

[News story: The visit of Lord Astor of Hever to Oman](#)

Lord Astor of Hever, the UK Prime Minister's Trade Envoy visited Oman on 11 – 15 February 2018. His role is to work with the UK Department for International Trade to support and encourage the growth of business links and partnerships between the UK and Oman, and to promote the UK as a trade partner of choice for Oman. His visit reinforced the importance the UK places on its bilateral trade relationship with Oman.

During his visit, Lord Astor had meetings with a range of senior government and business officials. He had a series of key meetings with senior officials to discuss Oman – UK business trade relations and focused on education & training, touring the new Takatuf-Petrofac Oman Centre of Excellence and meeting with the National Training Fund to discuss vocational training. He also hosted an Oil & Gas networking reception and spoke about the strength of the bilateral relationship in oil and gas, both historically and looking forward.

At the end of his visit, Lord Astor said:

“I was pleased to visit Oman again in my role as the Prime Minister's Trade Envoy. Oman is a country I have a long affinity with and it is important to the UK. As a Trade Envoy, I work closely with the Trade Team at the British Embassy in Muscat and organisations in the UK to help boost links and create opportunities for UK and Omani businesses to work together.

The UK is the largest source of Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) in Oman by far, accounting for over 45% of total FDI. The majority of this investment is in the oil and gas sector in Oman, both in upstream exploration and production and, increasingly, in the development of downstream oil and gas industry. Bilateral cooperation on education and training, both within oil and gas and across the board, underpins economic development, and I am delighted to see British industry working with Omani institutions to deliver high quality training in Oman. There is a strong appetite in Oman to see more trade with the UK and we are keen to continue to build, strengthen and support that relationship.”

[Press release: Government moves towards a shake-up of broken housing](#)

complaints system

Dissatisfied tenants and homeowners across the country may be offered a lifeline as government considers options to ensure that no-one is left battling with their landlord or builder to resolve issues with their home, Housing Secretary Sajid Javid has announced.

From broken boilers to cracks in walls, the current choice of schemes risks leaving thousands without answers, with others having to manoeuvre between at least 4 different services just to work out where to register a complaint.

An 8 week [consultation](#) beginning today (18 February 2018) will use people's experiences to shape a simpler and better complaints system, so future disputes can be resolved faster and consumers can access compensation where it is owed.

Options considered in the consultation include:

- introducing a single housing ombudsman to cover the whole of the housing market
- if homes builders should be required to join an ombudsman scheme, following on our commitment to expand redress to tenants of private landlord
- naming and shaming poor practice to help tackle the worst abuses

Housing Secretary Sajid Javid said:

For too long, tenants and homeowners have navigated multiple complaints procedures to resolve disputes about everyday household repairs and maintenance.

Fixing this housing crisis is about more than just building homes, it's ensuring people have the answers available when something goes wrong.

Today's top-to-bottom review shows government is working hard to deliver a better and simpler system.

Unlike other areas, such as financial services that have a single and accountable ombudsman, housing has over 4 different complaints bodies.

In the private rented sector, there is currently no obligation for landlords to register with a complaints system and this can often leave thousands who do not use a property agent without any option for redress.

House builders are responsible for fixing incomplete work in new build homes but when this does not happen many consumers with snagging issues can find that they have nowhere left to turn.

This is just one of the steps the government is taking to solve the country's housing crisis and improve the rental sector which 8.6 million households are part of.

From April we are introducing new measures to crack down on rogue landlords to ensure tenants are not being exploited by unscrupulous landlords who profit from providing overcrowded, squalid and sometimes dangerous homes.

Today's consultation will be crucial to improving the complaints process across the market, driving forward a higher standard for service in housing.

The 8 week [consultation](#) will provide an invaluable insight into the views and experiences of people, specifically addressing 3 key areas:

- the effectiveness of the current complaint process, or if more can be done to improve the experience
- what standard of service should be expected and if a single housing ombudsman is needed
- how to fill the existing gaps in the current system, such as private landlords not having to register with a redress scheme

The consultation will begin on the 18 February, with an online form being available to housing consumers until the 16 April 2018.

This consultation is open to all including: tenants, landlords, homeowners, and existing ombudsman schemes.

The Ministry will provide more information on future proposals to the housing redress process following the conclusion of this consultation.

Issues relating to social tenants will be considered in the social housing green paper, which is due to be published later in the year.

Currently, there are multiple providers of redress that cover some aspects of home buying and renting, but not all. Membership of ombudsman schemes is compulsory for some groups, but not for others.

In England, there are currently 3.9 million households in the social rented sector and 4.7 million in the private rented sector.

Press release: It's time to start planning your royal wedding celebrations

With just 3 months to go until the royal wedding, it's time to start thinking about how you can join in the celebrations on 19 May.

Holding a street party is a great way to get together with your neighbours to celebrate this special day and we're providing a handy guide to organising one, including helpful tips and steps to take.

Our online guidance helps bust popular myths and provides a useful checklist and practical advice for what is needed to anyone planning their own street party.

Did you know for example that you don't need a music licence if you want to play music at your street party? Or that you don't need to buy expensive road signs – you can lend or hire them.

Many councils, from Bromley to Salford, have already announced that they are waiving charges for street party road closures, making it easier and cheaper than ever to hold celebrations. The government is urging other councils to follow suit.

When communities come together, acting in partnership with businesses and voluntary organisations, they can achieve amazing things. As past events like the Queen's Diamond Jubilee and the London Olympic Games have shown, these same communities can also throw hugely fun parties and this year's celebrations look to be bigger and better than ever.

Parliamentary Under Secretary of State Jake Berry MP said:

We've made it easier than ever for local residents from all backgrounds to come together to celebrate the royal wedding and we hope councils will get into the spirit by helping people wishing to organise street parties.

With the FA Cup final taking place on the same day, there's never been a better reason to hold a street party and our updated guidance makes clear the steps residents need to take to ensure an enjoyable and safe day is had by all.

The number one tip from our guidance is to plan early by getting in touch with your council at least 4-6 weeks in advance.

The guidance includes a simple form people can use to let their local council know about their plans and information on how to apply for a road closure as

well as information on playing music, insurance and fund raising.

More helpful tips, advice and support for organising a successful event can be found on the [Street Party website](#) and [The Big Lunch website](#).

If you are not be able to arrange a road closure for street party, you can still have an informal 'street meet' on a driveway, parking area, front garden or end of a cul-de-sac that does not require permission from the council as it is on private land. See further information on [street meets](#).

See the [guidance on holding a street party](#). It is due to be updated very shortly.

[Press release: Two-thirds of motorists would risk their lives in a flood](#)

A shocking two-thirds of drivers would gamble with their safety by driving through floodwater

A shocking two-thirds of drivers would gamble with their safety by driving through floodwater – even though this is the leading cause of death during a flood, new figures have revealed.

In a survey commissioned by the Environment Agency and the AA, 68% of motorists admitted they'd take the risk rather than find a safer route.

The alarming figures emerge as the Environment Agency runs its campaign warning people across the country to be prepared for flooding in advance by [checking their risk and signing up for free warnings](#)

The AA has rescued more than 14,500 drivers from floods since 2013 with the top spot being Rufford Lane in Newark, Nottinghamshire, where over 100 rescues have been carried out in the last 5 years.

Driving through floodwater puts the lives of drivers and their passengers on the line, risks the safety of emergency responders, and often causes serious damage to the vehicle, with three-quarters of flood-damaged cars ultimately being written off.

Caroline Douglass, Director of Incident Management and Resilience at the Environment Agency, said:

The results of this survey are extremely concerning – no one should put their own life or those of their friends and family at risk during a flood. Just 30cm of water can float a family car, and

smaller cars take even less.

If you're driving long distances this winter, please check online for any flood warnings in force along your route, and if you find your way blocked by floodwater, never take the risk – turn around and find another way.

Vince Crane, AA Patrol of the Year, said:

If the road ahead is flooded, don't chance it – flood water can be deceptively deep and can mask other hazards on the road.

It only takes an egg-cupful of water to be sucked into your engine to wreck it and on many cars, the engine's air intake is low down at the front.

As well as the damage to your car, attempting to drive through flood water puts you and your passengers in danger – so it's just not worth the risk.

The survey of more than 18,000 AA members, carried out by Populus also found that:

5.2 million homes and businesses in England are at risk of flooding. This winter the Environment Agency is encouraging people to be prepared and stay safe during flooding by [checking their flood risk online](#).

For more information on driving in heavy rain and standing water visit the [AA's website](#).

The top 10 spots for rescues from flood water January 2013 – December 2017 were:

Location	Breakdown
Rufford lane, Newark, Nottingham	101
Slash Lane, Barrow upon Soar, Loughborough	77
Houndsfield Lane, Shirley, Solihull	47
Bridgenorth Road, Trescott, Wolverhampton	39
Riverside, Eynsford, Dartford, Kent	39
Bucklebury, West Berkshire	32
Mountsorrel, Loughborough	31
Hawkswood Lane, Fulmer, Gerrards Cross	31
Winterbourne, Wiltshire	30
Mill Lane, Brockenhurst, Hampshire	30

Press release: Charity Commission announces suite of steps on safeguarding

The Charity Commission has announced a suite of measures to help ensure charities learn the wider lessons from recent safeguarding revelations involving Oxfam and other charities, and to strengthen public trust and confidence in charities.

Summit on safeguarding in UK charities

The Secretary of State for International Development has already announced a joint DfID/Charity Commission safeguarding summit with charities and umbrella bodies working internationally.

As the Commission has consistently made clear, the need to strengthen and assure safeguarding is not limited to charities working internationally. The Charity Commission is therefore announcing today a second summit for charities and umbrella bodies working in the UK, to be co-chaired by the Minister for Civil Society, Tracey Crouch MP.

The summit will be an opportunity to reaffirm how vital it is that safeguarding is a key governance priority for charities, and to:

- establish a shared understanding of the safeguarding challenges facing charities working in the UK and emphasise the importance of maintaining public trust in the sector
- hear the sector's ideas for solutions and what actions they are taking and will take
- agree and commit to actions jointly and individually to strengthen the safeguarding capability and capacity of charities working across the UK

Both summits will involve charity regulators in Scotland and Northern Ireland to ensure a coordinated approach across borders.

Helen Stephenson CBE, Chief Executive of the Charity Commission said:

The Commission's actions and messages over the past few years demonstrate the top priority we expect charities to give to safeguarding, and the priority we place on ensuring trustees meet their legal duties, and public expectations, around this.

But recent revelations have shocked us all and brought a new focus on how charities deal with these issues. We want to do everything we can, using our authority as regulator, to ensure that safeguarding is prioritised in all charities – not just those

working with groups traditionally considered at risk. That's what these two summits are about.

At the heart of all this lies culture, governance and leadership in charities. Policies, procedures and formal systems – vital as they are – do not alone prevent safeguarding incidents, or ensure charities respond appropriately when incidents occur. The public rightly expect charities to be safe places, and for charity leaders to ensure their organisation lives its values, in everything they do.

New Charity Commission taskforce to handle the recent increase in safeguarding incident reports

The Commission is establishing a taskforce, including staff from across the Commission, to deal with the increased volume of safeguarding serious incident reports which it is already experiencing since the Oxfam story first appeared. The team will also undertake proactive work to ensure prompt and full reporting of serious safeguarding incidents, and give advice to charities reporting safeguarding incidents on appropriate actions. In addition the team will undertake a 'deep dive' of existing serious incident reporting records to ensure any gaps in full and frank disclosure are identified and necessary follow up actions, for charities or the regulator, have been completed. We will intervene in serious cases where we are concerned that trustees are not fulfilling their legal duties.

It is also reissuing its previous alert to all charities emphasising the importance of full and frank disclosure.

Helen Stephenson said:

Following alerts we issued in December 2017, and the recent public concerns following the events with Oxfam, we are already seeing increased reporting by charities, including historic incidents. While I am confident of the Commission's record on tackling issues which have been fully and frankly reported, I want to be 100% certain that we have done everything in our power to ensure reports we received, including those which we have cause to believe may be incomplete or inadequate, were properly handled, ensure follow up and to give regulatory advice to charities on the right actions to take. The team's work will reassure us, and the public, that charities have and are being transparent and open with the regulator, and that we are holding charities properly to account. It goes without saying that we will deal swiftly and robustly with concerns that this work discovers.

Additional safeguarding expertise

In addition to its existing engagement with various safeguarding experts in charities and across partner agencies, the regulator will also use independent experts on safeguarding, both in the international context and in the UK, to advise and support the work of the taskforce, the investigations team leading the Oxfam inquiry, and the two charity summits.

The Commission continues to work closely with other government departments, including DfID, law enforcement, the Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS), and other agencies with specific safeguarding responsibilities such as the Care Quality Commission and social services, to ensure each accesses the right expertise and shares information appropriately, in order to strengthen the work across government to identify and respond to concerns about safeguarding in charities.

Communication with informants

Helen Stephenson has also said she wants the organisation to review the way in which it communicates with informants who raise serious regulatory concerns that result in regulatory action.

She said:

It has become clear to me over the past week or so that whistle-blowers who come to us with serious concerns about charities are not always made aware of the difference their reports have made. That can't be right. People who make what is often a brave decision to come to the regulator with important information, should, where appropriate, be reassured that we have acted on their concerns. So I want us to look carefully at the way in which we communicate with those who bring vital information to us that leads to serious regulatory action.

Key recent work on safeguarding by regulator

- [Annual report on compliance case work](#) published in February 2018 – report highlights growing case work involving safeguarding issues, and reminds charities to prioritise safeguarding in their charities.
- [Safeguarding strategy](#) updated in December 2017: the new strategy makes clear that safeguarding is a key governance priority for all charities, not just those working with groups traditionally considered vulnerable. It also says charities must “provide a safe and trusted environment which safeguards anyone who comes into contact with it including beneficiaries, staff and volunteers”.
- [Safeguarding alert](#) issued in December 2017 warning charities to a) report incidents now if they have failed to in the past and b) review their safeguarding policy and procedures if they have not done so in the last 12 months. The Commission will reissue that alert to all charities

emphasising the importance of full and frank disclosure.

- [Safeguarding alert](#) issued in October 2017 to newly registered veterans charities, following a proactive case-working project which highlighted concerns around safeguarding in some newly registered military charities.
- [Guidance on reporting serious incidents](#) – updated in September 2017. This followed a consultation with charities. In publishing the new guidance, the Commission highlighted its concerns that charities continue to underreport incidents.

Ends

Notes to editors

1. The Charity Commission is the regulator of charities in England and Wales.
2. On 15 February 2018, the Commission set out the [scope of its inquiry into Oxfam](#).
3. Reports detailing the [conclusions and outcomes of the Commission's case work](#) can be found on GOV.UK.
4. On February 12, the Secretary of State for International Development [issued a statement setting out a series of measures to tackle sexual exploitation and abuse](#), and wrote to UK charities working overseas funded by the Department, calling on them to step up and do more on these issues. Yesterday (16 February) she issued a further statement which is available on [GOV.UK](#). Contact details: 020 7023 0600.