

## [PM meeting with five of Northern Ireland's main political parties: 31 July 2019](#)

The Prime Minister met five of Northern Ireland's main political parties today in Belfast.

The overarching purpose of these meetings was to discuss moving forward in the ongoing power sharing talks and getting the Northern Irish democratic institutions back up and running as soon as possible.

The Prime Minister told all of the parties that he was determined to bring this process to a successful conclusion and that he would do everything he could to make it happen.

He said that while there had been constructive progress in recent weeks at Stormont, that there now needed to be serious and intense engagement to get this done and that he had faith that all parties would step up to the challenge.

The discussions also included Brexit, where the Prime Minister made clear that the UK would be leaving the EU on October 31st come what may, and restated his intention to do so with a deal.

He said that in all scenarios, the Government is steadfast in its commitment to the Belfast-Good Friday Agreement and that in no circumstances would there be physical checks or infrastructure on the border.

He also made clear his belief and commitment in the rigorous impartiality set out in the Belfast-Good Friday Agreement, while at the same time reaffirming his determination to strengthen the Union and Northern Ireland's place within it.

They also discussed what the UK Government could do to support Harland & Wolff and Wrightbus.

Alongside the new Secretary of State Julian Smith, he said he was looking forward to engaging widely and seeing more of this fantastic part of our United Kingdom.

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## [ESFA Update: 31 July 2019](#)

[unable to retrieve full-text content] Latest information and actions from the

Education and Skills Funding Agency for academies, schools, colleges, local authorities and further education providers.

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## Perceptions of vocational and technical qualifications – wave 2

We have today (31 July 2019) published the results from our second annual survey of [Perceptions of vocational and technical qualifications](#) (PDF, 1.75MB, 59 pages) , which covers a range of regulated vocational and technical qualifications available for study in England. The survey reports the views of more than 3,000 employers, learners and training providers who were surveyed during late 2018 into early 2019.

The main report covers headline results, while a technical annex – [Perceptions of vocational and technical qualifications technical annex](#) (PDF, 1.7MB, 56 pages) – provides a more detailed breakdown of the survey data. In broad terms, there is a good deal of consistency with last year's results, although perceptions amongst all 3 respondent groups have improved slightly in this second wave.

Some highlights from this year's survey:

### **Functional Skills qualifications (FSQs)**

1. Employers' understanding of FSQs has improved between waves 1 and 2, with levels of knowledge increasing with organisation size
2. Larger businesses and training providers are more likely to hold positive perceptions of FSQs
3. The proportion of learners in wave 2 who said that they valued FSQs (78%) was similar to wave 1

### **Vocational and Technical Qualifications (VTQs)**

1. Employers, training providers and learners continue to hold very positive views of VTQs regardless of whether the qualifications are pursued within apprenticeships, or standalone
2. Amongst training providers, levels of agreement that learners/parents understand the purpose of VTQs has increased markedly (from 54% to 70%)
3. The proportion of learners in wave 2 who said that VTQs prepare them well for the workplace (77%) was similar to wave 1

### **End-point assessments (EPAs)**

1. Reported understanding and perceived value of EPAs has improved across training providers and learners in wave 2, while the picture for employers is more mixed

2. Larger employers and training providers are more likely to understand the difference between apprenticeship frameworks and new apprenticeship standards
3. The proportion of learners who said that they value EPAs was highest among those that had experience of the workplace (76%)

Phil Beach, Executive Director for Vocational and Technical Qualifications, said:

The results of this year's survey of stakeholder perceptions provide a first opportunity for us to review changes in levels of understanding and perceived value of vocational and technical qualifications among employers, learners and training providers.

There is positive evidence of general improvement in knowledge and understanding of qualifications among respondents. It is unsurprising that the perceptions of larger employers and training providers are typically more positive than their peers. The government's programme for reform will clarify the landscape for vocational qualifications and further assist employers' and learners' understanding. We are playing our part, and we are reflecting further on these results to consider what more we can do, where appropriate, to support this.

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## [6 company directors disqualified for office fit-out cartel](#)

All 3 were directors of companies within the Fourfront Group at the time the illegal cartel activity took place. Clive Lucking, founder and CEO of the Fourfront Group, has been disqualified for a period of 4 years and 9 months. Aki Stamatis, Chair of the Fourfront Group, has been disqualified for a period of 2 years and 9 months and Sion Davies, Managing Director at Area Sq. Ltd, has been disqualified for a period of 1 year and 6 months.

Clive Lucking contributed to 10 breaches affecting contracts with a total value of over £11.9 million. Aki Stamatis contributed to one of these breaches and took no steps to avoid the other 9 breaches even though he had reason to suspect or should have known about them. Sion Davies contributed to the illegal conduct by failing to prevent 3 breaches affecting contracts with a total value of £8.6 million.

In March 2019, [5 companies agreed to pay fines totalling £7 million](#) after the Competition and Markets Authority (CMA) found they had broken competition law by engaging in a form of collusive tendering known as "cover bidding".

Typically, cover bidding involves companies, when bidding in a competitive tender for a contract, agreeing with each other that one or more of them will place a bid that is deliberately intended to lose the contract, thereby reducing the intensity of competition. This type of illegal behaviour can lead to customers paying an artificially inflated price or receiving poorer quality services than if the companies had competed properly in the tender process. The 5 companies involved were: Fourfront, as well as JLL, Loop, Coriolis, ThirdWay and Oakley.

In May this year, the CMA secured legally binding disqualification undertakings from Robb Simms-Davies (former director of JLL group of companies), Trevor Hall (former director of Cube Interior Solutions Ltd, part of the Fourfront Group) and Oliver Hammond (former director of Area Sq. Ltd, part of the Fourfront Group).

Clive Lucking, Aki Stamatis and Sion Davies initially declined to give disqualification undertakings but have now done so after the CMA put them on formal notice of its intention to apply to the court for disqualification orders against them. Had they given undertakings before the CMA issued the formal notice, their periods of disqualification would not have been as long. Giving an undertaking means they agree to be disqualified from being a director of a company, or otherwise being involved in the management of any UK company, unless they have the permission of the court.

The undertakings will take effect on 7 October 2019. This allows the directors time to apply to the court for permission to carry out specified director duties. Whether or not any such application would be successful is a matter for the court, having heard representations from the directors and from the CMA. The CMA will be concerned to ensure that any permission is subject to appropriate public protection safeguards, and Fourfront and its directors are constructively engaging with the CMA to that end.

An application for permission to act is a routine feature of disqualification cases and the CMA will remain involved in this process to ensure that the public is protected.

Today's announcement brings the total number of director disqualifications secured for illegal cartel behaviour to 12 since December 2016, when the CMA began actively using this power.

It is important that company directors understand that they have a personal responsibility for ensuring that their companies comply with competition law. Failure to do so puts in question their fitness to be a director of a company.

[Guidance is available on the CMA website](#) to help directors understand how to avoid disqualification. Anyone who suspects they may have witnessed or been involved in a cartel should [report it on our Stop Cartels page](#).

For more information, [view the case page](#).

1. The CMA had found the companies involved had infringed the Chapter I

prohibition in the Competition Act 1998 by engaging in a form of collusive tendering, known as “cover bidding”, in a decision dated 12 April 2019.

2. Under the Company Directors Disqualification Act, the CMA has the power to apply to the court to disqualify a director from holding company directorships or performing certain roles in relation to a company for a specified period, if a company of which he or she is a director has breached competition law. The Act also allows the CMA to accept a disqualification undertaking from a director instead of bringing proceedings, which has the same legal effect as a disqualification order.
3. Disqualification orders and undertakings under the Company Directors Disqualification Act may provide that a prohibition on acting as a company director or performing certain roles in relation to a company does not apply if the person obtains the permission of the court. Any application to the court for such permission will be heard by the High Court, or in Scotland the Court of Session, which will take account of any matters that the CMA considers to be relevant, which it must draw to the attention of the court.
4. At the time of infringement, Clive Lucking and Aki Stamatis were directors of each of the Fourfront Group companies, and Sion Davies was a director of Area Sq. Limited, one of the companies that makes up the Fourfront Group.
5. As a former director within the JLL group, Robb Simms-Davies would have been immune from director disqualification but had his protection withdrawn because he did not submit to a voluntary interview with the CMA. Continuous and complete cooperation with the CMA’s investigation is a condition for leniency.

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## [Plastic bag sales down 90% since introduction of 5p charge](#)

Sales of plastic bags by the seven biggest retailers in England [have fallen by 90%](#) since the 5p charge was introduced in 2015, new figures out today [31 July] have shown.

Asda, Marks and Spencer, Morrisons, Sainsbury’s, The Co-operative Group, Tesco and Waitrose sold 490 million fewer single-use plastic bags in 2018/19

(549 million) – a drop of almost half on the previous year.

The average person in England now buys just 10 bags a year from the main supermarket retailers, compared with 140 bags in 2014 before the charge was introduced.

Welcoming today's figures, Environment Secretary Theresa Villiers said:

Our comprehensive action to slash plastic waste and leave our environment in a better state continues to deliver results, with our 5p charge reducing plastic bag sales by 90% in the big supermarkets.

No one wants to see the devastating impact plastic waste is having on our precious wildlife. Today's figures are a powerful demonstration that we are collectively calling time on being a throwaway society.

The total single-use carrier bag sales reported by all large retailers in 2018/2019 fell 37% to 1.11 billion compared with the previous year.

Government scientists believe [plastic in the sea is set to treble in a decade](#) unless marine litter is tackled. One million birds and over 100,000 sea mammals die every year from eating and getting tangled in plastic waste.

[Today's figures reveal 5p plastic bag sales](#) have also contributed around £169 million toward charities and other good causes since the charge was introduced on 5 October 2015, with more than £22 million raised in 2018/19 alone.

#### **Wider government action to tackle plastic waste:**

The UK continues to be a global leader in cracking down on plastic waste to protect seas, oceans and marine life. We have recently announced a range of measures to eliminate all avoidable plastic waste, underpinned by [our landmark Resources and Waste Strategy](#).

Key government actions include [our world-leading ban on microbeads](#), consulting on [introducing a deposit return scheme](#) to drive up the recycling of drinks bottles and cans, and recently [confirming a ban on the supply of plastic straws, stirrers and cotton buds in April 2020](#).

We will also introduce [a new world-leading tax on plastic packaging](#) which does not meet a minimum threshold of at least 30% recycled content from April 2022, subject to consultation, to encourage greater use of recycled plastic to tackle the problem of plastic waste and protect our environment.