

News story: Ofqual unveils corporate plan 2017 to 2020

Ofqual's new [Corporate Plan](#) which covers the period 2017 to 2020, builds on work undertaken over the past 12 months. It is focused in particular on:

I am delighted to be unveiling the first corporate plan since I came into post in April 2016. Over the past year we have made significant progress against our identified goals and objectives

The most visible aspect of our work remains the continuing focus on general qualification reform and the safe delivery of new GCSEs, AS and A levels will be the culmination of several years of intensive reform. We are working closely with exam boards to ensure they deliver accurate results, on time, and that standards are maintained. We are also working towards a system for reviews and appeals of marking outcomes that is clearer, more consistent and fairer for all students.

Since I arrived at Ofqual, government priorities for vocational and technical qualifications and assessment have moved on significantly, and as a result, so has our approach to this part of our remit. We are working closely with government on the redevelopment of functional skills qualifications, to make sure they remain relevant to employers. We are also closely engaged with government to support the development of T-levels and similarly are working with other bodies on finalising the outstanding operational decisions related to apprenticeship reform, including the development of high quality apprenticeship end-point assessments.

In primary assessment, our responsibilities focus on monitoring validity and promoting assessment standards, rather than test delivery. We will continue to advise government on policy, and keep our approach under review.

We have taken a wide range of regulatory action over the past year, including issuing our first fines. This plan makes clear that we will undertake both proactive regulatory activity, and stand ready to react where our risk analysis demands it.

To support these goals we will continue to develop and motivate our people and target expertise wherever we see it.

Press release: NI parties invited to

intensive talks

The main political parties in Northern Ireland are being invited to attend political talks on Monday 3 April at Stormont Castle, Belfast.

The talks will have two objectives.

First, to secure a coalition agreement to form the basis of the formation of a new Executive. Second, to address the implementation of outstanding issues from previous Agreements.

In a shared approach, the UK government and Irish government have agreed this phase of talks will be best supported by an intensive process to drive progress.

This includes:

- An agreed agenda;
- A structure of bilateral meetings;
- Regular roundtables; and
- A coordination mechanism across all the issues.

The talks will be conducted in accordance with the well-established three stranded approach.

Paul Blomfield responds to reports that EU nationals are finding it difficult to get mortgages agreed by UK lenders

Paul

Blomfield MP, Labour's Shadow Minister for Exiting the European Union, commenting on

reports that EU nationals are finding it difficult to get mortgages agreed by UK lenders, said:

"How

many more reports like this does the Government need before it realises it is committing a huge act of self-harm by not granting non-UK EU citizens certainty?

"EU

nationals, many of whom have been here decades, will simply vote with their feet if they can't secure jobs or homes here.

"This would spell disaster for our economy, our public services and our communities.

"It's beyond time for the Government to see sense."

[Funding announced for Armed Forces free swimming scheme](#)

AFFS was rolled out nationally from November 2015, with all 22 Local Authorities having a local scheme in place by 1st January 2016. It enables serving members of the Armed Forces and Veterans to swim for free at participating leisure centres and pools, using their Defence Privilege Card.

The funding, announced today, will support the delivery of the scheme in 2017-18.

Public Health Minister, Rebecca Evans, said:

"Physical activity has a huge impact on people's health and wellbeing. The free swimming scheme was designed to ensure members of the Armed Forces past and present are able to benefit from the physical, and mental, health benefits swimming can offer. I am very pleased to announce £75,000 funding for the initiative in 2017-18."

Communities Secretary, Carl Sargeant, said:

"We owe our Armed Forces a huge debt of gratitude. The free swimming initiative is part of a wider package of support we are pleased to provide to the Armed Forces community in recognition of their service."

Chris Llewelyn, WLGA Deputy Chief Executive & Director of Lifelong Learning, Leisure and Information, said:

"Local Government is proud to deliver free swimming for our Armed Forces personnel and Veterans. We hope that even more people take part in the scheme in the coming year, taking advantage of the

significant recuperative and social benefits physical activity offers. There are participating pools in each of Wales' local authorities; to find out where your closest facility is, visit your Local Authority website."

For too long the bus industry has put profit before passengers. Labour will change that – Jeremy Corbyn

Labour will overturn the Government's ban on council-owned bus companies as part of a wider strategy to put the public back into buses and deliver affordable, greener, and accessible transport.

Labour unveiled its bus strategy to put people not private profit first after figures revealed that passenger journeys in England outside London have declined by 39 percent and by 53 per cent in English cities since 1986. But over the same period in London, which kept regulation of bus services, passenger journeys increased by 99 per cent.

Labour's policy includes a commitment to low emissions vehicles, Wi-Fi enabled buses, improved joint and through ticketing schemes, mandatory disability and equality training, and a commitment to introduce a national strategy for local bus services, setting out objectives, targets and funding provisions, including considering concessionary fares for 16-19 year olds.

Jeremy Corbyn MP, Leader of the Labour Party, said:

"Labour will create the freedom for councils to run first class bus services which the public are proud of. The Tory legacy brought rising fares, plummeting passenger numbers and too many areas where pensioners have a bus pass but no bus.

"Labour wants to see local communities empowered to determine their own priorities

and

reverse the decline in bus services. Labour will extend franchising powers to all areas that want them and will overturn the ban on new community bus companies, allowing Local Authorities to replicate the successes of the country's best performing operators.

"For

too long the bus industry has put profit before passengers. Labour will change that."

Andy

McDonald MP, Labour's Shadow Transport Secretary, said:

"Buses

are by far the most important mode of public transport, connecting communities, places of education and businesses like no other.

"In

supporting local economies, combatting climate change, addressing air quality and tackling social exclusion, the importance of buses cannot be over-stated. Yet funding for buses across England and Wales has been cut by 33 per cent since 2010 and thousands of routes have been downgraded or cut altogether, meaning passengers across the country have to put up with sub-standard services.

"We

want to see clean, hi-tech fleets of buses running accessible and reliable services that meet passengers' needs. For this to happen, we need to give communities the power to reform bus services to make them work for passengers, as well as ensuring the funding and strategy is in place to ensure no communities are left behind."

Labour's

policy would:

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Create freedom for local authorities to form their own bus companies by removing the Government's ban.

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Extend the powers to re-regulate local bus services to all areas that want them

– not just to combined authorities with an elected mayor.

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Require all new buses to meet the low-emission requirements set out by the Government-sponsored Office for Low Emission Vehicles.

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Require new vehicles to be equipped with Wi-Fi, and install Wi-Fi on existing

buses.

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Introduce a national strategy for local bus services, setting out objectives, targets and funding provisions. This would include consideration of a reduced fare scheme for young people aged 16-19.

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Require all bus drivers and staff at bus terminals to complete approved disability equality and awareness training, including mental and physical disabilities, by a specific date.

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Ensure bus services in England make adjustments for any disabled passenger on the bus including policies for priority wheelchair spaces.

Labour

leader Jeremy Corbyn and shadow transport secretary Andy McDonald are in Tees Valley today (Friday) promoting Labour's bus policy.