

Successful restoration of Cornwall's River Camel

Environmentalists are celebrating the successful completion of two river restoration projects that will boost wildlife and improve the health of the River Camel and one of its major tributaries, the De Lank River.

The River Camel Restoration Strategy was launched by the Environment Agency and Natural England after the Camel Valley, a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI), was found to be in ecological decline.

A number of factors were preventing the river from functioning properly including agricultural pollution, sewage discharges, water abstraction and invasive species. One of the biggest challenges has been the removal of obsolete structures such as disused weirs that can act as barriers to migratory fish.

The River Camel is an internationally important river for the Atlantic salmon. It is also important for sea trout, sea lamprey and otters.

The Environment Agency and Natural England have been working in partnership with the Westcountry Rivers Trust to protect and restore the ecology of the Camel Valley. In the last 2 years, efforts have focussed on Grogley Weir on the Camel and Keybridge Weir on the De Lank where heavy machinery has been used to remove structures including an old gauging station. The improvements have cost approximately £450,000.

The work at Grogley involved the removal of a concrete weir, sheet piling and gabion baskets plus approximately 60-65 metres of block stone on both banks.

The new banks have been re-profiled, seeded and Bionet installed to reduce the potential for erosion until vegetation is re-established. In addition, a series of wood deflectors have been added to improve flow and habitat diversity and provide cover for fish.

There will now follow a winter of tree-planting to replace trees lost in the works and provide a new wet-woodland habitat in the floodplain.

James Burke for the Environment Agency said:

The removal of the old gauging station on the River Camel is a great example of how we should restore the environment after a structure becomes obsolete and is preventing a river from functioning properly.

It also removes a problem for future generations and improves the environment.

Keybridge Weir was a major obstacle to migratory fish. Its removal has been welcomed by Dr Bruce Stockley, head of fisheries at the Westcountry Rivers Trust who said:

It means the river can flow naturally again.

This will ensure salmon and sea trout are able to make their migration up the De Lank River to their spawning gravels on Bodmin Moor, protecting both species for future generations.

Both projects are part of the EU-funded Water for Growth programme and were led by Westcountry Rivers Trust (WRT) working in partnership with Natural England and the Environment Agency. South West Water helped co-finance the scheme.

The River Camel Restoration Strategy has also included the removal of phosphate at sewage treatment works and a Catchment Sensitive Farming project to reduce diffuse agricultural inputs. In addition, Natural England is working with the Westcountry Rivers Trust to control Himalayan balsam, an invasive species.

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impact on children's education and welfare, particularly the most vulnerable

- Repeated isolation has chipped away at the progress pupils have made since returning to school in September
- The effectiveness of remote education is varied and difficult to determine
- Children arriving at secure children's homes are, in effect, put into solitary confinement
- Many children with special education needs and/or disabilities (SEND) are not attending school, are struggling with remote learning and are at risk of abuse or neglect.
- Even more schools report at least one child now being home schooled. Many parents doing this say their children will not return to school 'until pandemic is over'

Her Majesty's Chief Inspector today praised education and social care staff for their hard work and resilience against all the odds, as [Ofsted published the third and final set of reports looking at the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on children and young people](#).

Amanda Spielman said:

Faced with all of these pressures, the education and social care sectors are showing considerable resilience and creativity to provide children and learners with the best experience they can ... And all of this is being done against the most challenging backdrop for staff in recent times. I would like to record my appreciation for everyone working in education and social care – from childminders and social workers to teachers and college tutors.

Read reports on our findings for:

Ofsted inspectors have carried out nearly 2,000 visits to education and social care providers during the autumn term. Today's reports reflect on the experiences of leaders working in schools, further education and skills, early years and SEND.

Inspectors heard that repeated absences due to COVID-19 outbreaks have resulted in pupils losing more learning. Many children are thought to be at least 6 months behind where they should be. And for a significant number of pupils, repeated periods of self-isolation have chipped away at the progress they have been able to make since September.

The reports find that in just over half of the schools visited, pupils in bubbles were sent home to self-isolate at some point during the term. More children were sent home in bubbles from secondary schools than primaries. Some schools were extensively affected by COVID-19-related absence. And a few school leaders said that a significant proportion of their pupils had to self-isolate on 2 or 3 separate occasions.

Inspectors found schools were having to provide meaningful remote education under 2 distinct circumstances: bubble isolation and individual isolation. Many schools were making real progress with remote provision for bubbles, which often included live or pre-recorded online lessons. However, pupils who were self-isolating individually for a fortnight at a time often had a poorer experience. Whole bubbles can more easily be kept up to speed with the planned curriculum while they work from home. But isolating individuals often miss out on the new content being taught to peers in class, instead doing revision at home. For these children, the loss of learning they experienced in the summer is being repeated.

Commenting on remote education, the Chief Inspector said:

While remote education is better than nothing, it's no substitute for the classroom ... Schools are struggling to assess whether remote learning is effective or not. For many, the measure of success is whether or not children are engaging with the work at all, rather than whether they are developing their knowledge and understanding – a case of remote attendance, rather than remote learning.

In children's social care, the need to isolate had a more detrimental impact. When children arrive at secure children's homes, they are required to self-isolate for 14 days, which in effect creates a form of solitary confinement. This had a negative impact on many children's well-being. In some cases it also undermined the child's safety, and that of others in the home, because the child's anxieties resulted in self-harm or physical attacks on staff.

Elsewhere, inspectors found that children with SEND often struggled with the restrictions placed on them. Many were not attending school full time. Remote education was a challenge for some of these children, particularly if their parents were unable to support them. And when vulnerable children are not at school and are out of sight, they may be at risk of abuse or neglect.

Inspectors also found that the number of children being home schooled has risen again. Almost three-fifths of schools told inspectors they had at least one pupil whose parents had removed them from school to be home educated since the start of the autumn term. School leaders said that some parents have told them that they only want to home educate temporarily and that their children would return once 'the pandemic is over'. This suggests there will be a significant number of children returning to school after a very long gap, expecting to catch up.

Closing her commentary, Ms Spielman said:

There is real optimism that the end is finally in sight for the sort of restrictions that we currently live under, but it's clear that there is a long way to go before education and social care returns to normal. For many children, there is more to be done: to catch them up, to level the playing field and to prepare them well for the next stage in their lives.

[HMCI commentary: findings from visits in November](#)

Throughout the autumn, we have been visiting schools, colleges, early years and social care providers to discuss their experiences since the summer. We have held constructive conversations with leaders about how they have educated and cared for children in the wake of the first national lockdown and the closure of schools to most children.

We wanted to document how children, and older learners, have responded to the dramatic events of the year and how the education and social care sectors have risen to the challenges they have faced. We reported in [October](#) and [November](#), explaining how children and young people experienced the COVID crisis in different ways, depending on their circumstances.

This month, in our [final set of autumn visit briefings](#), we can see how education and social care have progressed through the autumn, and the challenges that remain as we look forward in hope of better times ahead in 2021.

Read reports on our findings for:

Last month, we described how the events of 2020, and in particular the loss of access to education, affected children differently depending on their circumstances – and particularly the level of support that they received at home. It's very clear that the children growing up with acute challenges faced more significant issues and sometimes greater risks.

In this month's reports, we have described how children who live in secure children's homes have had a difficult experience during the year. These children are vulnerable and many are at risk of self-harm. The guidance on COVID security has added another layer of pressure to an already pressurised system. Children arriving at the homes were put into isolation for 14 days. In effect, this created a form of solitary confinement – and we learned that this removal from contact had resulted in greater anxiety, an increase in self-harm and, in some cases, physical attacks on staff.

Those staff are working hard to support children and there have been some positive signs, including a greater engagement with education by children in secure homes. But, with higher levels of absences due to self-isolation being covered by temporary staff, there is not always the consistency of support that these children need.

Children with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) have also often struggled with the restrictions placed on them. These children were already less likely to attend full-time education than their peers and concerns about the pandemic has exacerbated this problem. The removal from sight of vulnerable children is worrying on a number of levels. On one level are children who struggle to access remote education, particularly if their parents are unable to support them; on another are children at risk of abuse or neglect, who are not spending time under the watchful gaze of teachers. The pressure on parents of children with SEND during this period has been particularly acute, made worse by the reduced availability of support services.

For the children who are back in full-time education, the main concern is how we can evaluate and redress the lost learning from last summer. Schools, colleges and early years providers have now had longer to assess their pupils and understand better how much learning has been lost since the first national lockdown. Many school children are thought to be at least 6 months behind where they should be. This loss of learning shows itself differently in different age groups.

In early years and into the start of primary school, leaders reported children who had regressed in both fine and gross motor skills, through lack of practice – whether that's using scissors or having physical confidence around playground equipment. Children whose parents could help them consolidate their learning have proven fairly resilient to the lost time – but many parents were juggling childcare with working and were simply not able to focus their attention in that way. For some of the youngest children, we were told that the normal rhythms of the day – eating and sleeping – had been disrupted and needed to be re-established. Social skills, such as sharing and taking turns, needed to be re-learned. Language skills and early progress with reading had slipped back.

In primary schools, there was a widespread view that most pupils had made no real progress over the summer, and that reading and maths were of particular concern. Some secondary leaders noted greater variability: most pupils had 'generally kept up' but some had significant gaps. They attributed this to pupils' different experiences at home during the first national lockdown. There were particular concerns expressed about Year 7, those coming into secondary who had missed out on a proper transition – and Year 11, those preparing for exams.

The task of establishing what pupils are learning through the term has been a tougher challenge for schools. It's clear that wide variations in COVID-driven absence have led to very inconsistent experiences for pupils. Those lucky enough not to have many cases of COVID at their school might have avoided being sent home as part of a bubble – or having to self-isolate after

a contact outside school. But for a significant number of pupils, COVID isolation has chipped away at the progress they have been able to make since September.

As I have said before, remote education is better than nothing, but it's no substitute for the classroom. The problem that schools are continuing to grapple with is how to provide meaningful remote education under 2 distinct circumstances: bubble isolation and individual isolation. What we have seen on our visits is that many schools are making real progress with remote provision for bubbles – including live or recorded online lessons – but individuals who are isolating for a fortnight at a time often have a poorer experience. Whole bubbles can make some progress through the planned curriculum while they work from home, but many isolated individuals are provided with work that consolidates previous lessons, rather than new material. For these children, the loss of learning they experienced in the summer is being repeated.

In all cases, schools are struggling to assess whether remote learning is effective or not. For many, the measure of success is whether or not children are engaging with the work at all, rather than whether they are developing their knowledge and understanding – a case of remote attendance, rather than remote learning.

And of course, remote learning does not lend itself well to practical subjects – which is a problem in both schools and further education. Even when the learners attend school or college in person, there are considerable challenges to be overcome in delivering practical lessons and vocational courses. This is made harder in further education because of the dramatic loss in apprenticeship placements and in schools by the curtailment of much of the normal extra-curricular activity.

Faced with all of these pressures, the education and social care sectors are showing considerable resilience and creativity to provide children and learners with the best experience they can. In further education, there is good collaboration with local employers and wider support networks to provide opportunities for learners; in social care, creative solutions are in place to help children have contact with families in a COVID-secure way; in schools, leaders are using catch-up funding to pay for additional maths and English lessons and for targeted interventions using their own staff or tutors. And all of this is being done against the most challenging backdrop for staff in recent times.

There is no doubt that the constantly shifting guidance for schools, colleges, local authorities and other institutions has taken its toll on staff – alongside the uncertainty created by different permutations of tiers and lockdowns. Leaders described teams that were physically fatigued and stressed. They were often dealing with children and learners who had their own anxieties that needed to be addressed and they were taking on the additional burdens of managing COVID cases and isolation procedures in their setting. Local authority staff were also coordinating the wider local response. It has been an extraordinary year and I would like to record my appreciation for everyone working in education and social care – from

childminders and social workers to teachers and college tutors.

And of course, the start of 2021 will be no different to the end of 2020 – and there are live issues that will be taken forward into the new year. I have spoken before about the concerning increase in parents withdrawing children to be educated at home as a result of the pandemic. This month, we report another apparent rise, with three-fifths of schools reporting at least one child removed during the term. This is a worrying trend; in many cases, homeschooling will not be able to provide the level of education that a child will receive at school.

Many parents who have withdrawn their children have told the school they are doing so just for the short term, ‘until the pandemic is over’. This suggests there will be a significant number of children returning to school after a very long gap indeed, expecting to catch up. While we might hope that the deployment of a vaccine mitigates this trend, there is a risk that more parents decide to keep children at home waiting for the light at the end of the tunnel to arrive, before returning their children to school, a year or more behind their classmates.

The economic legacy of COVID also looms over local authorities, education and social care providers – and is being felt acutely in the early years and further education sectors. Many apprentices were furloughed and a significant number then lost their placements altogether. The pressures on apprenticeships are unlikely to ease anytime soon. There is also much concern among early years providers: half of nurseries and 60% of childminders that we spoke to expressed worries over the viability of their businesses.

So, while there is real optimism that the end is finally in sight for the sort of restrictions that we currently live under, it’s clear that there is a long way to go before the form of education and social care returns to normal; even though their function remains unchanged. This term, the institutions to which we entrust our children – whether for their education or their care – have made considerable progress. But for many children, there is more to be done: to catch them up, to level the playing field and to prepare them well for the next stage in their lives.

New plans set out to transform procurement, providing more value for money and benefitting small business

- Green paper will set out long-planned changes to UK’s procurement rules, putting value for money and transparency at the heart of the new approach
- Plans will cut red tape, reduce bureaucracy and help unleash wider

social benefits from public money spent on procurement

- New rules for lower value contracts will allow more UK based SMEs to win government business

The measures, which have been developed over the last 14 months by a team of specialists in international procurement and set out in a green paper, take advantage of new powers now that we have left the European Union.

Every year, the government buys some £292 billion of services from the private sector. Today's measures will transform the current procurement regime to put value for money at the heart of the new approach, by allowing more flexibility for buyers, enabling government to be more strategic and save the taxpayer money. This will also drive increased competition through much simpler procurement procedures.

The changes will make UK procurement rules more modern, flexible, innovative and diverse, by allowing government to consider wider social value when picking suppliers. This will ensure that taxpayers money goes further and has more of a wider benefit for society.

Cabinet Office Minister, Lord Agnew, said:

The measures outlined today will transform the current outdated system with new rules, providing flexibility to the public sector and less burden on business.

These long standing plans have been developed with international procurement specialists and will help unleash innovation across the country and provide a fairer system for small businesses.

In another new move, also published today, the government will allow the public sector to buy British for contracts not subject to international trade rules, by allowing competitions for government contracts under £4.7 million for public works and £122k for goods and services to be limited to small businesses, voluntary, community and social enterprises, or to a certain geographical area. These new rules will support SMEs by opening up new opportunities to them and making it easier for them to win contracts, in turn helping to drive local growth, promote innovation, support local recruitment and level up communities across the UK.

Specific changes to the rules proposed today include:

- Removing over 300 complex regulations, to create a single uniform rulebook
- Overhauling inflexible and complex procedures, replacing them with three simple modern procedures. This will allow more freedom for suppliers and the public sector to work together and innovate
- Allowing buyers to include wider social benefits of the supplier, such as economic, social and environmental factors, when assessing who to award a contract to, while also still considering value for money
- Giving buyers the power to properly take account of a bidder's past

performance, allowing them to exclude suppliers who have failed to deliver in the past

- A new unit to oversee public procurement with powers to improve commercial skills of public sector contractors
- A single digital platform for registering contracts, improving transparency and making life significantly simpler for business

The plans will also make procurement more transparent and effective during times of crisis where government needs to act quickly to ensure vital goods and services are bought. Throughout the COVID pandemic, the UK, along with many other countries internationally, has relied on direct awards to ensure that vital supplies, such as life-saving PPE, have been bought quickly and to high standards.

The new measures will bring more competition into this process, by changing the rules to encourage more competitive buying in a quick time frame. This will allow for multiple companies to bid for emergency work, without slowing the process down in times of emergency.

Gavin Hayman, Executive Director of the Open Contracting Partnership says:

This is a unique opportunity to make sure public money is spent wisely.

We've all seen how old school procurement has struggled during the pandemic. These proposals will digitize and transform how contracts are planned, awarded and delivered in the UK with open data and public transparency at their heart.

Done properly, the proposals will save huge amounts of time and money for both government and business, and deliver smarter public services to us all.

The future is open.

While suppliers of all sizes will benefit from the changes, SMEs, who feel the effect of long, bureaucratic and costly processes more, will benefit in particular. One tangible example of this is providing registration information on a 'tell us once' basis, which will help small firms by saving them time and resources.

Elizabeth Vega, Group Chief Executive of Informed Solutions and member of Cabinet Office's Procurement Transformation and Advisory Panel said:

I have experienced first-hand how difficult it can be under current procurement rules for SMEs bidding for public sector contracts, whether because of closed framework agreements locking them out of future opportunities, or complex procedures making it expensive to bid or difficult to offer innovative solutions.

That's why I was keen to be part of Cabinet Office's Procurement Transformation Advisory Panel because it was an unprecedented opportunity to generate radical ideas for procurement reform. I am confident that the proposals set out here have withstood significant challenge from a diversity of viewpoints and expert opinions. Our aim as Panel members has been to focus on simplification, increased transparency, removing unnecessary barriers to public sector opportunities for competent suppliers, and delivering improved value for money.

As a long-time champion for SMEs, these reforms will result in more SMEs being able to access public sector contracts, and ultimately put in place a new procurement framework that delivers better value for taxpayers and greater benefits for society.

The green paper will also bring forward extra measures on transparency, meaning taxpayers will be better informed about how their money is spent, as well as the ability to exclude poorly performing companies from winning valuable contracts and preventing spurious legal challenges from unsuccessful bidders, which all too often delay public sector projects and lead to spiralling costs.

Awarding authorities will also be encouraged to consider how public contracts can support social or environmental issues or promote local communities, small businesses and charities. The rules will also provide more flexibility to allow contractors to take account of wider government priorities and support work to build back better from the pandemic.

When public bodies are considering how social value benefits can be delivered through their contracts, the new rules will make it possible for them to consider full value to society and not just the public body undertaking the procurement. This means more, wider opportunities to deliver social value through public contracts.

The green paper is available here [Transforming public procurement green paper](#) (PDF, 509KB, 82 pages)