

[Press release: Government launches £3 million scheme to regenerate village halls](#)

A £3 million fund to improve village halls and better connect rural communities across the country is being launched today (5 April 2019) by the government.

With more than 10,000 village halls across the country, these spaces provide vital hubs for communities to connect, collaborate and celebrate.

Village hall committees are now able to apply for grants of up to £75,000 towards refurbishment and alteration of their buildings, from improvement works on existing facilities through to new meeting rooms.

The new scheme, which will help around 100 community building projects to get on site and start work, will be opened by [Rural Affairs Minister Lord Gardiner](#) and [Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury, Robert Jenrick](#) at the Oxton Village Hall in Nottinghamshire.

Speaking at the launch, hosted by the [Rural Community Action Nottinghamshire](#), Minister for Rural Affairs Lord Gardiner will say:

Village halls are the cornerstone of our rural communities. They provide vital spaces and facilities for people across the country – from fitness and social activity through to healthcare and education.

I am delighted to launch officially this £3 million grant scheme for village halls, supporting these important hubs for our local communities.

Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury, Robert Jenrick will say:

Village halls are the heart of rural communities. This £3 million will help ensure that people living in villages across the country will be able to enjoy these important assets for many years to come.

Many village halls were built as memorials to local people who lost their lives in the first world war and this funding is part of our national commemoration of the centenary of the armistice.

Over the past few years, village halls across the country have spent money on substantial projects funded by grants. In Nottinghamshire, where the new

scheme is being launched, Oxton Village Hall has refurbished the kitchen and toilets, and installed double glazing throughout the hall, while East Bridgford Village Hall has invested in a new heating system and installed energy efficiency lighting.

The new funding will cover 20% of the total costs of a project. The remaining funding comes from a combination of charity reserves, fundraising, local authority funding and other grants such as the [National Lottery Community Fund](#)

The application must be a village hall or similar rural community building and a registered charity. New build projects will not be eligible to apply to the fund due to their high costs and long timescales.

Applications will be assessed by a panel including Defra officials and [Action with Communities in Rural England \(ACRE\)](#) staff with extensive experience of halls and grant schemes.

The grant funding will be managed by ACRE on behalf of Defra and advice and support to potential applicants will be provided through the ACRE network. [Applicants can apply for grants by following this link.](#)

[News story: Universities urged to review 'unacceptable' admissions practices](#)

A full review of university admissions is required to end 'unacceptable' practices some universities use to lure students into accepting higher education places, the Education Secretary said today (5 April).

Damian Hinds is calling for a review of admissions practices after the extent that 'conditional unconditional' offers are used by institutions was revealed by UCAS last year.

A 'conditional unconditional' offer from a university informs students that they are guaranteed a place, but only if they put the university as their first option. This could breach laws designed to protect consumers from entering into a transaction they otherwise wouldn't have.

In letters to the 23 universities using this recruitment technique, Mr Hinds will call on them to end this practice. He will say they are 'backing students into a corner' to accept a place at their institution – trapping them from exploring other options that could be more suitable. A small number of institutions have recently decided to end this practice, and now Mr Hinds is calling for other universities to follow suit.

Education Secretary Damian Hinds said:

It is simply unacceptable for universities to adopt pressure-selling tactics, which are harming students' grades in order to fill places. It is not what I expect to see from our world-class higher education institutions.

'Conditional unconditional' offers are damaging the reputation of the institutions involved and our world-leading sector as a whole. That is why I will be writing to 23 universities, urging them to stamp out this unethical practice.

But I am concerned about the wider picture of how some universities are getting students through their doors, so I am asking the OfS to look at how well current admissions practices serve students and how they can be improved, so we can protect the integrity of our higher education system.

'Conditional unconditional' offers are a subset of all offers with an 'unconditional' component, which have risen drastically across subjects in recent years.

The Education Secretary's concerns over admissions is the final in a series of interventions in the higher education sector, following announcements made around essay writing services and grade inflation in recent weeks.

In 2018, 34.4 per cent of 18-year-olds from England, Northern Ireland and Wales received a form of unconditional offer whereas in 2013, this figure was just 1.1 per cent. This means 87,540 applicants were given some form of offer with an unconditional component before they sat their final exams at school or college.

In 2018, the University of Roehampton made 1,940 conditional unconditional offers to 18-year-olds from England, Northern Ireland and Wales, representing 65.8% of all their offers made to this group. Nottingham Trent University made 8,380 'conditional unconditional' offers, representing 39.9% of all offers.

UCAS data published last year also shows that students who accept unconditional offers, whether conditions are applied or not, are proportionally 7 per cent more likely to miss their predicted A levels by two grades than students with conditional offers.

Universities Minister Chris Skidmore said:

This excessive use of conditional unconditional offers is not in the best interests of students – and it is worrying to see such a major rise in their use across all subjects.

I know there is a place for unconditional offers, but I expect

universities to use them responsibly. They must not be used to place students in a position where they are forced to make choices before they know their respective options. Where institutions are not acting in the best interests of students the Office for Students should use their full range of powers to take action.

The review of admissions practices will be an important moment for the sector to ensure the system works in the interests of students, and provides a truly accurate measure of performance for universities going forwards.

The Education Secretary will be asking the OfS to take a comprehensive look at university admissions procedures, in guidance sent to the regulator setting out his priorities for the financial year.

The scope of the review would be developed in due course. But the Education Secretary would like the OfS to look at ways of improving current practices, including greater access and participation for students from underrepresented groups and disadvantaged backgrounds.

Press release: Joint Statement on Fighting Near Gharyan, Libya

The governments of France, Italy, the United Arab Emirates, the United Kingdom, and the United States are deeply concerned by fighting near Gharyan, Libya and urge all parties to immediately de-escalate tensions, which are hindering prospects for UN political mediation. At this sensitive moment in Libya's transition, military posturing and threats of unilateral action only risk propelling Libya back toward chaos. We strongly believe that there is no military solution to the Libya conflict. Our governments oppose any military action in Libya and will hold accountable any Libyan faction that precipitates further civil conflict.

We stand united behind UN Special Representative of the Secretary-General (SRSG) Ghassan Salamé as the UN seeks to break Libya's political deadlock, improve transitional governance, and chart a path toward credible and peaceful elections. All Libyan actors should work constructively with SRSG Salamé as the UN finalizes plans for the national conference planned for April 14-16.

Further information

[Press release: Equine Viral Arteritis confirmed in Dorset](#)

The UK's Chief Veterinary Officer has today confirmed two cases of Equine Viral Arteritis in non-thoroughbred stallions on a premises in Dorset. There is no risk to public health.

Restrictions on breeding have been put in place on the animals to limit the risk of the disease spreading and further investigations are ongoing. The animals affected are not racehorses and there is no indication that upcoming racing events will be affected.

Chief Veterinary Officer Christine Middlemiss said:

We have taken swift action to limit the risk of the disease spreading by restricting the movement of the animals and their semen. A full investigation is underway to determine the source and possible spread of the infection. Owners of mares and stallions are urged to have their animals tested before they are used for breeding.

These findings remind us that we must all be vigilant for signs of disease and follow strict biosecurity measures.

You can help prevent the disease spreading by:

- vaccinating stallions against the disease – talk to your vet for advice
- [practising good biosecurity](#) on your premises
- owners of mares and stallions are urged to have their animals tested before they are used for breeding.

If you suspect equine viral arteritis please get in touch with the Animal and Plant Health Agency. If you wish to have your horse tested on a precautionary basis contact your private vet and have your animal tested at an accredited laboratory.

[News story: Work starts on new £4 million kitchen and dining area to](#)

boost training facilities at Nesscliff

A £4 million investment will see the Defence Infrastructure Organisation (DIO), its industry partner Landmarc Support Services Limited and local building contractor Pave Aways Limited, deliver an enhanced facility capable of feeding 600 armed forces personnel each meal time and up to 200 personnel in the field. It will also include additional storage and welfare space and improve the current disabled facilities on the site.

Designed to meet the mandated 60-year life span for all new buildings, with enhanced thermal insulation and photovoltaic roof panels, the project supports the Ministry of Defence (MOD) Sustainable MOD Strategy and will significantly reduce ongoing maintenance and utilities costs for the MOD.

The project is expected to have a positive impact on the local economy by sustaining around 300 jobs locally.

DIO Training Safety Officer, Major (Ret'd) Richard Slaney, commented:

DIO supports our armed forces by providing what they need to live, work and train. Nesscliff is a core site for military training within the West Midlands and surrounding counties, dealing with all priority military units' pre-operational training. With the changes in regular army basing and the increase in UK-based troops, the new kitchen and dining facility will allow Nesscliff to support the inevitable increase in use, whilst providing the high quality service troops expect and deserve.

John Shippen, Landmarc's Project Manager added:

As DIO's industry partner for the delivery of services across the national Defence training estate, we're proud to be managing a project that will provide improved welfare facilities for our armed forces.

Not only will the new facilities enable an enhanced training experience for end users but they will be sustainable too, with far more efficient utilities, photovoltaic roof panels and better insulation, which will reduce running costs. We are also partnering with local contractors to provide additional employment and business opportunities for local people.

Steven Owen, Managing Director of Pave Aways, said:

As the local contractor, we are delighted to be building this important facility at Nesscliff, which is where we secured our

first ever contract 45 years ago.

We estimate that the scheme will sustain more than 300 jobs through Pave Aways and our supply chain and are committed to working with contractors and sub contractors that are based within a 25-mile radius so it will have a positive impact on the local economy.