

Cash boost to crackdown on illegal building on nation's Green Belt

- Councils across country to receive share of nearly £2 million to crackdown on illegal development, including on the Green Belt
- Local authorities from Cheshire to the Chilterns will benefit from new fund
- The move is part of the Housing Minister's drive to protect the Green Belt for future generations

Councils across the country are set to benefit from a slice of nearly £2 million to crack down on illegal developments on the nation's Green Belt, Housing Minister Esther McVey MP has announced today (12 September 2019).

Local authorities will be able to use the money to hire enforcement officers, use new technology, and help meet the legal costs of bringing rogue developers to task for their illegal developments.

Speaking at the annual RESI Convention in Newport today, the Housing Minister announced that 37 councils would be receiving a total of up to £50,000 each to help with the clampdown.

The Housing Minister Rt Hon Esther McVey MP said:

Once the Green Belt is built on it's often gone for good that's why we are determined to protect it. The public have told us loud and clear they want it kept for future generations to enjoy.

The funding announced today will help councils clamp down on rogue developers, giving the areas with the highest levels of Green Belt the funds needed to punish those who build illegally.

Reforms to the national planning rulebook last year maintained the strong protections on the Green Belt, which protect an area's character and prevent urban sprawl. Only in exceptional circumstances can land in the Green Belt be built on.

Alongside the cash boost for councils, the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government is teaming up with the Royal Town Planning Institute to overhaul the national enforcement handbook.

The updated handbook will provide the latest best practice and expertise on shutting down illegal building and preventing it from happening, whilst ensuring developers obtain full planning permission before a shovel hits the ground.

Councils will be receiving cash from the Planning Delivery Fund – a one off cash boost to assist with the costs of tackling unauthorised and illegal

development in areas with significant areas of Green Belt land.

The councils who applied and were successful in receiving the funding are as follows:

- Cheshire West and Chester
- Sevenoaks
- South Staffordshire
- Epping Forest
- Central Bedfordshire
- Kirklees
- Bath and North East Somerset
- Guildford
- Wakefield
- Tandridge
- Doncaster
- South Cambridgeshire
- Barnsley
- South Gloucestershire
- Calderdale
- York
- Stratford-on-Avon
- Rugby
- Rotherham
- Mole Valley
- Bromsgrove
- Warwick
- East Hertfordshire
- Staffordshire Moorlands
- Chiltern
- North Warwickshire
- Tonbridge and Malling
- Rushcliffe
- Windsor and Maidenhead
- North Somerset
- Cheshire East
- Selby
- Bradford
- Leeds
- Shropshire
- Northumberland
- Dorset Council

[Census rehearsal taking place this](#)

autumn

census 2021

The census rehearsal is taking place in four local authority areas across England and Wales. These are:

- Carlisle
- Ceredigion
- Hackney
- Tower Hamlets

The ONS is sending households in these areas a letter asking them to visit www.census.gov.uk and fill in an online questionnaire. The letters contain a unique access code they can use to access the questionnaire.

Census Rehearsal Day is 13 October 2019, but people can take part as soon as they receive the letter. It's important that you take part if you're invited. In doing so, you'll help the ONS make sure Census 2021 runs smoothly and represents everyone.

Census field staff will be working in the four rehearsal areas. They'll be visiting households that have not yet completed the questionnaire, offering help and encouragement to take part.

For more information on the census rehearsal, or to fill in the questionnaire once you've received your letter, please visit www.census.gov.uk.

Published 12 September 2019

£730,000 to boost diversity, wellbeing and skills in maritime

- interactive roadshows launched to show young women the value of STEM studies and the full breadth of maritime careers

- £140,000 to safeguard the wellbeing of existing sailors, ensuring they are supported when returning from sea
- funding launched as part of London International Shipping Week, the leading global event in the maritime calendar

More young people will be supported to embark on a career at sea, thanks to a suite of new policies announced by Maritime Minister Nusrat Ghani today (12 September 2019).

Speaking at a careers fair aboard the Northern Lighthouse Vessel PHAROS, the minister officially opened a £100,000 programme to boost maritime careers through 10 roadshows around the UK, funded by government.

Through the new scheme, girls aged 11 to 14 will be paired with inspiring women from the sector to teach them about the full breadth of careers available before they make their GCSE choices. This aims to get more of them into STEM subjects as they make the next step.

The Maritime Minister has also announced funding to better understand and address the skills gaps and improve careers promotion in the maritime sector, setting out today:

- £40,000 for the 'Maritime and Me' campaign – a new industry-led project aiming to increase and retain female talent in the maritime sector
- £300,000 for a new Maritime Skills Commission to identify existing and future skills needs of the sector, informing the training curriculum and ensuring it evolves over time
- £250,000 for a new single industry body that will raise awareness of maritime careers in schools and better coordinate their promotion sector wide

This comes as the Prime Minister Boris Johnson pledges to bring shipbuilding back to the UK and strengthen the Royal Navy, set to create thousands of jobs in the British shipping industry over the next decade.

Maritime Minister Nusrat Ghani said:

I am immensely proud of the vibrant range of jobs offered by the maritime industry, and I know that the 186,000 people who work in the sector will agree that it is a truly fantastic place to build a career.

We need to ensure this fantastic industry is fuelled with the brightest talent from across the country, and that means tapping into the potential of our diverse society and increasing the number of women working in maritime.

In doing this we will boost British standing in maritime globally, allowing us to successfully lead the charge to a bright new future for the UK.

The 'Maritime and Me' project will use a public campaign to show girls of all ages the fantastic range of opportunities in maritime – from jobs at sea to engineers on the shore.

It will work with WISE, a community interest organisation, to create an online quiz where girls and young women can see which roles would suit their personalities, supported by case studies of women working across different sectors, including maritime.

Minister for Women, Victoria Atkins, said:

Girls usually outperform boys in STEM subjects at GCSE. Yet, compared with boys, almost half the number of girls feel a STEM subject is their strongest. This means industry is missing out on top talent.

Our women of the future need role models. This fantastic project, which pairs girls with inspiring women from the maritime industry, will show them how pursuing careers in these areas can lead them to great things.

Sarah Kenny, Vice Chair of Maritime UK said:

It's been fantastic to see so many people hearing first-hand what a rewarding career maritime can offer during London International Shipping Week.

With the sector globally forecast to double in size, there really is a job for everyone – and with typical pay significantly above the national average, our people are well rewarded.

We warmly welcome government's funding to support careers in maritime, and we'll continue working across the country to attract tomorrow's talent.

As part of this focus on the maritime workforce, the DfT is also investing £140,000 in high quality support for British and international seafarers across the UK, as well as working with charities to ensure workers receive pastoral care on their return from sea.

This all delivers on commitments set out by the Department for Transport in the [Maritime 2050 Strategy](#), which outlines its ambition for the UK to become a world leader in the move to clean maritime, reducing the environmental impacts of shipping and supporting UK businesses to grow.

Universities Minister gives speech at Universities UK conference

It's great to be with you here today.

I'd been looking forward to this date for some time – I think I put it back in my diary last December. Obviously a few things have changed since then.

I've had an invaluable experience over the past few weeks as Health Minister and, if anything, it's only reinforced my appreciation for this sector, as I've got out and about in our hospitals and seen first-hand the unbreakable link between health and higher education – be it in the workforce or new medicines and treatments.

Above all, I've recognised the same, undeniable social value generated by both our higher education sector and our health sector – pushing the frontiers of knowledge to improve our lives and wellbeing, and training people up for high-quality, high-value careers in their local communities. But this has always been my dream job – and I'm delighted to be back.

When you've lost something you love doing, you come to reflect upon what you wanted to say, if you got one more chance to do so.

Now that I've got that chance, I thought I would share with you some of my personal reflections on what I believe should be the future of Higher Education.

Those of you who've met me already – and I can see quite a few familiar faces in the room- know that I passionately believe in the opportunities that Higher Education and attending university brings. That universities transform the lives of individuals, and the communities that they serve. I knew that long before I became Universities Minister the first time, having taught at Bristol University before I became a politician, seeing for myself first-hand the awesome power that the transfer of knowledge brings, watching my students grow in confidence, expanding their horizons and understanding, finding their place in the world. It's one of the greatest privileges academic teaching can bring.

It's a feeling that I'm sure unites us all in this room – you certainly know it if you've felt it. So I start unashamedly with a principle that I will defend, and defend again: there are not too many people going to university.

The 2019 version of the OECD's Education at a Glance report launched earlier this week by the Higher Education Policy Institute confirmed just that. As Andreas Schleicher himself said, the UK economy is in fact very responsive to the skills and qualifications our citizens have, and this country will continue to see growing demand for workers with graduate level skills.

We live in a modern, knowledge economy, one which requires the advanced skills that university teaches. Other countries fully recognise this. To take

a different path risks eroding the progress that we have made as a nation, a nation that has travelled so far in recent decades in placing education at the forefront of its investment. Over the past year- and I can't quite believe it hasn't yet been a year since I was first appointed Universities Minister- I've visited 39 universities across the country. In fact, I think I have the highest university visit run-rate of any minister since David Willetts! And today, I'll be visiting my 40th, Birmingham City University – an institution with the Arts and Humanities firmly at its core in the form of the Royal Birmingham Conservatoire.

Since becoming Universities Minister the first time round, I've been keen to defend the Arts and Humanities, and shall continue in my efforts to ensure their value is enhanced and appreciated as we make our way into a new, uncertain world; a world where languages, communication and inter-cultural awareness are going to be more important than ever before.

Each and every one of my university visits has only reinforced my belief in Higher Education and the value that HE expansion has contributed to society.

From the Student Unions that are modern, professional organisations committed to voluntary work and advancing the causes of student mental health, to the early career researchers passionate about their work and demonstrating to me its value, to the wider investments that universities are making in the other parts of my ministerial brief, whether that is in space technology at Leicester, nuclear robotics at Manchester, or Quantum technology at Sussex.

Universities are crucial to our society; as institutions, they are woven deep both into the fabric of local communities but also our national reputation.

The work of the UPP Foundation Civic University Commission earlier this year has helped to tease this out and I am pleased that so many of you have committed to create Civic University Agreements going forwards, to cement your contribution to your cities and regions.

I am also pleased to learn of work like the '21st Century Lab' being led by the University of Lincoln, which is opening up thinking on how our higher education sector should develop as our economics, societies, nations and cultures evolve.

And it is in the context of this changing world that it is worth reflecting upon your importance.

I'm proud to be the Minister for a sector which boasts many of the best universities in the world – including four in the QS World top 10, and 18 in the top 100. A sector which is second in the world in attracting global talent to study here.

As the Minister who published the International Education Strategy, as well as the International Research and Innovation Strategy earlier this year, I know we all can, and want, to go even further.

Which is why I am delighted that the Prime Minister and the Education and Home Secretaries announced the return of the two year post-study work visa

this week. And I want to pay tribute here to the work of my predecessor Jo Johnson for his efforts to make this a reality.

I want to work with everyone in this room to ensure the United Kingdom continues to be an attractive place to study.

As your Minister, I want you to know that I will continue to also take the approach that I have always done with the sector: to listen, to learn, and to work together to help co-create the solutions to the challenges that we face.

And of course, I recognise that the sector does indeed face challenges.

But I've always taken the approach that if we work hand in hand, as critical partners and friends, we possess the will and the ability to meet them.

And we have in this government and the Prime Minister someone who is willing to create the environment to enable our universities to succeed for the future.

I've only been gone from this role less than fifty days, but already we have had key announcements on expanding the government guarantee to fund European Research Council grants, and a crucial restatement of our ambition to raise R&D spending to 2.4% of GDP by 2027.

This restatement matters, and it will shape our future as a nation. With the support and advice of UKRI and many others, we are working hard on the roadmap for achieving this target. After outlining my vision in a series of speeches before the summer, I am keenly looking forward to getting this detailed roadmap published this autumn. Let me just offer one early reflection, though. If we want to turn the UK into scientific superpower and achieve our ambition to reach 2.4%, then we need to ramp up capacity and capability in our universities. And as you know, one of my final acts as science minister last time around was to announce a significant real-terms increase to QR funding – the largest increase in a decade.

Connected to this, I am determined to see renewed focus given to basic research. Funding for blue-skies, curiosity-driven research has been dwindling as a proportion of our overall spend. This is a problem. As part of our 2.4% package I want to see further increases to QR and a significant uplift to response-mode research council funding.

Don't get me wrong. It is of course essential that we should continue to drive application and impact from our research investments – turning great ideas into real benefits for the UK in the form of better jobs, improved products and services, and real action on issues such as climate change.

Let me reassure you that I remain firmly committed to the impact agenda and to knowledge exchange, including support via HEIF and implementation of the Knowledge Exchange Framework.

But if we want to succeed in the long term, the really long term, then we need to ensure we are doing everything we can to entice and empower our research community to undertake the most ground-breaking, cutting edge work,

raising the UK's international reputation even higher.

That's why as Science, Research and Innovation Minister, I will continue to make the case, time and time again, for not just the importance of raising public funding for research, but as the Minister who published the International Research and Innovation Strategy, and commissioned Sir Adrian Smith to undertake a review of how we can improve and increase our international science and research partnerships, that we seek to transform our research agenda, to become the partner country of choice, and to invest in new models of research funding that will catalyse this.

And as we approach leaving the European Union, I will continue to make the case loud and clear, that while we are leaving the EU, we are not leaving our European friends and research partners behind. We want to get a deal with the EU which will protect our continuation in Horizon 2020, and will continue our participation in Erasmus+. We will be fully exploring the option of participating in the next Erasmus programme, whilst also developing potential alternatives which are ambitious and truly global. We will protect our participation in Erasmus+ and will be working hard to secure full association with Horizon Europe – I personally will be doing everything in my power to achieve this.

In order to manage the transition through Brexit, I want to reassure the sector that EU nationals who start a higher education course in England in the 2020/21 academic year or before will continue to be eligible for 'home fee' status and student finance support on a similar basis to domestic students for the full duration of their course. And as we scale up our research efforts, we must make sure that every single one of our brilliant scientists and researchers is able to work in a vibrant and diverse research environment – underpinned by an institutional culture of trust, support and integrity.

I therefore want to give my strong backing to the work that Julia Buckingham has led to review and update the Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers. I encourage everyone in this room to now do their part to bring it to life.

I also want us to learn lessons from what works in other sectors, such as the NHS, that are successfully tackling bullying and harassment.

One of the lessons I will take away from my 'placement', as it were, within the NHS, relates to my work on the NHS People Plan. For if we are to ensure organisations and institutions are to be sustainable for the future, then we need to invest in people, at every stage of their lives. Creating not only new jobs, and indeed recognising that these jobs may need to adapt for the future, but building careers.

As institutions that are leading the world in creating ideas, talent and social value, universities should aspire to be beacons of virtue and lead by example. We need to be looking closely not only at how we train, but also how we retain the academics of the future; so a focus on the working conditions of early career research, building a pipeline of talent, is absolutely vital.

But a well-functioning university culture needs sustainable institutions. And when it comes to ensuring that we have a sustainable university landscape, while it is absolutely right that we focus on post-18 education for all, making investment in Further Education that is desperately needed, we must not lose sight of what we have in the HE sector.

We cannot afford as a society to pit FE against HE: as I have argued elsewhere, both are crucial to a unity of purpose in our post-18 landscape that needs to be more flexible, more portable, and one that meets the needs of the learner, not simply those of the provider.

And at the same time, ensuring that access and participation remains at the heart of that vision also. How we achieve this must be central to not just my mission as Universities Minister, but all of our missions. Universities have made vast improvements since 2010, but there is, I believe, much more we can do together. Access and Participation plans are just the start. Those of you who have read my previous speeches will know that I believe that we can go further focusing not just on the importance of increasing access, but realising that the journey does not end once students pass through the university door. Understanding that student transition, experience and progress, through to a successful degree outcome are all equally important and we can and must do more to deliver for disadvantaged students throughout their university career.

In my last speech as Universities Minister in July, I touched upon where I believe the sector and government will need to focus its attention for the future. Effective data will be vital if we are to understand how to drive performance, and I remain determined to ensure that universities have the effective tools to analyse and drive their civic missions to improve access for WP categories.

Universities have never been better placed to help be the agents of change, unlocking the opportunities that can transform disadvantaged communities in their regions. I know from my experience that you too are all passionate about making further progress. What progress will look like for the future is a debate which I wish to engage the sector on. Already we have the review of admissions by the OfS and UUK, and I believe that we can continue to focus on the best practice that should exist on that critical, defining, relationship between secondary and tertiary education. But I also believe that when it comes to admissions, in turn we will need to continue to be more radical still, as I spoke in my Birkbeck lecture in July, recognising that contextual offers will take on an increasing importance if we are to deliver a truly level playing field that provides opportunity from some of the most disadvantaged in society.

The truth is, you know as well as I do, that our universities are remarkable institutions of knowledge; complex and intricate organisations, the product of decades of dedication from individuals who have built them to become the success story they are today. Reform and change too, while vital if we are to meet the future challenges of the twenty first century, must recognise this, alongside ensuring the principle of autonomy, enshrined in law, is recognised and respected.

It is my role as your minister, to both be challenged by yourselves, but also to challenge, to act as a critical friend, but also as your champion and ambassador, both at home and abroad.

I look forward to working with you all to secure a bright, truly international future for our universities in the years to come.

Thank you.

Education Secretary addresses Universities UK conference

Thank you Julia.

Ladies and gentlemen, it is a great honour to be here and I'd like to thank Universities UK for their kind invitation to join you.

It's fair to say that I have had a busy first few weeks as Education Secretary.

I can clearly recall that day in July when the Prime Minister asked me to take on this job... going into the Cabinet Room ... the immense excitement I felt on being given the chance to play a role in shaping what we do in education, to change so many lives for the better.

I must confess, I am driven by a mission... a mission to ensure that everyone, from early years to adulthood, whatever their background, is able to extract the absolute maximum out of their time in education. And I know that is a mission that is shared by every single one of you in this room.

Every Education Secretary knows when they take on this role that they become a guardian to one of our national treasures. Now lots of things are described as national treasures, but our higher education system is genuinely one of them.

It is known everywhere around the world as a byword for excellence. Your reputation is second to none...

We have four universities in the QS world's top 10. The most recent figures we have show there are around 60 serving world leaders who have all benefited from a British education. Since 2001 we have produced 20 Nobel prize winners.

These are tremendous statistics and they make me incredibly proud as they do our nation.

So you can rest assured, I will be doing everything I can to both protect and build on that reputation, to see that your sector continues to shine and that

we continue to lead the world.

Over the last few weeks I have been listening to your concerns and how we go about maintaining this incredible national resource not just for today's students but for future generations.

Only last week I hosted a roundtable of vice-chancellors to hear first hand how we go about doing that.

I think it's fair to say that there are a variety of opinions in the university sector.

There is one thing I do find almost total agreement on, however, and that's the importance of our openness to the world.

The vice-chancellors I was talking to might have had their differences about some things but they were as one on the importance of the UK being a global leader in higher education and what we need to do it with it.

Now just because we are negotiating our exit from the European Union, that doesn't mean that we are cutting our ties with Europe or indeed the rest of the world. I am quite clear that as far as education is concerned we need to be bolder than ever before.

We must step forward in the world and be clear of the global role of our universities. People have always come here to study and we are very glad and privileged to have them.

A recent report by the Higher Education Policy Institute found that after graduation, a single cohort of international students contributes almost £3.2 billion in tax over 10 years and plays a key role in filling existing skills shortages in the UK economy.

But they bring far more than that. They contribute to the diverse tapestry of our national life; they not only bring the best of the world in, they also help us to look out, and our entire economic and cultural spectrum is the richer for what they bring to our country.

In the months and years ahead, the partnerships we make through these international networks will be crucial. Partnerships which I know benefits many of our young people through the exchange of ideas and learning. Many of you are wondering about what's going to happen to them after we leave the EU.

I want to reassure you that my department is open to continuing to be part schemes like Erasmus+. But we have to prepare for every eventuality and it is sensible to consider all options.

As such I have asked my officials to provide a truly ambitious scheme if necessary.

In March this year my predecessor Damian Hinds set out the government's ambitions in a new international education strategy and I'd like to acknowledge everything he did to help drive this forward.

I can assure you ladies and gentlemen, I am doubling down.

I want the best minds from around the world to come here to study, research and work in the UK. We plan to increase the number of international students we host by 30% by 2030. We also want to see the value of education exports rising to £35 billion by then. Enabling global Britain to continue its record levels of investment in our vital public services.

As part of that commitment I can announce that we will be introducing a new two-year "Graduate Route", or post-study work arrangement, for graduates to stay in the UK after their degrees.

This will mean that students who want to study in the UK will have time to work, time to develop their skills and time to secure a sponsor if they want to make a more longstanding contribution to our economy.

Bringing us into line with our main international competitors – countries like Canada, Australia and the US.

But I'm not suggesting we stop at matching our competitors; I want us to beat them and I want students from all over the world to pick our universities before any others.

I'd like to thank all of you today who have done so much to protect and promote the UK's reputation as a destination for international students. You have shifted the debate.

When I took on this job, you told me that you wanted the post-study Graduate visas more than anything else. Indeed whenever I spoke to a vice chancellor the first thing I would hear is visas. Well, we listened and the Prime Minister and I have given you what you asked for, what you wanted most.

So I have to ask you for something in return.

I see this as a deal. I expect you, in exchange, to drive greater access to your institutions. Young people from deprived backgrounds who have the ability, deserve to benefit from studying for a degree.

We cannot forget that ability is evenly spread across this country but opportunity – sadly – is not.

We must continue to crusade to put that right.

But this is not about lowering standards. In fact in order to maintain our reputation students need to be reassured that their degree will be worth something, that it will give them the knowledge and the skills they need to achieve whatever goals they set themselves. It has to be seen as a good investment for them.

And I have another challenge for you: I want you to be ambitious in your engagement with the wider education landscape, with schools, colleges, and employers: share your resources and expertise, drive excellence across the sector more widely.

You are world leaders but you need to share your expertise with everyone in the country. I'd like to thank those universities like Kings College and Exeter who have set up maths specialist free schools; and other universities that are in the process of doing so. What you are doing will change lives. I encourage others to rise to the challenge.

I expect others to rise to the challenge.

I see this as a shared effort and I want to work with all of you in the sector to make sure all our children have access to this kind of excellence and expertise.

And we must not forget that over half of young people do not attend university. Already we've made great progress raising standards in post-16 education but we have so much more that we need to do.

I want you to continue to work in even greater partnership with the further education sector and employers. The pioneering Institutes of Technology, that I'll be talking about in more detail in a minute, are an example of what we can achieve when we work together.

For most young people, moving away from home for the first time will be an enormous step into the unknown. It's one of the reasons they choose to go to university in the first place.

I can clearly remember the nervous excitement as I prepared to leave home for the first time. For someone who'd grown up in Scarborough, Bradford seemed a very, very long way away.

Obviously going to Lancashire would have been a step too far...

But it was certainly one of the greatest opportunities I've had in my life. And it's one that so many young people will be sharing over the next few weeks. Their worlds will suddenly have got so much bigger. Some of them may well find the adjustment challenging.

So your responsibilities are twofold: you have to not only stretch and mould young minds but also give people a helping hand as they take their first steps towards adulthood and independence.

It has been amazing to see the great work that you have been doing. Far greater attention is given to students' health and wellbeing than used to be the case and I welcome the support that you give to all these new arrivals through things like the Education Transitions Network, the Step Change Programme and the Mental Health Charter.

It is just another example of how you continue to adapt and develop what you provide for students.

Many of the things I am going to talk about today have been raised by the independent panel to the Review of Post-18 Education and Funding.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank Philip Augar and the panel for

all their hard work on what is a thorough and comprehensive study. It is going to make a big difference to our thinking. I'd also like to thank all the stakeholders, including many of you here today, who contributed to it.

I look forward to working with you to ensure that we have a joined up post-18 education system that is accessible to all, builds the skills we need, promotes choice and competition and provides value for money for students and for taxpayers.

Anyone, from any part of Britain with the talent, or potential must feel welcome and have the chance to be the best version of themselves they can be.

We need to obliterate once and for all the kind of prejudice where some people are held back by others' expectations of what they can achieve.

Nobody with the potential should be dissuaded from going to university because they think it isn't for them. Although we know a greater proportion of 18-year-olds than ever before are going on to higher education, and record rates of those are from a disadvantaged background, the truth is these young people are still under-represented, and when they do enter higher education they are less likely to complete it.

White lads on Free School Meals are far less likely to go to university than other groups, and young black men and women are less likely to succeed when they get there.

This is not good enough. Society should not, and I will not, let this wasted potential go unchecked a minute longer.

I would like to say thank you to all of you who have been working hard to remove the obstacles that exist for some sections of society, young people who have the odds stacked against them from a young age.

Your passion and vision to improve their life chances are an inspiration.

Plenty of universities are introducing schemes to address this, Kings College London for example, has been blazing a trail on supporting students from disadvantaged backgrounds for years. This has seen a steady rise in students from ethnic minorities and state schools.

And to those that aren't I'd say: ask yourself what more you need to do – and get on with doing it.

Another scheme I'm hugely excited by is 'Realising Opportunities'. This group of universities including Goldsmiths, Kings, Lancaster and Leeds are boosting access for 16-17 year olds who are deemed the 'most able, least likely'. Between them they've helped more than 7,000 young people who might otherwise not have considered higher education to take the step up.

That's 7,000 kids whose lives took totally different paths because of those universities who have been doing that outreach work and their lives will have been changed for the better because of it.

I welcome the work that the Office for Students has been doing not just on access but also helping to tackle drop-out rates, improve attainment of qualifications and progression from higher education.

I see that 41 universities have just published more ambitious access plans which is good news.

So I know the will is there. What we have to do now, is make sure these initiatives are having the effect we want them to.

The sector plans to spend around £1 billion this year alone on improving access. But we still don't know enough about what's working and what isn't. This is taxpayers money. This is students' money. This isn't about virtue signalling. This is about one thing, and one thing only. And that is ensuring that talented young people, from Southend to South Shields, can get on.

It is your duty and our duty to make sure that happens. So as a priority, the OfS needs to ensure that evaluation programmes are in place to make sure these schemes are doing what they are supposed to do.

I will be watching carefully to see how these are now delivered and I will support the OfS in any action it takes if universities are not delivering against their commitments.

Once we are sure that they are, ladies and gentlemen, we will be one step closer to making sure children from the most disadvantaged backgrounds get the best from your offer. eradicating the social mobility gap.

And let's be clear about our reasons. This is not just about levelling the playing field; it's not just about social fairness; it's not an exercise in ticking boxes. This is about making sure that every adult in the country can play a full – and fulfilling – part in our future.

We are making tremendous strides in our ambition to make sure that all young people get a world-class education that's right for them.

But there is one area where we cannot afford to ease up. And that area is standards.

The OfS gained its full powers on 1 August and its register of providers is up and running. The Teaching Excellence and Student Outcomes Framework is bedding down and I have just received Shirley Pearce's review of how things are progressing. I'll be responding to that shortly.

Students, too, are beginning to show greater satisfaction with value for money in the courses they take.

But there is much more to do.

Unconditional offers have shot up, going from under 3,000 in 2013 to nearly 76,000 this year.

Grade inflation has become even more entrenched. When I was at university,

you could count the number of students on my course who got firsts on one hand. I am sad to say that I was not one of them. Now it seems that they are ten a penny. In 1997 – which is when I graduated – 50% of students gained a first or a 2:1; last year 80% of students did so.

I'm delighted that some universities have already scrapped making so-called 'conditional unconditional' offers and I hope that the rest will soon follow suit.

Universities UK and OfS reviews of admissions are an opportunity for the sector to get its house in order here, perhaps by agreeing a minimum predicted grade threshold, or a maximum proportion of students who may be offered one.

I want you to know that I will always speak up for your autonomy. I know what helps foster the brilliance of our teaching and our research but I also need to safeguard our reputation, so that everyone knows that they can trust the system.

So we need to work together on some of these issues.

If we don't tackle them, your hard-won reputation for excellence will be undermined.

Worse still, there is a risk that employers will begin to lose faith in grades and foreign students will think twice about investing their time and money in studying here.

Your institutions will be the backbone of our country as it establishes its new place in the world. You are helping to create a dynamic economy, enabling our communities to flourish and putting the UK on a firm footing for an exciting future.

Higher education is vital in providing the UK with enough workers with the right skills and qualifications for the jobs we need – the architects and the doctors and the software designers – it will also drive the economy in terms of innovation and research.

It's a huge inspiration to me personally, to see how far ahead of the curve you are, constantly pushing the boundaries of human knowledge and taking us further with every step.

To further oil the wheels we will be taking a number of active steps to open up markets and work opportunities.

A key aspect to this will be to boost further education and its links with industry and business. We have a live consultation on proposals to improve and grow higher technical education. This closes at the end of the month so I urge you to make your views known. Chances to change the face of education don't come round every day. Please do make the most of this opportunity. You have a vital contribution and we want to hear it.

So I am excited that the first 12 Institutes of Technology will start opening

over the coming months. These are a new type of high-quality employer-led organisation, backed by £170million of government funding. They show partnership working at its best and each Institute is a joint effort involving universities, FE colleges and employers. So many in this room are already doing this.

This collaborative approach will deliver teaching of the highest standard, from providers with proven track records and that directly responds to the needs of local employers.

Our reformed apprenticeships are also going from strength to strength. They are now becoming embedded in business and young people are warming to the fact that they can learn AND earn at the same time. In fact more than 208 thousand of them did so last year alone.

There is a real momentum building in higher education at the moment and I want us to make the most of it but I need your help here.

Take the lead in your local communities, work with businesses, engage civic leaders. Between you, you can take us to the next level in developing the skills, the research and the innovation that is going drive this country forward.

It will be this kind of collaboration that will help us make that leap; will help turn research into enterprise and theory into application.

Before I finish I want to assure you that it is an enormous privilege to be your champion in government. It is a role I have been extremely proud and excited to take on and I am looking forward to working with you very much.

When I set out for Bradford all those years ago, I had no idea that it would eventually lead me here. And this is what is so fantastic about our higher education system. It can set all of us on a path that we can't begin to imagine when we start out, and the opportunities it offers along the way are truly remarkable.

Those of us who have benefited from it owe you more than I can say. So to all the lecturers and leaders, past and present, thank you. While I am the Education Secretary, you will not find someone else who will fight tooth and nail for you. I hope that in the few weeks I have been in this role I have demonstrated this. But let's work together to change the lives of the future generation. Now let's all go and make a difference to the lives of many more young people.