

Press release: PM call with the President of South Africa: 18 February 2018

The Prime Minister called President Cyril Ramaphosa this afternoon to congratulate him on his recent appointment.

Ramaphosa welcomed the call which followed their short discussion at the World Economic Forum, and the Prime Minister extended an invitation for him to attend the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in April.

President Ramaphosa confirmed that he looked forward to attending and using the opportunity to discuss deepening the UK-South Africa relationship, including by building on trade ties and working together on South Africa's transformation agenda.

Press release: Church spires to boost digital connectivity in rural areas

The [accord](#) (PDF, 74.9KB, 3 pages) , signed by the the National Church Institutions (NCIs) of the Church of England, the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) and the Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) encourages the Church of England to use its buildings and other property to improve broadband, mobile and WiFi connectivity for local communities.

65% of Anglican churches and 66% of parishes in England are in rural areas and their locations at the heart of their communities mean they are often well placed to address connectivity and coverage problems.

The use of these churches, as well as other church properties and farm buildings, to host digital infrastructure will help to deliver the Government's commitment for everyone to get good quality mobile connectivity where they live, work and travel.

DCMS Secretary of State, Matt Hancock said:

Churches are central features and valued assets for local communities up and down the country. This agreement with the Church of England will mean that even a 15th century building can help make Britain fit for the future improving people's lives by

boosting connectivity in some of our hardest-to-reach areas.

Through its Industrial Strategy, the Government is continually driving the UK's connectivity, telecommunications and digital sectors, and investing in the skills, industries and infrastructure of the future.

Improved digital connectivity will bring a range of benefits to rural communities, including:

- better access to online public services
- improved social interaction with family and friends
- effective online presence meaning that local businesses can extend their reach and better compete with other
- businesses, or in the case of tourism businesses, better attract visitors to the local area
- better access to skills and training which can lead to further local employment opportunities that deliver
- improved productivity and can boost the wider local economy.

The Dioceses of Chelmsford and Norwich are already supporting programmes which use Church buildings to improve connectivity in rural areas. It is hoped the accord will be instrumental in encouraging more local dioceses and parishes to positively consider how they can use their property in this way.

The Bishop of Chelmsford, Rt Revd Stephen Cottrell, said:

We know that rural churches in particular have always served as a hub for their communities. Encouraging churches to improve connectivity will help tackle two of the biggest issues rural areas face – isolation and sustainability.

The Diocese of Chelmsford has been pioneering this approach with County Broadband since 2013. Our work has significantly improved rural access to high-speed broadband.

Many new forms of technology are available to improve internet access in rural areas and I hope that this partnership between the Church of England and the Government will help rural churches consider how they can be part of the solution. I know that many churches already help people access the internet and provide digital skills training, and this Accord is a natural extension of great work already occurring.

The Bishop of Norwich, Rt Revd Graham James, said:

I welcome this agreement. It builds on what we have been seeking to do in the Diocese of Norwich since 2011 with the creation of WiSpire, a company seeking to use church towers and spires to enable Wifi connectivity in communities, especially in rural

locations.

Our parish churches are a truly national network, and to use them creatively to create new forms of connectivity enhances their value for the communities they serve.

Hamish Macleod, Director Mobile UK, said:

Mobile UK welcomes this announcement from Government and the Church of England, which emphasises the benefits of mobile connectivity to local communities.

Where there is a need, a suitable building is available and appropriate terms can be agreed, the mobile operators will continue to extend their use of churches to increase mobile coverage and capacity, while respecting the church environment.

Rural Affairs Minister Lord Gardiner said:

It is vitally important people living in the countryside have the same opportunities as those in urban areas, and that means having strong mobile and broadband infrastructures in place.

This initiative marks an important step in our continued drive to connect better our rural communities and bridge the digital divide.

Clear guidance set out by both the Church and Historic England ensures that any telecoms infrastructure deployed does not impact on the character and architectural or historic significance of churches.

Under the accord the Government has also pledged to provide advice for parishes and dioceses to enable them to consider supporting digital connectivity and to develop the necessary skills for digital infrastructure projects.

There is the possibility that similar accords could be made with other faith communities that have similar estates.

ENDS

Notes to Editors

Owing to varying terrain and different community needs the Accord covers all types of mobile and broadband technologies – churches are free to explore different options to meet the needs of their communities.

There are more than 120 cases of broadband and mobile services being delivered from parish churches across the country. These take a number of forms – from wireless transmitters in church spires and church towers, to

aerials, satellite dishes, and more traditional fibre cables. The Church of England has just over 16,000 church buildings in 12,500 parishes.

[Church of England](#) and [Historic England](#) guidance on the installation of telecoms equipment in churches

At a round table meeting with rural Church of England Bishops, convened by the Bishop of St Albans, Rt Rev Alan Smith, and representatives of the fixed and mobile operators on 13 December 2017, chaired by the then Minister for Digital, Matt Hancock, and the Minister for Rural Affairs and Biosecurity, Lord Gardiner, it was agreed that an accord between the Church and Government would help make clear the importance of connectivity and support in principle for using Church assets to host fibre and mobile infrastructure.

Joint [accord](#) (PDF, 74.9KB, 3 pages) on Use of Church Land and Buildings to Support Digital Connectivity

[News story: The visit of Lord Astor of Hever to Oman](#)

Lord Astor of Hever, the UK Prime Minister's Trade Envoy visited Oman on 11 – 15 February 2018. His role is to work with the UK Department for International Trade to support and encourage the growth of business links and partnerships between the UK and Oman, and to promote the UK as a trade partner of choice for Oman. His visit reinforced the importance the UK places on its bilateral trade relationship with Oman.

During his visit, Lord Astor had meetings with a range of senior government and business officials. He had a series of key meetings with senior officials to discuss Oman – UK business trade relations and focused on education & training, touring the new Takatuf-Petrofac Oman Centre of Excellence and meeting with the National Training Fund to discuss vocational training. He also hosted an Oil & Gas networking reception and spoke about the strength of the bilateral relationship in oil and gas, both historically and looking forward.

At the end of his visit, Lord Astor said:

“I was pleased to visit Oman again in my role as the Prime Minister's Trade Envoy. Oman is a country I have a long affinity with and it is important to the UK. As a Trade Envoy, I work closely with the Trade Team at the British Embassy in Muscat and organisations in the UK to help boost links and create opportunities for UK and Omani businesses to work together.

The UK is the largest source of Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) in Oman by far, accounting for over 45% of total FDI. The majority of this investment is

in the oil and gas sector in Oman, both in upstream exploration and production and, increasingly, in the development of downstream oil and gas industry. Bilateral cooperation on education and training, both within oil and gas and across the board, underpins economic development, and I am delighted to see British industry working with Omani institutions to deliver high quality training in Oman. There is a strong appetite in Oman to see more trade with the UK and we are keen to continue to build, strengthen and support that relationship.”

Press release: Government moves towards a shake-up of broken housing complaints system

Dissatisfied tenants and homeowners across the country may be offered a lifeline as government considers options to ensure that no-one is left battling with their landlord or builder to resolve issues with their home, Housing Secretary Sajid Javid has announced.

From broken boilers to cracks in walls, the current choice of schemes risks leaving thousands without answers, with others having to manoeuvre between at least 4 different services just to work out where to register a complaint.

An 8 week [consultation](#) beginning today (18 February 2018) will use people's experiences to shape a simpler and better complaints system, so future disputes can be resolved faster and consumers can access compensation where it is owed.

Options considered in the consultation include:

- introducing a single housing ombudsman to cover the whole of the housing market
- if homes builders should be required to join an ombudsman scheme, following on our commitment to expand redress to tenants of private landlord
- naming and shaming poor practice to help tackle the worst abuses

Housing Secretary Sajid Javid said:

For too long, tenants and homeowners have navigated multiple complaints procedures to resolve disputes about everyday household repairs and maintenance.

Fixing this housing crisis is about more than just building homes, it's ensuring people have the answers available when something goes

wrong.

Today's top-to-bottom review shows government is working hard to deliver a better and simpler system.

Unlike other areas, such as financial services that have a single and accountable ombudsman, housing has over 4 different complaints bodies.

In the private rented sector, there is currently no obligation for landlords to register with a complaints system and this can often leave thousands who do not use a property agent without any option for redress.

House builders are responsible for fixing incomplete work in new build homes but when this does not happen many consumers with snagging issues can find that they have nowhere left to turn.

This is just one of the steps the government is taking to solve the country's housing crisis and improve the rental sector which 8.6 million households are part of.

From April we are introducing new measures to crack down on rogue landlords to ensure tenants are not being exploited by unscrupulous landlords who profit from providing overcrowded, squalid and sometimes dangerous homes.

Today's consultation will be crucial to improving the complaints process across the market, driving forward a higher standard for service in housing.

The 8 week [consultation](#) will provide an invaluable insight into the views and experiences of people, specifically addressing 3 key areas:

- the effectiveness of the current complaint process, or if more can be done to improve the experience
- what standard of service should be expected and if a single housing ombudsman is needed
- how to fill the existing gaps in the current system, such as private landlords not having to register with a redress scheme

The consultation will begin on the 18 February, with an online form being available to housing consumers until the 16 April 2018.

This consultation is open to all including: tenants, landlords, homeowners, and existing ombudsman schemes.

The Ministry will provide more information on future proposals to the housing redress process following the conclusion of this consultation.

Issues relating to social tenants will be considered in the social housing

green paper, which is due to be published later in the year.

Currently, there are multiple providers of redress that cover some aspects of home buying and renting, but not all. Membership of ombudsman schemes is compulsory for some groups, but not for others.

In England, there are currently 3.9 million households in the social rented sector and 4.7 million in the private rented sector.

[Press release: It's time to start planning your royal wedding celebrations](#)

With just 3 months to go until the royal wedding, it's time to start thinking about how you can join in the celebrations on 19 May.

Holding a street party is a great way to get together with your neighbours to celebrate this special day and we're providing a handy guide to organising one, including helpful tips and steps to take.

Our online guidance helps bust popular myths and provides a useful checklist and practical advice for what is needed to anyone planning their own street party.

Did you know for example that you don't need a music licence if you want to play music at your street party? Or that you don't need to buy expensive road signs – you can lend or hire them.

Many councils, from Bromley to Salford, have already announced that they are waiving charges for street party road closures, making it easier and cheaper than ever to hold celebrations. The government is urging other councils to follow suit.

When communities come together, acting in partnership with businesses and voluntary organisations, they can achieve amazing things. As past events like the Queen's Diamond Jubilee and the London Olympic Games have shown, these same communities can also throw hugely fun parties and this year's celebrations look to be bigger and better than ever.

Parliamentary Under Secretary of State Jake Berry MP said:

We've made it easier than ever for local residents from all backgrounds to come together to celebrate the royal wedding and we hope councils will get into the spirit by helping people wishing to organise street parties.

With the FA Cup final taking place on the same day, there's never been a better reason to hold a street party and our updated guidance makes clear the steps residents need to take to ensure an enjoyable and safe day is had by all.

The number one tip from our guidance is to plan early by getting in touch with your council at least 4-6 weeks in advance.

The guidance includes a simple form people can use to let their local council know about their plans and information on how to apply for a road closure as well as information on playing music, insurance and fund raising.

More helpful tips, advice and support for organising a successful event can be found on the [Street Party website](#) and [The Big Lunch website](#).

If you are not be able to arrange a road closure for street party, you can still have an informal 'street meet' on a driveway, parking area, front garden or end of a cul-de-sac that does not require permission from the council as it is on private land. See further information on [street meets](#).

See the [guidance on holding a street party](#). It is due to be updated very shortly.