

Press release: First joint exercise with the fire service in the south west to test flood defence barriers

Environment Agency field operatives will roll out up to 120 metres of temporary defence barriers, in partnership with Dorset and Wiltshire Fire and Rescue Service officers. This will be the first joint exercise of its kind in the south west, although the fire service has previously helped deploy barriers during live incidents.

The exercise will take place at the Ashley Road recreation ground, next to the River Avon, from 10am to 1pm. Teams will deploy 3 types of barriers and seepage pumps to practise their joint response to flooding.

Robbie Williams, Environment Agency Operations Manager for the Wessex Area, said:

We are investing to reduce flood risk in Salisbury as part of a £2.5 billion investment nationally to better protect 300,000 homes by 2021.

Salisbury is at risk from flooding from 5 rivers running into the city and their close proximity to homes and businesses, so it's important we limit the overall impact and extent of flooding, and keep people safe.

Joint exercises like this will help us be better prepared for any future incidents as we'll be able to deploy the barriers more quickly and efficiently when flooding is expected, helping to protect communities and the local economy.

Jason Moncrieff, Station Manager for Salisbury, Wilton and Amesbury, said:

Across our area, Dorset and Wiltshire Fire and Rescue Service has a number of communities at high risk of flooding. It is great to have this opportunity to work closely with Environment Agency colleagues, both to test how we can support them when flooding is expected, but also to better understand how they work and the defences they have available.

The exercise site is 1 of 4 areas in the city where temporary defence barriers would be deployed in a real life river flooding incident.

These measures are supported by the Salisbury Operating Flood Working Group, which launched a multi-agency flood plan outlining the city's emergency

response last year. Volunteer wardens were also recruited by Salisbury City Council to act as the eyes and ears of the community for any flood risks.

Partner agencies and some schools have been invited to observe the exercise, including Wiltshire Council, Salisbury City Council, Wiltshire Police and wider members of the Wiltshire and Swindon Local Resilience Forum.

One of the Environment Agency's new Incident Command Vehicles will also be on site recording footage of the exercise. The WiFi-enabled vehicle acts as a mobile incident room and a temporary headquarters for staff out in the field, enabling better site management, situational awareness and visibility in flood risk communities.

Local residents will be informed about the exercise in advance and invited to stop by to find out more. Ashley Road and the formal footpath around the edge of the recreation ground will still be accessible to users.

Residents can sign up to receive flood alerts by phone, email or text message. Residents can [register online](#) or by calling the 24-hour Floodline on 0345 988 1188.

There are 3 types of barriers. The Innero and Geodesign barriers are aluminium frames which expand into shape before being lined with plastic sheet to create a waterproof wall, with the Floodstop barrier being a plastic structure linked together for more specific deployments.

Three teams of 8 people (6 Environment Agency, 2 fire service) will rotate on the hour between each barrier type, overseen by site controllers.

The Salisbury Operational Flood Working Group members are Salisbury City Council, Wiltshire Council, the Environment Agency, Salisbury Cathedral, Salisbury BID (Business Improvement District) and Highways England.

The media are invited to attend the exercise at 11am on Tuesday 5 December and carry out a brief tour of the site and carry out photo/filming/interview opportunities with approved spokespeople from the Environment Agency and Dorset and Wiltshire Fire and Rescue Service. Please confirm your attendance with the Environment Agency press office by emailing communications_wessex@environment-agency.gov.uk.

On arrival the media should report to the information stand on site, to be signed in and given high visibility jackets for safety and identification purposes. Press officers will assist with this process. Please note, the Environment Agency cannot accept any liability if health and safety procedures are not followed.

Press release: Better Broadband Scheme extended for another year

A scheme designed to help those people struggling with the slowest broadband speeds in the UK has been extended for another year, Digital Minister Matt Hancock announced today.

- Scheme offers immediate assistance to those in hardest to reach places
- More than 10,000 UK homes and businesses have already had their broadband speeds boosted through the initiative

The “Better Broadband Scheme” provides a subsidy of up to £350 to enable access to an affordable basic broadband service to those people unable to get broadband speeds of at least 2Mbps.

Minister for Digital, Matt Hancock said:

Thanks to the UK Government’s rollout of superfast broadband, more than 94 per cent of the UK can now access superfast broadband speeds and thousands more homes and businesses are being reached every week.

There is still more to be done to get decent broadband to all and the Better Broadband Scheme helps people with the very worst broadband, to provide immediate assistance to those most in need. I’m delighted to say we are extending the scheme to help people in some of the most rural and hard to reach areas of the country.

Already more than 10,000 homes and businesses have benefitted from the Scheme, with subsidies that are worth over £3 million in total. Originally due to conclude at the end of 2017, the steadily growing popularity of the scheme means that it will now be extended until the end of 2018.

Households and businesses that are eligible to take advantage of the Scheme are provided with a unique code by the Government that they can use to obtain an affordable basic broadband connection. The code does not have a specific fixed value but the subsidy contributes towards the installation and hardware costs to ensure that the customer’s first year costs are no more than £400.

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Notes to Editors

1. Taking out a broadband service under this Scheme will not prevent your premises from being considered for superfast broadband in the future.

2. People can check what broadband services are already available to them by using the GoSuperfast checker , and what their current broadband speed is, using the ADSL availability checker.
3. If, after making these checks, they believe their speed is less than 2 Mb per second and they have no other options available enter your postcode below to find out how to apply for help.

[News story: Royal Navy ship set for Australia, Defence Secretary reveals](#)

The Defence Secretary had announced that [the ship would sail to the Asia Pacific whilst addressing the crew on-board in Devonport on Friday](#), and has now provided further information of the deployment.

During recent conversations with Australian Defence Minister Marise Payne and Minister for Defence Industry Christopher Pyne the Defence Secretary reaffirmed his commitment to strengthening the Australia-UK defence relationship and exploring opportunities for our Armed Forces to work together.

The visit of HMS Sutherland, a Type 23 anti-submarine warfare frigate, offers further opportunities for the Royal Navy and the Australian Navy to collaborate.

Defence Secretary Gavin Williamson said:

Though we may be currently battling against each other on the cricket field, when it comes to defence, we stand together with Australia as allies not opponents. Our countries have fought alongside one another since the First World War and we continue to stand strong in the face of today's intensifying global threats.

I am pleased to announce that HMS Sutherland will set sail across the world next year and look forward to strengthening our close relationship with Australia.

The Type 23 frigate HMS Sutherland will deploy to Australia in the New Year.

The ship will visit Sydney, Perth and Adelaide and provides an outstanding opportunity for joint exercising. The deployment has the added benefit of showcasing Britain's cutting-edge anti-submarine warfare technology.

Australia and the UK remain extremely close trading partners, exchanging £13.1bn of goods and services in 2016. In that year we also agreed to establish a bilateral Trade Working Group to begin scoping out the parameters for a future Free Trade Agreement. This week International Trade Secretary Liam Fox is in the country to advance the UK/Australia trade relationship, following a visit from Minister for Defence Procurement Harriett Baldwin earlier this month.

In August this year both countries' Foreign and Defence Secretaries strengthened the already close relationship in the [9th annual Australia-UK Ministerial talks \(AUKMIN\)](#), agreeing on further joint work on cyber, Commonwealth and modern slavery. This deployment is a tangible demonstration of that commitment.

Whilst in the country earlier in the month, Defence Minister Harriett Baldwin [announced the intention to look at the feasibility of fitting an Australian radar on future British warships](#). The 'CEAFAR' radar, developed by CEA Technologies, is already in service with the Australian Navy and a capability study to fit the radar to British ships will begin early next year.

[Press release: Social mobility in Great Britain: fifth state of the nation report](#)

A stark social mobility postcode lottery exists in Britain today where the chances of someone from a disadvantaged background succeeding in life is bound to where they live, the Social Mobility Commission's '[State of the nation' report](#), published today (Tuesday 28 November) has found.

The report uncovers a striking geographical divide with London and its surrounding areas pulling away from the rest of the country, while many other parts of the country are being left behind economically and hollowed out socially.

It warns that Britain is in the grip of a self-reinforcing spiral of ever-growing division and calls on government to increase its proportion of spending on those parts of the country that most need it. Estimates suggest that the North is £6 billion a year underfunded compared to London.

At the heart of the report is the Social Mobility Index, which ranks all 324 local authorities in England in terms of their social mobility prospects for someone from a disadvantaged background. It uses a range of 16 indicators for every major life stage, from early years through to working lives, to map the nation's social mobility hotspots and coldspots. A similar, but not comparable, approach has been taken for Scotland and Wales.

The report debunks the assumption that a simple north-south divide exists. Instead, it suggests there is a postcode lottery with hotspots and coldspots found in almost every part of the country. London dominates the hotspots, while the East and West Midlands are the worst performing regions. The best performing local authority area is Westminster and the worst performing area is West Somerset.

The index finds that the worst performing areas for social mobility are no longer inner city areas, but remote rural and coastal areas, and former industrial areas, especially in the Midlands. Young people from disadvantaged backgrounds living in these areas face far higher barriers than young people growing up in cities and their surrounding areas – and in their working lives, face lower rates of pay; fewer top jobs; and travelling to work times of nearly four times more than that of urban residents.

There is also no direct correlation between the affluence of an area and its ability to sustain high levels of social mobility. While richer areas tend to outperform deprived areas in the index, a number of places buck the trend. Some of the most deprived areas in England are hotspots, including most London boroughs – such as Tower Hamlets, Hackney and Newham. Conversely, some affluent areas – such as West Berkshire, Cotswold and Crawley – are amongst the worst for offering good education, employment opportunities and affordable housing to their more disadvantaged residents.

The report highlights that local policies adopted by local authorities and employers can influence outcomes for disadvantaged residents. But it also warns that there is a mind-blowing inconsistency of practice in how to improve social mobility outcomes, with little pooling of experience or evidence-based strategies.

The Rt Hon Alan Milburn, chair of the Social Mobility Commission, said:

The country seems to be in the grip of a self-reinforcing spiral of ever-growing division. That takes a spatial form, not just a social one. There is a stark social mobility lottery in Britain today.

London and its hinterland are increasingly looking like a different country from the rest of Britain. It is moving ahead as are many of our country's great cities. But too many rural and coastal areas and the towns of Britain's old industrial heartlands are being left behind economically and hollowed out socially.

Tinkering around the edges will not do the trick. The analysis in this report substantiates the sense of political alienation and social resentment that so many parts of Britain feel. A new level of effort is needed to tackle the phenomenon of left behind Britain. Overcoming the divisions that exist in Britain requires far more ambition and far bigger scale. A less divided Britain will require a more redistributive approach to spreading education, employment and housing prospects across our country.

Key findings include:

- London accounts for nearly two-thirds of all social mobility hotspots
- The Midlands is the worst region of the country for social mobility for those from disadvantaged backgrounds – half of the local authority areas in the East Midlands and more than a third in the West Midlands are social mobility coldspots
- Some of the worst performing areas such as Weymouth and Portland, and Allerdale, are rural, not urban
- Coastal and older industrial towns – places such as Scarborough, Hastings, Derby and Nottingham – are becoming entrenched social mobility coldspots
- Some of the richest places in England, such as West Berkshire, Cotswold and Crawley, deliver worse outcomes for their disadvantaged children than places that are much poorer such as Sunderland and Tower Hamlets
- Apart from London, English cities are punching below their weight on social mobility outcomes. No other city makes it into the top 20%
- Early years – disadvantaged children are 14 percentage points less likely to be school ready at age 5 in coldspots than in hotspots: in 94 areas, under half of disadvantaged children reach a good level of development at age 5
- Schools – 51% of London children on free school meals achieve A* to C in English and maths GCSE compared to an average of 36% of children on free school meals in all other English regions: in the best place (Westminster), 63% get good English and maths GCSEs whereas in the worst (Isle of Wight), only 27% do
- A critical factor in the performance of top local authorities is the number and quality of teachers available. A secondary teacher in the most deprived area is 70% more likely to leave
- Schools in rural and coastal areas are isolated and lack partnerships with other schools. In Lancashire and West Yorkshire only 19% of all schools are either in a multi-academy trust or an equivalent trust compared to 35% in north east London and the East of England
- Youth – In Kensington and Chelsea, 50% of disadvantaged young people make it to university, whereas in Hastings, Barnsley and Eastbourne, the university participation rate for this group falls to just 10%
- One quarter of young people are NEET (not in education, employment or training) in the worst local authority area a year after GCSEs (South Ribble), compared to 1% in North Hertfordshire
- Working lives – In 71, largely rural areas, more than 30% of people earn below the voluntary living wage: average wages in the worst performing area, West Somerset, are £312 a week, less than half of the best performing areas of London such as Wandsworth, Richmond upon Thames and Westminster
- In Bolsover, just 17% of residents are in jobs that are professional and managerial positions, compared to 51% in Oxford
- City residents face barriers in their working lives with high housing costs and high rates of low paid work compared to commuter belt residents who benefit from higher rates of the top jobs and with more families owning their homes
- In Blaby, Rochford and Harborough, 80% of residents own their homes

whereas in Tower Hamlets it is just 18%

Key recommendations:

- Every local authority should develop an integrated strategy for improving disadvantaged children's outcomes and Pupil Premium funds should be invested in evidence-based practice
- Local authorities should support collaboration between isolated schools, subsidise transport for disadvantaged young people in isolated areas and encourage Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEP) to follow the North East LEP's approach to improving careers support for young people
- Local authorities should all become accredited Living Wage employers and encourage others in their communities to do likewise
- Central government should launch a fund to enable schools in rural and coastal areas to partner with other schools to boost attainment
- Regional School Commissioners should be given responsibility to work with universities, schools and Teach First to ensure that there is a good supply of teachers in all parts of their regions
- The Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy should match the Department for Education's £72 million for the opportunity areas to ensure there is a collaborative effort across local education systems and labour markets
- Central government should rebalance the national transport budget to deliver a more equal share of investment per person and contribute towards a more regionally balanced economy

Notes for editors

1. The Social Mobility Commission is an advisory, non-departmental public body established under the Life Chances Act 2010 as modified by the Welfare Reform and Work Act 2016. It has a duty to assess progress in improving social mobility in the United Kingdom and to promote social mobility in England. It currently consists of four commissioners and is supported by a small secretariat.

2. The commission board currently comprises:

- Alan Milburn (chair)
- Baroness Gillian Shephard (deputy chair)
- Paul Gregg, Professor of Economic and Social Policy, University of Bath
- David Johnston, Chief Executive of the Social Mobility Foundation

3. The functions of the commission include:

- monitoring progress on improving social mobility
 - providing published advice to ministers on matters relating to social mobility
 - undertaking social mobility advocacy
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News story: New rules on blood donation come into force

Changes to the rules on blood donation in England come into force on 28 November. The new rules will allow more people to donate blood, without affecting the safety of the blood supply.

[The changes were announced in July, on the recommendation of the Advisory Committee on the Safety of Blood, Tissues and Organs \(SaBTO\).](#)

Dr Gail Mifflin, Medical and Research Director at NHS Blood and Transplant said:

The SaBTO review took into account the latest available medical and scientific evidence. This included more information about the risk of acquiring infections that can be passed on in blood, more evidence on how well donors comply with our guidelines and also more evidence that supports the reliability of the blood screening tests we use.

We have one of the safest blood supplies in the world. Anyone may require a blood transfusion in the future and so it's in all our interests to ensure that we work hard to keep blood safe for patients.

Before every donation, all donors must complete a Donor Health Check and have a private health screening where they may be asked confidential questions based on their completed form.

Subject to meeting the other donation rules, the following groups will now be able to donate after 3 months have passed since the last sexual activity:

- men who have had sex with another man
- commercial sex workers
- people who have had sex with a partner at high risk of having a sexually transmitted infection

Previously, commercial sex workers were permanently excluded from blood donation and the other groups had to wait until 12 months had passed before they could donate. The rules are now consistent for all groups that are deferred due to sexual behaviours.