

# Press release: Chance to have your say on dualling the A1

Highways England is asking for views on a scheme which will dual around five miles of the A1. The consultation opens on Monday 25 February and anyone with an interest in the route is encouraged to take part.

The consultation – which can be viewed here – will run for six weeks until Monday 8 April and there will also be a series of public events.

Highways England project manager Mark Stoneman said:

We are holding four public consultation events across the area which will provide people with an update on the progress we have made since the last consultation in November 2016 and the preferred route announcement which was made in September 2017.

The events will also provide an opportunity for people to understand the proposals in more detail and provide feedback which we may be able to incorporate into our preliminary design for the scheme.

In September last year it was announced that the orange option was the preferred route between Alnwick and Ellingham. It will include a new junction at Charlton Mires.

Highways England is planning to upgrade sections of single carriageway in Northumberland as part of a £290m investment, creating a dual carriageway on the entire stretch of the route between Newcastle and Ellingham.

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

Junction improvements north of Ellingham have already started. Work has been completed at Adderstone and work has started at Fenham and Outchester. Work is due to start at Old Mousen and Newstead in March 2019.

Six other junctions, Cheswick, Warenford, Station Road, Haggerstone Castle, Purdy Lodge and Fenham Hill will be started by the end of March 2020.

Work on the section between Morpeth to Felton is continuing and the Development Consent Order, similar to planning permission is due to be submitted in summer 2019.

Consultation events for Alnwick to Ellingham will be held at the following:

- Rennington Village Hall – Thursday 7 March, 3pm – 8pm, Rennington, Northumberland, NE66 3RR

- Rennington Village Hall – Saturday 16 March, 10am – 3pm, Rennington, Northumberland, NE66 3RR
- Willowburn Leisure Centre – Wednesday 20 March, 3pm – 8pm, Willowburn Avenue, Alnwick, Northumberland, NE66 2JH
- Willowburn Leisure Centre – Saturday 30 March, 10am – 4pm, Willowburn Avenue, Alnwick, Northumberland, NE66 2JH

We will also be at Heighley Gate garden centre, Morpeth, NE61 3DA, on Friday 1 March between 9am and 11.30am and then between 1pm and 4pm in Alnwick main square to highlight the upcoming consultation events taking place.

## **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.

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# **[News story: Improving service to customers: The recruitment drive and a better online service](#)**

With the aim of meeting our customers' expectations in the time we take to process appeals, we are making improvements to ensure we provide our services in the most efficient way.

Whilst feedback from customers who use our service the most, predominantly appellants and local planning authorities (LPAs), shows that they highly rate our quality and rigor in deciding cases, 9 in 10 think we are not quick enough from submission to decision. The feedback also shows that progress of appeals is difficult to track with main parties needing more information about the progress of cases.

The [recent independent review by Bridget Rosewell CBE](#) says the average time to decide a planning appeal inquiry could be reduced from 47 to 26 weeks. The report made 22 recommendations. These range from a more proactive approach by the Planning Inspectorate to managing the inquiry process appointing inspectors earlier, through to more active case management and better technology solutions such as a new online portal. The recent recruitment effort should also allow more resources to be focused on processing important inquiry casework. We welcome the findings of the report. Bringing our performance on track is an absolute necessity and we wanted to share some of

the work going on behind the scenes to improve our service.

## **What has caused performance issues?**

There are several factors that have contributed to this. Demand has increased by around 5% each year across all areas of casework, exacerbated by 1350 'telephone kiosk' cases over the financial year 2017/18.

Demand for our more complex infrastructure and local plan work has also increased and will continue to do so this year. Supply, which is directly linked to the number of inspectors, has been impacted by budget restraints, coupled with difficulties in recruiting inspectors, and generally more complex casework.

Currently it is also difficult for us to accurately predict future demand effectively and therefore manage the number of people needed to carry out the work. The absence of more sophisticated management information has hindered our ability to understand the situation, make effective decisions and predict future performance.

## **The recruitment drive**

One of the priorities in addressing the backlog is our recruitment drive to employ more planning professionals.

As the UK's largest employer of planners, the Inspectorate handles a wide array of planning matters from section 78 planning appeals, enforcement appeals through to specialist case work such as rights of way orders, local plan examinations and applications for nationally significant infrastructure projects (NSIPs).

However, our most experienced inspectors are in high demand. Complex inquiries into large scale developments or local plan examinations can take many weeks to conclude. The same 'band' of inspectors are also appointed to panels to examine applications for nationally significant infrastructure projects.

With more appeals arriving daily requiring technical expertise, the demand for our services has outstripped the supply for some time resulting in both a backlog of cases awaiting the appointment of an inspector and elongated casework processing times.

Part of the solution is to employ more skilled inspectors. Since the start of 2018, we have recruited 53 new inspectors and this figure is due to rise following an extensive recruitment campaign at the end of last year. This intake represents 16% of our current pool of inspectors. New inspectors, who typically join at band 1, where they will decide all but the most complex cases, undergo intensive and on-going training. Working remotely in all regions of England and Wales, they are assigned to cases at the outset with mentoring and quality assurance provided by experienced inspectors.

Our latest external [recruitment drive](#) aims to bring over 60 inspectors at

Band 1 and a further 15 inspectors at band 2. We are also promoting a large cohort of Band 1 inspectors to Band 2. Extending the pool of highly skilled inspectors whom we can appoint for NSIP applications is vital to ensure examinations are resourced adequately.

Training is fundamental to equip inspectors with the latest policy knowledge so they can develop and lead on more complex casework. We place great importance to ongoing training programmes which we provide through workshops, training events and digital based guidance.

Inspectors attend the Inspectorate's Annual Training Event

Our performance improvement strategy also includes contracting the services of non-salaried inspectors (NSIs) who provide an important and flexible on-demand service. Our latest procurement drive at the end of last year brought the team of NSIs up to 84 from around 40 and, having recently received training, are now working on cases.

Despite the steady stream of new recruits joining our organisation we have, in the past, struggled to recruit the number we need to stay on top of demand. One of the significant challenges we face is recruiting from a finite pool of qualified planners in the public and private sectors. Consequently, we need to think creatively and differently about how we can source our inspectors of tomorrow. We have therefore embarked on a new model through appeals planning officers (APOs).

APOs, like inspectors, work remotely and perform a similar role but are assigned to the lower level more straight forward planning and enforcement appeals that follow the written representation procedure. Although they do not make the decision on the case (this is taken by an inspector, based on a recommendation) the role provides an excellent career development opportunity for less experienced planners and to benefit from the depth of experience in the organisation.

Like inspectors, APOs will receive an extensive training programme that will develop their skills and knowledge of the planning system to either become an inspector or to further their careers outside the Planning Inspectorate. Our recent recruitment efforts yielded 82 applications for 20 positions.

## **Better online service**

An important aspect of providing a better service is the work to redevelop the Appeals Casework Portal.

The Portal is the primary way the various parties in an appeal submit information to the Planning Inspectorate but it has a number of key issues:

- **One in three appeals we receive have documents missing or are invalid.** This causes considerable delays while our staff follow up with appellants to obtain the missing files we need to start the appeal. The existing Portal needs updating to ensure we effectively capture all the

information on submission and help people to "get it right first time".

- **Difficulty to track appeal progress.** One of the key issues appellants raise is the inability to find out where their appeal is in the process. Whilst the existing Portal provides an indication of key stages, we want to provide better notifications to give service users greater transparency on their appeals.
- **Digital service standards.** Whilst the current Portal has seen a number of developments over the years, the way government delivers services has moved on with greater emphasis on creating a better user experience through digital. The new Portal is being developed, and will operate, to the [digital service standards](#) outlined by the Government Digital Service to offer a better online experience for customers.

On top of this, there are aspects of the process that are completed outside the Portal which causes an administrative burden and frustrates users. An example is the questionnaire we ask LPAs to complete for each appeal.

The prototype website we are building is based on extensive user research and testing involving the input of planning agents, unrepresented appellants, LPAs and interested parties. Our team work closely with these groups to ensure the prototype meets user needs and that we can move into a beta phase with a clear direction.

Feedback indicated that users want clearer guidance when submitting appeals and the new Portal will contain more succinct on-page guidance. Our team of content writers are testing it with the user groups to ensure it meets the need and users get it right first time.

## **Appellants – getting it right first time**

The structure of the appeal submission form is crucial to helping users get it right first time. Inspired by the 'Task List' in other digital services across government, we received positive feedback from users on this method for collecting data. The new form makes it easier for users fill in different sections of the form in the order that they wish to.

As the appeals process is both lengthy and complex, users felt a timeline showcasing the progress of their appeal would benefit them. This applied to both one-time users (unrepresented appellants) to help them navigate the process, as well as LPAs who are likely to be managing multiple appeals at once.□

The eventual design of the timeline was inspired by the design patterns used in the HMRC Self Assessment Tax Return service□.

## **Local Planning Authorities – understanding my appeals**

As we engaged with LPAs, who handle multiple appeals at any one time, we understood their need to be able to quickly understand the progress of appeals.

Introducing the timeline to the LPA 'case view', as well as clearly laying out key appeal information, enables LPAs to quickly see their available actions relating to this appeal.

The questionnaire is one of the most important evidence collecting devices the Inspectorate uses and as such it's vital it is easy to complete for LPAs.

By ensuring that evidence is clearly requested only when needed, as well as simplifying the language used, we can ensure the process is not overly complex for LPAs.

(Please note that the screenshots above show the prototypes in development and is indicative of the look and feel of the site. The live product may not look identical to this.)

### **Introducing the new service**

We are aiming to launch a trial of this new service in Summer before rolling out to all planning appeals by the end of the year.

## **Investment to improve**

Our recruitment and online service improvements are realistic and achievable but investment is critical in any upcoming projects and developments aiding improvement. In November, our sponsor department, the Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG), brokered a principle investment subject to the 2019-20 budget being finalised. Whilst MHCLG has given us the go ahead to proceed, we still need to rely on the final investment agreement going through before committing to all our ambitions.

The investment is about improving our performance across all casework areas and then, when achieved, staying on top of it. Critically, it also allows us to invest in improved management information and a Strategic Workforce Planning capability. Put simply this will allow us to better predict and manage our future work as well as giving the public better access to the data we hold.

If you'd like to hear more about our service improvements and related news then sign up for GOV.UK notifications or follow us on Twitter and LinkedIn.

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# [News story: Almost half a million new keys exchanged with Help to Buy](#)

430,000 of these completions were made by first time buyers, who benefit from the £3,000 government top up on their savings.

Quarterly Help to Buy statistics released today (Tuesday 26 February) show that:

- 494,108 completions have taken place using one or more Help to Buy schemes, over 93% of which took place outside of London
- the average house price purchased through the schemes is £202,815
- first time buyers have now opened 1.4 million Help to Buy: ISAs, offering government bonuses of up to £3,000 on top of their savings

Chancellor of the Exchequer, Philip Hammond said:

This government supports those who dream of owning their own home, and wants to help them take the first step onto the property ladder. That's why we've cut stamp duty and extended the Help to Buy equity loan scheme to run until March 2023, supporting half a million more home purchases.

Minister of State for Housing, Kit Malthouse MP, said:

This government is committed to helping more people get on the housing ladder as we power through to delivering 300,000 homes a year by the mid-2020s.

Our Help to Buy: Equity Loan scheme has supported more than 190,000 households in purchasing their home, helping to make the dream of home ownership a reality for a new generation.

The most completions using the Help to Buy: ISA continue to take place in the North West and Yorkshire & the Humber. In total, 194,379 completions have taken place across the UK since its launch in December 2015. The London Help to Buy scheme – which provides an equity loan of up to 40% for buyers in the capital with a 5% deposit – has helped 15,056 buyers across 33 boroughs purchase their own property between February 2016 and September 2018.

Find out more about all the different ways the government can [help you to buy your own home](#).

## **Further information:**

To find out more about today's Help to Buy figures visit our [statistical](#)

[release](#).

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## **News story: Undulate Ray by-catch allowance in the English Channel**

The by-catch allowance for Undulate Rays caught in ICES Areas VIIId (Eastern English Channel) and VIIe (Western English Channel) will be 70kg live weight, per vessel, per trip from 1 March 2019. This may be subject to change on a monthly basis with a closed period from May 2019 – August 2019.

The 2019 TAC and Quota Regulation has amalgamated the Area VIIId and Area VIIe by-catch allowance for Undulate Rays. In previous years the two areas had separate allowances but this year there is a combined allowance of 58 tonnes for both areas. Any restrictions applied to catches of this species must therefore be the same for both areas. The TAC and Quota Regulation stipulates that this species shall not be targeted and shall be landed whole or gutted. These conditions are the same as in previous years and are in line with the fact that this is a protected species, considered endangered world-wide.

In order to protect juveniles and spawning females the current restrictions on minimum and maximum size and the closed period remain in place:

- Minimum size of 78cm
- Maximum size of 97cm
- Cannot be landed during May, June, July and August

70kg per vessel per trip represents a decrease in the amount that can be landed in VIIe but this is necessary to ensure the UK stays within its 58 tonne limit for both areas. Uptake so far this year is 10 tonnes and is being monitored closely. Further changes to the by-catch allowance may be necessary later in the year.

Catches of Undulate Rays in Areas VIIId and VIIe will be recorded separately from the wider area VII stock, which means the 70kg is additional to and not included in any quota allocation for Skates and Rays in the wider Area VII.

Any question please contact Edward Baker: email

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# Speech: Lord Ahmad addresses 40th Session of the UN Human Rights Council

Mr President, (High Commissioner), Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen. It is, as ever, an honour to address you today.

In an ideal world, we would not need this Council. In an ideal world, states would meet the human rights obligations they have to their people. States and non-state actors would not abuse the vulnerable, persecute certain communities, or silence those who speak out. In an ideal world, those who did such despicable things would face justice. Sadly, we do not yet live in an ideal world. That is why this Council is so important, and why the UK is and will continue to be one of its most steadfast supporters.

We support the Council's work because, in addition to the obvious moral argument for standing up for the oppressed, we also believe that States that respect human rights create the conditions for societies that are more secure, more prosperous and better equipped to meet the needs of their people.

Yet the challenges the Council faces are many and complex. If it is to rise to those challenges we must work together to strengthen it. Its success depends on all of us. We must ensure that the Council is not only more vocal and more ambitious, but also more proactive. We must not only tackle the most pressing human rights issues of today, but also work to prevent those of tomorrow.

My government is determined to do just that, and this year we are focusing particular attention on three human rights issues: freedom of the media, freedom of religion, and preventing sexual violence in conflict.

Mr President, media freedom plays an essential role in protecting all other human rights and freedoms. A free media helps people form their own opinions, and it holds governments and corporations to account. It is a vital foundation for any healthy democracy. That is why journalists should be free to do their jobs without fearing for their safety. Yet in many parts of the world, the statistics tell another story. Indeed, according to Reporters Without Borders, 2018 was the most dangerous year on record to be a journalist. 80 were murdered, 348 imprisoned and a further 60 taken hostage.

That is why, this year, the UK has launched a campaign to champion media freedom. We want the world to know that journalism is not a crime. On the contrary, media freedom is an essential element of the human right of freedom of expression.

Our campaign will advocate for the benefits of a free media; it will generate international support for the protection of journalists; and it will press for legislation to protect media freedom, not constrain it. The centrepiece of this campaign will be an ambitious international conference in London on

10 and 11 July. We will bring together journalists, civil society and governments from around the world to highlight the urgency of the issue, mobilise a global consensus and share best practice.

On behalf of our co-hosts, the Government of Canada, and ourselves, I would like to take this opportunity to invite all Foreign Ministers from this Council to attend. We look forward to working with you to champion this vital human right.

The UK's second major human rights focus this year is Freedom of Religion or Belief. We have long worked to defend and promote the rights of those of all faiths, and none, and we continue to do so. We are deeply concerned about the persecution of Uighur Muslims in Xinjiang, the prosecutions of Baha'i in Yemen, and we echo the concerns expressed by the High Commissioner recently about the criminalisation of Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia. We hope to see Iraq doing more to protect its minority communities and promote community cohesion.

We recognise that Christian communities worldwide have faced particularly aggressive persecution in recent years. That is why we have launched an independent review into this specific issue, to ensure that we are doing as much as we can to respond. Just last week during a visit to Pakistan I heard from Ahmadi Muslims, Hindus and Christians about the discrimination they face on a daily basis. While we remain concerned about restrictions on freedom of religion and belief in Pakistan, I was encouraged by the Government's plans.

Our third major human rights focus this year will be preventing sexual violence in conflict. This is an issue on which the UK has shown global leadership and in which we have seen significant progress, but there is still more to do. In November this year, five years on from our Global Summit in 2014, we will be hosting a major follow-up event to galvanise the international community into further action. I hope you will join us.

Mr President, in addition to these three key focus areas, the United Kingdom remains deeply concerned about the serious human rights situation in a number of countries.

In Syria, human rights are still being systematically violated on a daily basis. Thousands of peaceful activists are still in regime detention, exposed to appalling abuse torture, sexual violence and execution. And when I was in Iraq last year I heard first-hand from Syrian women that they had suffered harrowing sexual violence. This Council must do all it can to ensure that those responsible for these crimes are held accountable.

In Burma too, there must be genuine accountability for the crimes committed against the Rohingya and other ethnic groups by members of the Burmese military, crimes highlighted by the Fact Finding Mission.

It is to this Council's great credit that it recognised the gravity of the issue and established a mechanism to collect and preserve evidence for future prosecutions. I am proud of the role the UK played in securing that mandate. It is now essential that the mechanism gets the tools and access it needs to

carry out its vital work and that the Burmese government cooperates with it fully.

In North Korea, despite some welcome signs on the political track, there has been no improvement in the human rights situation. North Korea is still top of both the Global Slavery Index and the Open Doors World Watch List of countries where Christians face the most severe persecution. People are not free to practice religion. Their freedom of expression is severely restricted and they cannot access the world's media. I once again call on the North Korean authorities to work with the Council and other human rights actors to end widespread human rights violations.

In South Sudan, the human rights situation remains dire, and is exacerbated by persistent conflict and a worsening humanitarian situation. The UK welcomes the peace agreement, but we will continue to press, at the highest levels, for all parties to implement fully the commitments they have made to protect the rights and freedoms of the people of South Sudan.

Elsewhere, we remain concerned about instability and insecurity in Libya that is exacerbating the poor human rights situation. In Iran human rights defenders are still being harassed and arbitrarily detained, and detainees are denied the right to fair trials.

In Iraq, their next National Action Plan must properly address the impact of Daesh on women and children. And in Cameroon the cycle of violence in Anglophone regions must end.

Finally, to end on a more positive note, we welcome the decision of the Government of Sri Lanka to return more land to its people, and to establish an Office for Reparations and we encourage them to implement in full the commitments made to this Council to secure long-term reconciliation.

Mr President, to conclude: The UK remains committed to strengthening human rights, both at home and abroad. We remain committed to justice, accountability, and the rules based international system. And we remain committed to this Council. That is why we are seeking re-election next year, for the 2021-2023 term. And it is why we will continue to speak up for the oppressed and the persecuted... to champion freedom of the media, freedom of religion or belief and an end to sexual violence....

And it is why we will continue to stand up for human rights, for freedom and for justice – for everyone, everywhere.

Thank you Mr President.