

UK Hydrographic Office appoints UK National Hydrographer and Deputy Chief Executive

The UK Hydrographic Office (UKHO) has announced the appointment of Rear Admiral Peter Sparkes to the position of National Hydrographer and Deputy Chief Executive: a role that helps to improve the sharing, standardisation and collection of marine geospatial data through international collaboration.

As National Hydrographer, Peter is the UK government's representative at the International Hydrographic Organization (IHO), where he works with partners to set and maintain standards that protect the safety of mariners around the world. In addition to this, he oversees key international partnerships with foreign navies, hydrographic offices, governments and commercial organisations to support the sharing of global marine geospatial data. And on behalf of UK government, his teams continue to deliver numerous hydrographic and capacity building programmes that help UK Overseas Territories to create safe and sustainable blue economies.

Commenting on his appointment, Peter said:

It is a tremendous privilege to be appointed as the UK National Hydrographer at the UKHO: a world-leading marine geospatial information agency and hydrographic office. I look forward to working with our partners to support safe maritime navigation, defence and marine development around the world.

Peter joins the UKHO as a Rear Admiral in the Royal Navy. He has served previously in a wide variety of appointments, both at sea and ashore. Notably, he commanded the frigate HMS CUMBERLAND on counter-piracy patrol off Somalia and the UK's Ice Patrol Ship, HMS PROTECTOR, in Antarctica. In addition to this, he commanded the 44 units (aircraft carriers, destroyers, frigates, mine-hunters, patrol vessels, and the maritime explosive ordnance disposal teams) of the Portsmouth Flotilla.

Ashore, Peter Sparkes has served in Ministry of Defence acquisition appointments and was responsible for the development and introduction into RN service of the Warship Electronic Charting Display Information System. Prior to joining UKHO he served as the Chief of Defence Staff's liaison officer in the Pentagon, Washington DC.

Shropshire farmer fined £800 for dumping illegal waste

A Shropshire farmer has been fined £800 and ordered to pay £6,000 costs after he admitted illegally burying waste dust on his land near Market Drayton.

Keith Wilson, age 43, of Old Springs Farm, Market Drayton, received the sentence at Telford Magistrates' Court on Thursday 12 December 2019.

Officers from the Environment Agency brought the case following reports a large pit had been dug and filled with around 2500m³ of waste dust produced in the making of animal bedding.

The court was told that the defendant had no environmental permit and that the pit had been filled without having regard to the impact on the environment.

In addition, the area is designated as a Nitrogen Vulnerable Zone (NVZ) indicating that the local environment is particularly vulnerable to excessive organic deposits.

Farmers whose land is in a NVZ area must plan the management of organic materials and wastes carefully to avoid pollution. Nitrates in groundwater can affect the safety of drinking water and cause pollution to rivers.

A spokesperson for the Environment Agency said:

Had the dust been left to decompose in the pit, it had the potential to have a negative impact on the localised groundwater.

Pollution was only avoided due to the intervention of the Environment Agency as it was the intention of the site to bury it and leave it.

This kind of waste dumping is unacceptable and this case shows we are determined to bring offenders to justice.

If anyone is concerned about environmental incidents they should call our 24/7 hotline on 0800 80 70 60.

The Charge: On 13 November 2019 Keith Wilson pleaded guilty to a single charge under Regulations 12 (1) (a) and 38 (1) (a) of the Environmental Permitting (England & Wales) Regulations 2016. Keith Wilson, between 30 April 2017 and 23 May 2016, on land at Old Springs Farm, Market Drayton, operated a regulated facility, namely a waste operation involving the burial of waste, when there was not in force an environmental permit authorising such activity.

Estate agents fined over half a million pounds for price fixing

The move comes after the CMA found that the companies, Michael Hardy, Prospect and Richard Worth, together with a fourth company, Romans, broke competition law by taking part in a price-fixing cartel, which began in September 2008.

For almost 7 years, the 4 companies conspired to set minimum commission rates for the sale of residential properties in Wokingham, Winnersh, Crowthorne, Bracknell and Warfield – where they were the leading estate agents at that time. This involved the firms exchanging confidential information on pricing and holding meetings to make sure all members enforced and maintained the agreed minimum rates.

The result was that local home-owners were denied the chance of securing the best possible deal when selling their property because they were unable to meaningfully shop around all their local agents for better commission rates.

Romans will not be fined as it brought the illegal activity to the CMA's attention and fully cooperated with the investigation, under the CMA's [Leniency Programme](#).

Michael Grenfell, Executive Director of Enforcement, said:

It is disappointing we've found yet another case of estate agents breaking competition law.

We trust that the fines issued today will reinforce our message that we expect the sector to clean up its act and make sure customers are not being ripped off in this way.

The industry needs to take note: this kind of behaviour will not be tolerated. If you break the law, you risk similar consequences.

The total fines imposed take into account the behaviour of the companies involved. Michael Hardy's and Prospect's fines have been discounted to reflect the fact they admitted to illegal behaviour and agreed to cooperate with the CMA, thereby shortening the length of its investigation.

Tackling cartels is a fundamental part of the CMA's work, and this is the third case it has taken against estate agents in recent years. Others include fining [3 members of the Three Counties Estate Agent Association £735,000](#) for breaking competition law in relation to letting and estate agent fees, and fining [4 estate agents in Somerset over £370,000](#) for colluding to set minimum commission rates.

The CMA runs a [Stop Cartels campaign](#), which aims to educate businesses about which practices are illegal and urges people to come forward if they suspect a business has taken part in cartel behaviour, such as rigging contracts or price fixing. It has also issued a range of [guidance to help businesses](#) understand more about how to comply with competition law.

1. Media enquiries should be directed to the CMA Press Office at press@cma.gov.uk or 020 3738 6460.
2. The CMA has taken action in this case under the Chapter I prohibition in the Competition Act 1998. This prohibits agreements, practices and conduct that may have a damaging effect on competition in the UK. It covers anti-competitive agreements and concerted practices between businesses ('undertakings') which have as their object or effect the prevention, restriction or distortion of competition within the UK or a part of it and which may affect trade within the UK or a part of it.
3. As part of its probe, on 13 June 2019 the CMA issued a Statement of Objections against 4 estate agents: i) Michael Hardy & Company (Wokingham) Ltd and Geocharbert UK Ltd – together known as Michael Hardy, ii) Prospect Estate Agency Ltd and Prospect Holdings (Reading) Ltd– together known as Prospect, iii) Richard Worth Ltd (in administration) and Richard Worth Holdings Ltd – together known as Richard Worth, and iv) The Romans Group (UK) Ltd and Romans 1 Ltd – together known as Romans. The company, Adelfas Property Group Ltd, currently trading as Richard Worth Estate and Land Agents is not one of the companies subject of this decision. All information relating to the CMA's work in this case can be found on the [provision of residential estate agency services case page](#).
4. Michael Hardy is being fined £142,843. This includes a reduction of 10% for settlement. Following the CMA's provisional decision in June 2019, Michael Hardy agreed to settle the investigation with the CMA. By settling with the CMA, Michael Hardy admitted being part of the cartel, and agreed to pay the penalty and to a streamlined procedure.
5. Prospect is being fined £268,765. This includes a reduction of 50% under the CMA's [Leniency Programme](#) and 10% for settlement. As in the case of Michael Hardy, by settling following the CMA's provisional decision, Prospect admitted being part of the cartel, and agreed to pay the penalty and to a streamlined procedure.
6. Richard Worth is being fined £193,911.
7. The CMA's [Leniency Programme](#) encourages businesses and individuals to come forward if they are involved in a cartel and those that cooperate may be granted immunity from penalties or significant reductions. An undertaking may qualify for immunity or a reduced penalty where it has a genuine intention to confess that it has engaged in cartel conduct, and provides information that adds significant value to the CMA's investigation. Individuals involved in cartel activity may also in certain circumstances be granted immunity from criminal prosecution for the cartel offence under the Enterprise Act 2002.
8. Anyone who has information about a cartel is encouraged to call the CMA cartels hotline on 020 3738 6888 or email cartelshotline@cma.gov.uk.
9. For more information on the CMA see our homepage or follow us on Twitter, taken LinkedIn and like our Facebook page. Sign up to our email

alerts to receive updates on Competition Act 1998 and cartels cases.

Telecommunications boss banned for breaching regulations

Advanced VOIP Solutions Ltd was incorporated in March 2013, with Altrincham-based Charlotte McKeever (41) appointed as a director of the company two years later in April 2015

Advanced VOIP Solutions facilitated marketing calls to members of the public by supplying telephone numbers and a call-back service to marketing companies. The call-back service in particular allowed people, once they received a marketing call, to either request further information or opt out of further marketing calls.

However, contrary to telecommunication regulations, members of the public were charged for the use of this call-back service

Between November 2014 and April 2016, the Information Commissioners Office (ICO) received a substantial amount of complaints concerning calls facilitated by Advanced VOIP Solutions.

People complained that they had received unsolicited direct marketing calls which had caused them distress. Advanced VOIP Solutions records show that many had also been charged for calling back to opt out of receiving further information.

Further investigations of the company's accounting records, by the Insolvency Service showed that between May and June 2015 at least 1.3 million calls were made.

The ICO found that Advanced VOIP Solutions was in breach of the Privacy and Electronic Communications Regulations and fined the company £180,000.

Advanced VOIP Solutions entered into Creditors Voluntary liquidation in 2016. The liquidators appointed to wind-up the company reported the breaches of the regulations to the Insolvency Service and stated that the fine imposed by the regulators remained unpaid at the date of the liquidation.

Due to the distress caused to the members of the public receiving unwanted calls, the Insolvency Service began directorship disqualification proceedings against Charlotte McKeever.

On 3 September 2019, the Secretary of State accepted a seven-year disqualification undertaking from Charlotte McKeever, after she did not dispute that she had caused Advanced VOIP Solutions to breach the [Privacy and Electronic Communications Regulations](#).

Effective from 24 September 2019, Charlotte McKeever cannot, without the permission of the court, be involved in the formation, promotion or management of a company, directly or indirectly.

Claire Entwistle, Assistant Director of Operations from the Insolvency Service said:

The communications regulations are there to protect people from receiving unsolicited calls, but Charlotte McKeever showed scant regard towards the rules, causing distress to a significant amount of people. This disqualification will prevent her from acting in a similar way in the future.

Directors of companies in the telecommunications sector should take note that if you fail to comply with regulations, the Insolvency Service will investigate and you could lose the protection of limited liability.

Charlotte McKeever is of Altrincham, Greater Manchester, and her date of birth is January 1978.

Advanced VOIP Solutions Ltd (Company no. 08440874).

Disqualification undertakings are the administrative equivalent of a disqualification order but do not involve court proceedings. Persons subject to a disqualification order are bound by a [range of restrictions](#).

[Further information about the work of the Insolvency Service, and how to complain about financial misconduct](#).

You can also follow the Insolvency Service on:

[RPA makes full payments to thousands of rural businesses](#)

More than 92% of farmers received their 2019 Basic Payment Scheme (BPS) money in the first two weeks of the payment window.

The latest figures from the Rural Payments Agency (RPA) show that 92.4% of payments were made by end of Friday 13 December, worth £1.6bn. This builds on the 59,600 farmers who received payments totalling £1.2bn on 2 December, the first day of the payment window.

Additionally, those who claimed in 2019 on their Countryside Stewardship (CS) and Environmental Stewardship (ES) agreements will receive one full payment

this year, as part of a wider improvement plan to deliver a better service to farmers and land managers.

This means that ES and CS final payments have started to arrive with customers four months earlier than last year, with £77.8m ES and £4.3m CS payments made so far. Eligible customers should expect to receive their payment within the payment window which runs between December 2019 and June 2020.

RPA Chief Executive, Paul Caldwell, said:

We are committed to ensuring timely payments to farmers and land managers, so that rural businesses can plan for the year ahead.

We remain focussed on continuously improving the delivery and performance of BPS, CS and ES schemes, and this year CS and ES customers will receive their one full payment against their annual claim.

Payments are made direct to bank accounts via BACS transfer so farmers should make sure the RPA has the most up-to-date account details on the Rural Payments service.

Stopping fraudulent activity

Claimants are also urged to remain vigilant against fraud. They should remember:

- Your bank, police or the RPA will never ask you to reveal your online password, PIN or bank account details or ask you to make a payment over the telephone.
- Never disclose personal information to someone you don't know or open unknown or unexpected computer links or emails.
- If in doubt, call the organisation back, ideally on a different telephone, using a number you are familiar with or you know to be official. You can find this on the organisation's website, correspondence or statement.

Contact [Action Fraud](#) on 0300 123 2040 without delay for advice and to register your concern.