

## [News story: Darwin Plus: 'Bird-borne' radar for albatrosses among 17 new projects to be funded](#)

[unable to retrieve full-text content]Funding for 17 conservation projects worth more than £3.5 million in the UK Overseas Territories has been announced from the Darwin Plus initiative to deliver commitments in the 25 Year Environment Plan.

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## [Press release: New tool helps savers get a 50% government boost to their savings](#)

Over 80,000 people have signed up to the government's new saving account – Help to Save – depositing over £10 million.

A new tool in the HMRC app is available which lets savers set their own savings goals and personal reminders, to keep on track and maximise bonuses.

The account offers working people on lower incomes a 50% bonus, with Help to Save rewarding savers with an extra 50p for every £1 saved. Over a 4 year period a maximum saving of £2,400 would result in an overall bonus of £1,200.

Help to Save is easy to use, flexible and secure, and will help those on lower incomes build up a 'rainy day' fund, and encourage savings behaviours and habits. How much is saved and when is up to the account holder, and they don't need to pay in every month to get a bonus.

John Glen, Economic Secretary to the Treasury said:

The new year is a good time to start getting into the habit of saving, and with Help to Save you'll get a massive 50% boost from the government.

Whether you are saving for a family break, putting money away for a rainy day, or even saving for next Christmas, Help to Save is designed to make saving as simple as possible. And with the new version of the app, which can be personalised to help you make the most of your bonus, it's easier than ever.

## [Help to Save explained](#)

Help to Save is available to working people on Tax Credits and Universal Credit.

Account holders can save between £1 and £50 every calendar month and accounts last for 4 years from the date the account is opened. After 2 years, savers get a 50% tax-free bonus on the highest balance they've achieved. If they continue saving they could receive another 50% tax-free bonus after a further 2 years.

On maximum savings of £2,400 over 4 years, the overall bonus would be £1,200. To check eligibility, get more information, and apply savers can visit [the Help to Save page](#) or use the HMRC app.

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## [News story: Defence Secretary commissions new report to step up support for service families](#)

A new study that will assess the support available to military families has been commissioned by Defence Secretary Gavin Williamson.

The report will be authored by Andrew Selous MP, who has previously served in the Honourable Artillery Company and the Royal Regiment of Fusiliers. It will analyse the different experiences of service family members, focussing on;

- Spouses and civil partners
- Long term partners
- Children and dependents

The report's findings, which will be completed by summer 2019, will consider the diverse needs of service families and assess whether the current support on offer is meeting these needs. The study will also allow the MOD to further enhance the delivery of vital support for military families.

The MOD supports service families in many aspects of their lives, including housing, education, and spousal employment.

As part of the study, Mr Selous will engage with key stakeholders, including the three single service families federations, service charities, and the Covenant Fund Trust, which makes grants to support the armed forces community.

Defence Secretary Gavin Williamson said:

The success of our armed forces would not be possible without the constant support of the service families, who are often the unsung heroes of the military community.

I'm always inspired by their unfaltering fortitude, and the pride they take in their loved ones' service. I'm delighted that Andrew will be considering how we can best support them, as they support those who are keeping this country safe.

Andrew Selous MP said:

I have been a long-term champion of the importance of healthy and respectful couple and family relationships across society. As a nation, we rely on the strength of our Armed Forces to keep us safe. The nation in turn, has a duty to support and strengthen service families to help them perform a challenging role to the best of their ability.

I look forward to leading this critically important study, at the request of the Secretary of State, to assess the current needs of military families and to advise on the support they need.

The MOD has continued to bolster its funding for service families, allocating £5 million to the Education Support Fund, which supports the children of military personnel, and investing £68 million into the improvement of family accommodation.

Last year saw the launch of the Armed Forces Flexible Working Act, which enhances serving personnel's ability to serve part-time, should their circumstances change, and the announcement of a new scheme to support spouses' employment, providing vocational training.

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## **[News story: £2.5 million to boost international exchanges for schools](#)**

Thousands more young people will have the chance to take part in international exchanges and visits thanks to a new £2.5 million programme, the Education Secretary announced today (19 January).

Schools in England will be able to apply for grants to take pupils aged 11 and above to visit partner schools around the world, giving them the chance to experience different cultures, improve language skills and build independence, character and resilience.

The programme, which will be principally focused on supporting children from disadvantaged backgrounds, will be run in partnership with the British Council – whose [own research](#) has found that only 39% of secondary schools run international exchanges. For independent schools, the figure is 77%.

As education ministers from around the world prepare to gather in London for the Education World Forum, Damian Hinds has stressed the importance of ensuring disadvantaged young people don't miss out on the life-changing experiences and academic opportunities offered by overseas visits.

Evidence shows that businesses are increasingly looking for employees with international experience and language skills – and, according to a British Council survey, almost two-thirds of university language students said that an international exchange helped inspire them to choose their degree course.

The programme will build on the government's work to encourage more pupils to study a foreign language, including their inclusion in the English Baccalaureate. Since 2010 we have seen 45% more entries in GCSE Chinese and 51% more entries in GCSE Spanish.

Education Secretary Damian Hinds said:

I want every child to have a world-class education, and that includes the opportunity to experience other cultures and go to places they wouldn't normally visit – whether that's practising their Mandarin in China or learning about American history in the US.

School exchanges are so valuable, bringing subjects such as modern languages and international history to life as well as helping pupils develop into confident, independent and well-rounded young people.

As Britain leaves the European Union, it's more important than ever to show how much we value international opportunities, language-learning, and ensuring our young people have a global outlook – something I'll be discussing with education ministers from around the world at Education World Forum.

This investment will help schools who may not have much experience organising trips abroad to ensure their pupils don't miss out on all the fantastic benefits these experiences can bring, encouraging children to broaden their horizons and aim high throughout their education and beyond.

Sir Ciarán Devane, Chief Executive of the British Council, said:

Pupils keep the memory of a school trip abroad for the rest of their lives – it is an important first step in understanding the world. It encourages children to think about working and studying overseas and sows the seeds of international co-operation that we encourage in young people all around the world.

The programme's focus on disadvantaged pupils was also welcomed by schools.

Geoff Lumsdon, headteacher at Seaham High School in County Durham, said:

This programme will expand students' international horizons and experience, delivering on our school's vision to help the young people of Seaham to achieve the highest possible outcomes and to make a valuable contribution to the global society in which we all now live.

Many of our students receive the Pupil Premium and we do our utmost to ensure equality of opportunity so that all of our pupils feel safe, secure, and are free from prejudice and able to develop a mutual respect for others. This is an exciting opportunity to ensure every young person can access international and multicultural experiences so they are ready to take on the challenges of the 21st century – and we would be delighted to participate.

Funding will be targeted at schools with above-average numbers of pupil-premium students. Over the course of the programme, it is estimated that trips could be funded for 2,900 pupils. Young people will be encouraged to stay with host families abroad where possible, maximising their opportunity to practise language skills and be fully immersed in another culture.

To make the scheme as easy as possible for schools to take part in, there will be a simple application process, grants to cover the administrative cost of organising trips, and seminars to help schools without much experience of international visits find partner institutions abroad – in Europe or further afield.

Schools will be able to register their interest on the British Council website from Monday.

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**[News story: Review of UK university](#)**

# rating system launched

A review is being launched today (18 January) to ensure the Government's flagship higher education rating system continues to support high quality teaching so students have the information they need to choose the best university for them.

The Teaching Excellence and Student Outcomes Framework (TEF) shines a light on higher education providers that offer excellent teaching and good student outcomes, through awards of gold, silver or bronze.

[Research](#) out today shows that the TEF has already been an important driver of quality in higher education, leading providers to invest in training schemes and develop initiatives to improve teaching standards, and that applicants are using the ratings to inform their university choices.

In order to ensure the rating system continues to be effective as it can be, Dame Shirley Pearce is leading an independent review to make sure it is fit for purpose, starting with a public call for views opening today to hear how the potential of the system can be maximised.

Universities Minister Chris Skidmore said:

As Universities Minister I want you, the experts, to take part in Dame Shirley's call for views and to give your thoughts so the TEF can work as well as it possibly can. It is important that we maximise the potential of this system and can only do that by getting invaluable insights from the sector.

We all know that choosing a university is one of the biggest decisions that many people will make in their lives, and the information that TEF provides is helping students make the best choice for them.

Of course, this framework is just one part of the wide range of information we are making available on institutions and courses, including employability and likely earnings, to help students them make the a choice which can boost their future prospects.

The [call for views](#) will close on Friday 1 March and asks the higher education sector, students, graduates, parents, careers advisers, employers and the general public about the effectiveness of the scheme. Anyone with suggestions of how the scheme can be enhanced is urged to take part.

The current framework for the TEF aims to provide information for students and employers and to drive world-class standards and quality in higher education.

Dame Shirley will consider, among other things, whether the information used

for the current rating system is appropriate, the names of the rating categories, the impact of the rating system on providers and whether it is in the public interest.

The TEF is just one measure as part of the department's priority to drive high-quality teaching in higher education and ensure students have access to the information they need to make the best decision for their future careers. Last year the department announced a second year of pilots for the subject-level TEF rating system, which will include 'grade inflation' as one of the key criteria that institutions will be measured against.

At the same time, the Government is improving student information and choice by increasing transparency in higher education data, publishing a wide range of data on likely earnings, employability, and teaching quality at universities.

Dame Shirley Pearce DBE said:

This independent review is an important and exciting opportunity to make recommendations to government about the future of TEF. I want these recommendations to be informed by the views of all involved in TEF providers of higher education, students, applicants as well as employers.

I hope all will respond to this Call for Views so that we can ensure your ideas are able to influence TEF's future development.

Dame Shirley has appointed her own expert group to advise her on her review, which will conclude in summer 2019.

Alongside the launch of the review today, the Department for Education has published research, showing findings from the initial impact of the TEF on applicants and higher education providers.

The TEF was introduced in 2016 and its full impact will not yet be felt, however the research shows that it has already contributed to higher education providers driving improvements, particularly in the quality of their teaching, and for student employability.

This research will form part of the evidence base that the review will consider.