

Press release: Don't throw plastic or other items at Matlock raft racers

With this year's annual Matlock Boxing Day Raft Race given the go-ahead once again, the Environment Agency is urging the thousands of spectators expected to turn out to watch the popular event to leave their flour-filled plastic bags and other objects at home.

In previous years, spectators have thrown eggs, flour, plastic or paper bags, and other products at the raft racers from various points along the 3.5 mile course of the race on the River Derwent, which poses a real threat to the environment and wildlife.

Paul Reeves, Environment Officer at the Environment Agency, said:

We realise the Matlock Raft Race is an important social event for the area, which attracts a large number of local residents as well as visitors from further afield, has a positive impact on the local economy, and raises funds for the Royal National Lifeboat Institution (RNLI).

However, we are appealing to spectators to consider the environment by not throwing flour-filled plastic bags or other objects at the raft racers and into the water this year.

If plastic or paper bags enter the watercourse, they pose a real threat to wildlife both locally and further afield. Last year there were sightings of water birds trying to eat floating flour-filled bags, and the deadly impact of plastics on river and sea life is well known and currently in the news.

Councillor Lewis Rose OBE, Leader of Derbyshire Dales District Council, said:

The Boxing Day raft race has become something of a tradition here in the Derbyshire Dales and long may it continue. However, we absolutely support the Environment Agency's plea to spectators to refrain from activities that threaten the environment and wildlife, as well as littering our waterways and streets.

Kath Stapley, Living Rivers Officer, Derbyshire Wildlife Trust, added:

On behalf of the 60 partner organisations which make up the Derbyshire Derwent Catchment Partnership, we're asking people to spare a thought for the wildlife in and around the River Derwent.

We're constantly working to improve the rivers in the catchment, from Howden Moor above Ladybower Reservoir, down into Derby, but we can only make a difference with support from members of the public. If plastics and other items are thrown into the river at Matlock, they may travel out of sight, but will inevitably affect the watercourse and wildlife downstream in Belper, Duffield, Derby and even down into the River Trent.

[News story: Defence Minister reveals new RAF Squadron at Qatar event](#)

Defence Minister Harriett Baldwin hands a model Typhoon to His Excellency Mr Yousef Ali Al-Khater. Crown copyright.

[Defence Secretary Gavin Williamson was in Doha last weekend](#), where he agreed a package of training and co-operation between the British and Qatari Air Forces which will see them working together more regularly as part of the multi-billion pound deal to supply the country with 24 Typhoon aircraft.

Defence Minister Harriett Baldwin expanded on that agreement at a State of Qatar National Day reception in London today. She revealed that a new UK-based Typhoon joint squadron will be called No. 12 squadron, and that it will temporarily integrate Qatari personnel, including pilots and ground-crew based at RAF Coningsby, Lincolnshire.

Defence Minister Harriett Baldwin said:

Qatar proudly becomes the ninth nation to buy the world's leading multi-role combat aircraft.

The formation of a joint squadron means our RAF will take the lead in providing training and support to the Qatari Emiri Air Force as it brings the Typhoon into service.

The Qataris will not be a permanent part of the squadron, but will be integrated ahead of the delivery of the Typhoon aircraft. The move will provide the country with valuable joint frontline experience on an RAF Typhoon Squadron and speed up their preparation for when their own jets are delivered.

The UK and Qatar already share a close defence relationship, with a joint-exercise between the Royal Air Force and Qatar Air force just last week seeing Typhoon aircraft fly over the Arabian Peninsula. Defence Minister

Harriett Baldwin visited the country at the end of last month, where she met the pilots taking part in the exercise.

The two countries share mutual interests in countering violent extremism, and ensuring stability in the region, and this formation will further reinforce those ties by helping to prevent terrorism from spreading and protecting the prosperity and security of the UK at home. The new 12 squadron is currently operating Tornados, and will transition to the future Typhoon force.

The biggest export deal for the Typhoon project in a decade, valued at around £6 billion and sustaining thousands of UK jobs, Qatar is the ninth country to purchase the Typhoon. This year also saw the first delivered to Oman, whilst the MOD is leading the offer to replace Belgium's F-16s with the jets and continues to discuss the prospect of a second batch of sales to Saudi Arabia, as it continues to bang the drum for Britain's world-leading aerospace industry around the world.

Notes to editors

- Qatar National Day is on Monday 18 December. Today's reception at The Savoy Hotel on The Strand was hosted to celebrate the occasion.

Statement to Parliament: Written Ministerial Statement: government accountability and transparency

Chris Skidmore MP, Parliamentary Secretary (Minister for the Constitution)

Since 2010, the government has been at the forefront of opening up data to allow Parliament, the public and the media to hold public bodies to account. Such online transparency is crucial accountability for delivering the best value for money, to cutting waste and inefficiency, and to ensuring every pound of taxpayers' money is spent in the best possible way. Indeed, such data has allowed those working within central and local government to identify savings and stop excessive spending they did not otherwise know about.

The sunlight of transparency also acts in itself as an important check and balance, and helps ensure the highest standards of public life amongst elected representatives and officials. Alongside this, open data has great potential to deliver better public services through innovative uses of digital and mobile technology.

This moves away from more bureaucratic processes under previous administrations, such as Public Service Agreements, Departmental Strategic

Objectives and Comprehensive Performance Assessments, which were time consuming for public servants and opaque to the outside world.

Open data and transparency

Today a new webpage will go live on gov.uk that will, for the first time, bring together in one place a comprehensive list of the core transparency data published by all government departments, alongside details on how that data is prepared.

We have published new guidelines that clarify not only what core transparency data will be published by central government and how frequently; but also how we will ensure it is available in the most usable format and is easy to find.

This new landing page and publication guidance will help people find and navigate the information they need more easily and reaffirms our commitment to continue to drive forward the transparency agenda.

This guidance represents the minimum requirements which are common to all central government departments: many departments can and do go further.

Single Departmental Plans

We are also publishing today a refreshed set of Single Departmental Plans across government. These set out each government department's objectives and how they will achieve them. Taken together, they show how departments are working to deliver the Government's programme.

Single Departmental Plans are important tools for transparency and accountability. They allow the public to track the Government's progress and performance against a number of indicators. They also indicate which Ministers and senior officials are responsible for delivering each objective.

Ministerial Accountability

Under the terms of the Ministerial Code, Ministers must ensure that no conflict arises or could reasonably be perceived to arise between their Ministerial position and their private interests. Today we are publishing an updated List of Ministers' Interests which captures those interests relevant to Ministers' responsibilities; it should be read alongside the two Parliamentary Registers.

We are also publishing an update report on the handling of Ministers' Interest from Sir Alex Allan, the Prime Minister's Independent Adviser on Ministers' Interests, alongside an updated List of Ministerial Responsibilities and the regular quarterly disclosure of Ministers' gifts, hospitality, overseas travel and meetings with external organisations.

The Government is also publishing agendas and the meeting notes of the first two meetings of the Coordination Committee between the Government and the DUP, as well as the terms of reference.

Diversity in public appointments

The Cabinet Office is also today publishing an action plan for improving the diversity of public appointments. Getting the balance right when making public appointments is a key part of ensuring we have public services which understand and respond to the needs of the population they serve.

In 2013, Government set an aspiration that 50% of new public appointments made each year should go to women. Good progress has been made – 49% new appointments made in 2016-17 went to women.

However, up until now we have had very little data on the make-up of existing bodies. This report sets out the record of each department, and the steps we are taking to ensure public bodies accurately reflect the diversity of 21st Century Britain with a new strategy and new aspirations for increasing diversity in public appointments.

Transparency of senior officials and special advisers

Special advisers are a critical part of the team supporting Ministers. They add a political dimension to the advice and assistance available to Ministers while reinforcing the impartiality of the permanent Civil Service by distinguishing the source of political advice and support. The Cabinet Office is today publishing the annual list of special advisers and their cost.

Special advisers are temporary civil servants. They represent 0.05% of the Civil Service pay bill. There are 88 special advisers across the whole of government; the total Civil Service has 423,000 civil servants.

Departments are also publishing routine quarterly data on gifts and hospitality, received by special advisers, as well as information on meetings with senior media figures.

Alongside quarterly data on the travel and expenses of senior officials, the Government is also publishing today the transparency returns on senior public sector pay, as well as updated guidance on the controls for remuneration of senior civil servants and ministerial appointments to public bodies.

The government will also shortly be publishing new figures on gender pay differentials across the Civil Service.

Copies of the associate documents are being placed in the Library of the House and will be published on gov.uk.

[News story: £200 million funding boost](#)

for England's roads

£46 million to help repair potholes.

Road users will benefit from an investment of almost £200 million to help improve the condition of local roads up and down the country, Transport Minister Jesse Norman announced in York today (December 14 2017).

This funding will go towards repairing almost 1 million potholes, and will also be used for highways maintenance, developing new technologies to improve highways resilience, and high quality cycle parks.

The £200 million announced includes:

The Transport Minister visited York to see the progress of the innovative pothole spotter trial and a new e-bike, which will be 11th vehicle to have cameras fitted to it as part of the pilot, which is also running in Thurrock and Wiltshire.

The trial sees high-definition cameras fitted to bicycles, buses and bin lorries to monitor road conditions. It gives councils detailed information so they can fill potholes when they occur as well as plan resurfacing works and help prevent potholes and other road defects.

Roads Minister Jesse Norman said:

People need great roads to get about, do business and see friends and family.

We're investing record amounts at present to improve the condition of our roads, so drivers and cyclists don't have to dodge potholes to travel safely.

We're also looking at how new innovations can help councils keep their roads in the best condition, saving money and planning their maintenance better.

Almost 1 million more potholes will be repaired by highway authorities in England, outside London, thanks to £46 million of additional funding, which is on top of the £75 million [Pothole Action Fund](#) already given to councils this year. The £250 million Pothole Action Fund was announced in the 2016 Budget and will fix more than 4 million potholes by 2020/21.

The next round of the local highways maintenance incentive fund was also launched today with £151 million to reward councils for efficiently planning roads maintenance. This money is part of just over £6 billion to authorities to help keep their roads in a good condition.

A new £500,000 competition will also challenge councils to develop pilot projects of new connected technologies for the collection of road condition and pothole data.

A further £4 million will enable the government's Cycle Rail Programme to continue to be funded next year. The project pays for high quality cycle parking built at stations and has seen bike journeys at participating stations increase by nearly 40%. Since 2012, the Department for Transport has invested almost £35 million to build cycle facilities at stations, including cycle hubs which are secure and have retail and repair facilities.

The pilot Cycling and Walking to Work fund will also be extended by 6 months, with Greater Manchester, West Yorkshire and Liverpool benefitting from a share of £1.6 million.

Press release: BBFC proposed to enforce age verification of online pornography

Age verification will mean anyone who makes pornography available online on a commercial basis must ensure under 18s in the UK cannot access it. This is part of the Government's continuing work to make the UK the safest place in the world to be online.

The BBFC has unparalleled expertise in classifying content and has a proven track record of interpreting and implementing legislation as the statutory authority for age rating videos under the Video Recordings Act.

This, along with its work with industry on the film classification system and more recently classifying material for mobile network operators, makes them the preferred choice for regulator.

Digital Minister Matt Hancock said:

One of the missions of age verification is to harness the freedom of the internet while mitigating its harms. Offline, as a society we protect children from viewing inappropriate adult material by ensuring pornography is sold responsibly using appropriate age checks. It is now time that the online world follows suit. The BBFC are the best placed in the world to do this important and delicate task.

David Austin, Chief Executive Officer at BBFC said:

The BBFC's primary aim is to protect children and other vulnerable groups from harmful content and we are therefore pleased to accept the Government's proposed designation.

Age-verification barriers will help to prevent children accessing or stumbling across pornographic content online. The UK is leading the way with this age-verification regime and will set an international precedent in child protection.

The government's proposal must be approved by Parliament before the BBFC is officially designated as the age-verification regulator.

The regulator will notify non-compliant pornographic providers, and be able to direct internet service providers to prevent customers accessing these sites. It will also notify payment-services providers and other ancillary service providers of these sites, with the intention that they can withdraw their services.

The Government will shortly also publish guidance on how the regulator should fulfil its duties in relation to age verification.

Notes to Editors:

- Once designated, the regulator will develop and issue guidance (subject to parliamentary approval) on the age-verification arrangements for online pornographic material that it will treat as compliant and the role of ancillary service providers
- With regards to privacy, the regulator's guidance will set out the expectation that age-verification services and online pornography providers should have regard to the ICO's guidance on data protection and wider data protection laws..
- The Digital Economy Act requires that companies delivering adult content in the UK act responsibly by having robust age verification controls in place to prevent children accessing explicit material.
- The regulator will also have powers to take action where a person is making available extreme pornographic material on the internet in the United Kingdom. Extreme pornography is defined in section 22 of the Digital Economy Act.
- Age verification for online pornography is being taken forward alongside implementation of the Government's recently launched [Internet Safety Strategy](#).
- A 2016 report by the NSPCC found that nearly two thirds (65%) of 15-16 year olds and just under half (48%) of 11-16 year olds had viewed online pornography. Over a quarter (28%) of 11-12 year olds had seen pornography on the internet. It also found that children were just as likely to stumble across pornography (28%) as to search for it deliberately (19%).
- Research shows that viewing pornography at a young age can cause distress, and can have a harmful effect on sexual development, beliefs, and relationships. Pornography tops the list of online risks named by children, with more than one in five young people expressing concern

about such content according to [EU Kids Online research in 2013](#).