

Statement to Parliament: Ministerial correction to closing speech on Thameslink upgrades across the south east

I wish to inform the House that an error has been identified in the [closing speech of the End of Day Debate: Thameslink upgrades across the South East, Official Report, 18 April 2018, Vol. 639](#). The correct information should have been:

As part of this upgrade, a fourth track and other improvements are being built north of Bedford, which will provide space for an additional train path from December 2020. Unfortunately, until these works take place, some difficult decisions have to be taken. East Midlands Trains' fast peak-time services will not call at Bedford or Luton from May 2018 to December 2020.

Press release: Government announces Tech Fund to support disabled people and their employers

The news came as the Minister spoke in Birmingham today (27 April) at Naidex, Europe's largest assistive technology conference.

[Access to Work](#) provides financial support to ensure someone's disability or health condition does not hold them back at work, and can cover assistive technology, workplace adaptations, transport and interpreters.

Previously, medium and large employers were required to pay a mandatory contribution towards the cost of assistive technology required by disabled employees.

As part of the government's drive to ensure disabled people can benefit from the latest advances in technology, this cost will now be waived for all employers under the new Tech Fund.

The Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work, Sarah Newton, said:

We know that assistive technology has the power to transform lives, helping to break down the barriers disabled people can face at work and so many other areas of their everyday lives.

Access to Work is providing support to disabled people across the country, and I hope that through the new Tech Fund more disabled people and their employers will be able to benefit from advances in assistive technology that can help create more inclusive workplaces.

Employers will be able to make a significant saving through the Tech Fund. Before the new rules were introduced, medium employers paid the first £500 towards technological solutions and large employers paid the first £1,000, with both paying 20% of the cost thereafter up to £10,000.

Paul Luigi Giuntini is a social worker from Scotland who is registered blind and has one hand. Through Access to Work, Paul is able to fund cutting edge assistive technology to help him do his job.

Paul's support includes Orcam, a lightweight camera which clips onto the wearer's glasses that can recognise faces and read from any surface in real time.

Paul said:

Access to Work funding is essential for disabled people, as it helps reduce the barriers and difficulties that disabled people face in trying to get into and maintain full-time employment.

Without the support of Access to Work, I would not have been able to obtain and sustain my current employment. I believe that this funding should be promoted so that disabled people are given every opportunity to improve their life situation.

Access to Work is part of a range of support available to ensure that disabled people can enter, and thrive in, the workplace. This includes supported work experience placements, the government's [Disability Confident](#) scheme and personalised support package.

Follow DWP on:

[News story: Further restrictions on](#)

neonicotinoids agreed

Further restrictions on neonicotinoid pesticides have been approved following a vote by EU member states today.

The UK voted in favour of the proposals that will see a ban on outdoor use of three neonicotinoids – Clothianidin, Imidacloprid and Thiamethoxam.

Currently, their use is banned for oilseed rape, spring cereals and sprays for winter cereals, but they can be used to treat sugar beet, various horticultural crops and as seed treatments for winter cereals.

In November last year the Environment Secretary Michael Gove said [tougher restrictions on neonicotinoids are justified](#) by the growing weight of scientific evidence they are harmful to bees and other pollinators.

This followed advice from the [UK government's advisory body on pesticides](#) which said scientific evidence now suggests the environmental risks posed by neonicotinoids – particularly to our bees and pollinators – are greater than previously understood, supporting the case for further restrictions.

Research estimates the value of the UK's 1,500 species of pollinators to crops at £400-680 million per year due to improved productivity.

A Defra spokesperson said:

We are committed to enhancing our environment for the next generation, and welcome the vote today in support of further restrictions on neonicotinoids.

The Government has always been clear we will be led by the science on this matter. The weight of evidence now shows the risks neonicotinoids may pose to our environment, particularly to the bees and other pollinators is greater than previously understood.

We recognise the impact a ban will have on farmers and will continue to work with them to explore alternative approaches as we design a new agricultural policy outside the European Union.

The current restrictions will stay in place until the new measures comes into force following a phasing out period of around eight months, giving farmers and businesses time to adjust.

Unless the scientific evidence changes, the government will maintain these increased restrictions post-Brexit.

The UK reserves the right to consider emergency authorisations. We will only do so where there is a real need for the products and the risk to bees and other pollinators is sufficiently low.

News story: Meeting of the Australia-UK Trade Working Group

The Australia-UK Trade Working Group met in Canberra on 19 to 20 April 2018.

It was the third meeting of the Trade Working Group since it was established in September 2016 by:

- the Hon Steven Ciobo MP, Australia's Minister for Trade, Tourism, and Investment
- the Rt Hon Dr Liam Fox MP, the United Kingdom's Secretary of State for International Trade and President of the Board of Trade

The meeting brought together senior officials to identify practical steps Australia and the UK can take to deepen their existing trade and investment relationship.

The delegations were led by officials from:

- the UK's Department of International Trade (DIT)
- Australia's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT)

They included representatives from a wide range of UK and Australian government departments.

The Trade Working Group continued to build momentum towards the shared commitment to begin bilateral FTA negotiations once the UK leaves the European Union.

Discussions covered a range of topics to help build a shared understanding of both countries' approaches and ambitions for the future bilateral trade and investment relationship.

The Trade Working Group also discussed broader trade policy issues of mutual interest, including World Trade Organization processes and the wider regional and plurilateral trade landscape.

The Trade Working Group reflects a strong political commitment by Australia and the UK to take a leadership role in the global rules-based multilateral trading system.

News story: Review announced into training NHS staff to use AI and robotics

Jeremy Hunt, Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, has announced a review into how tens of thousands of NHS staff can be trained to use artificial intelligence and robotics.

The review will be led by Dr Eric Topol an expert in cardiology, genetics and digital medicine. Dr Topol will look at opportunities where the NHS could invest in training for existing staff. He will also consider the implications on the skills required of future healthcare professionals.

Dr Topol will look at technologies such as artificial intelligence (including robotics), genomics and digital medicine. He previously led a US research programme on using technology and data for more precise, tailored patient treatment.

He will begin with a visit to Moorfields Eye Hospital to see its life-changing technology in action. Moorfields Eye Hospital is looking at how machine-learning technology could help analyse eye scans, giving eye care professionals a better and faster understanding of eye disease.

Health and Social Care Secretary, Jeremy Hunt, said:

Every week we hear about exciting new developments surfacing in the NHS which could help provide answers to some of our greatest challenges such as cancer or chronic illness. These give us a glimpse of what the future of the whole NHS could be, which is why in the year of the NHS' 70th birthday I want to empower staff to offer patients modern healthcare more widely and more quickly. I'm delighted that Dr Topol is kicking off this review – ensuring the NHS is at the forefront of life-saving, life-changing care across the globe for decades to come.

Dr Topol said:

While it's hard to predict the future, we know artificial intelligence, digital medicine and genomics will have an enormous impact for improving the efficiency and precision in healthcare. Our review will focus on the extraordinary opportunities to leverage these technologies for the healthcare workforce and power a sustainable and vibrant NHS.