

Newt conservation and sustainable development in Norfolk and Suffolk

The 'District Level Licensing' scheme will create and restore a network of ponds, providing vital habitat across the 2 counties and adding to the characterful wooded countryside of the Suffolk coast and heaths, the wide wetland habitats of the Norfolk broads and beyond.

The scheme works by taking payments from housing and other developers and investing them in 4 times the number of ponds that were impacted by their construction projects.

In the past, landowners or housing developers in Norfolk and Suffolk had to apply for a licence before building on or around the places where newts live. Seasonal restrictions led to delays and uncertainty over the costs and scheduling of planned development.

Now, a 'landscape-scale' approach to licensing means that developers can make a simple, straightforward application and payment to join their local, area-wide scheme.

The one-off payment covers the creation, restoration, maintenance and monitoring of ponds in the area for 25 years, in locations specially selected to provide the best habitat for great crested newts. The award-winning, evidence-based scheme will help support and link up local populations of this yellow-bellied amphibian.

The initiative is timely, contributing to the government's plans to 'Build Back Greener' and fuel the UK's economic recovery, in turn providing social and economic benefits for local communities.

Martin Horlock, Environment Manager, Norfolk County Council, said:

District Level Licencing provides us with a useful tool to help conserve this species, which is threatened throughout its European range. Developers using this approach will bring about lots of high-value, secure ponds for newts which are well managed and monitored for the long term. The scheme offers developers certainty in terms of costs and timescales, and it means developments that have been through planning will not be held up by protracted post-planning licensing.

Hannah Thacker, Natural England Area Manager for Norfolk and Suffolk, said:

This initiative is a fantastic example of how working in partnership at a landscape scale can provide benefits for our largest species of newt, our local communities and other wildlife,

as well as reducing the burden for developers – a true win-win.

Norfolk and Suffolk are the latest areas to launch a district level licensing scheme, joining 77 others including Kent, Cheshire, Essex, Shropshire and Greater Manchester. Natural England is working to expand the initiative to 150 local authorities across the country, as part of a programme funded by the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government.

UN Human Rights Council 45: Interactive Dialogue on the Democratic Republic of the Congo with the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights

Thank you, Madam President,

The UK thanks the United Nations Joint Office for Human Rights, the High Commissioner, and the Expert team on Kasai for their reports and continued work to support the improvement of the human rights situation in DRC. We note the reports' recognition of government efforts to improve human rights and tackle corruption. We call on the Government of DRC to commit to achieving further progress and reforms, including by taking all necessary measures to address human rights violations and combat the culture of impunity that persists in DRC.

The UK remains concerned by the human rights situation in DRC. The increase in abuses committed by armed groups, the widespread nature of conflict-related sexual and gender-based violence, continued human rights violations by state agents and recent restrictions on democratic space are all worrying trends. We are concerned progress made by the Government of DRC risks being undermined and reversed, partly due to the additional challenges presented by Covid-19.

High Commissioner,

We would welcome an update on the measures the Government of DRC is taking to ensure the protection of communities at risk of violence, including conflict-related sexual and gender-based violence, from armed groups and state agents, and on measures to ensure the preservation of open democratic spaces and media freedom. Thank you.

Lord Chancellor's Speech: Opening of the Legal Year Service

It is such a pleasure to be here this evening, a pleasure especially given that we were only able to observe a scaled back service at Westminster Abbey earlier today to mark the opening of the legal year; I am grateful for this opportunity to thank so many of the judiciary and fellow lawyers as I would normally do in Westminster Hall.

I am very pleased as well that so many people have been able to join us virtually, both here and internationally. The only shame of it is that you cannot enjoy the tranquil, reflective surroundings of this, the Temple Church. It is, for me as an Inner Templar, a very familiar place. Whenever I am here, I am reminded that we walk in the footsteps of others who, in many ways, faced the same challenges that we do today.

As the order of service reminds us, William Marshal, 1st Earl of Pembroke, is interred here at Temple. A loyal supporter of King John, Marshal counselled his monarch to sign Magna Carta and end his dispute with the barons. Indeed, his name appears in the original charter, to which those of us living in democracies today owe so much. Marshal stewarded the country through the turbulent end of the reign of John and the early years of the young Henry III – it is down to him that Magna Carta became more than just a quick fix by a desperate king to buy off rebellion.

And as we walk into this church, we walk past the grave of John Selden, a celebrated jurist and parliamentarian in the 17th century and a fellow Inner Templar. Amongst his numerous contributions to law and politics, Selden was a key figure in a lively dispute with the Dutch in the 1620s concerning international maritime law. Some things you might think never really change!

The Rule of Law

As a new legal year begins, my mind turns to the enduring success of our legal system over the centuries, with judicial independence and the Rule of Law at its heart.

When I took my oath of office in both English and Welsh, I swore to uphold and respect these principles. Principles which act as guardians of fairness in our society. In many ways, my role is right at the frontline, where the law meets policy and policy meets the law. There will be tensions at times, which can be frankly, difficult to resolve. Those observing, who aren't privy to all the swirling issues, are naturally and understandably tempted to come to hard and fast conclusions. In my judgement, that can lead to error. When I sat as a part-time judge, I quickly learned that not every ruling that I was asked to make needed to be made at once, and that the fairness of proceedings was enhanced by making key decisions at just the right moment as the evidence progressed.

That is what I apply to my work as Lord Chancellor now. As Lord Chancellor I will of course tackle sensible criticism head on but, ultimately, my focus will remain on discharging my duties in accordance my oath. And when it comes to the professions – barristers, solicitors, legal executives – it is right and proper for practitioners to make the strongest cases possible and do their utmost for their clients within the confines of the law. Sometimes a lawyer will find the argument they advance to be at odds with the Government of the day – but it frankly it is a strength of our mature democracy underpinned by the Rule of Law that such debates can occur.

In a healthy democracy like ours it is inevitable that there will be criticism of both politicians and indeed of lawyers for the work they do. Sometimes that will be robust, tensions will arise, but it is wholly wrong for any professional to be threatened, harassed or worse, attacked simply for doing their job – we must call it out and deal with it. And make the point that those who attack people providing a professional service will be subject to that very same Rule of Law.

The Coronavirus Pandemic

That commitment to the Rule of Law was one of the driving forces behind the government's response to the coronavirus pandemic. As the true scale of the challenge became apparent, our primary concern was, of course, safety. The instinctive and understandable reaction might have been to halt the motors of justice – as many jurisdictions chose to do – but we were mindful that, in many instances, justice simply cannot wait; and that we were duty bound to keep the system moving as much as that was possible.

There has been a gargantuan effort to achieve that – from utilising phone and video technology to allow many hearings to continue happening remotely; to putting in place the necessary social distancing measures, so that some hearings could continue to take place safely in person. I pay tribute to everybody concerned – from the judiciary and those who staff our courts, to those who use and practise within them – for your patience, your resilience and your sheer determination to keep the wheels of justice turning.

We are also making progress across all jurisdictions, opening more rooms and adding capacity through Nightingale Courts.

I am, however, as keenly aware as you are that the restrictions that continue to be in place – and could require tightening as the course of the pandemic changes – mean that we will need to do more. The scale of the challenge is unprecedented, even if the current volume of cases is not, and it could be necessary to look at further creative solutions in the future.

A better system for a different future

The response of the justice system to coronavirus has demonstrated something else that has been so critical to its success through the ages: its ability to change and to adapt in order to meet the needs of our society.

The increased digitisation of our justice system was already a priority

before the virus arrived, because we know that, in our modern world, many users want the option to access the courts as they access other types of services. Continuing to modernise the system will be crucial to safeguarding its ongoing success, which is why I announced in July a major £142m investment to boost technology across our system and to upgrade the court estate. I think it is important that we look at the period ahead not just as a recovery from the virus, but as a renewal for justice in our country. We can use it as an opportunity to improve the system for everyone who uses our courts and tribunals; to create a better system and to continue the tradition of England and Wales leading the way where other jurisdictions follow.

This will make it possible to open up justice to more people and make our society fairer than it ever has been. That is what I believe is possible. There is no doubt that the time ahead of us looks very different than it did just a few short months ago, but I hope and trust we can all work together to realise a smarter justice system for what will be a very different future.

Thank you for listening and I wish everyone here and further afield the very best wishes for the legal year ahead.

[Stark warning to several water companies as environmental performance fails to improve](#)

The Environment Agency has today (2 October) released its annual report on the environmental performance of England's water and sewerage companies, showing that four out of nine companies are falling short of expected standards.

The annual report rates each company in England from 1 star to 4 star, based on a range of measures including serious pollution incidents, pollution per km of sewer pipes and compliance with permits.

It found that:

- Severn Trent and Wessex Water achieved the highest level of performance with 4 star (industry leading)
- Thames, United Utilities and Yorkshire Water are rated as 3 star (good)
- Anglian, Northumbrian and South West Water are rated as 2 star (requiring improvement)
- Southern Water is the first company to be rated as 1 star (poor) since 2015

While the number of serious water quality pollution incidents from water company sewerage and clean water assets has plateaued – with a slight

improvement to 52 compared to 56 in 2018 – the total number of pollution incidents has increased.

In light of these results, both the Environment Secretary George Eustice and the Chair of the Environment Agency, Emma Howard Boyd, will be holding meetings with all underperforming companies to discuss improving their poor performance.

Other action being taken includes:

- Pollution Incident Reduction Plans (PIRPs) – The EA has requested all water companies develop, publish and implement specific plans to reduce the pollution incidents by the end of this year, which the EA can scrutinise and monitor, challenging companies where needed to ensure they deliver.
- Penalties and prosecutions – The EA has brought 44 prosecutions against water companies in the last five years, securing fines of £34 million. £7.9 million has also been donated to environmental and wildlife trusts organisations in the same period through enforcement undertakings, a voluntary agreement which will include a donation to environmental charities to restore any harm done. The EA will also continue to prosecute water companies which fail to uphold the law or cause serious environmental harm.
- Storm Overflows Taskforce – A new Taskforce was set up between Defra, the EA, Ofwat and Water UK earlier this year which will set out proposals to reduce the frequency and volumes of sewage discharged into our water courses.

Environment Agency chair Emma Howard Boyd said:

We cannot transform water quality in the way we all want if water companies' environmental performance continues to backslide. Severn Trent and Wessex Water show high performance is possible, and United Utilities have had no serious pollution incidents for the second year in a row, but the evidence suggests that the rest of the sector isn't listening.

I will be meeting water company chairs in the coming weeks to make it clear that we expect much more. This includes developing, publishing and implementing specific plans by the end of this year to reduce pollution incidents. We will closely follow the delivery of these plans and will apply tough regulation to ensure companies stick by them.

Environment Secretary George Eustice said:

Water companies have a responsibility to act as custodians of the environment and this report for 2019 shows that some are failing to

take their obligations seriously. That is not good enough.

We have the rightly ambitious target in our 25 Year Environment Plan to bring at least three quarters of our waters as close as possible to their natural state as soon as possible and are bringing forward a legally binding target on water quality in the Environment Bill. Our new Environmental Land Management scheme – replacing the EU CAP scheme – will also play a critical part in reducing some of the farming practices which pollute our waters.

Certain water companies must step up and do better, which is why I will be meeting those who are falling short of our expectations to discuss how we can work together to drive better performance.

The Environment Agency has been clear it will continue to take whatever action is needed to protect our waters. Its work with water companies and industry in the last two decades means there is now 60% less phosphate, 70% less ammonia, 50% less cadmium and mercury, and significantly lower levels of copper and lead in waste water.

Environment Minister Rebecca Pow, along with representatives from EA and Ofwat, also met with water company CEOs on 8 September and reiterated the need for improvement specifically on storm overflows, chalk streams and leakage.

Emma Clancy, chief executive of the Consumer Council for Water (CCW), said:

No water company should need reminding that consumers see protecting the environment as a vital part of the water industry's day job and not treated like an optional extra. Whenever a water company pollutes a river, stream or the sea it damages not just the environment but the trust of its customers who pay it in good faith to protect it.

We want to see all water companies keeping their customers regularly informed of their plans and progress in reducing pollution incidents.

Marcus Rink, Chief Inspector of the Drinking Water Inspectorate, said:

Protecting and improving our natural waters enhances the environment we live in as well as improving and managing the catchments for our drinking water. The combined benefit of protecting the environment ultimately reduces risks to our drinking

water resources and minimises the energy and chemicals we need to expend in treatment, securing a better future for all.

I encourage companies to improve environmental performance thereby enhancing the wider synergies of water supply.

Rachel Fletcher, Chief Executive at Ofwat said:

We expect companies to deliver more for customers, society and the environment, so we are disappointed to see an increase in the number of pollution incidents.

At the same time it is good to see two companies, Severn Trent and Wessex Water, improving their performance to reach the highest EPA score, and to see United Utilities demonstrating that the goal of zero serious pollution incidents can be achieved. We expect others to learn from such successes, and our recent price review has also set tougher new performance targets for companies to further reduce pollution incidents.

We all have our part to play, and we will continue to work with government, Environment Agency and the industry to ensure that the sector as a whole can step up and leave the environment in a better place than we find it now.

[The full report is available on .gov.uk](#)

Chinandega residents in Nicaragua better informed about COVID-19

During the month of September, Casa Alianza Nicaragua held a series of community workshops in Chinandega aimed at providing young people and adults with clear, factual information on COVID-19, dispelling myths about the virus and providing training on healthy habits and ways to strengthen the immune system.

The workshops provided a space for participants to speak openly about their understanding of the virus and how they could decrease the incidence of its

transmission. They also presented an opportunity to dispel myths and allay concerns related, for example, to the increased use of infrared thermometers in public buildings. Workshop coordinators reiterated the need for increased hygiene measures to reduce the risk of catching and spreading the virus and directed participants to Spanish-language resources online, such as the World Health Organization's website, where they could find reliable data on the subject.

The workshops also touched on the social impacts of COVID-19, including the increase in gender-based violence, substance abuse and addiction, deteriorating mental health, irregular migration and people trafficking.

A special session dedicated to boosting the immune system was well received, since participants learned about the importance of a balanced diet and exercise in maintaining their health. Additionally, they received tips on preparing nutritious meals based on ingredients and products that they already consumed – an easy way of enhancing the immune system and managing chronic diseases like diabetes, high cholesterol and hypertension. Participants also received a session on managing their mental health and learned different techniques to cope with anxiety and stress.

One workshop attendee said:

This activity has been a real blessing for us. There's a lot of tension in the world, due to COVID-19, there's a lot of stress, which has been detrimental to our mental health. These workshops have allowed us to correct several erroneous ideas in regard to COVID-19. It is now our duty to share the information that we learned with others.

At the closing session, Casa Alianza distributed hygiene kits containing household and personal cleaning products to all participants to help them to prevent the virus from spreading.

The British Embassy is pleased to support this initiative aimed at tackling misinformation around and preventing the spread of COVID-19 in Nicaragua.