

## School holidays and parent power

The Supreme Court upheld the law which states parents must send their children to school during term time unless they are ill or are being home educated to an agreed standard and programme.

Some think this is an unreasonable interference with parents who may have other ways to bring up their children. They believe children can learn outside school as well as in, and think that sometimes a child could benefit from travel during term time.

Others, including the Supreme Court, think children are best advised to follow the full courses offered by their schools. Missing a week or two in a busy term would mean the child has to catch up somehow on the lessons and exercises missed. Teachers do not welcome having to make special provision for children who missed the first explanation and the work on the new topics introduced when they were away. Of course they need to help children who have been off sick for a time period to catch up, but they usually do not want to increase the numbers and incidence of this remedial task. They point out that schools offer quite long holidays allowing families time off with their children.

The father who brought the case now says he has the money to send his child to a fee paying school, where he thinks he could get a better agreement with the Head teacher. He says he is bringing the case for all those who cannot afford this option. It is true that limiting families to travel in school holidays allows travel companies to charge more for these peak periods. In the case of the summer holiday in the UK the school time off also coincides with the better weather which would attract premium prices anyway.

Parliament intended the law to require parents to send their children to school in term time. The Court has upheld the will of Parliament. Do any of you think that wrong?

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## BCC: Shortage of digital skills hampering business productivity and growth

Today the BCC releases the results of our digital survey on skills.

7 April 2017

Digital skills are increasingly important to the operation of businesses in the UK but companies are facing a shortage of skills in their workforce which is hampering productivity, according to a new survey by the British Chambers of Commerce (BCC), released today (Friday).

The survey of more than 1,400 businesses across the UK found that 84% of firms say digital and IT skills are more important to their business than two years ago, with half (51%) saying these skills are significantly more important.

However, the survey also found that more than three-in-four businesses are facing a shortage of digital skills in their workforce, with 52% reporting a slight shortage, 21% a significant one and 3% a critical shortage.

**The key findings of the survey are:**

- The skills most important to companies are **basic computer skills** (72%), **communicating and connecting through digital channels** (71%) and **management of digital information** (69%)
- Skills shortages are having adverse effects on many firms including, **increasing workload on existing staff** (52%), **higher operating costs** (29%), and causing **difficulties in meeting customer requirements** (28%)
- Businesses regard **a lack of time for staff training** (41%), **difficulty in identifying appropriate training** (32%), and the **high cost of training** (25%), as the **leading barriers to rectifying these shortages**.

**Adam Marshall, Director General of the British Chambers of Commerce (BCC), said:**

“The evidence is clear: better digital skills make firms more productive, and a lack of digital skills holds them back.

“Businesses themselves need to do a lot more to tackle the digital skills shortages they face, and their leaders need to be alive to the fact that a failure to tackle this issue will have an impact on their bottom line. Too many firms are stuck in an unproductive cycle, where the failure to take action has serious consequences.

“Training providers can give firms a helping hand, by engaging with companies on their digital needs and helping them to free up resources for growth. Government must help as well, by recognising that some of the high-level digital skills businesses need will come from overseas so a pragmatic immigration system needs to be in place to provide firms with access to the workers required to fill the gaps.”

**Ends**

**Notes to editors:**

The British Chambers of Commerce (BCC) surveyed 1,465 business people from all regions of the UK online in January 2017 to understand how businesses rate the overall reliability of their broadband connections, and how a more reliable connection could help their businesses. Of the businesses surveyed,

96% were SMEs, 22% operate in the manufacturing sector, and 78% operate in the services sector.

The British Chambers of Commerce (BCC) sits at the heart of a powerful network of 52 Accredited Chambers of Commerce across the UK, representing thousands of businesses of all sizes and within all sectors. Our Global Business Network connects exporters with nearly 40 markets around the world. For more information, visit: [www.britishchambers.org.uk](http://www.britishchambers.org.uk)

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## **[News story: Clean energy projects receive £24 million to keep towns warm](#)**

The £24 million is spread across projects from Sheffield to Somers Town, which will soon help warm homes and businesses with low carbon energy.

This is the first round of funding from a £320 million pot set aside to support heat networks, which have been dubbed ‘central heating for cities’ and have the potential to reduce heating costs in some cases by more than 30%.

The networks remove the need for individual properties to have their own boilers by linking them to a single heat source.

Climate Change and Industry Minister Nick Hurd said:

This Government is committed to ensuring a clean, secure and affordable energy supply for communities and businesses across the country.

Energy innovations like heat networks can cut costs for households and reduce carbon emissions, as almost half of the energy we use goes towards heating our homes and buildings.

The £24 million in Government funding awarded to these projects will help deliver low carbon energy at competitive prices for local consumers.

Nine of the winning authorities will receive a share of just over £24 million of capital funding to support the building of their projects, with around £200K in early stage funding for a further four authorities to develop their plans. This will build a pipeline of high quality projects ready to compete for future rounds of capital funding.

Winning entries at the building stage include four projects in London, two in Manchester and one each in Sheffield, Crawley and Colchester. Support was won at the planning stage by projects in Trafford, Islington, Buckinghamshire and Middlesbrough.

Heat networks use technologies such as biomass boilers, heat pumps, energy from waste, combined heat and power (CHP) plants and even heat from deep below the earth's crust. They can also use recycled waste heat from places like factories, power stations and even the London Underground and pump it into homes and businesses to keep them warm.

The scheme will run over five years and is expected to enable up to 200 heat networks to be built, while leveraging around £2 billion of wider public and private investment.

Heat networks have already been used successfully in the UK, and are popular across Scandinavian cities for keeping homes warm in winter. The winners of this pilot will now begin to build their projects, with further funding available over the next four years to support hundreds more. The department aims to launch the main funding scheme by the end of 2017.

## Notes to Editors

1. This initial funding was open to local authorities in England and Wales and public sector bodies who submitted applications last November. The total value of the fund over five years is £320m and in future years this will be opened up to a wider set of applicants. More information about applying for the scheme.
2. The estimated 30% reduction in heating costs is sourced from AECOM (2015) Assessment of the Costs, Performance, and Characteristics of UK Heat Networks. It compares estimated heat price for a small flat (10.24p/kWh) with average heat price from heat networks studied (6.43p/kWh) – pp. 35-36.
3. The nine winning projects will receive a share of just over £24 million, and will build networks using a variety of technologies:
  - Sheffield District Energy Network development- Energy from waste plant
  - Somers Town (Phase 2), Camden- Gas Combined Heat and Power (CHP) plant
  - Manchester Civic Quarter Heat Network- Gas Combined Heat and Power (CHP) plant
  - Colchester Northern Gateway- Heat pump

- Wood Street South, Waltham Forest, London- Gas Combined Heat and Power (CHP) plant
  - Becontree, Barking & Dagenham- Gas Combined Heat and Power (CHP) plant
  - Church Street District Heating Scheme, Westminster- Gas Combined Heat and Power (CHP) plant
  - Crawley Town Centre Heat Network- Biomass boiler and Gas Combined Heat and Power (CHP) plant
  - St Johns Heat Network, Manchester- Gas Combined Heat and Power (CHP) plant
4. An energy from waste plant burns refuse such as household and garden waste to generate electricity and/or heat.
  5. Combined Heat and Power (CHP) plants produce both heat and power simultaneously, often using reciprocating engines and water jackets to collect the heat. Combining generation of heat and power in this way can reduce carbon emissions by up to 30%.
  6. A heat pump takes heat from the environment (e.g. air, ground, water but in this case heat from ground water), boosts it with a pump and it is then circulated to buildings on the network.
  7. A biomass boiler burns sustainable wood product e.g. pellets or chips to create heat.

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## **Press release: Opening of humanitarian corridor from Sudan to South Sudan**

The members of the Troika (Norway, the United Kingdom, and the United States) welcome the Government of Sudan's opening of the border crossing into Bentiu, in South Sudan, for the delivery of humanitarian food assistance to areas gravely affected by the conflict and suffering from famine and severe food insecurity. This border crossing will allow for a second access route for emergency food assistance, along with the already open Kosti – Renk river corridor. The Troika also recognizes the Government of Sudan's efforts to facilitate the flow of food assistance through Port Sudan.

The Troika notes Sudan has accepted over 365,000 South Sudanese refugees, including more than 60,000 South Sudanese who have entered Sudan in the first three months of 2017, and encourages the government to ensure continued humanitarian access to these refugee communities. The Troika also welcomes the Sudanese government's decision to donate food from their own food reserves to people in need in South Sudan.

The Troika calls on the Government of South Sudan to coordinate with the World Food Program and partners providing vital assistance. The Troika urges the government and all armed groups to allow full and safe humanitarian access to reach communities in need, and to ensure that food and other commodities are not diverted from the intended beneficiaries.

The Troika recommends the opening of additional land and water routes between Sudan and South Sudan so that communities in both countries can benefit from open trade and the efficient and swift movement of humanitarian goods and personnel.

### **Further information**

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## **[Press release: £250,000 of UK Government funding for the International Fund for Ireland](#)**

Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, Rt Hon James Brokenshire MP, has today announced an additional £250,000 of UK Government funding to tackle the underlying causes of sectarianism and violence and to build a stronger society.

The financial package is a further contribution by the UK Government to support the work of the International Fund for Ireland. The new money builds on the financial package put in place under the Fresh Start agreement which allocated £500 million to assist the Executive in tackling issues unique to Northern Ireland, including support for their programme to remove peace walls.

Announcing the additional funding, the Rt Hon James Brokenshire MP said:

By working towards the removal of peace walls, preparing young people from all walks of life to become economically and socially engaged and promoting shared education, the International Fund for Ireland makes a vital contribution to overcoming division within Northern Ireland society. They are helping to create a genuinely shared future for people in Northern Ireland.

This extra money from the UK Government will support this important

work.

Under the Fresh Start Agreement in November 2015, the UK Government undertook to provide £60 million over 5 years in support of the Executive's delivery of confidence and relationship building measures between communities which would provide the conditions to allow for the removal of peace wall and the creation of a shared future.

Welcoming the announcement by the Secretary of State, IFI Chairman, Dr Adrian Johnston commented:

We are grateful for the generous support and encouragement from the UK Government. Along with the Irish Government, they have enabled the Fund to support many communities that have become marginalised and divided as a result of the conflict. The value of the Fund's international support and the independence it fosters has never been greater nor has our willingness to take measured risks for a lasting peace. The achievements of our approach are significant and set us apart from other funders.