

[News story: Launch of new East West Railway Company puts UK's own 'Silicon Valley' rail link on fast track](#)

Bletchley Viaduct 1973 – not used since the early 1990s, the viaduct will be reopened. ukrailpix.co.uk

A direct rail link between the university cities of Oxford and Cambridge took a step closer today (14 December 2017), as Transport Secretary Chris Grayling officially launched the [East West Railway Company](#).

The Transport Secretary launched the new company, which will oversee the restoration of the link between the two academic powerhouses, nearly 50 years to the day since the closure of the old Varsity Line at the historic Second World War site of Bletchley Park.

The Transport Secretary also visited nearby Bletchley Station and Bletchley Viaduct, which are being re-opened as part of the new route. Bletchley Park, so vital in the UK's Second World War effort, was a key stop on the old Varsity Line and is at the heart of the East West Rail line as it sits halfway between Oxford and Cambridge.

Transport Secretary Chris Grayling said:

We are making the biggest investment in the railways since Victorian times to meet the growing demand for rail travel, while also boosting business and increasing productivity.

East West Rail is the perfect example of how we can revitalise the railways, grow the network and unlock jobs and housing growth. And Bletchley Park – the home of World War II codebreakers – is the perfect location to mark the historic occasion, because the line will be key to the development of this corridor as a world-class centre for innovation, technology and high-skilled jobs.

East West Rail will be one of the country's most strategically important rail projects, with its direct link through the corridor dubbed the UK's own 'Silicon Valley' when it is completed in the mid-2020s.

The new line will also create a direct link between East Anglia and central and southern England, delivering benefits for passengers and businesses regional and nationally by unlocking additional housing and economic growth.

Mr Grayling met with Rob Brighouse, interim chair of the East West Railway Company, regional council leaders and Milton Keynes South MP Iain Stewart for the launch.

He also met with Cyril Bleasdale who worked on the original Varsity Line construction in the 1960s and helped to build the Bletchley Viaduct.

Mr Bleasdale said:

I remember when we had our own little ceremony where I dug the first spade for it in 1962, so I'm delighted that the viaduct could be part of this historic line from east to west.

Rob Brighthouse, interim chair of the company, said:

This railway has huge potential to spread prosperity all the way along the line, making life better for those who live and work here.

That's why it's so important to deliver it quickly and cost effectively; and that's what the East West Railway Company has been set up to do. We are working very closely with local representatives, to make sure we build a railway that works for the passengers and the communities it will serve.

Councillor Ian Bates, on behalf of the East West Rail Consortium, said:

We welcome the formal launch of the East West Railway Company and its real emphasis on accelerating delivery of the Oxford to Cambridge link in support of economic growth. The consortium has played a pivotal role getting us to this point, and we have pledged to continue working in partnership to ensure there are trains on tracks at the earliest opportunity.

When the line opens, it will have interchange stations with 4 main railway lines radiating out of London, but it will run under or over each, minimising any risk of delay. The aim is to build a route that allows future upgrades to be incorporated with as little disruption as possible.

[Statement to Parliament: Grenfell Tower fire 6 months on](#)

Today marks 6 months since the Grenfell Tower tragedy and my thoughts very much remain with those affected.

A national memorial service will take place at St Paul's Cathedral today to mark 6 months since the Grenfell Tower tragedy which the Prime Minister, ministerial colleagues and I will attend. This will provide the opportunity for us to remember those who tragically lost their lives, comfort the bereaved, and for all of us to reflect on how, together, we move forward.

I am determined those who lost their lives, their families and friends, the survivors and the community will not be forgotten and are supported in getting the help they need and deserve.

On 11 December I wrote to all colleagues with an update on some of the work being undertaken to support those affected and I plan, with Mr Speaker's permission to make an Oral Statement to the House before recess.

Above all, I am determined that the lessons of the Grenfell fire are learnt and never forgotten so that a tragedy like this can never, ever happen again.

[News story: Plan to boost social mobility through education](#)

An ambitious plan to provide opportunity on every young person's doorstep and help make Britain a country fit for the future has been unveiled today (Thursday 14 December) by Education Secretary Justine Greening.

In a speech at the inaugural [Reform social mobility conference](#), the Education Secretary pointed to the success of government reforms in raising school standards and creating more opportunities.

This includes 1.9million more children in good and outstanding schools than in 2010, record numbers of young people in education or training and more disadvantaged pupils going to university. And earlier this month [a new study](#) revealed that England is rising up the international literacy league table, with English 9yr olds now significantly better readers than their American, Canadian and Australian counterparts.

But she made clear that if we are to make this a country that truly works for everyone, there is much more to be done to deliver equality of opportunity for every child, regardless of where they live.

The plan [Unlocking Talent, Fulfilling Potential](#) will deliver targeted action where it is needed most, focusing £800 million of government investment on overcoming these challenges.

One overarching ambition will focus on places and communities across the country that feel they have been 'left behind', because they have not yet seen the improvement that other parts of the country have already benefited

from. A further four ambitions will cover the key life stages of people's education.

Ambition 1: Closing the word gap

Boosting access to high quality early language and literacy, both in the classroom and at home, ensuring more disadvantaged children leave school having mastered the basic of literacy that many take for granted.

Ambition 2: Closing the attainment gap

Raising standards for every pupil, supporting teachers early in their career as well as getting more great teachers in areas where there remain significant challenges.

Ambition 3: Real choice at post-16

Creating world-class technical education, backed by a half a billion pounds in investment, and increasing the options for all young people regardless of their background.

Ambition 4: Rewarding careers for all

Boosting skills and confidence to make the leap from education into work, raising their career aspirations. Building a new type of partnership with businesses to improve advice, information and experiences for young people.

Education Secretary Justine Greening said:

In modern Britain, where you are born, where you live, where you go to school and where you work directly affects where you get to in life.

Talent is spread evenly across this country; the problem is that opportunity isn't. We need systemic change and we need everyone – government, employers, education professionals and civil society – to work together so that social mobility runs through everything we all do.

[A recent study](#) has revealed that if disadvantaged pupils in all English regions performed as well as disadvantaged pupils in London, this would lead to an overall economic benefit of around £20 billion in present value terms.

Today's plan focuses government reforms and funding on the people and places that need it most to level up opportunity and ensure no community is left behind, helping to make Britain a success as it prepares for life post-Brexit.

It sets out action and investment in a range of areas including:

- £50million to boost school nursery provision in some of the most

challenging areas, so more children benefit from early education support before they arrive at primary school.

- A consultation on proposals to enhance early careers support and professional development for teachers, in particular those working in challenging schools and areas. This will help to further drive up standards in schools by retaining the best teachers and attracting the best individuals to the profession with a 'gold-standard' training and development offer.
- A new £23 million Future Talent Fund to trial a range of new teaching approaches to support the education of the most-able children from less well-off communities.

Sir Peter Lampl, Founder and Chairman of the Sutton Trust and Chairman of the Education Endowment Foundation said:

We welcome today's social mobility action plan. It will play an important role in enabling less advantaged young people to get on in life. We particularly welcome the Future Talent Fund, which will support bright young people to fulfil their potential and the new role for the Education Endowment Foundation to evaluate early years practice.

Melanie Richards, Deputy Chair at KPMG UK said:

We have heard the Secretary of State's call to arms today for all sectors to work together to ensure future generations of young people have the skills, opportunity and support they deserve. We strongly support the Department's Unlocking Talent, Fulfilling Potential action plan; it is the right thing to do for the good of our society and it is also vital if the UK is to remain competitive on the global stage.

It will take the best efforts of all of us – working together – to stamp out the social immobility that currently stops too many people in this country from reaching their full potential.

David Hughes, Chief Executive of Association of Colleges said:

This is an important statement of intent and focus for the DfE. The plan sets out an ambitious agenda to tackle longstanding and deep-seated inequalities which the education system struggles to overcome. It is a brave step to establish this as a goal for the Government and I know that colleges across the country are already working on this ambition in everything that they do. Colleges are

drivers of social mobility and will want to work with the Secretary of State to help transform the life chances of children, young people and adults.

The plan builds on wider government work to boost social mobility including the publication of an Industrial Strategy to boost productivity across the UK to create more jobs and increase earning power. In addition, the government has introduced the National Living Wage, investing £9 billion in affordable housing and creating more full-time, permanent jobs.

It will sit alongside work already underway via the [Opportunity Areas](#) programme, and comes after the Education Secretary hosted a [Skills Summit](#) for Britain's top employers at the DfE last month.

[Press release: Child maintenance consultation launched](#)

The government is asking for views on options to give the Child Maintenance Service (CMS) stronger compliance, collection and enforcement methods to make sure parents are meeting their responsibilities towards their children.

The Child Maintenance Service was established in 2012 to replace the old Child Support Agency (CSA). Steps have already been taken to strengthen the action taken against parents who don't pay the child maintenance they owe, including consulting on [seizing unpaid maintenance from joint bank accounts](#).

The consultation proposals today include:

- removing passports – parents who persistently do not pay the child maintenance they owe could face being banned from holding or obtaining a UK passport for up to 2 years
- improved calculations – income from capital, foreign income, notional income from assets and unearned income could all be taken into account when the CMS works out how much maintenance a parent owes
- deductions from business accounts – the CMS could seize funds from sole trader and partnership accounts to pay off a parent's unpaid maintenance bill.

The consultation also outlines proposals to address historic unpaid child maintenance built up under the old CSA, and options for writing it off. New analysis shows that it would cost the government £1.5 billion to collect the debt, most of which is owed on CSA cases where the children are now adults.

Minister for Family Support, Housing and Child Maintenance Caroline Dinenage said:

Our priority is to make sure parents meet their responsibilities to their children so we have been replacing the old CSA – which failed children over the decades – with a new system that is already working better for families. But we need to go further to ensure children get the support they need. That’s why we are consulting on a range of options, including tougher powers against parents who do not pay the child maintenance they owe.

The consultation opened on 14 December 2017 and closes on 8 February 2018.

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Follow DWP on:

[News story: Ofqual publishes reports relating to 2017 GCSEs, AS and A levels](#)

Ofqual has today (14 December 2017) published its [review of the 2017 summer exam series](#), during which a range of new GCSEs and A levels were awarded for the first time. This report provides a broad overview of exam planning, exam administration, marking, the awarding process and what happened post-results.

As [shown in our infographic](#), around 14.1 million scripts were generated by approximately 1.4 million candidates this summer. Around 2,200 different GCSE, AS and A level exams were taken and these were marked by approximately 63,000 examiners, leading to 6.6 million certifications.

Overall, GCSE and A level results were stable, and the degree of variation in year-on-year results for individual schools and colleges was similar to previous years. The changes made to special consideration provisions this year ensured that students affected by the tragic events of the summer were treated appropriately.

The vast majority of question papers were, as in previous years, error free. In the small number of cases where serious errors occurred, we monitored the exam boards' handling to make sure, as far as possible, each affected student was given the fairest result. And we launched a review of teacher involvement in developing exam papers given the impact on affected students and public confidence of two well-publicised incidents. We have [issued an update on this work today](#).

Reviews of marking and moderation

We have publishing [official statistics on reviews of marking and moderation for GCSE, AS and A level exams](#) today. This was the second summer when revised, fairer rules applied, such that marks should only be changed to correct a marking error and not because of legitimate differences in opinion between two markers.

Overall, 99% of all AS and A level grades, and 98.6% of all GCSE grades, were unchanged in England this year after the conclusion of any review. The number of grades challenged increased from 346,920 last year, to 369,215 this year (+6%). There were 6.6 million qualification grades issued in 2017. In total, 88,505 GCSE, AS and A level qualification grades were changed, compared to 63,345 grades in 2016. The proportion of all [qualification grades that were changed by 2 or more grades](#) in 2017 was less than 0.03%.

The data indicate that the rise in grades changed after review this year stemmed principally from an increase in the number of successful review requests in new and legacy versions of GCSE English language and English literature. This is partly explained by a significant increase in GCSE entries in these subjects this year, with fewer students taking alternative qualifications. However, the proportion of successful grade changes has also risen.

The evidence from a range of original marking and review of marking data points to variation in some exam boards' efforts to embed the revised rules for reviews, rather than issues with original marking. The data suggests Pearson was more successful than the others at embedding the rules for reviews of marking.

Sally Collier said:

Overall, this year's exams have been carefully planned, effectively managed and successfully delivered by the exam boards. From our initial analysis, it appears that some of the exam boards have not done enough to change old practices and meet our new rules around reviews of marking. We expect all exam boards to comply with our

rules at all times. We are currently looking at where more could and should be done and will consider what form of regulatory action may be appropriate. We will not require exam boards to reconsider the outcomes of the reviews they have undertaken this year, so students' awards following review will stand.

Comparability between exam board qualifications and the maintenance of standards over time

A further 3 reports published today cover our work to ensure standards are maintained between exam board qualifications in the same subject, and over time.

Ahead of the summer, we considered [how standards should be maintained in the first awards of new 9 to 1 GCSEs](#), given anticipated changes in cohort entries. We decided that predictions would be based on previous GCSE outcomes only.

After exam papers have been marked, we monitor selected GCSE and A level awards to [ensure that grade standards within subjects are in line across exam boards](#). We found this to be the case in 2017.

And this year we also [looked at the difficulty of the live GCSE maths questions compared with the sample questions](#) that were accredited. Our research indicates that the exam boards produced papers containing questions of similar difficulty to their sample assessment materials and to each other this summer.

National Reference Test

We are also publishing [further details of the first national reference tests in English and maths](#), which were conducted earlier this year. We expect that it will be 2019 at the earliest before exam boards start to use the information from the tests when they award GCSEs. At that point, we will publish the outcomes alongside GCSE results.

National Assessments regulation: annual report 2017

Finally, we are issuing our [annual report on the regulation of national assessments](#). It provides assurance that the Standards and Testing Agency took an appropriate approach to making sure that performance standards were effectively maintained for 2017 key stage tests. We will continue to focus on key aspects of assessment validity and to monitor STA's response to our findings.