

CMA warns firms over price-fixing of supplies to disabled students

The Competition and Markets Authority (CMA) has sent advisory letters to a number of firms, reminding them of their obligations under competition law, after learning of allegations that some suppliers colluded over the price of key services and equipment. Price-fixing is a serious breach of competition law and can cheat people out of a lower price, which could have been available if competition was working properly.

Disabled students who are eligible can receive funding through the Disabled Student Allowances grant scheme, managed by the Student Loans Company (SLC), which acts on behalf of the UK and Welsh governments' education departments. Under the current system, an independent needs assessor will provide SLC with recommendations for products and services along with quotations from suppliers, and SLC will work with the student to put the support in place.

The CMA is concerned that SLC – and so ultimately the taxpayer – may have paid over the odds for certain goods and services because some suppliers agreed prices before providing quotations. This alleged activity could also have reduced the overall amount which disabled students have available for purchasing equipment through the scheme.

While the CMA has been considering these allegations, SLC has told the CMA that it is making a number of changes to the way it procures goods and services for disabled students. The changes will increase price transparency and competition amongst companies, and should therefore limit the potential for anti-competitive behaviour to take place.

Michael Grenfell, the CMA's Executive Director of Enforcement, said:

“Healthy competition is the cornerstone of getting the best deal so we are concerned if companies might be doing something to threaten that. It is particularly troubling in this case if the interests of disabled students are affected, and if public funding is hit.

“We trust that the letters we have issued, and today's announcement, send a clear message. Any suppliers engaging in price fixing with competitors, or other illegal collusion, need to review their practices and make changes now.”

The CMA has not made a legal finding as to whether competition law has been broken at this stage, but it will keep this sector under review, remaining open to the possibility of further action if these concerns are not fully addressed.

The CMA runs a '[Cheating or competing?](#)' campaign, which aims to educate businesses about which practices are illegal and urges people to come forward if they suspect a business has taken part in cartel behaviour, such as

rigging contracts or price fixing. It has also issued a range of guidance to help businesses understand more about how to comply with competition law.

Notes to Editor

1. For more information on CMA advisory letters, what they are and when they are used, look at the CMA's [Warning and Advisory Letters page](#).
2. The Students Loan Company provides funding to disabled students through [Disabled Students' Allowances](#).

[New Chair appointed to the Joint Nature Conservation Committee](#)

Defra Ministers have appointed Professor Colin Galbraith as Chair of the Joint Nature Conservation Committee.

Colin Galbraith's appointment is for three years and will run from 25 January 2021 to 24 January 2024. Remuneration is £40,059 per annum based on a time commitment of 2.5 days per week.

Professor Colin Galbraith is the Director of his own environmental consultancy, which deals with a range of environmental issues in the UK and at the global level. Colin has been Deputy Chairman of the Joint Nature Conservation Committee (JNCC) from 2017 and Independent member of the Committee since 2014. Until early 2010, Colin was the Director of Policy and Advice in Scottish Natural Heritage (now NatureScot). In this capacity he was the principal adviser on policy, scientific and technical matters for the organisation for over 12 years.

Colin has been involved with the United Nations for a number of years and has made contributions through the Convention on Migratory Species and the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment in particular. This work involved Colin in high profile nature conservation issues, including the development of international agreements on the conservation of birds of prey across Europe and the Middle East and separately, on the conservation of Albatross. More recently, his work has focussed on reviewing the impact of global climate change on protected areas and on the ecology of threatened species. Colin has been the Chairman and the Vice Chairman of the Scientific Council of the Convention on Migratory Species (CMS) and is presently the Appointed Councillor on Climate Change issues for the Convention.

Professor Melanie Austen, Charles Banner QC and Professor Marian Scott OBE have all been reappointed as Independent Members for second terms of two years and ten months. Their second terms will run from 15 February 2021 until 14 December 2023. Remuneration is £9,836 per annum based on a time commitment of 2.5 days per month.

The new appointment and reappointments have all been made in accordance with the Ministerial Governance Code on Public Appointments published by the Cabinet Office. All appointments are made on merit and political activity plays no part in the selection process.

There is a requirement for appointees' political activity (if significant) to be declared. The appointees have declared that they have not taken part in any significant political activity in the past five years. The JNCC was established in 1991 and reconstituted in the Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act (2006) as a non-departmental public body. The JNCC advises the UK Government and Devolved Administrations of Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales on UK-wide and international nature conservation

Biographical details

Professor Melanie Austen

Melanie is Professor of Ocean and Society at the University of Plymouth. She is an interdisciplinary marine research leader with a strong background in marine ecology. She was on the Government's Natural Capital Committee and served a three-year term as the first Chief Scientific Advisor to the UK's Marine Management Organisation. She is currently Chair of the Partnership of the UNESCO Biosphere Reserve in North Devon, a member of the Board of Canadian Healthy Oceans Network (CHONe2), and a member of the Strategic Advisory Group of the UKRI Sustainable Management of UK Marine Resources Programme. She has previously been a member of various EU and UK Expert Advisory Groups including chairing an EU Marine Board ecosystem valuation working group.

Melanie's research focuses on developing interdisciplinary understanding of marine systems, their natural capital and ecosystem services, and their use and governance to improve social, economic, and environmental outcomes.

Charles Banner QC

Charles is a barrister at Keating Chambers. He was called to the Bar of England and Wales in 2004 and to the Bar of Northern Ireland in 2010. He practices across both jurisdictions and internationally, specialising in environment & planning law, commercial dispute resolution and public & regulatory law. He is regularly recognised by the legal press as one of the leading barristers in his fields of practice, and he has been the recipient of multiple legal industry awards. He sits judicially on a part-time basis as a Justice of the Astana International Finance Centre Court in Kazakhstan and is an independent member of the Royal Institution of Chartered Surveyors' Global Standards and Regulation Board. He was previously a Trustee and Council Member of the UK Environmental Law Association (2016–2020) and the Independent UK Member of the EU Fundamental Rights Agency's Management Board (2017–2020).

Professor Marian Scott OBE

Marian is Professor of Environmental Statistics in the School of Mathematics

and Statistics at the University of Glasgow; an elected member of the International Statistical Institute (ISI), a Fellow of the Royal Society of Edinburgh (RSE) and a chartered statistician of the Royal Statistical Society (RSS). Marian's research interests include model uncertainty and sensitivity analysis; modelling the dispersal of pollutants in the environment, radiocarbon dating and assessment of animal welfare. She was awarded an OBE in 2009 for services to social science.

[Runaway and derailment of wagons at Toton](#)

News story

Runaway and derailment of wagons at Toton, Nottinghamshire, 17 January 2021.



The derailed wagons at Toton South junction (courtesy of DB Cargo)

At 04:42 hrs on 17 January 2021, a rake of 22 wagons ran away from a siding within Old Bank sidings at Toton. Twenty-one wagons were loaded and the full rake had a reported weight of about 1870 tonnes.

As it ran away out of the siding, the rake passed a red signal, which generated an alarm on a signaller's workstation in the East Midlands Control Centre. This alerted the signaller, who could see that track sections along the line leading away from the exit to the sidings were being occupied. The rake then passed a second red signal and, a short distance later, the leading four wagons derailed at the end of the run-out rails associated with a set of trap points at Toton South junction. The trap points worked as intended to derail the unauthorised movement. However, the front two derailed wagons stopped foul of the adjacent running line, although no trains were nearby when the derailment occurred. The rake of wagons ran away for a total distance of about 0.5 miles (0.8 km).

Our investigation will seek to identify the sequence of events which led to the accident. It will also consider the processes that were in place for securing trains within the sidings, any factors relevant to how the risk of runaway wagons from within the sidings was being managed, the performance and design of the trap points, and any relevant underlying factors.

Our investigation is independent of any investigation by the railway industry or by the industry's regulator, the [Office of Rail and Road](#).

We will publish our findings, including any recommendations to improve safety, at the conclusion of our investigation. This report will be available on our website.

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[Rapid testing to be piloted at Manchester court](#)

- rapid testing pilot trial to run for four weeks at Manchester court
- supports national testing programme run by Department of Health and Social Care
- results will determine how rapid testing could be rolled out to courts and tribunals nationally

From today and for the next four weeks, lateral flow tests will be offered to all people attending a case at Manchester CJC who are not showing any symptoms of coronavirus (COVID-19). The test will also be offered to all staff, judiciary, contractors and legal professionals who visit the site. It will not be a public testing facility.

The tests are voluntary and will be carried out through lateral flow devices, which detect the presence or absence of coronavirus by applying a swab or saliva sample to the device's absorbent pad. The sample runs along the surface of the pad, showing at the end a visual positive or negative result dependent on the presence of the virus.

The pilot will support the Department of Health and Social Care's (DHSC) national testing programme by providing information on how rapid testing works in different public sector settings. HMCTS will use findings to decide how rapid testing could be rolled out nationally to other courts and tribunals across the country.

Kevin Sadler, Acting CEO of HMCTS, said:

We are pleased to be supporting DHSC in their national testing programme by running this pilot trial for lateral flow testing. The results will help develop and improve the national testing programme and inform how we could roll out rapid testing nationally to other courts and tribunals.

We've ensured that all our courts and tribunal buildings are safe and secure against COVID-19. This additional measure will provide further reassurance to those visiting our buildings.

All Manchester CJC court users will be given the opportunity to book a test slot. Users will be asked to register their details, and the test carried out using a lateral flow device testing kit. Specially trained staff who manage the testing site will supervise the test and process the results.

Once the test has been taken, NHS Test & Trace will send results by text or email in 30 minutes. If the test comes out negative, this indicates that the person is not infectious and the person will be permitted to remain in the building. If the test gives a positive result, the court user will be required to leave the court, return home quickly and directly, and follow NHS advice.

HMCTS continues to work with DHSC to explore regular nation-wide testing for staff, judiciary and professionals. There are practical issues to resolve before any wider roll out – not least space, staffing and supply of equipment. We will provide updates as soon as our plans evolve.

Every building we operate – including [our Nightingale courts](#) – meet the government's Covid-secure guidelines, and public health experts have confirmed our arrangements remain sufficient to deal with the new strain of the virus.

£70 million to keep prison leavers off the streets and cut crime

- Closer supervision of highest risk prison leavers for longer
- Homeless offenders to be housed temporarily to prevent reoffending
- Second part of £220 Government plan to reduce crime and protect the public

Homeless prison leavers will be temporarily housed in basic hostels to reduce the risk of them reoffending, backed by £70 million of new investment.

With offenders around 50 per cent more likely to break the law again if released without somewhere to stay, this is the latest part of the Government's work to tackle the root causes of crime. It follows last week's £148 million investment to combat illegal drug supply and treat addictions, taking the total funding to £220 million.

More than £20 million will be invested in supporting prison leavers at risk of homelessness into temporary basic accommodation for up to 12 weeks, giving them the foundation for a crime-free life. Launching in five of the 12 National Probation Service regions, it will support around 3,000 offenders in its first year. While there, offenders will get help to find a permanent home so there is less reason for them to turn back to crime.

Getting prison leavers into stable accommodation provides the platform they need to find work and access treatment for addictions and mental health problems which are also proven to help reduce the risk of reoffending. Tackling all three together in this way could prevent thousands of people becoming victims each year and save some of the £18 billion annual cost of repeat crimes.

At least £23 million of funding will go towards the [Government's plans to build 200 new spaces in Approved Premises \(APs\)](#), formerly known as bail hostels, which allow probation staff to closely monitor and support the highest-risk offenders in the community. It will also fund new training for staff, increased security, and vital repairs and maintenance. The expansion will see an extra 1,700 prison leavers receive closer supervision each year, boosting public safety.

Prisons and Probation Minister Lucy Frazer QC MP said:

Releasing prisoners without addressing why they ended up there in the first place, only leads them to reoffend and cause more harm.

By tackling homelessness, we are cutting crime, reducing drug and alcohol misuse and making our streets safer. This low-cost solution has the potential to save billions for the taxpayer and prevent thousands of people becoming victims.

Last week, the Government announced the largest increase in drug treatment funding in fifteen years as part of a £148 million investment to cut crime and protect people from the scourge of illegal drugs. It includes:

- An extra £80 million invested across England to increase the number of substance misuse treatment places for prison leavers and those diverted into tough and effective community sentences.
- £40 million of new money to tackle drugs supply – doubling the funding available for law enforcement to take down county lines gangs and drug kingpins.
- £28 million invested into piloting Project ADDER – a new intensive

approach to tackling drug misuse, which combines targeted and tougher policing with enhanced treatment and recovery services. It will begin in five areas with some of the highest rates of drug misuse: Blackpool, Hastings, Middlesbrough, Norwich and Swansea Bay.

A further £6 million will be spent in the coming year improving the work done across Government to reduce reoffending. Dedicated staff will be appointed in an initial eleven prisons to act as brokers for prisoners so that they can get quicker access to accommodation, healthcare and employment support services as they are released.

The £20 million Prison Leavers Project is also underway bringing together charities, public and private partners to find and test new ways to prepare offenders for life on the outside and ensure they don't fall back into criminal lifestyles. Local organisations will be able to bid for grants to join-up their existing services and a £1 million competition is being launched to encourage start-ups to create new technology-based support services.

Taken together, this £220 million investment represents a gear shift in the Government's approach to tackling crime, helping to build back safer from the pandemic.