

News story: New universities regulator comes into force

The Office for Students (OfS), the new regulator designed to champion the interests of students, promote choice and help to ensure that students are receiving a good deal for their investment in higher education, has legally come into force today (1 January).

With the legal establishment of the OfS, Education Secretary Justine Greening has also announced the final six appointments to the OfS' 15-strong Board.

These appointments will not only reflect the diverse needs of the HE sector but will also make sure the interests of employers and students are represented by the new body, which will also hold universities to account over issues such as vice chancellor pay and free speech.

The OfS will replace HEFCE as the main regulator of higher education, and it will hold universities to account for the quality of teaching they provide.

It marks a major milestone in the implementation of the Higher Education and Research Act (2017), and the OfS will have an explicit legal duty to promote choice and consider the student, employer and taxpayer interests.

Education Secretary Justine Greening said:

The higher education sector is one of our nation's greatest assets, and the OfS will play a vital role in ensuring our universities retain their world-class reputation for years to come.

I welcome the new OfS board members to their important new roles. Their experience and skill will be key in ensuring the OfS achieves its ambitions.

OfS Chair Sir Michael Barber said:

I am delighted to be welcoming another outstanding set of appointments. The new Board members' broad mix of skills and experiences complement those already appointed.

I am confident that the OfS has a Board in place that is well-placed to successfully oversee the creation and guide the operation of a new organisation which will be shaping our brilliant higher education sector in the interests of students, short, medium and long term.

Minister for Universities Jo Johnson said:

The OfS will introduce a truly modern approach to regulation – one that will further enhance the reputation of our university sector.

I welcome today's appointments, and I am confident that the OfS has a board that will champion choice and competition, and put the interests of students at the heart of regulation.

Newly appointed board members will take up posts in January 2018. They include:

- Simon Levine is the Managing Partner and Co-Global Chief Executive Officer of the global law firm, DLA Piper. A graduate of Cambridge University, he is a Visiting Professor and Lecturer at Imperial College Business School.
- Toby Young is the co-founder of the West London Free School, and now serves as the director the New Schools Network. His teaching experience includes working as a teaching fellow at Harvard and a teaching assistant at Cambridge. He is a Fulbright Commissioner.
- Elizabeth Fagan is Senior Vice President, Managing Director of Boots.
- Katja Hall is a partner at Chairman Mentors International, previously she was Group Head of External Affairs and Sustainability at HSBC where she was responsible for external communications, stakeholder engagement, social responsibility and community investment.
- Monisha Shah is Chair of Rose Bruford College of Theatre and Performance. She is also a serving Trustee of ArtFund, an independent fundraising charity for art. In December 2015, Monisha was invited by the Prime Minister to join the Committee on Standards in Public Life.
- Ruth Carlson is a current student at Surrey University, where she is a Student Ambassador for civil engineering. She has experience as a course representative, as a former president of the Surrey University Women's Football Team and has also worked in other institutional and regional representative forums.

These 6 board members will join those that have already been announced to form the full OfS Board of 15 members. The other board members are: Sir Michael Barber (Chair), Martin Coleman (Deputy Chair), Nicola Dandridge (CEO), Chris Millward (DfAP), Gurpreet Dehal, Kate Lander, Prof Carl Lygo, David Palfreyman, and Prof Steve West.

Notes to editors

For more information or interview requests, please contact the Department for Education press office on 0207 783 8300

The Office for Students (OfS) was created by the Higher Education and Research Act which received Royal Assent in April 2017.

The Office for Students will have a duty to promote student interests, ensuring students have a wide range of quality options

By implementing the Government's Teaching Excellence Framework, the OfS will hold universities to account for the quality of teaching they provide. They

will shine a light on the grade inflation that we have seen tearing through the system and play a central role in pressing institutions to respect student's rights and comply with consumer law consistently across the sector.

News story: MMO board member Tony Delahunty awarded OBE

Her Majesty The Queen has made Marine Management Organisation (MMO) non-executive board member Tony Delahunty Officer of the Order of the British Empire in the New Year's honour list 2018 for his services to the fishing industry.

OBEs are awarded for having played 'a major local role in any activity, including people whose work has made them known nationally in their chosen area'.

Tony is a fisherman and businessman with over 40 years' experience of working in the inshore fishing industry. He has represented and championed fisheries management issues locally, nationally and internationally throughout his career driven by a lifelong commitment to the sustainable management of our seas.

As well as being an MMO board member he has had roles in both the public and private sectors including his appointment as National Chair of the National Federation of Fisherman; Chair of the Sussex Inshore Fisheries Conservation Authority and Vice Chair of Sussex Sea Fisheries Committee.

Tony has also been a member of Selsey Lifeboat since 1978 serving as a crew member, senior helmsman and deputy coxswain and currently serves as deputy launch authority.

On receiving his OBE, Tony said:

"I have worked as an inshore fisherman for most of life and have had the opportunity to contribute to fisheries management issues, locally and nationally and I am honoured to receive this award. Whilst I am personally very pleased, I feel that it also recognises the importance and value of the work done by the National Federation of Fishermen's Organisation (NFFO), DEFRA and the Marine Management Organisation."

News story: One year countdown begins to Severn tolls' abolition

There is just a year to go until drivers will benefit from free travel into Wales across the Severn Crossings, thanks to the UK Government's promise to abolish the tolls by 31 December 2018.

The decision will strengthen the economic links and prospects of the natural corridor of South Wales and the South West of England, boosting the Welsh economy by an estimated £100m a year, and generating annual savings for regular motorists of thousands of pounds.

Secretary of State for Wales Alun Cairns has invited local partners and businesses from South East Wales and the South West of England to attend the first cross-border business summit in Newport on 22 January, in a bid to explore how links between the two economies can be strengthened ahead of removing the tolls.

Secretary of State for Wales Alun Cairns said:

The major level of tolls on the Severn Crossings have represented a drag and barrier to Wales' economic growth for over half a century, in less than a year we will see the biggest economic stimulus for South Wales and the Valleys for decades.

My decision to abolish the tolls with the support of my UK Government cabinet colleagues is a boost to commuters, tourists and business owners alike who will be see extra money in their pockets as they make their way to and from Wales.

The tolls' removal will cement the ties between the economies and communities of South Wales and South West England, creating a growth corridor spanning from Cardiff through Newport to Bristol.

I have spoken to several business owners who are encouraged by this decision, and I look forward to discussing further cross-border business opportunities at January's summit.

Following the return of the Severn Crossings to public ownership on 8 January 2018, the tolls will be reduced for all drivers in line with the commitment made by the UK Government in Budget 2015.

This will be the first time the tolls have decreased since their introduction in 1966. The normal annual inflation increase (due 1 January 2018) will also not be applied.

From 8 Jan 2018:

- Cars will pay £5.60 instead of £6.70.
- Small buses or vans will pay £11.20 down from £13.40
- Lorries and coaches will pay £16.70 instead of £20

Notes to editors:

1. The abolition is set to benefit the Welsh economy by around £100m a year, according to Welsh Government: The Impact of the Severn Tolls on the Welsh Economy, 30 May 2012
2. Regular motorists are set to save over £1,400 per year based on a monthly tag charge of £117.92 over 12 months.
3. The Secretary of State for Wales Alun Cairns has announced that he will host the first cross-border, Severn Growth business summit on 22 January 2018 at the Celtic Manor Resort. Businesses can sign up to attend the summit via [Eventbrite](#).
4. On 13 January, the Government launched a consultation, setting out a series of proposals designed to deliver improvements at the Crossings. This consultation ran for eight weeks until 10 March. The consultation response can be found [here](#)
5. The Severn Bridge was built in 1966 and a second crossing was completed 30 years later.
6. When the bridges come under public ownership, they will be run by Highways England. Previously it has been run by Severn River Crossing plc.
7. The first Severn Bridge was opened in September 1966, providing a direct link from the M4 motorway into Wales, with a toll in place for use of the bridge to pay for the cost of construction. It continually operated above capacity and in 1986 the then Government stated that a second bridge would be constructed.
8. In 1988 it was announced that tenders would be invited from private consortia to fund, build and operate the second bridge and take over the operation of the first bridge. In 1990 the concession was awarded to Severn River Crossing PLC ("SRC"). Construction work also started in April 1992 and the second bridge was opened in June 1996.

News story: Prime Minister Theresa May's New Year message for 2018

2017 has been a year of progress for the United Kingdom.

In January, I set out our objectives for the Brexit negotiations, and in the months since we have pursued them with steady purpose.

In March we triggered Article 50, putting the decision of the British people into action.

In December we reached agreement on the first phase of negotiations with our EU partners.

Next year we will move on to the vital issues of trade and security, and I am determined that we will keep up our progress in 2018.

Because whichever way you voted in the referendum, most people just want the government to get on and deliver a good Brexit, and that's exactly what we are doing.

Making a success of Brexit is crucial, but it will not be the limit of our ambitions.

We also have to carry on making a difference here and now on the issues that matter to people's daily lives.

That means building an economy fit for the future and taking a balanced approach to government spending, so we get our debt falling but can also invest in the things that matter – our schools, our police and our precious NHS.

Our goal is simple: more good jobs in every part of the country, and more opportunities for young people to get on in life.

The first step to a better future is getting a place at a good school.

It's what every parent expects, and it's what every child deserves.

So we will build more good schools, keep a tight focus on standards and discipline, and give more help and support to our fantastic teachers.

We will build more homes, so housing becomes more affordable and more families can get on – and climb up – the housing ladder.

And we will protect and enhance our natural environment for the next generation.

2018 is a special year in the life of one of our most cherished institutions, as we will celebrate the 70th birthday of our National Health Service.

It is a year to rededicate ourselves to its founding ideal: that good healthcare should be available to everyone, regardless of income.

And it's a chance to celebrate the care and compassion of our wonderful NHS staff.

We will continue to invest in our NHS and ensure it can deliver a world-class service now and for generations to come.

As we mark the centenary of the end of the First World War, and remember the tremendous sacrifices of that conflict, the UK will remain a champion of peace and order around the world.

Together with our allies, we will continue the fight against all forms of extremism, and support our security services as they work every day to keep us safe.

When we host the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in April we'll work with our partners to tackle global problems like climate change and plastic waste in our oceans.

And as we celebrate the 100th anniversary of the first votes for women, let's vow to eliminate all prejudice and discrimination from our society.

Because in the United Kingdom in 2018, everyone deserves the chance to succeed and everyone has a right to be treated with respect.

That means safe workplaces, free from harassment.

And it also means a public sphere where debate is constructive and courteous, and where we treat each other with decency.

Of course any year brings its challenges – that is true for each of us personally, as much as for our country and the world.

But the real test is not whether challenges come; it's how you face them.

Whether you allow a task to overcome you, or tackle it head on with purpose and resolve.

I believe 2018 can be a year of renewed confidence and pride in our country.

A year in which we continue to make good progress towards a successful Brexit deal, an economy that's fit for the future, and a stronger and fairer society for everyone.

And whatever challenges we may face, I know we will overcome them by standing united as one proud union of nations and people.

I hope that 2018 is a great year for you and your family – and I wish everyone a very happy new year.

Press release: Welsh Secretary Alun Cairns' New Year message for 2018.

Each New Year provides us with the opportunity to reflect on our achievements over the 12 months, and look forward to the year that stretches before us.

2017 was the year that Wales once again shone in the global spotlight and underlined its credentials as a first class host of major sporting events when Cardiff hosted the UEFA Champions League final. The biggest sporting event in the world that year was beamed to 200 countries and up to 170,000 fans from all over the world flocked to the city and left with a clear and positive message about everything Wales has to offer.

There is little doubt that 2017 was also the year that launched the UK into a seminal moment in our political and constitutional history.

We began the year by writing a new chapter in Welsh devolution as the Wales Bill received Royal Assent. In March we triggered Article 50, putting the decision taken by the British people to leave the European Union into action. And we ended the year by reaching an agreement on the first phase of negotiations which will take us through to discussions on trade and security in 2018.

It was the year that the UK Government also underpinned its ambition to re-balance the Welsh economy and grow the private sector with major investment in infrastructure.

The decision to reduce the Severn Tolls before abolishing them altogether, the introduction of state of the art trains on the Great Western Mainline and funding for superfast broadband, are all essential steps towards delivering long-term, balanced economic growth.

We have also continued to demonstrate that this Government is firmly on the side of business. The Government's modern Industrial Strategy has been designed to build on Wales' strengths in fields such as aerospace, technology and life sciences and I want to ensure that we are putting our best foot forward to maximise the benefits for Wales from the initiatives and grand challenges it presents.

And of course, the UK Government has set out the way forward for a comprehensive and ambitious series of City Deals for Cardiff and Swansea, is progressing with a growth deal for North Wales and is opening discussions on a growth deal for the Mid Wales region.

These deals are about creating a network of regional economic powerhouses capable of forging mutually beneficial connections and linkages.

This is why our announcement to abolish the Severn tolls is so important – my number one aim when I became Secretary of State – sending a direct message to businesses, commuters and tourists alike that we are committed to strengthening the links between England and Wales.

And in order to build on this, one of my first tasks in the New Year will be to host a Summit on 22nd January at the Celtic Manor to bring together local partners from across the South West of England and the South Wales to explore how we can further strengthen the links between the two economies.

So if 2017 was the year of progress for Wales and the United Kingdom, 2018 will be the year where we must have the vision and the courage to seize the opportunities these moment present.

This is also the challenge that we lay down to the Welsh Government when firmer foundations for devolution in Wales come into force on 1 April next year. The new reserved powers model of devolution in Wales will make clear what is devolved, and the responsibility of the National Assembly for Wales, and what is reserved – and the responsibility of Parliament. This will put more decisions into the hands of Welsh Ministers, giving them important new levers to grow the Welsh economy and to deliver better public services across Wales.

As the voice of the UK Government in Wales, and the voice of Wales in Westminster my department will continue to closely with departments across Whitehall to ensure companies and investors see Wales as an outward-looking, ambitious trading partner. That was the message I gave to business leaders on my recent trips to Japan and Qatar, where I spoke to a number of investors – both existing and potential – about what Wales has to offer post EU exit. And it will be the message we will carry forward into 2018.

The UK Government will not be found wanting in energy, enterprise or enthusiasm when it comes to delivering for Wales. In 2018, we will continue to manage our economy carefully, to build a country that works for everyone and an economy that is fit for the future.

This is how we will preserve, protect and progress our prosperity.

On behalf of my ministerial colleagues, I wish you all a very healthy, happy and prosperous 2018.