

Press release: Pair guilty of illegal fishing in County Durham

The Environment Agency has prosecuted two County Durham men for poaching and using illegal fishing equipment.

Ian David Cook, 38, of The Grove, Consett, and Michael Fullerton, 22, of Surrey Crescent, also in Consett, were each given a 12 month conditional discharge by Newton Aycliffe Magistrates' Court on 6 December 2017 after pleading guilty to the offences. They were also each ordered to pay £420 costs.

Magistrates heard that on 30 November 2016 Environment Agency fisheries enforcement officers observed Cook and Fullerton shining torches into the upper River Browney near West Butsfield, during a targeted evening patrol.

The River Browney and its catchment is an important and improving area for migratory fish, especially sea trout. Recent improvements to aid fish passage and water quality and a robust approach to enforcement have led to an increase in returning fish but at present, stocks remain low and vulnerable.

After detaining the men they seized two torches and a landing net containing three dead sea trout, each at various stages of spawning. Under the Salmon & Freshwater Fisheries Act 1975, lights are prohibited, as are landing nets if used without an authorised rod and line. It is also illegal to fish during the close season for migratory fish.

During interview, Fullerton admitted to shining the torch into the river and using the net to take fish but denied knowing it was illegal. He also denied knowing it was illegal to take fish during the close season. This was despite him holding a rod licence at the time, which spells out when and how legal fishing can be undertaken. Cook confirmed he understood that using a lamp to either take or assist in taking fish is an offence.

Kevin Summerson of the Environment Agency said:

This was a serious poaching incident using illegal instruments that could have had a severe impact on future stocks of sea trout in the River Browney. At this time of year sea trout are returning to rivers to spawn and protecting returning fish is vital to maintaining a healthy fish population.

That's why our fisheries enforcement officers work hard to target those people flouting the law and we won't hesitate to take action.

The conditional discharge will appear on Fullerton and Cook's criminal record. If either commits another crime within the next 12 months they can be sentenced for the first offence and the new offence.

Anyone witnessing illegal fishing incidents in progress can report it directly to the Environment Agency hotline on 0800 80 70 60. Information on illegal fishing and environmental crime can also be reported anonymously to Crime stoppers on 0800 555 111.

Press release: Severn bridges transfer to public ownership draws closer

On Monday 8 January 2018 the responsibility for the operations, maintenance and vehicle charges for the bridges will be managed and run by Highways England, the Government-owned company which looks after England's strategic network of motorways and major A-roads.

At the same time all vehicle charges will be exempt from VAT, reducing the overall charge for individual crossings from £6.70 to £5.60.

Clive Perkin, Highways England Divisional Director of Strategy and Planning, explained:

We want to remind drivers that when Highways England takes over management of the bridges, prices will be reduced as they will no longer be subject to VAT.

This is good news for private vehicle drivers as this is the first step in the Government's commitment to abolishing the bridge tolls by the end of 2018. Today we are setting out how people can prepay for their crossings when the change takes place.

UK Government Secretary of State for Wales Alun Cairns said:

Our decision to abolish the Severn tolls sends a powerful message to businesses, commuters and tourists that the UK Government is committed to strengthening the Welsh economy.

By strengthening the links between communities in south Wales and south-west England, we will transform the joint economic prospects of both regions, creating a growth corridor stretching from Cardiff through Newport to Bristol.

I want to ensure that visitors and investors know what Wales has to offer and I want the world to know our nation is open for business.

Holders of TAGs – the prepayment system that allows regular travellers to

cross without stopping to pay manually – have been informed of the new arrangements by letter this week.

Drivers paying by direct debit will not need to take any action – their accounts and balances will be transferred automatically and their payments adjusted to reflect the new charges.

Those who pay by top-up with a Trip TAG through online banking will need to update their payment details to Highways England's account from 8 January 2018. Account holders will still be able to pay through the website or phone.

After 8 January the crossings will operate as normal with just a few small changes to signs at the toll plazas.

Staff currently employed with Severn Crossing PLC have all been offered employment with Highways England.

Details of the changes and actions necessary are set out in the letters and are also available on the [Severn Bridges website](#). TAG holders with any queries can also contact the TAG helpline on 01454 633 522.

Background information

Severn Bridges (M4 and M48) monthly charges after 8 January 2018:

Category 1: £5.60, with the Season/Shared TAG at £98.56 (20% discount based on 22 trips per month).

Category 2: £11.20, with the Season/Shared TAG at £197.12 (20% discount based on 22 trips per month).

Category 3: £16.70, with the Season/Shared TAG at £330.66 (10% discount based on 22 trips per month).

Vehicle Category	Current daily toll charges	Daily charges after 8 January 2018
Category 1 (Cars and other vehicles up to 9 seats)	£6.70	£5.60
Category 2 (Goods vehicles up to 3.5 tonnes, small buses)	£13.40	£11.20
Category 3 (Goods vehicles over 3.5 tonnes, large buses)	£20.00	£16.70

General enquiries

Members of the public should contact the Highways England customer contact centre on 0300 123 5000.

Media enquiries

Journalists should contact the Highways England press office on 0844 693 1448 and use the menu to speak to the most appropriate press officer.

News story: Chinese Vice Premier attends UK/China People to People Dialogue

As part of her four day visit to the UK for the 2017 UK-China People to People Dialogue (P2P), Chinese Vice Premier Madame Liu arrived in London on Tuesday 5th December. Mme Liu arrived in London from Edinburgh, where she met First Minister Nicola Sturgeon and received an honorary degree from Edinburgh University.

Madame Liu participated in a variety of events in London, including a meeting with Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson, a drop-in meeting with Prime Minister Theresa May and an Audience with HRH The Princess Royal.

The P2P promotes UK-China collaboration on issues that are important to people in both our countries, including health, education and culture. The high level engagement between Mme Liu and UK figures will further deepen Britain's relationship with China and lay the ground for future collaboration.

On Tuesday 5th December, Mme Liu Yandong met Prime Minister Theresa May. Secretary of State for Health Jeremy Hunt hosted the meeting in Downing Street. The Prime Minister and Vice Premier Liu discussed various topics including the UK-China relationship, women's empowerment and education.

On the morning of Wednesday 6th December, HRH The Princess Royal hosted Chinese Vice-Premier Mme Liu Yandong for an Audience at Buckingham Palace. The pair established a firm friendship in July when HRH The Princess Royal visited Beijing on her tour of China.

On Wednesday 6th December, Mme Liu visited Oxford where she delivered a speech to Oxford University students at the Sheldonian Theatre. In her speech, Mme Liu discussed the Golden Era of UK-China relations.

On Thursday 7th December, Mme Liu Co-Chaired the 5th Plenary Session of the UK-China People to People Dialogue with Secretary of State for Health Jeremy Hunt. During the plenary session, Mme Liu and SoS Hunt celebrated our achievements throughout the 5 years of P2P, including advancements in women's equality and educational exchange.

On Thursday 7th December, Mme Liu met the Foreign Secretary in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. During the meeting, the pair discussed their vision for the UK-China relationship, the Middle East peace process and tackling the Illegal Wildlife Trade.

Press release: First UK Minister visit to Russia in two years

Minister for Europe Sir Alan Duncan visited Russia to discuss international security issues ahead of the Foreign Secretary's visit later this month.

Minister for Europe Sir Alan Duncan used the opportunity, the first Ministerial visit to Russia for two years, to discuss international security issues ahead of the Foreign Secretary's visit later this month.

Meeting the Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Vladimir Titov, the two Ministers agreed that the strong cooperation shown around security and policing ahead of next summer's World Cup in Russia is hugely important and proves the value of working together on issues of mutual interest.

Minister for Europe Sir Alan Duncan said:

The UK's approach of robust engagement with Russia is the right one. We will continue to engage with Russia, agreeing where we can but challenging when we do not.

In my wide-ranging meeting with First Deputy Foreign Minister Titov, I thanked him for the efforts Russia have shown in preparing for the World Cup next summer. We agreed that where our interests align, there is huge value in cooperation.

As permanent members of the UN Security Council, my visit, and indeed the forthcoming visit by the Foreign Secretary, are vital opportunities to discuss matters of international security such as Ukraine, Syria, Iran and North Korea.

The Minister also visited the venue for the 2018 World Cup Final, the Luzhniki Stadium, and saw the preparations underway which have included visits by UK Police.

Press release: Ten minute passport

renewal service extends to 16 to 25 year olds

The online passport renewal service, which takes an average of 10 minutes to complete, has previously only been available to people over the age of 26.

An HMP0 survey found that 63 percent of people would prefer to renew their passport online. Over 300,000 16 to 25 year olds renew their passport each year, the expansion means that they will all be able to benefit from the service which provides an easy, convenient and secure service to British nationals across the globe.

Immigration Minister Brandon Lewis said:

This service makes it easier than ever before to renew your passport and I am delighted that we are now able to offer it to 16 to 25 year olds.

We are harnessing technology to transform our services. As part of this service, customers are able to digitally upload pictures taken on their tablet or smartphone, and even those taken at photo shops or booths, to their passport application.

We want to ensure we have a modern and easy-to-use service for our millions of passport holders and applicants.

The survey also found that 84 percent of women and 74 percent of men were embarrassed to some extent by their current passport photograph.

In addition over 30 percent of applicants report that it can take them multiple attempts to take a compliant passport photo themselves. This is one of the reasons HMP0 have significantly increased the digital offering. This includes the option to get the photo taken in a photo booth or shop where a compliant photo is uploaded and a special code is generated that is then used to start your online application. This will make applying for a passport easier and help applicants to get their passport photo right the first time.

HMP0 issue 6 million passports every year, and these new services make the process of applying for a passport even more simple and convenient.

Notes to editors

To renew your passport online visit www.gov.uk/apply-renew-passport