News story: Baroness Anelay comments on Amnesty's Death Penalty report

It is encouraging that there was a reported decrease in the number of executions in 2016. I welcome the fact that compared with the previous year, fewer countries imposed death sentences and carried out executions. The Government's opposition to the death penalty is clear; we condemn it in all circumstances.

It is concerning that Iran, Iraq, Pakistan and Saudi Arabia have reportedly carried out 87% of the world's executions. It is also deeply troubling that the report indicates that China continues to execute in the thousands. I urge those countries – and all countries that continue to impose the death penalty – to reconsider its use and to acknowledge its ineffectiveness as a deterrent and its inhumanity.

The global trajectory is towards abolition, with countries that retain the death penalty becoming an increasingly isolated minority. The UK supports this trend and is funding projects in a wide range of countries to promote abolition. UK Ministers and diplomats raise our objection to the death penalty and support for reform at every appropriate opportunity. The UK will continue to support the UN global moratorium on use of the death penalty as a first step towards ultimate abolition.

Press release: UK House Price Index (HPI) for February 2017

The February data shows an annual price increase of 5.8% which takes the average property value in the UK to £217,502. Monthly house prices have risen by 0.6% since January 2017. The monthly index figure for the UK was 114.1.

In England, the February data shows an annual price increase of 6.3% which takes the average property value to £234,466. Monthly house prices have risen by 0.8% since January 2017.

Wales shows an annual price increase of 1.8% which takes the average property value to £145,293. Monthly house prices have fallen by 0.9% since January 2017.

London shows an annual price increase of 3.7% which takes the average property value to £474,704. Monthly house prices have fallen by 0.9% since January 2017.

The UK Property Transaction statistics showed that in February 2017 the total number of seasonally adjusted property transactions completed in the UK with value of £40,000 or above decreased by 1.9% compared with February 2016. See the economic statement.

Sales during December 2016, the most up-to-date HM Land Registry figures available, show that:

1. The UK House Price Index (HPI) is published on the second or third Tuesday of each month with Northern Ireland figures updated quarterly. The March 2017 UK HPI will be published at 9.30am on 16 May 2017. A calendar of release dates is available.

2. Data for the UK HPI is provided by HM Land Registry, Registers of Scotland, Land & Property Services/Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency and the Valuation Office Agency.

3. The UK HPI is calculated by the Office for National Statistics andLand & Property Services/Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency. It applies a hedonic regression model that uses the various sources of data on property price, in particular HM Land Registry’s Price Paid Dataset, and attributes to produce estimates of the change in house prices each month. Find out more about the methodology used from ONS and Northern Ireland Statistics & Research Agency.

4. The first estimate for new build average price (April 2016 report) was based on a small sample which can cause volatility. A three month moving average has been applied to the latest estimate to remove some of this volatility.

5. Work has been taking place since 2014 to develop a single, official HPI that reflects the final transaction price for sales of residential property in the UK. Using the geometric mean, it covers purchases at market value for owner-occupation and buy-to-let, excluding those purchases not at market value (such as re-mortgages), where the ‘price’ represents a valuation.

6. Information on residential property transactions for England and Wales, collected as part of the official registration process, is provided by HM Land Registry for properties that are sold for full market value.

7. The HM Land Registry dataset contains the sale price of the property, the date when the sale was completed, full address details, the type of property (detached, semi-detached, terraced or flat), if it is a newly built property or an established residential building and a variable to indicate if the property has been purchased as a financed transaction (using a mortgage) or as a non-financed transaction (cash purchase).

8. Repossession data is based on the number of transactions lodged with HM Land Registry by lenders exercising their power of sale.

9. For England this is shown as volumes of repossessions recorded by Government Office Region. For Wales there is a headline figure for the number of repossessions recorded in Wales.

10. The data can be downloaded as a .csv file. Repossession data prior to April 2016 is not available. Find out more information about repossessions.

11. Background tables of the raw and cleansed aggregated data, in Excel and CSV formats, are also published monthly although Northern Ireland is on a quarterly basis. They are available for free use and re-use under the Open Government Licence.

12. As a government department established in 1862, executive agency and trading fund responsible to the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, HM Land Registry keeps and maintains the Land Register for England and Wales. The Land Register has been open to public inspection since 1990.

13. With the largest transactional database of its kind detailing more than 24 million titles, HM Land Registry underpins the economy by safeguarding ownership of many billions of pounds worth of property.

14. For further information about HM Land Registry visit www.gov.uk/land-registry.

15. Follow us on Twitter @LandRegGov, our blog, LinkedIn and Facebook.

News story: New market-leading bond launches today

This new product gives people access to a market-leading rate of 2.2% for between £100 and £3000 of their savings.

In a move to support savers who have been affected by low interest rates, the Chancellor announced the market-leading product at Autumn Statement 2016. The rate of 2.2%, fixed for three years, was confirmed at last month’s Budget.

Economic Secretary to the Treasury, Simon Kirby said:

> From raising the ISA threshold to introducing the new Lifetime ISA, this government is committed to creating a nation of savers.
>
> With its market-leading rate of 2.2%, the investment bond will provide a valuable boost for savers who have been affected by low interest rates.

With the average 3 year fixed term product having a rate of 1.24%, the new offering is significantly higher than others currently on the market.

In the decade before 2009, the average 1-year fixed term savings rate was 5.0%. But since then the average has been 1.9%, and is currently 0.6%.

The product is provided by NS&I, one of the largest savings organisations in the UK with 25 million customers, and is available to those aged 16 and over.

It can only be purchased online to give customers a simple way to apply for the bond and to manage their investment. This also reflects the changing nature of customer behaviour as more money is deposited online with NS&I than via any other individual sales channels.

The new NS&I product comes on top of other actions the government has taken to support savers, including increasing the ISA allowance to £20,000, introducing a new personal savings allowance that means that 98% of adults pay no savings tax and launching the Lifetime ISA to help younger people buy their first home and save for later in life.

News story: CMA accepts Mastercard/VocaLink undertakings

The CMA has today accepted undertakings offered by Mastercard to address competition concerns arising from its purchase of VocaLink.

On 18 January 2017, the Competition and Markets Authority (CMA) announced it would look in detail at whether the undertakings offered by Mastercard UK Holdco Limited, an affiliate of MasterCard International Incorporated (Mastercard), and VocaLink Holdings Ltd (VocaLink) removed the need to carry out an in-depth merger investigation.

The package of measures offered by Mastercard and VocaLink consisted of:

- VocaLink making its existing network connectivity available to a new supplier of infrastructure services to LINK. This could allow a competitor to use VocaLink's connectivity to members of the LINK ATM network, rather than having to build their own;

- VocaLink transferring to LINK the intellectual property rights relating to the LINK LIS5 messaging standard, which members of the network use to communicate when customers use cash machines; and

- Mastercard contributing to the cost to LINK members of changing to a new supplier of infrastructure services to LINK.

After considering responses to a formal consultation, the CMA has concluded the proposals are sufficient to address its competition concerns.

The undertakings and all other information relating to this merger investigation will shortly be available on the case page.

Press release: Families to benefit from £55 million boost to childcare schemes

Thousands of new childcare places for working parents around the country are being created thanks to a multi-million grant scheme, the Early Years Minister Caroline Dinenage has announced today.

The £50 million capital grants double the government's investment to help nurseries, pre-schools and playgroups invest in new buildings and upgrade facilities. This will deliver more than 9,000 additional childcare places – helping to meet the government's commitment to give working families 30 hours free childcare from September.

The money builds on the £50 million funding announced in January, doubling the total spend to £100 million and altogether providing nearly 18,000 extra childcare places.

Alongside this, nearly £5 million will go to organisations that are helping children from disadvantaged backgrounds or with additional needs to access high-quality early education, so that every child can reach their full potential, regardless of their background.

The 12 opportunity areas announced by the Education Secretary will also benefit from £5 million as part of the government's latest capital investment. These areas, identified as social mobility ‘coldspots’, are already benefitting from a share of £72 million – today’s funding will be a further boost for families living there.

As part of its Plan for Britain, the government is working to create a society where success is defined by work and talent, not birth or circumstance. Supporting parents with the cost and availability of quality childcare to enable them to work if they choose to is an important part of this ambition.

Minister for the Early Years Caroline Dinenage said:

> In my visits around the country I have heard from families whose lives have been improved by access to 30 hours. As part of our Plan for Britain we want to make this a country that works for everyone, not just the privileged few, so that means removing the barriers facing parents struggling to balance their jobs with the cost of childcare.
>
> This investment will deliver more childcare places to working parents, giving them the benefits of 30 hours’ free childcare while giving their children high-quality early education that sets them up for life. This is backed by our record £6 billion investment in childcare per year by 2020.

Up to £5 million of voluntary and community sector (VCS) grants will be shared among 13 projects working to improve the quality of early education and supporting professionals to deliver the 30 hours offer. This includes:

- more than £1.5 million for 5 organisations working with parents of children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), delivering workshops and training that will raise awareness of the support available for these families
- nearly £1.7 million to directly support disadvantaged children by boosting outreach programmes in areas such as early literacy and home learning
- more than £1 million to groups working directly with providers, developing tools and resources to support the delivery of 30 hours

The government has also relaunched its Childcare Business Grant Scheme, aimed at supporting new childminders or childminder agencies who are looking to start their own businesses. Eligible professionals could receive grants of £500 or £1,000 to help with the costs of setting up, making it easier for those who want to offer 30 hours free childcare to prepare.

Childminders will also benefit from grants to Action for Children and PACEY, worth £370,000 and £381,000, which will help upskill and empower them to deliver 30 hours and make sure their businesses are sustainable.

The announcement is on top of the government’s record £6 billion each year investment for childcare by 2020 and follows the recent publication of a new fairer funding system for early years education. This formula will see the minimum hourly rate for councils increased to £4.30 per hour, ensuring the 30 hours free offer is sustainable for providers.

The government has recently launched its Childcare Choices website. This sets out details of all of the childcare support available for parents from across the government and allows them to register for email alerts that will notify them when applications for 30 hours open nationally.

Opportunity areas will see local partnerships formed with early years providers, schools, colleges, universities, businesses, charities and local authorities to ensure all children have the opportunity to reach their full potential. Opportunity areas include:

- Blackpool
- Bradford
- Derby
- Doncaster
- Fenland & East Cambridgeshire
- Hastings
- Ipswich
- Norwich
- Oldham
- Scarborough
- West Somerset

The priority of the council bid round, which closed in August, was to target grants to areas where there was a demonstrable need for additional places to support the delivery of the 30 hours offer. Each bidder was required to contribute at least 25% of the total funding they requested, in order to share the budget around the maximum possible projects around the country.

The capital grants are being matched by around £40 million in additional funding from various local sources across the country, resulting in a total investment of approximately £140 million.

We are providing tools to support childcare providers, including a package of 30 hours delivery resources and an updated business sustainability toolkit.

Successful bids for VCS grants were required to demonstrate they met specific priorities: their positive impact on disadvantaged communities – including children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) or ethnic minorities – distinct ways of enhancing the quality of the early years workforce, or helping to boost the number of 30 hours places available. The grants run over 15 months to March 2018.