

Multimillion-pound initiative to improve local roads across England

- councils across the country to receive millions of pounds to upgrade traffic signals
- new data standard for monitoring road condition to be developed, providing more useful data for local authorities and the Department for Transport (DfT)
- government continues to encourage research into new and innovative technology, such as 3D printing and drones, to help find and fix potholes faster and more effectively

A multimillion-pound scheme to improve traffic signals and a commitment to explore how new technology – such as drones and 3D printing – could be used to find and fix potholes are part of a raft of measures announced by Transport Secretary Grant Shapps today (13 August 2021).

The package will see councils across England receive a share of £15 million in government funding to improve their traffic light systems to cut congestion, boost safety and reduce journey times and emissions – a commitment set out in the recently announced [Transport decarbonisation plan](#).

In addition to announcing today's funding, the government has also published the findings from a new initiative called the [Digital Intelligence Brokerage \(DIB\)](#), which aims to encourage more work with small and medium enterprises outside of the transport sector and to speed up research into new and innovative ways to fix potholes.

The DIB has already made waves in this area, identifying:

- graphite nanoparticles in asphalt to reduce surface cracks
- the use of bio-bitumen materials to create environmentally friendly road surfaces which contribute to the decarbonisation of highways maintenance
- automated repair operations to minimise risk to road maintenance workers

This work supports wider government commitments to use advanced technology, such as drones to spot defects in roads and 3D printing to repair cracks.

This all comes as the government continues its drive to level up the country's transport network and build back better from the pandemic.

Transport Secretary Grant Shapps said:

Whether you're a motorist, cyclist or pedestrian, every road-user across our country deserves the best possible journey. That's why, despite already having some of the best and safest roads in the world, this government is providing millions of pounds to improve them further still.

This vital funding and work will cut journey times for millions of people, reduce emissions and keep the UK at the forefront of technological developments in roads maintenance as we continue to invest in local economies and build back both better and greener from the pandemic.

RAC Head of Roads Policy Nicholas Lyes said:

Additional investment to cut congestion and make pothole repairs better for the future is very welcome. Improving traffic lights can make a significant difference to local roads by efficiently maximising the number of vehicles that can safely pass through junctions while hitting a pothole can be an expensive and even a dangerous experience.

We look forward to seeing how drivers and road users more widely can benefit from the use of 21st-century technology to repair their local roads more quickly.

The £15 million announced today builds on the £1.125 billion that has already been made available to local authorities for local road maintenance.

Councils will be expected to not only use the extra funding to repair and improve existing traffic signals but also consider how to future-proof their local road networks and prepare for technological innovations.

In addition to these measures, DfT has also today announced the development of a [new data standard for local road condition monitoring](#), which will allow councils to use multiple technologies to carry out road condition surveys for national reporting purposes. This will lead to more accurate and useful data being collected.

£100,000 of funding is also being put towards the [Transport Technology Forum](#). The open forum is funded by the DfT and [Innovate UK](#) and brings together road operators and suppliers from across the industry to offer their skills and experience to drive technological advances in the traffic management sector.

[Record number of households benefit from Help to Buy as loans pass £20bn](#)

- Figures released today show a record number of people buying a home through the Help to Buy: equity loan scheme
- Over £20 billion has been lent to help people into homeownership since start of the scheme

- Despite impact of COVID-19 housing market remains healthy as more first-time buyers get on the housing ladder
- Government committed to providing a realistic and affordable route into home ownership

The number of people purchasing a home through the Help to Buy scheme is at an all-time high, according to figures released today (13 August 2021).

The latest [Help to Buy statistics](#) show that in the financial year 2020-21 over 55,000 households bought their home with the support of Help to Buy: equity loan – a record year for the scheme.

Since the scheme was introduced 328,506 households have now purchased a home through Help to Buy.

In total, the value of these equity loans has reached over £20 billion, with the value of the properties sold under the scheme going past the £90 billion mark.

The scheme helps first-time buyers on to the housing ladder by providing a loan to put towards the cost of buying a newly built home.

Today's figures show the appetite for home ownership remains high across the country with the government committed to supporting first-time buyers and hard-working families into home ownership.

It was also announced earlier in the week that home builders across the country can [bid for a share of £150 million to support roll-out of the new First Homes scheme](#) helping local first-time buyers onto the housing ladder.

Housing Secretary Robert Jenrick MP said:

Over 55,000 households bought their home with the support of Help to Buy equity loan last year: a record year for the scheme, which is helping young people and first-time buyers feel the sense of pride and achievement that comes with owning your own home.

Whether it be Help to Buy, the 95% mortgage guarantee scheme or First Homes – we're doing everything we can to make home buying an affordable and realistic ambition.

Holly Roberts, 27, is one of the thousands of people who have benefitted from the scheme over the past year having recently purchased a property in Poole, Dorset.

Holly said:

It feels really good to have my own home, I just love having my own place and knowing that I did that through my own hard work.

I wouldn't have been able to get on the housing ladder without Help to Buy. That equity loan just helped me bridge the gap between what I could borrow from a mortgage and the sort of prices I was looking at around this area.

I would recommend help to buy to other people. I genuinely think it is such a good government scheme.

First-time buyers can find the right home ownership scheme for them, including Help to Buy: equity loans, via the [Own Your Home website](#) which provides a single gateway for all routes on to the housing ladder.

The website is an easy and accessible way for first-time buyers to start their home ownership journey and find the right government scheme for them.

[Another successful year for Hen Harrier breeding in England](#)

Natural England and partners, including the RSPB, have recorded the best year for hen harrier breeding in England since the 1960s with 84 chicks fledged from nests across uplands in County Durham, Cumbria, Lancashire, Northumberland and Yorkshire.

Hen harriers were once found across upland and lowland Britain including throughout many English counties, however after 1830 it became an exceptionally rare breeding bird in England due to illegal persecution. The hen harrier now is one of England's rarest breeding birds of prey.

Hen harriers are one of our most distinctive birds with a characteristic owl-like face with stiff facial feathers that direct sound toward their ears to enable them to hunt more effectively.

This is the fifth successive year of increases, following a low in 2016 in which only 8 chicks fledged. This year has also been the strongest for breeding numbers since [Defra's Hen Harrier Action Plan](#) was established to monitor hen harriers to understand why numbers are so low.

Dave Slater, Director for Wildlife Licensing and Enforcement Cases at Natural England, said:

It is wonderful that these striking birds have seen another lift in their breeding numbers this year. It is thanks to all those involved – volunteers, landowners, and staff from all our partner organisations who have worked so hard to protect, encourage and monitor these vulnerable birds.

However, the stark reality is that illegal persecution is still rife in their habitats, and, sadly, too many birds still go missing in unexplained circumstances.

In recent years, tagging has increased our knowledge of their ecology and movements. Despite this year's success, hen harriers are critically endangered in England and there is a long way to go, if we are to achieve a permanent recovery.

This year has also seen the first successful year of breeding for brood-managed birds. Of the eight chicks raised in captivity in 2020 and re-released, six survived their first winter, and four of these birds went on to successfully breed.

Natural England is involved in a number of initiatives to help ensure hen harriers recover including through Defra's Hen Harrier Action Plan.

These include:

- Satellite tracking to improve understanding of the birds' movements and behaviour
- Issuing licences to allow people to provide additional food to breeding Hen Harriers. Setting up a project to reintroduce Hen Harriers to new breeding habitats in southern England.
- Working with the National Wildlife Crime Unit, through a secondment of a senior enforcement officer from NE into the police, to deliver improvements in how Natural England, the police, local communities and other relevant stakeholders can work together to prevent, identify, and take effective enforcement action in relation to raptor persecution incidents.
- Brood management, in which eggs or nestlings are taken from the wild, reared safely in captivity, and later released, with the aim of contributing healthy adults to the breeding population and reducing persecution.

The hen harrier is considered vulnerable within Europe and is on the red-list of birds of conservation concern in the UK. It is a species of principal importance for biodiversity conservation in England.

- The latest information about the actions taken under the Hen Harrier Action Plan can be found [here](#)
- A wide range of organisations have come together to work in partnership to ensure that the hen harrier chicks are well looked after and protected for the future. These include: Natural England, RSPB, Forestry Commission, the Moorland Association, United Utilities, the National Trust, Hawk and Owl Trust, Yorkshire Dales National Park Authority, Northumberland National Park Authority, Peak District National Park Authority, Nidderdale & Forest of Bowland Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty and Northumberland Wildlife Trust, Game & Wildlife Conservation Trust, local police forces, individual Estates and their keepers, farmers, and a large number of volunteer raptor enthusiasts.

- The hen harrier is listed on Annex 1 of the EC Birds Directive as it is considered vulnerable within Europe and is on the red-list of birds of conservation concern in the UK. It is a species of principal importance for biodiversity conservation in England under Section 41 of the Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act 2006.
-

[UK marks anniversary of the 4 August Beirut blast](#)

On the one-year anniversary of the devastating 4 August port blast that tore Beirut apart, killing more than 200 people and injuring thousands, the British Embassy Beirut held a series of events to commemorate the day. In his messages over the past week, British Ambassador to Lebanon Ian Collard told of his empathy for the Lebanese people's sense of devastation and quest for justice. He paid tribute to the bravery of front-line workers that day and called on Lebanese leaders to deliver a fair and transparent investigation.

Ambassador Collard added:

In Beirut's hour of need, the United Kingdom was among the first of Lebanon's international partners to respond to the blast and we will continue to stand by the people of Lebanon.

The UK's response to the 4 August blast included delivering military aid to the Lebanese Armed Forces, and deploying teams of humanitarian, medical and military specialists. Through the British Red Cross, the UK delivered PPE, ambulances, blood transfusion services, and more to the Lebanese Red Cross. Working with international partners, we provided shelter, psychosocial support, safe spaces, Gender Based Violence outreach to women and girls, counselling and legal assistance, and rehabilitation services including to persons with disabilities. We also supported the NGO, March Lebanon's Beirut Relief programme, rehabilitating Civil Defence units, the Fire Department, cultural heritage sites and more.

On the morning of 4 August 2021, with the Embassy's Union Jack flag at half-mast, the British Ambassador led embassy staff in a memorial service at the Commonwealth War Graves Cemetery, Qasqas. The service was set to solemn music played by the band of the Queen's Royal Hussars, and attended by the UK's Defence Senior Advisor to the Middle East, Air Marshal Sammy Sampson, who was visiting. British Embassy and British Council colleagues paid tribute to those, including friends and relatives, whose lives were lost and others who were impacted on that tragic day.

A few minutes after 6 p.m., British Embassy staff held an online vigil to

remember lost loved ones, family and friends, and all those affected by the blast. It was a moment to reflect on what happened a year ago, share experiences and support collective healing.

On the eve of the anniversary, the British Ambassador hosted a reception dedicated to frontline workers where he paid tribute to selflessness of heroes from the Red Cross to firefighters, members of civil society and NGOs, unknown soldiers and others for their response in the immediate aftermath of the blast and during the days that followed. He reiterated the UK's call on Lebanon's leaders for 'transparency and accountability that is needed to bring closure to the victims, their families and all of the people who continue to suffer'.

In a recorded video message at an international conference for Lebanon, British Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab said:

As we remember the terrible Beirut blast one year ago, I reiterate the UK's strong support for the Lebanese people and urge Lebanon's leaders to deliver justice and accountability. They must form a government capable of addressing the crisis the country faces'. He added: 'The international community is ready to assist if they follow this path. But if they fail, Lebanon's friends must look at how we can tackle the corruption that has seen narrow vested interests placed above the needs of the people.'

The anniversary coincided with the visit of the UK Defence Senior Advisor to the Middle East Air Marshal Sammy Sampson who held a series of meetings with Lebanese officials.

Government scales up support to protect the world's ocean with multimillion boost for marine recovery

Projects to tackle climate change and protect the world's ocean have been given a major boost with the first £16.2 million of funding from the UK's £500 million Blue Planet Fund announced today.

The programmes, financed from the UK's overseas aid budget, will increase marine protection, tackle plastic pollution and the decline of global coral reefs, as well as using the UK's world-leading expertise to help respond to marine pollution disasters such as the Xpress Pearl in Sri Lanka.

The ocean is a critical carbon sink which every year absorbs almost a third

of global CO2 emissions. Around the globe, the ocean supports the livelihoods of one in every ten people, including some of the poorest and most vulnerable.

In the run up to the UK hosting the COP26 climate talks in November, the government is working with developing countries to take action to protect and restore our oceans.

The projects receiving funding include the launch of a new UK-led programme which will help developing countries partner with the UK's world-leading scientists to better manage marine protected areas, and improve our understanding of the impacts of climate change and contaminants in the ocean.

The Ocean Country Partnership Programme (OCP) already has work underway with UK scientists at the Centre for Environment, Fisheries and Aquaculture Science (Cefas) providing analysis of water samples from Sri Lanka to contribute to the ongoing response to the Xpress Pearl environmental disaster in June.

Environment Secretary, George Eustice, said:

The UK is a global leader in marine protection and will continue to advocate for ambitious climate and ocean action at COP26 this year.

Our shared ocean is a vital resource and provides habitat to precious marine life, as well as supporting the livelihoods of one in every ten people worldwide.

The Blue Planet Fund will support many developing countries on the front line of climate change to reduce poverty and improve the health of their seas.

Coral reefs support 25% of marine life and provide benefits to thousands of species – qualities that make them one of the world's most valuable ecosystems. However, they are also extremely vulnerable to climate change and pollution. Today's investment will support work by the [Global Fund for Coral Reefs \(GFCR\)](#) in the Caribbean, Indian Ocean, Pacific and Southeast Asia by exploring techniques such as sewage treatment and the management of marine protected areas to help save these suffering ecosystems.

Marine pollution, including plastic pollution, is a significant pressure on the marine environment – not only does it threaten key species and ecosystems in the world's ocean, it also affects the health and livelihoods of those living in coastal regions. A share of the £16.2m will also go towards the expansion of the [Global Plastic Action Partnership \(GPAP\)](#)'s pioneering work in developing countries and facilitate a united effort against plastic waste globally. Since its launch in 2018, GPAP secured a commitment by Indonesia to reduce 70% of mismanaged waste by 2025 and a commitment by Viet Nam to reduce marine plastic waste by 75% by 2030, among others.

The UK is also leading calls for a new global '30by30' target to protect at

least 30% of the land and at least 30% of the ocean by 2030. Over eighty countries now support the marine protection target, and the Blue Planet Fund will help make sure that 30by30 becomes a reality.