

RPA opens application window for farm payments for 2022

The Basic Payment Scheme (BPS) application window has opened today (15 March) for farmers to claim for their 2022 payments. The claim window for customers with existing Countryside Stewardship (CS) and Environmental Stewardship (ES) revenue agreements has also opened.

Farmers are being encouraged to apply as soon as they are able, to ensure applications are submitted ahead of the deadline of 16 May.

All applicants can quickly update their personal and business information by applying through the Rural Payments service, where farmers and their agents can also view and transfer their BPS entitlements and land parcels.

Rural Payments Agency (RPA) Chief Executive Paul Caldwell said:

I am pleased that last year we paid over 98% of all BPS claims in the first month. This year we are committed to match this target, and ensure timely payments to all farmers and land managers – but we strongly encourage all eligible farmers to submit their applications as soon as possible.

We will continue to build on our performance while also supporting farmers across the country to make the most of the opportunities arising from the transition to the new farming schemes.

Since leaving the Common Agricultural Policy, the Government is introducing a new system that is tailored to the interests of English farmers. The new [environment land management schemes](#) are the most significant change to farming and land management in 50 years, designed to deliver a renewed agricultural sector, producing healthy food for consumption at home and abroad, where farms can be profitable and economically sustainable.

Since last year, Direct Payments are being gradually reduced – with the biggest reductions made to the higher payment bands. Reductions will be applied until the last payments are made in 2027.

The savings from phasing out these payments will free up funds which will go back to farmers and land managers through new grants, and through the roll-out of the three environment land management schemes, namely the Sustainable Farming Incentive, Local Nature Recovery and Landscape Recovery, which will incentivise sustainable farming practices alongside profitable food production.

Later this year, Defra will open applications for the [Lump Sum Exit Scheme](#),

which provides financial support to BPS applicants in England who wish to retire or leave farming in a planned way. Farmers who are considering applying for the Lump Sum Exit Scheme are encouraged to apply for BPS in 2022 as well as applying for the Lump Sum Exit Scheme later on. This will protect applicants if they find that they are not eligible for the lump sum payment, cannot complete the transfer of their land in time, or decide to withdraw their application before payments are made.

- The Sustainable Farming Incentive will open for applications later this year. Farmers who participated in the SFI pilot will continue to receive their BPS payments while they are in pilot agreements.
- Basic Payment Scheme guidance 2022 is available [here](#).
- Guidance on how to make a capital or revenue claim for Countryside Stewardship is available [here](#).
- Guidance on how to make an Environmental Stewardship claim is available [here](#).
- The Rural Payments Service can be accessed [here](#).

Businesses to benefit from extension to plug-in van and truck grants

- plug-in van and truck grants extended for 2 years as government goes further and faster to decarbonise transport
- drivers with standard licences can continue driving electric goods vans at a higher weight limit, making it easier for businesses to make the switch
- comes ahead of 2030 phase-out of new petrol and diesel cars and vans as part of net zero commitment

Businesses will be supported to make the switch to electric as the government commits to a 2-year extension of [plug-in van and truck grants](#).

The move is expected to support the purchase of tens of thousands of greener vans and trucks, and will help make the UK less reliant on imports of foreign oil, improving the security of our energy supply and reducing our vulnerability to volatility in global energy prices.

Last year, industry figures showed the UK had the [highest number of plug-in electric vans sold in Europe](#) and there were around 4 times as many grant applications compared to 2020.

Existing grants have supported the purchase of more than 26,000 electric vans and heavy goods vehicles (HGVs) across the UK since the programme launched in 2012.

With nearly 5% of the UK's CO2 emissions currently coming from vans, the 2-

year extension to these grants and the switch to greener vehicles is essential to support the government's climate change and air quality commitments.

Transport Minister Trudy Harrison said:

When it comes to clean business, this government means business. We are backing a generation of green growth for our thriving fleet sector.

As demand for electric vehicles continues to grow at speed, this extension to our grant scheme will allow tens of thousands more vans to be purchased, transporting goods in a way which is kinder to our environment. This will support our vital, ongoing work to clean up our air in towns and cities right across the country and build back greener.

Government grants for electric vans and trucks has helped kickstart the market, which now offers more than 30 models of electric vans and trucks which qualify for such schemes.

Electric vehicles are becoming more popular and affordable, and the number of available models will continue to rise, allowing more people and businesses to benefit from the lower running costs of greener vehicles.

This government has committed £2.5 billion to vehicle grants and chargepoint infrastructure to support the transition to zero emission vehicles to date, and plug-in vehicle grant schemes have supported the purchase of over 450,000 ultra-low emission vehicles across the UK – including more than 300,000 zero emission vehicles.

As well as the extension to grant schemes, the government has also announced it will continue to allow drivers holding standard car driving licences to drive electric goods vans at a higher weight limit, up to 4.25 tonnes (compared to a 3.5 tonne limit for diesel vans).

This takes into account the additional weight of electric vehicle batteries and makes it easier for businesses and drivers to make the switch.

To ensure funding and taxpayers' money goes where it's really needed and supports the transition to zero emission vehicles, eligibility criteria for existing plug-in vehicle grants will also be recategorised from the spring with a focus on heavier vehicles.

From 1 April 2022, the threshold to claim the small truck grant of up to £16,000 will be increased from 3.5 tonnes to 4.25 tonnes. Vans up to 4.25 tonnes will be able to claim the large van grant of up to £5,000.

With the increasing number of large vans on the market, the move will ensure government targets support where it's most needed, allowing for heavier and more costly trucks, up to 12 tonnes, to benefit from the higher grant

funding.

This change will ensure funding is focused on helping more polluting trucks to make the switch to a zero-emission future.

[Solent's underwater meadows get a boost](#)

England's largest seagrass planting project will begin planting in its new restoration site in the Solent this week.

It is part of the 4-year (LIFE Recreation ReMEDIES) project being led by Natural England to help protect and restore the marine environment. The seagrass planting is being carried out by the project's restoration lead, the Ocean Conservation Trust (OCT).

At least 44% of the UK's seagrass has been lost since 1936*, but seagrass meadows provide homes for juvenile fish and protected creatures like seahorses and stalked jellyfish. They also play an integral role in stabilising the seabed, cleaning the surrounding seawater and capturing and storing significant amounts of carbon.

The project's new seagrass restoration site is west of the Beaulieu River mouth, next to the North Solent National Nature Reserve shoreline. The OCT is preparing to carry out one hectare of planting there this week. Around 20,000 biodegradable hessian bags of seed are being packed by Natural England staff and by volunteers at the National Marine Aquarium in Plymouth, North Solent National Nature Reserve, University of Portsmouth, and National Oceanography Centre in Southampton. The bags will be taken out onto the water by barge and dropped down long pipes to land on the seabed.

Fiona Crouch, Natural England Project Manager for ReMEDIES, said:

Seagrass meadows are an important but threatened habitat. Restoring them means restoring the benefits they bring to people and nature – vital homes for wildlife, enhanced water quality, carbon storage, and so much more.

We're very proud of our partners, funders, and the many volunteers who have given their time to pack seed bags.

Mark Parry, Development Officer at the Ocean Conservation Trust, said:

After the success of our previous planting efforts in Plymouth

Sound National Marine Park, we are excited to be getting underway in the Solent. These events are only made possible by the hard work of our partners in the LIFE ReMEDIES Project and the hundreds of volunteers who are willing to dedicate their time to help restore such an important habitat.

Seagrass is delicate and can be damaged by activities such as the anchoring, mooring, and launching of leisure boats, as well as other shore and water-based activities. That's why, in addition to planting new seagrass meadows, ReMEDIES is working to protect existing beds by helping recreational users to reduce impacts on these sensitive habitats. This has involved trialling and installing Advanced Mooring Systems (AMS) at popular boating locations including the area around Yarmouth Harbour on the Isle of Wight. These AMS are specially designed to minimise interaction with the seabed.

The seagrass planting is being carried out by the project's restoration lead, the Ocean Conservation Trust; Photo: Ocean Conversation Trust

ReMEDIES will also be working with local schools around the Solent to introduce pupils to the importance of seabed habitats, as well as collaborating with other organisations including Hampshire and Isle of Wight Wildlife Trust, World Wildlife Fund, Isle of Wight Estuaries Officer and Project Seagrass. Together, they hope to visit and assess every seagrass bed in the Solent to build a thorough picture of its health and extent so that restoration efforts can have the greatest impact.

Find out more about LIFE Recreation ReMEDIES by following on [Twitter](#), Instagram and Facebook, or visiting www.saveourseabed.co.uk.

Volunteers will be packing seagrass seed bags at the National Oceanography Centre in Southampton on 15 March, and at the Institute of Marine Science, University of Portsmouth on 16 March (evening), and 17 March (daytime).

Subject to weather, there will be planting in the Solent on the morning of Friday 18 March.

Media are welcome to attend packing and/or planting and interview representatives from Natural England and Ocean Conservation Trust.

Please note: Media will not be able to accompany the planting team on the barge but can film/photograph the barge being loaded from Portsmouth International Port (from approximately 7am) and setting off. Please let us know by Thursday 17 March if you would like to attend so we can arrange your security clearance through the port.

Images and footage from the seagrass planting in Plymouth Sound in April 2021 and November 2021 is also available.

*Research by Alix Green, published in Frontiers in Plant Science journal, March 2021

<https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpls.2021.629962/full>.

LIFE Recreation ReMEDIES

[LIFE Recreation ReMEDIES](#) is a £2.5 million, 4-year marine conservation project to Save Our Seabed at 5 Special Areas of Conservation along England's south coast, through seagrass restoration, education and innovation. It is funded by the LIFE programme and led by Natural England in partnership with Marine Conservation Society, Ocean Conservation Trust, Plymouth City Council/Tamar Estuaries Consultative Forum and Royal Yachting Association.

Natural England

[Natural England](#) is the government's adviser for the natural environment in England, helping to protect England's nature and landscapes for people to enjoy and for the services they provide.

Ocean Conservation Trust

The [Ocean Conservation Trust](#) is an Ocean conservation charity that focuses on 2 key areas: habitat restoration and behaviour change. Following a conservation pathway that has been proven to work, the charity's approach puts people at the centre, working hard to create meaningful connections between people and the Ocean as the first step to inspiring long-term behaviour change. This is done in tandem with more traditional conservation work surrounding the monitoring and restoration of crucial Ocean habitats, with a particular focus on seagrasses.

Royal Yachting Association (RYA)

The [RYA](#) is the national body for dinghy, yacht and motor cruising, all forms of sail racing, RIBs and sports boats, windsurfing and personal watercraft and a leading representative for inland waterways cruising.

The [Green Blue](#) is the joint environment programme created by British Marine and the RYA. It was set up to encourage everyone who enjoys getting out on the water or whose livelihood depends on it, to do so as sustainably as possible.

Marine Conservation Society

The [Marine Conservation Society](#) is the UK's leading charity for the protection of our seas, shores and wildlife.

Plymouth City Council/Tamar Estuaries Consultative Forum

[Plymouth City Council](#) is a unitary authority and has hosted Tamar Estuaries Consultative Forum since it was first established in the early 1990s. It has a vision for Plymouth to be Britain's Ocean City and one of Europe's most vibrant waterfront cities which is sustainable and cares about the environment and is currently working towards creating Britain's first National Marine Park.

The Tamar Estuaries Consultative Forum (TECF) is a collaborative partnership bringing together the key authorities responsible for the management of the tidal waters of Plymouth Sound and Estuaries European Marine Site. Under the chair of the Queen's Harbour Master, members consist of 5 local authorities, 4 harbour authorities, Natural England, Environment Agency, Marine Management Organisation, Duchy of Cornwall and both Devon and Severn, and Cornwall Inshore Fisheries and Conservation Authorities.

[£10 million to provide long-term income for woodland creation with fifth auction of Woodland Carbon Guarantee](#)

£10 million is being made available for farmers and land managers to create new woodlands to help tackle the effects of climate change, through a unique scheme which provides new income in the form of long-term payments for the amount of carbon a new woodland will store.

Farmers and land managers across England are encouraged to [apply for the Woodland Carbon Guarantee scheme](#) by 24 April, ahead of the fifth auction which will take place online between 9 and 15 May 2022.

Administered by the Forestry Commission, the Woodland Carbon Guarantee is a £50 million scheme that aims to help accelerate woodland planting rates and permanently remove carbon dioxide from the atmosphere.

Following an online auction process, successful bidders will be offered the option to sell woodland carbon in the form of Woodland Carbon Units – a financial value given to each tonne of carbon stored – to the Government over 35 years at a guaranteed price protected against inflation. The scheme reflects the Government's confidence in the continued growth of markets for woodland carbon, as landowners will continue to benefit from a reliable revenue stream in selling carbon on the domestic market.

Before applying for the Guarantee, land managers will need to have [registered with the Woodland Carbon Code](#), which provides the tools and information required to verify and record the carbon they are capturing and can sell in future.

Sir William Worsley, Chair of the Forestry Commission, said:

This pioneering scheme could be the perfect fit for land managers of all kinds looking for long-term income support for creating new

woodlands.

Now in its fifth round, it's encouraging that this scheme has continued to grow in its success, resulting in the creation of 2,650 hectares of new woodland specifically to help combat the many and varied impacts of climate change.

I strongly encourage farmers, foresters and land managers across England to submit their applications to the Guarantee ahead of the application deadline on 24 April.

The outcome of previous auctions supported projects across England at a range of scales, including in the South West and East where tree planting has been lower in recent years. The average price of bids accepted in the fourth auction was £18.62 per woodland carbon unit.

Encouraging diverse woodland types and tree species is a key factor in the Forestry Commission's efforts to treble tree planting rates in England by the end of this Parliament and plant 30,000 hectares of trees across the UK per year by 2025.

[Register with the Woodland Carbon Code](#) and [apply for the Woodland Carbon Guarantee](#) here.

[Dr Jo Saxton's speech at 2022 ASCL conference](#)

Yesterday, I was 12 miles up the road in Walsall. It was a powerful afternoon talking to students, staff and leaders about how this past two years has been for them; hearing about the challenges they're facing, as well as talking about qualifications and exams. Among other things, I was particularly struck by hearing about a lad who is one of 16 siblings, and that his family had one laptop to share between them during the lockdown period. Nevertheless, now he's able, this lad is staying at school for two hours extra each day, because he's so keen to do himself justice in his exams.

I met some heroic local leaders, who describe themselves as "normally pro exam", but right now fighting to get kids into school, struggling to staff their schools.

To them, and to you, I want to say that I see how awful it's been; I see how difficult it continues to be. I am doing everything I can to listen to get the arrangements for this year right for you and the students that you serve. The package that we've put in place has been developed with leaders like you, and your communities in mind.

It's precisely because of students such as Ashley, Jamie, Katie and Theo, who I met yesterday, that I have made it my mission to make sure we are being as fair as we possibly can.

Ashley and Jamie are eloquent about what they've missed. But they're also adamant that they "don't want people looking down on [their] results".

In fact – they're angry that the GCSE grades they were awarded in 2020 are doubted by some. Ashley was very clear he doesn't want to go to university not having done public exams.

This is something I've heard students saying up and down the country. I've been trying really hard to focus on listening to what students are feeling and what they want.

Yesterday's visit was the latest in a series of conversations with over 50 leaders across 40 schools and colleges, some in person, some remotely. My mission is to listen to staff, listen to students and, where they come in to talk, also with parents.

It would be all too easy in this role to spend all of my time caught up in technical and complex arguments, in the minutiae of one policy detail or another, and not make time to speak and listen to the people who matter the most. You, and your students.

And so, while it presents challenges, for me it's the most important part of what I do. By the time the summer exam series starts I will have visited schools and colleges from Plymouth to Durham and, to date, I've spanned Kent and Lancashire.

It's very clear that, as a nation, we perhaps have never valued the work of our schools and colleges more than we do now. Throughout the pandemic our teachers and support staff have shown incredible dedication and determination. Our pupils have shown endurance and, despite it all – despite increased anxieties and worries which I hear about everywhere I go – nevertheless enthusiasm to get on and show what they can do.

While we all want to get back to normal, it's palpably clear that we're not there yet. As a head I met yesterday, Jacqui, put it: "we're just not in the same place that we were."

Students know they have missed a lot, and they know that what they've missed isn't only educational. They have a huge amount to catch-up on, not just curriculum content. And for that reason, even though there are some voices – including some in this room – calling for a more direct return to 'normal' in terms of qualifications, I resisted.

Students deserve – and want – the level playing field that exams allow, but it's only right that we get there by giving them every reasonable form of support we can to [reintroduce] this form of assessment.

2022

In taking up the job as Chief Regulator, I have been very clear that I want Ofqual to regulate in the interests of students. That's because I am an educator at heart, and a former school leader. Qualifications are only meaningful if they are for somebody.

But what does that actually mean, specifically in terms of the arrangements put in place for this summer's exams?

Well, it means that we've worked with government and awarding organisations to find a balance. A careful and delicate balance, that had to be found to ensure as smooth a path back to normality as possible. That has meant taking full account of:

- fairness to students taking qualifications not just this year, but thinking about the relationship with previous and future years
- thinking about how to respond at a national level to what in reality was a very varied impact of the pandemic on students – varied even from classroom to classroom in the same school
- and amidst all of this, making sure that qualifications remain meaningful and genuinely show what students know, understand and can do

Forgive me if you're familiar with this, but please allow me to summarise exactly what that means we're doing this year.

For GCSEs, AS and A levels, it's through a package of support. It's made up of several elements:

- greater flexibility in some subjects through changes to non-exam assessment and field work
- less content or fewer topics in some subjects
- the innovation of advance information for most subjects that will support revision
- and formulae and equation sheets for some exams

These changes have been carefully considered as different subjects are assessed in different ways. A one-size-fits-all approach would not have worked for everything. Though I am acutely aware, from talking to students, that the package isn't straightforward, particularly making the most of advance information.

The one aspect of the package that applies across all subjects is the approach to grading.

This year will be a transition year. We want to get back to pre-pandemic grading arrangements, not least because it's what examiners best understand, but I don't think it would be fair to do it in one fell swoop.

So, in 2022, rather than going straight back, results will reflect a staging post between 2021 and 2019. This will act as a safety net for those students who might otherwise just miss out on a higher grade. 2022 national results

are likely to be higher than in 2019, but not as high as in 2021.

As in any other year, grade boundaries will be set at a national level, but only after students have taken their exams, and only after their papers have been marked. What we are securing is generous, or sensitive, grading, not generous marking. Students' responses will be marked in line with the mark schemes for that paper and specification, as in any year. And examiners are not going to adjust for advance information. They'll have to work with the mark schemes in front of them, they have to judge the work on its own merits, using the mark schemes.

Once set, grade boundaries will apply to all students, regardless of the school or college where they take their exams.

As in any normal year, exam boards will also use data as a check and balance to support fairness. This is for two reasons: to align standards in a subject, and to smooth out differences between boards. This is vital; one of the most important things Ofqual does. We make sure students are not advantaged or disadvantaged depending on the exam boards they're sitting with.

The data will be based on an average of 2019 and 2021 results by subject. As in any other year, the grade boundaries for each specification will be set by senior examiners, after they have reviewed work produced by students. And all of this is overseen by Ofqual. I've been lucky enough to get some experience of how that works through the autumn series, which has recently presented its results.

Students' grades, as in any other years when exams took place, will be based on how many marks they achieve. As you know, one of the good things about general qualifications is that there are a number of ways that you can gain marks across the paper. Students also get these marks irrespective of which centre they attend, irrespective of historical results in that centre.

The whole package – less content, advance information, the approach to grading – is the fairest way we could support the return to normal this year. I am confident that it strikes a balance between responding to the disruption caused by the pandemic and the drive to get back to normal.

We have heard calls for an approach that somehow takes account of the differential impact of the pandemic on education – regional grading perhaps, or some sort of individual COVID uplift for those students most affected during their course.

Intuitively, I hear and understand the desire for such compensation – it doesn't feel fair that some students have been more affected by the pandemic than others. But we all know that Covid has affected students to different degrees – it's not just regionally but under the same rooves of the same schools. It wouldn't be possible to compensate for that differential impact on learning by changing the approach to grading. There is no way that we could do it that would be objectively fair. So we've put this package in place.

I've thought long and hard about what a qualification does and doesn't do – what it's for. Is it a measure of potential or is it a measure of attainment? Qualifications will only serve young people in the long term if they give a reliable indication of what a student knows, understands and can do.

I've met students at college right now on what they call 'Covid grades'. Some of the students I spoke to last week are realising that their apprenticeship is further away than they thought because they have more maths to do than their grades indicated. As a society we won't recover from this tragic pandemic if students receive grades that aren't linked to what they know and can do. To do so undermines the value of a qualification as a key to a next phase.

It is in this context that the package of support for GCSEs, AS and A levels has been agreed: it is a balance between an approach to grading that is sensitive to the circumstances of the last two years, and making sure that qualifications still mean something. A balance that gives students the agency they're calling for and shows that they have earned their qualifications. At the same time, giving them every reasonable form of support we can without dissolving the integrity of that qualification.

Contingency

Although it feels as though we're entering a new phase in the pandemic – with restrictions lifted and some semblance of normality returning, like being able to be together today – our experiences over the last two years have shown us the unpredictability of the pandemic.

And so, it's essential – even with the government fully committed to exams going ahead this summer – that we have contingency arrangements in place. For GCSEs, AS and A levels this means teacher assessed grades would be used if exams could not go ahead.

One of the messages I wanted to give you today is that there is no secret date. We aren't sitting there knowing that on 'x' date, we're going to say: now turn all that evidence into a TAG. I hope I can give you that reassurance. Indeed, everybody hopes that we will not need to do that.

By their very nature, no one wants contingency arrangements to be used, but they're there for the worst-case scenario. Many of you will have had students who felt very uncomfortable last year when they didn't know what provision for the worst-case scenario would be. And so, allow me, if I may, to emphasise that you can be proportionate in how you administer, or finish off, those contingency arrangements.

Do what you know to be right for your students, and within the cycle and rhythm of what works in your setting. Our guidance suggested 3 assessment points, not because you have to do that; more to suggest don't have 6 (or 8, 9, even 12 as we saw in some settings last year). Our guidance referred to the summer term not as an instruction, but because students keep learning and making progress, and I know from speaking to them that, in the worst-case scenario, they didn't want to be pinned to how they were performing in the

autumn or at Christmas. They wanted a bit longer. But if you don't think you need to collect further evidence after Easter, don't.

What our guidance is trying to encourage is another balance – between having materials that could support a grade if needed, but that might also play a part in helping prepare students for formal exams and assessments. And while no one enjoys mocks, I've yet to meet a student who hasn't found the experience of mocks useful – increasing the familiarity of what the real thing will be like is so important. This is a cohort for whom, in many cases, the only people they know who have done exams are their teachers. The more we can do to reduce their concerns by increasing certainty, the better. That's what a number of the resources we've published on our website are aiming to do; help you increase certainty for your students.

Vocational

I want to turn now to vocational and technical qualifications.

This is an area that I care passionately about. The trust that I ran offered a whole range of qualifications, as most of you will also do. It was always so thrilling to see young people develop specialist skills, and take their first steps into exciting careers.

I am thinking here of Lilly, an apprentice baker, now working in a bakery at a national supermarket. And Jamal, who overcame a looked-after background, now working in the music industry having studied music tech at one of our academies.

So that more Lillys and Jamals can access these opportunities, for 2022, Ofqual is regulating so that awarding organisations can make adaptations to assessments and qualifications, where they need to, in response to the impact of the pandemic. For those who want to know more, there's a Contingency Regulatory Framework for vocational and technical qualifications that enables this flexibility published on our website. It allows awarding organisations to put in place arrangements that work best for the diverse range of qualifications and assessments that they offer.

Accordingly, there are slightly different contingency arrangements for vocational and technical qualifications. Teacher assessed grades would be used for those qualifications most similar to GCSEs and A levels. Those qualifications that require students to demonstrate occupational and professional competence, would be accommodated around any public health circumstances.

2023

From my conversations with schools and college leaders over the last few months, I know that many of you are turning your minds to 2023 and what this will mean for your current Year 10s and 12s.

The government has been clear that it is fully committed to exams and other assessments going ahead in 2023.

When we announced the grading arrangements for this year, we confirmed that in 2023, we would aim to return to normal results: those in line with pre-pandemic years. As you would expect, we will carefully review qualification outcomes in 2022 and we will continue to watch the path of the pandemic and its impact closely, because I need to be sure that we get the approach to grading absolutely right for students. I've been talking to year 10s and 12s on some of the school visits that I do. I understand that they are really conscious of the things they've missed. Not just in lockdowns.

The broader landscape

You would expect Ofqual as regulator of qualifications to have a strong focus on the summer exam series, and we do, particularly as we're now returning to exams after two years without them. But Ofqual is about so much more than overseeing the delivery of exam series.

There is sometimes misconception about Ofqual's role – that we are responsible for subject content, or for ensuring that centres offer certain qualifications. In fact, we are responsible for setting rules that awarding organisations must follow in order to offer regulated qualifications.

It's also our responsibility to make sure the content requirements, as set out by the government, are met in those qualifications.

When awarding organisations do not meet our rules, we will hold them to account.

We can, and do, take regulatory action when it's required.

The last couple of years have been extraordinary in terms of how Ofqual has had to regulate. It's had to completely rethink the traditional ways of delivering its duties. As, indeed, has been the case in almost every aspect of life.

Ofqual has a range of statutory objectives – these include securing qualification standards and promoting public confidence in regulated qualifications. Sometimes these objectives can be in tension – again we're back to that idea of finding a balance. I don't think the pressure on that balance has ever been as great as during the pandemic.

Most people who know a bit about Ofqual are familiar with our role to secure standards and promote public confidence. Our other objectives tend to be less well known.

If I look back, one of my favourite places to be in a school is the early years. I loved being with the very youngest children as they built their vocabulary and understanding of the world around them.

Working on the EYFS curriculum was always a joy to me; the reading and playing with children, engaging in stories and songs, bringing spoken and written traditions to life.

To arrive at Ofqual and find that we are empowered with what the team describe as the 'Goldilocks duty' was a pleasant surprise. The Goldilocks duty, a colloquial name for one of our statutory objectives, is to promote the range and benefits of regulated qualifications. We have a statutory requirement to make sure there are not too many and not too few.

It's this objective which sits behind Ofqual's role in the level 3 qualifications review. Recently, we published a consultation on how we should regulate these qualifications and I would welcome you responding to it.

I support the government's intention to increase confidence in level 3 qualifications and Ofqual shares the government's ambition to create a world-class post-16 education system, with both technical and academic routes. These level 3 qualifications already serve a wide range of students with a wide range of needs and ambitions. And I've no doubt that all of us here today want there to be clear opportunities for students so that they can progress from high-quality qualifications into further study or skilled employment.

With any qualification reform, it is a non-negotiable that implementation is done carefully and sensitively with particular attention on who the qualifications are for. That is the lens through which I will look at everything I do at Ofqual. In particular the most vulnerable, and those with particular protected characteristics, those are the students that most need qualifications of the highest quality. They must be fit for purpose. They must enable clear, secure choices at the end. So consideration of the benefits and impacts our regulations can bring for these students is a particularly important part of the consultation for us.

The Secretary of State announced in November last year that the government would delay the reform timetable by a year. We welcome this longer timescale. It seems to me that just as with exams this year, with the reform to qualifications, education just needs time to recover. We all need time to catch our breath and take the next step calmly, confidently and with great care.

Our 'Goldilocks' duty then, is to make sure that there are neither too many qualifications, nor too few. We need just the right amount of the right quality. It's about finding that delicate balance.

As you're well aware, T Levels are beginning to play an important part in the landscape, and I'm reassured by ministers' statements that none of us is looking at a binary system of A levels and T Levels. Ofqual, for its part, was involved in their design and development, and we continue to work with the Institute as these qualifications and new ones come to market.

I'm excited too, about the positive power that regulation can bring to those who want to pursue an apprenticeship route. Apprentices at Morecambe and Lancashire college were making the most of fluid routes between specialisms so that their own portfolios – and opportunities – could be as wide as possible.

I'm going to continue to champion choice like that for students. Choice which means that, as I found back up the road in Walsall – this time at a college – armed with their T Levels, BTECs and A levels, youngsters (and indeed one learner of 90 years old) were choosing between employment, apprenticeships and university.

So while it might not make for the most exciting headlines, the message I want to leave with you today is about choices that strike that balance:

- balance between returning to normal vs finding the right support for students who have been through a truly horrendous few years
- balance between having contingency plans that are there in the back pocket just in case, but that help rather than hinder qualification readiness
- and an enduring challenge for Ofqual, finding and striking the right balance between our statutory objectives so that the choice – and quality of qualifications – remains just right

I know, from being in your shoes, that being an educator is the very definition of being a high-wire tightrope walker, with daily challenges in finding the right balance between often competing demands.

I hope that by sharing this thinking, I can help foster a greater understanding and insight into what Ofqual does, and why we made certain decisions.

And of course, all of this is wrapped up in something that unites us all – beyond this room and the sector: the balance between really wanting to get back to normal, but needing to do so carefully, cautiously and with confidence.

Thank you