

Standing side by side, we'll build back better than ever

The rainbow balloon stickers that still doggedly adhere to seemingly every commercial vehicle in the greater Belfast area brought a much-needed splash of colour and a sizeable serving of hope to the people of Northern Ireland during the toughest days of the Coronavirus lockdown.

Sam McClean, the Belfast sign-maker who has been churning them out non-stop since April, has already raised north of £100,000 for the NHS and local charities – for which I was delighted to give him a special Point of Light award earlier this year.

And while the stickers he has produced say a well-deserved “thank-you” to our amazing key workers, the way in which they rapidly spread to every part of Northern Ireland also says something about the way in which the people of this country pulled together in the fight against this awful virus.

About the way dividing lines that have existed in the past simply ceased to matter in the face of a foe that cares nothing for politics or faith.

In the kind of cross-community co-operation that the late John Hume spent his life promoting, we saw all the people of Northern Ireland coming together and looking out for one another, demonstrating quite remarkable levels of compassion, resilience and good humour.

From manufacturers of baby equipment to distillers of gin, businesses across the country turned their hands to creating handwash, face masks, ventilators and more.

And, just as Northern Ireland faced Coronavirus as one people, so the four nations of the UK faced it as one Union.

Our combined strength and economic heft has allowed us to share and shoulder a burden that would have otherwise proved unbearable.

What does that look like? It looks like almost a quarter of a million people across Northern Ireland having their jobs supported by the UK government's relief schemes.

It looks like nearly five million items of PPE committed to Northern Ireland from UK resources, and 250,000 medical-grade gowns heading from Northern Irish suppliers to frontline workers in England.

Millions of pounds of support to keep Derry and Belfast airports open and vital air links running during the worst of the lockdown.

And, as the Chancellor recently announced, at least £2.2 billion of additional funding for the Northern Ireland Executive this year.

This is the kind of alchemy that happens when Stormont and Westminster work together, hand-in-glove.

And I cannot overstate how important it is that this close co-operation continues as we strive to not simply rebuild in the wake of Coronavirus, but to come back stronger than ever, bigger than ever, better than ever and ready to take advantage of the innumerable opportunities that lie ahead.

So when I meet with the First Minister and deputy First Minister today I won't only be talking about the ongoing pandemic, vital though the fight against it remains.

I'll be talking about the unique freedoms Northern Ireland will enjoy when the Brexit transition period comes to an end in five months from now.

About the £562 million City and Growth Deal programme, bringing opportunity and prosperity not just to Belfast but every part of Northern Ireland.

And about our hugely exciting plans for marking Northern Ireland's centenary – using UK Government funding from the New Decade, New Approach package to support a programme of events that will help people across the UK and around the world celebrate Northern Ireland and its integral place within the United Kingdom.

All of these are serious issues for Northern Ireland's leaders, yes.

But they are also just as important to me as what's going on in London or Liverpool or Leeds.

Because this government has an unshakeable commitment to each and every person in each and every nation of our United Kingdom.

And, just as we continue to fight Coronavirus together, so we will stand side by side as we build back better, constructing the kind of exciting, strong, prosperous Northern Ireland that all of us want to see.

[Rise in top grades as students celebrate A level results](#)

Hundreds of thousands of students have had their university places confirmed with more disadvantaged pupils than ever going on to higher education.

Despite the unprecedented circumstances, grades have remained broadly stable with a 2.5 percentage point rise in A and A* grades at A level, and a 0.7 percentage point rise in overall passes (A*-E), helping students take their next step.

This year's results reflect the robust grading system implemented by Ofqual after exams were cancelled to prevent the spread of coronavirus and keep schools, colleges and wider communities safe.

Results show the right balance has been achieved of making sure students receive the grades they deserve, while being fair to students studying at different schools and colleges across the country through standardisation.

As a result, this year's AS, A level and vocational and technical qualification results will hold the same value for universities, colleges and employers, with students able to progress to the next stage of their education or training as they would in any other year.

Statistics published today show:

- 98.3% received grades A* to E at A level, up from 97.6% in 2019
- Increase in As and A*s awarded at A level, up from 25.5% in 2019 to 27.9%
- Maths remains the most popular subject at A level with a 2.5% increase in entries this year; entries for 18 year olds increased by 7.7%
- Entries for English A level increased by 1.8% despite a decrease in cohort size
- Computing saw an 11.7% increase in entries, with more girls taking up the subject
- A record number of 18 year olds from the most disadvantaged backgrounds in England have been accepted into university – up 7.3% from last year
- Almost 60% of grades received by students are exactly the same as those submitted by schools and colleges
- 96.4% of grades were either the same as the one submitted by schools or colleges or only changed by one grade, testament to the excellent judgement and hard work of teachers
- Results for vocational and technical qualifications are broadly in line with previous years

Whilst the grading system is robust, earlier this week the Government announced a new 'triple lock' process for exam results to give young people added security and make sure the system is fair to all students.

Students can accept the calculated grade received today, appeal to receive a valid mock result, or sit an exam in the autumn. The triple lock will provide an important safety net for the minority of cases where students feel that the calculated grades do not reflect their achievements.

Schools are also able to appeal if they believe their historic data does not reflect the ability of their current students.

Education Secretary Gavin Williamson said:

Receiving your results is always a huge moment, particularly this year after the disruption caused by coronavirus and the uncertainty that came with it, and I hope all students can take pride in their achievements.

I know how difficult it was for students to find out that they were unable to sit an exam. It wasn't a decision that was taken lightly.

The majority of young people will have received a calculated grade today that enables them to progress to the destination they deserve, with the added safety net of being able to appeal on the basis of their mock results, as well as the chance of sitting autumn exams, thanks to our triple lock process to ensure confidence and fairness in the system.

I want to congratulate all students, and thank parents, teachers and everyone involved in education for their contribution to making sure all of our young people are able to progress with the next stage of their lives.

Many students will also go on to one of the UK's world leading universities, and today's data shows that more than 358,000 UK students have been accepted so far this year, an increase of 3% on last year. There has been a 14% increase in the number of UK students accepted on nursing courses and a 3% increase in UK students accepted on to education and teaching courses.

Thousands of the students getting their results today will also go on to do an apprenticeship, offering them high-quality training and a wide range of career options.

The grades students receive today are based on the judgement of their school or college, and have been moderated by exam boards to make sure the same standard is applied for all students, whichever school, college or part of the country they come from.

Final data published by Ofqual today shows that students have not been disadvantaged due to their background by this year's awarding process.

For any students who want to sit exams in October and November, the government recently announced an extensive support package for all schools and colleges for the additional costs associated with running exams in the autumn. This is on top of the announcement by Ofqual last week of arrangements for appeals for summer grades.

[Police given new powers to tackle hostile state activity](#)

News story

Police officers now have powers to stop, question, search and detain

individuals at UK ports in relation to espionage and foreign interference.



Powers coming into effect today (Thursday 13 August) will allow specially trained police officers to stop, question, and when necessary detain and search individuals travelling through UK ports to determine whether they are involved in hostile state activity.

The new Schedule 3 powers were introduced in the Counter-Terrorism and Border Security Act 2019 and created in response to the 2018 Salisbury nerve-agent attack.

Home Secretary Priti Patel said:

The threat posed to the UK from hostile state activity is growing and ever changing.

These new powers send a very clear message to those involved in it that this government has zero tolerance for those acting against British interests.

But I am clear more must be done and we are developing new legislation to bring our laws up to date and create new ones to stay ahead of the threat.

Following parliamentary approval, the powers have today come into effect and the police will now start bringing them into operation.

A code of practice setting out the processes governing how Schedule 3 will be used and overseen has been published on [GOV.UK](https://www.gov.uk).

It includes robust safeguards such as independent oversight by the Investigatory Powers Commissioner, and provides special protections for confidential material and journalistic sources.

The new powers are just one part of a wider effort to tackle hostile state activity.

Last year, the government announced in the [Queen's speech](#) plans to introduce new legislation to provide the security services and law enforcement agencies with the tools they need to tackle the evolving threat of hostile activity by

foreign states.

This includes considering whether to follow allies in adopting a form of foreign agent registration, updating the Official Secrets Acts, as well as the case for updating treason laws.

A [fact sheet](#) explaining the powers and the codes of practice which govern their use is also available on GOV.UK.

Published 13 August 2020

[UK House Price Index to return](#)

News story

HM Land Registry will resume publication of the UK House Price Index (UK HPI) on Wednesday (19 August).



Image credit: Jozef Sowa/Shutterstock.com

We are pleased to announce that we will resume publication of the UK HPI on 19 August when we'll begin by publishing the April 2020 index, following the suspension of UK HPI in May 2020.

We'll be working to a provisional publication schedule that will see us publish interim releases with a view to resuming normal publication in October with the publication of the August 2020 index. The schedule will ensure we can use as many transactions as possible in each of the suspended periods following the [issues caused by the coronavirus outbreak](#).

The initial release will not contain heatmaps – this will subsequently be reviewed on a release by release basis. As per our usual [revisions policy](#), the figures for all months are first estimates and are subject to revision in subsequent periods.

Data	Publication date
April 2020 index	19 August
May 2020 index	2 September
June 2020 index	16 September
July 2020 index	7 October
August 2020 index	21 October

[Access the previous UK HPI reports](#)

Published 13 August 2020

[We're hooked! People across England flock to fishing hotspots to enhance post-lockdown wellbeing](#)

Fishing is seeing a surprising post-lockdown surge with experts encouraging as many people as possible to take advantage of the activity's mental health and wellbeing benefits this summer.

The Environment Agency has revealed that over 100,000 more people are fishing, with a boom in rod licence sales by nearly a fifth (17%) compared to the same time last year. Fishing retailers have also reported a huge demand for beginners' fishing kits and tackle since lockdown restrictions eased on 13 May.

There are currently over 3/4million anglers with a licence in England and Wales. In light of renewed demand and the wellbeing benefits of fishing, the Environment Agency has set a new target to get one million people fishing by 2025.

"Gone fishing"

Since lockdown restrictions eased, evidence suggests that people are keen to get outside and re-connect with nature after months indoors. In a recent survey from the Angling Trust, it was revealed 99% of survey respondents agreed angling benefits their mental health and wellbeing. Since lockdown restrictions eased, 91% of respondents have already been out angling and many are enjoying the social distancing benefits of fishing.

Half of the Angling Trust's survey respondents say fishing has allowed them to bond with friends and family post-lockdown whilst remaining at a safe distance due to the nature of the sport. More beginners are also taking up the sport as nearly half (42%) of respondents reported taking someone from

their family along with them to try fishing for the first time. For any beginners looking to try it out, the Angling Trust recommends searching [“get fishing”](#) online for events in your area and tips on how to get started.

The benefits of fishing to mental health and wellbeing include:

- Creating bonds with friends and family – re-connecting after the intensity of the lockdown period can help combat loneliness, anxiety and depression. Fishing provides a relaxed opportunity to meet-up with family and friends away from the crowds
- Enhancing connections with nature – being near water and connecting with the natural environment offers a relaxing environment for many
- Boosting your self-esteem – learning a new skill can be rewarding and build a sense of achievement. Taking part in the sport is made easy through UK-wide fishing club events planned throughout the summer holidays.
- Discovering new places – with staycations and short UK-based trips planned this summer, increase your sense of happiness by exploring new areas
- Taking time out from day-to-day life – working from home and planning family time can be challenging. Fishing is a socially-distanced activity that all the family can enjoy, or you can enjoy on your own for some quiet time

Heidi Stone, Fisheries Manager at the Environment Agency said:

Fishing licence sales have risen to an exceptional high against the last few years and we’re seeing a true revival for the sport as people recognise all it has to offer. As lockdown restrictions have eased there has been a boom in licence sales as now, more than ever, people have a desire to get outdoors and escape their daily stresses.

Fishing is a sport that can be done by a person of any age or ability and it provides a great opportunity for families to try something new during the school holidays.

The Mental Health Foundation has backed the Environment Agency’s call to fish, encouraging the pursuit of outdoor activities like fishing to help people deal with the impact of the pandemic since lockdown restrictions eased.

Dr Antonis Kousoulis, Director of the Mental Health Foundation, said:

Growing evidence suggests that spending time in 'green' and 'blue' spaces has a very positive effect on our mental health, providing protective and restorative benefits.

Fishing remains one of the most popular outdoor activities in England and it is important for people's mental health that they can continue to pursue this activity in a safe way both during and after the pandemic.

Clive Copeland, Head of Participation at the Angling Trust said:

After an understandably quiet period during lockdown, we have seen huge demand on angling clubs, coaches and fisheries since restrictions have eased.

We've known for a long time that the wellbeing benefits of our sport are considerable and are very keen to promote the mental wellbeing elements of fishing through our work with Sport England and the Environment Agency. Going fishing helps recovery from and prevention of mental health issues, involves spending time by the water – which is brilliant for relaxation and aids concentration – it's a fantastic way to spend time with family and enjoy an activity together.

We've been working flat out ensuring that we meet demand and get as many people as possible involved in the sport at beautiful beginner-friendly locations around the country which are listed on our website ['Get Fishing'](#) along with videos, top-tips and advice perfect for anyone who wants to give fishing a go. Now is a great time to try fishing – you can experience angling in a safe and positive way outdoors, in nature.

The Canal & River Trust, which is running over 150 outdoor introductory courses for newcomers as part of its ['Let's Fish' campaign](#) this summer, believes demand for fishing has skyrocketed.

John Ellis, National Fisheries and Angling Manager at the Canal & River Trust said:

We've seen record numbers of people take up fishing since lockdown, many of whom are completely new to the activity and some of whom have taken up the sport through family members and friends at local clubs.

Others have not known how to get started and that where [Let's Fish](#) comes in. Half the population live within 5 miles of a Trust owned

fishery and already through our Let's Fish events we've seen people from all walks of life try fishing as a way of re-connecting with nature, from young children with their parents or grandparents to young women and older people who have felt isolated and are keen to try something new.

Mat Woods, Brand Manager at fishing retailer Korum said:

When fishing was given the green light post-lockdown, tackle companies had to help many tackle shops get back up to speed, as initially they were still 'officially' closed outside of mail order business.

As stores re-opened properly, trade propelled to dizzying new heights and for many in the industry, this saw their stocks of key items selling at record levels. For some, this meant shortages and being out of stock of some products. Many have kept the wheels in motion and made the most of the boom in our industry. It's great to see so many new people fishing as often as they are. Long may it continue.

The Environment Agency works to promote fishing and make it as accessible as possible. The income generated from fishing licence sales funds essential work to maintain, improve and develop fisheries, fish habitats and angling. Income is also used to fund projects in collaboration with partners to benefit the angling community.

The Environment Agency is calling on all to give the sport a go and see the benefits for themselves. [Find out more about how to get a licence.](#)