice and competition.

Sir Michael Barber is a leading thinker and practitioner on public service delivery and has been at the forefront of global thinking in education for the past 20 years including in higher education, for example as a member of the [Browne Review of higher education funding](#).

Justine Greening, Secretary of State for Education, said:

I am delighted to confirm Sir Michael as the government's preferred candidate for this vital role as Chair of the Office for Students (OfS).

Sir Michael is a globally respected figure both in the sector and in government with an impressive record in leading and supporting public sector delivery.

The OfS will play a vital role in this government's ambitions for higher education by replacing a regulatory system from a bygone era with framework that can truly respond to the challenges of the 21st century. I welcome Sir Michael's commitment to the opportunities for higher education through the creation of this new body.

Minister for Universities Jo Johnson said:

I am delighted Sir Michael is taking up this crucial role. With his deep understanding of education systems, Sir Michael has a world-class background in delivering HE reform and is the right person to lead the creation of the Office for Students.

The OfS will play a pivotal role in reforming one of our nation's

greatest assets – the higher education sector. This new body will drive a focus on choice and competition and rightfully put the interests of students at the heart of regulation.

Sir Michael Barber said:

I am delighted to take on this role and deeply conscious of the degree of responsibility it involves. The higher education sector in England, with its welcome diversity, is a jewel in this country's crown. It has a major role to play in a global Britain and a fairer Britain.

The challenge will be to combine the traditions that make our universities great with the innovation that the decades ahead demand.

Above all the Office for Students will aim to create a framework in which universities are enabled to provide for students both high academic standards and employability for the 21st century.

I look forward to working with everyone to sustain and develop world-leading higher education in this country.

The Rt Hon the Lord Mandelson said:

Michael Barber is an excellent choice. His commitment to education and public service is strong and he knows the importance of university independence.

The Rt Hon Baroness Gillian Shepherd said:

Sir Michael Barber will bring to this post an outstanding intellect, a proven track record in education and business, and a strongly strategic approach.

Professor Sir Steve Smith, Vice Chancellor, University of Exeter said:

Sir Michael Barber is one of the most thoughtful and impressive educationalists I have worked with. His educational expertise has been sought by the Obama administration and the Pakistan government.

In all his work he has consistently put students first, striving to improve their education whatever their background. He is a tireless advocate for adding value educationally and sees education as a continuum from school to university. I can think of no one better

qualified to act in this incredibly important role.

The appointment will be subject to a pre-scrutiny hearing by the [Education Select Committee](#). If appointed, Sir Michael will serve a term of 4 years.

News story: Freight train derailment, Lewisham

From:

First published:

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Investigation into a freight train derailment, Lewisham, London, 24 January 2017.

At around 05:35 hrs on Tuesday 24 January 2017, two loaded wagons of a westbound freight train derailed as they passed over Courthill Loop South Junction, to the south of Lewisham station, while travelling at around 20 mph (32 km/h).

The accident resulted in major damage to the railway infrastructure. The first of the two derailed wagons overturned and spilt its contents. The train divided in front of the derailed wagons and its brakes automatically applied.

There were no injuries. However, there was major disruption to local train services.

The freight train was the 03:36 hrs service from a loading terminal at Grain, on the Thames Estuary. It comprised a class 66 diesel-electric locomotive and 18 bogie hopper wagons. It was carrying building sand to Neasden, in north-west London. The wagons that derailed were the 16th and 17th from the front. They were both of the JGA type.

The track work at Courthill Loop South Junction was new. It was made up of modular panels of switches and crossings that had been part assembled offsite. They had been delivered and installed as part of engineering work carried out on the weekend of 14 and 15 January 2017. Follow-up engineering work had been carried out at the junction on the weekend before the derailment.

Our investigation will identify the sequence of events that led to the accident and how the wagons derailed. It will also consider:

- the condition of the wagons and how they were maintained
- how the wagons were loaded
- the design of the new track work at the junction and how it was installed
- the condition of the track and its geometry
- any relevant underlying management factors.

Our investigation is independent of any investigation by the railway industry or by the industry's regulator, the [Office of Rail and Road](#).

We will publish our findings, including any recommendations to improve safety, at the conclusion of our investigation. This report will be available on our website.

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Green Party: Housing Minister's plans a slap in the face for people who can't afford a home



7 February 2017

***Jonathan Bartley, co-leader: 'We must end our narrow obsession with home ownership and meet people where they are – by investing in social housing and improving the private rented sector'**

The Green Party has branded the Housing Minister's new housing strategy [1] a "slap in the face" for people struggling to afford the cost of their homes.

Jonathan Bartley, Green Party co-leader, said the Government should instead focus on:

- Setting up a Living Rent Commission to bring down rents
- Introducing a Land Value Tax to reduce property speculation
- Expand the use of community land trusts and co-operative home ownership
- End tax breaks for buy-to-let investors and use the money for social housing

Bartley said:

"The Housing Minister's plans are a slap in the face for the millions of people in this country desperate for bold plans to reduce rents and make their housing affordable.

“People are living in desperate insecurity and we need to end our narrow obsession with home ownership and meet people where they are – by investing in social housing and improving the private rented sector. Any plan to help renters which doesn’t have at its heart a clear intention to reduce the amount tenants are paying is doomed to failure.

“It is scandalous that many people are paying up to two-thirds of their income on rent, and often living in sub-standard accommodation. The Government should immediately set up a Living Rent Commission to work out what rent is truly affordable and take action to bring down costs for tenants.

“With Britain suffering such an acute housing crisis – and with property developers earning such huge sums for simply holding onto land – it’s also clear that idea such as a Land Value Tax should be explored. Such a tax could reduce property speculation, revitalise inner city areas and raise revenue – there’s no excuse for failing to investigate it as an option.

“We need to start talking seriously about expanding the use of community land trusts and co-operative home ownership. If the Government wants to take the heat out of the housing market it must end tax breaks for buy-to-let investors, and use the money to create a new generation of social housing.

“Housing should not be a speculative commodity and we must move beyond piecemeal tinkering with a broken market to ensure that everyone has a place they can call home.”

Notes:

1. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-38884601>

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News story: Law change demands equal treatment for disabled taxi users

Taxi drivers face a fine of up to £1,000 if they refuse to transport wheelchair users or attempt to charge them extra, in a change to the law announced today (7 February 2017) by Transport Minister Andrew Jones.

From 6 April taxi and private hire vehicle drivers will be obliged by law to:

- transport wheelchair users in their wheelchair

- provide passengers in wheelchairs with appropriate assistance
- charge wheelchair users the same as non-wheelchair users

Transport Minister Andrew Jones said:

We want to build a country that works for everyone, and part of that is ensuring disabled people have the same access to services and opportunities as anyone else – including when it comes to travel. People who use wheelchairs are often heavily reliant on taxis and private hire vehicles and this change to the law will mean fair and equal treatment for all.

The new rules will apply in England, Wales and Scotland affecting vehicles that are designated as wheelchair accessible and will apply to both taxis and private hire vehicles. All taxis in London and a significant number in most major urban centres are wheelchair accessible.

In a change to the law, drivers found to be discriminating against wheelchair users face fines of up to £1,000 as part of provisions being enacted from the Equality Act. Drivers may also face having their taxi or private hire vehicle (PHV) licence suspended or revoked by their licencing authority. Drivers unable to provide assistance for medical reasons will be able to apply to their licensing authority for an exemption from the new requirements.

Robert Meadowcroft, Chief Executive of Muscular Dystrophy UK, said:

This is a victory for all people with disabilities who experience daily struggles with accessible transport.

Being able to get from A to B is usually very easy for most people, however we know that this can be a challenge that affects a disabled person's entire life, including their ability to have a job and play an active part in society. This is a positive and very welcome step in the right direction which we hope will not affect the number of accessible taxis being made available by companies because of the duties now being placed on to drivers.

[Muscular Dystrophy UK](#) and our Trailblazers have been campaigning on this issue for many years, and we commend the government for listening to the views of disabled people.

The new requirements, which will come into force from 6 April, complement those already in place to prevent discrimination against users of assistance dogs and underline the government's wide-ranging commitment to supporting transport networks which work for everyone. The government will be consulting on a draft 'Accessibility action plan' later this year, which will seek to address the barriers faced by disabled people in accessing all modes of public transport.

Statement to Parliament: PM statement on European Council: 6 February 2017

Mr Speaker, before I turn to the European Council, I am sure the whole House will want to join me in sending our congratulations to Her Majesty the Queen as she marks her Sapphire Jubilee today.

It is testament to Her Majesty's selfless devotion to the nation that she is not marking becoming our first Monarch to reign for sixty-five years with any special celebration, but instead by getting on with the job to which she has dedicated her life.

On behalf of the whole country, I am proud to offer Her Majesty our humble thanks for a lifetime of extraordinary service. Long may she continue to reign over us all.

Turning to last week's informal European Council in Malta, Britain is leaving the European Union but we are not leaving Europe – and a global Britain that stands tall in the world, will be a Britain that remains a good friend and ally to all our European partners.

So at this summit, we showed how Britain will continue to play a leading role in Europe long after we have left the EU.

In particular, through our contribution to the challenge of managing mass migration; through our Special Relationship with America – and through the new and equal partnership that we want to build between the EU and an independent, self-governing, global Britain.

Let me take each in turn.

Migration

First, on migration, the discussion focused in particular on the route from Libya across the central Mediterranean.

As I have argued, we need a comprehensive and co-ordinated approach – and that is exactly what this council agreed.

This includes working hard in support of an inclusive political settlement to stabilise Libya, which will not only help to tackle migration flows but also counter terrorism.

It means working to reduce the pull factors that encourage people to risk their lives, building the capacity of the Libyans to return migrants to their own shores, treat them with dignity and help them return home.

It means looking beyond Libya and moving further upstream, including by urgently implementing the EU's External Investment Plan to help create more opportunities in migrants' home countries – and by helping genuine refugees to claim asylum in the first safe country they reach.

And it means better distinguishing between economic migrants and refugees, swiftly returning those who have no right to remain and thereby sending out a deterrence message to others thinking of embarking on perilous journeys.

And the council agreed action in all of these areas.

Britain is already playing a leading role in the region and at this summit I announced further steps including additional support for the Libyan coastguard and more than £30 million of new aid for the most vulnerable refugees across Greece, the Balkans, Egypt, Tunisia, Morocco, Algeria, Sudan and Libya.

Britain is also setting up an £8 million special protection fund to keep men, women and children in the Mediterranean region safe from trafficking, sexual violence and labour exploitation as part of our commitment to tackle modern slavery.

And the council agreed with my call that we should do everything possible to deter this horrific crime, including by introducing tough penalties for those who trade in human misery and by working together to secure the necessary evidence for prosecutions that can put these criminals behind bars where they belong.

America

Mr Speaker, turning to America, I opened a discussion on engaging the new administration and I was able to relay the conversation I had with President Trump at the White House about the important history of co-operation between the United States and the countries of Europe.

In particular, I confirmed that the President had declared his 100 per cent commitment to NATO as the cornerstone of our security in the West.

But I also made clear that every country needs to share the burden and play its full part, meeting the NATO target of spending 2 per cent on defence. Because, Mr Speaker, it is only by investing properly in our defence that we can ensure we are properly equipped to keep our people safe.

I was also able to relay my discussions with President Trump on the importance of maintaining the sanctions regime on Russia in response to its actions in Ukraine.

And I very much welcome the strong words last week from the new US ambassador to the United Nations, Nikki Haley, in confirming America's continued support for these sanctions.

Mr Speaker, of course, there are some areas where we disagree with the

approach of the new administration. And we should be clear about those disagreements and about the values that underpin our response to the global challenges that we face.

But I also argued at this council that we should engage patiently and constructively with America as a friend and ally – an ally that has helped guarantee the longest period of peace that Europe has ever known.

For we should be clear, Mr Speaker, that the alternative of division and confrontation would only embolden those who would do us harm, wherever they may be.

Brexit

Finally turning to Brexit, European leaders welcomed the clarity of the objectives that we have set out for the negotiation ahead.

They warmly welcomed our ambition to build a new partnership between Britain and the European Union that is in the interests of both sides. They also welcomed the recognition that we in Britain want to see a strong and successful European Union, because that is in our interests and the interests of the whole world.

On the issue of acquired rights, the general view was that we should reach an agreement which applied equally to the other 27 member states and the UK, which is why we think a unilateral decision from the UK is not the right way forward.

But as I have said before, EU citizens living in the UK make a vital contribution to our economy and our society and without them we would be poorer and our public services weaker.

So we will make securing the reciprocal agreement that will guarantee their status a priority as soon as the negotiations begin, and I want to see this agreed as soon as possible because that is in everyone's interests.

Mr Speaker, our European partners now want to get on with the negotiations.

So do I.

And so does this House, which last week voted by a majority of 384 in support of the government triggering Article 50.

There are of course further stages for the Bill in Committee and in the other place. And it is right that this process should be completed properly.

But, Mr Speaker, the message is clear to all.

This House has spoken. And now is not the time to obstruct the democratically expressed wishes of the British people.

It is time to get on with leaving the European Union and building an independent, self-governing, global Britain.

And I commend this Statement to the House