

[Press release: Housing starts hit 9-year high](#)

The number of new build homes that have started to be built continued to rise last year to the highest level since 2007, figures released today (23 February 2017) show.

The [latest house building data](#) shows that 153,370 new homes were started in the year to December, up 5% on the previous year.

More than 140,500 homes were completed in the year to December 2016.

Meanwhile, figures from the Council of Mortgage Lenders show first-time buyer lending totalled 338,900 loans in 2016, up 8% on last year.

Housing and Planning Minister Gavin Barwell said:

We've got the country building again with the highest number of housing starts for 9 years. However, we know there's more to be done to build more homes in the places that people want to live.

Our housing white paper sets out an ambitious set of proposals to deliver more land, speed up build out, diversify the housing market, and support people who need help now.

The figures also show strong growth across the country with Islington and Manchester experiencing high levels of starts in the year to December 2016, with an annual increase of 296% and 323% respectively.

Reforms in the recently published [housing white paper](#) set out the government's bold new plans to fix the broken housing market and build more homes across England.

The 4 key aspects of the paper set out new measures to ensure the housing market works for everyone, and help local authorities, developers and SME builders get building.

Building more homes is an absolute priority, which is why the government plans to invest £25 billion in housing over the Spending Review.

£1.4 billion of funding has been released for Affordable Housing, and restrictions on funding have been relaxed so providers can build a range of homes including for Affordable Rent and Rent to Buy which help people save for a deposit before they buy.

The [House building: December quarter 2016 England statistics](#) record the number of new build homes completed and started during the quarter October to December. It uses data sourced from building control officers at local

authorities, the National House Building Council and independent inspectors.

According to the [Council of Mortgage Lenders](#), the number of first-time buyers in December 2016 is up 8% year on year.

[Press release: Review of the National Heritage Memorial Fund and Heritage Lottery Fund launched](#)

From:

First published:

23 February 2017

The Government has today launched a call for evidence on the roles and responsibilities of the National Heritage Memorial Fund (NHMF) and Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF).

It forms part of a review on how the organisations carry out their roles in supporting the heritage sector and how HLF operates in distributing National Lottery funding to heritage projects across the UK.

It will also consider how NHMF and HLF engage with the public and work with partners across the country.

Heritage, natural environment and other cultural organisations, as well as members of the public, are invited to submit their views over the next six weeks.

Every government-sponsored public body is reviewed at least once in each Parliament to ensure it is fit for purpose and provides good value for money.

The National Heritage Memorial Fund review Challenge Panel, made up of stakeholders and experts in the sector, is chaired by DCMS Non-Executive Director Charles Alexander. The review is expected to be completed in summer 2017.

Notes to editors:

1. The call for evidence for the National Heritage Memorial Fund tailored review will be open for six weeks, from today until 06/04/2017. More information, including how to take part in the online call for evidence can be found [here](#).

2. A Challenge Panel made of external experts and stakeholders has also been set up to look at the scope, methodology and conclusions of the National Heritage Memorial Fund review. This will be chaired by Charles Alexander, lead Non-Executive Director of DCMS with a background in international finance.
3. Tailored reviews are part of the Government's Public Body Transformation Programme, and look at the effectiveness, efficiency and good governance of public bodies.
4. The National Heritage Memorial Fund (NHMF) was set up in 1980 to save the most outstanding parts of our heritage at risk of loss to the nation, as a memorial to those who have given their lives for the UK. NHMF, operating as the Heritage Lottery Fund, also distributes money from the National Lottery to help people across the UK to explore, enjoy and protect the heritage they care about.
5. The Terms of Reference for the Review are attached.

Media enquiries – please contact the DCMS News and Communications team on 020 7211 2210.

Statement to Parliament: Prison governor empowerment and accountability

I have today introduced the Prisons and Courts Bill, which will create a new statutory framework to support the Government's plans to make prisons places of safety and reform. The measures in the Bill are a vital part of the wider structural reforms announced in the Prison Safety and Reform white paper published on 3 November 2016.

The right framework and standards for improvement

In the white paper we committed to reforming how the prison system is structured in order to make lines of accountability clear and create sharper and more transparent scrutiny.

To deliver this, the Prisons and Courts Bill will enshrine in statute the purpose of prison, setting out for the first time that reform of offenders is a key aim for prisons. The Bill makes clear how the Secretary of State for

Justice will account to Parliament for progress in reforming offenders.

The Bill also provides strengthened powers to Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Prisons, including enabling the Chief Inspector to trigger an urgent response from the Secretary of State where they have significant concerns about a particular prison that need to be addressed as a matter of urgency. It puts the Prisons and Probation Ombudsman on a statutory footing, giving them greater permanence and powers.

The white paper set out how this new framework will be underpinned by new standards, a new commissioning structure and new powers for governors. This will create a more focused prison system where governors are clear what they need to deliver and are empowered to do so.

To deliver this, we will create new, 3 year performance agreements signed by the Secretary of State and the governor of each prison. The agreements will be phased in over the next two years: the first third of prisons will sign the new agreements on 1 April, with the other two thirds moving to this approach by 1 April 2019. The agreements will include the following standards, based on the aims for prisons set out in the Bill, which governors will be held to account for:

- Protecting the public. We will do this by measuring, from April 2017:

- The number of escapes from closed prisons;
- The number of absconds from open prisons; and
- Compliance with key security processes such as searching.

- Reforming offenders. We will do this by measuring:

- Time spent out of cell, starting from April 2017 in the prisons where the technology to track this has been introduced;
- Progress made in getting offenders off drugs. Prisoners will be tested on entry and exit with a phased roll out beginning in 2017;
- Progress made in health, starting with a measure of medical appointments attended by prisoners starting in England from April 2017;
- Progress made in maths and English, starting with qualifications gained from April 2017 and introducing testing on entry and exit in the longer term; and
- Progress in maintaining or developing family relationships. This will be a new measure which we are currently developing.

- Preparing prisoners for life on release. We will do this by measuring, from April 2017:

- Rate of prisoners being released to suitable accommodation;
- Rates of sustainable employment, including apprenticeships, and education in

the period following release.

- Improving safety. We will do this by measuring, from April 2017:

–Assaults on prison staff and prisoners;

–Disorder and self-harm; and

–Staff and prisoner perceptions of safety.

We want the public to understand what progress is being made in our prisons, so we will publish data setting out how prisons are performing. We will collect the data from April 2017 and begin publishing official statistics regularly from October 2017.

To support delivery of these reforms on the ground, on 1 April we are creating a new, operationally-focused executive agency, Her Majesty's Prison and Probation Service, which will be responsible for all operations across prison and probation and will refocus headquarters on supporting, not micro-managing, governors. The Secretary of State will set standards, commission services, and hold them to account.

Empowering governors to deliver

If we are to hold governors to account for meeting this new standards, they must be given the power to deliver change. We are devolving key operational policies to give governors greater flexibility, and have already cancelled 101 policies to help reduce bureaucracy for prisons. We will also remove current restrictions so that from 1 April 2017, governors have the freedom to:

- Design their regime to meet local delivery needs and target training and work in prisons to match the local labour market. Prisoners could, for example, work shift patterns to deliver new commercial contracts. This would help them to meet the standards to reform offenders and prepare prisoners for life on release.
- Decide their workforce strategy, including their staffing structure, to support meeting the standards. They could bring in specialists to work with particular types of prisoners, and tailor their staffing to support the prison regime they have designed.
- Control how they spend their resource budget. They could choose, for example, to pay for increased dedicated police officer time to reduce criminal activity in prison to improve safety and protect the public.
- Plan and take decisions about health services jointly with local health commissioners, through a co-commissioning framework.

Over the coming months, we will build on these essential freedoms even further by giving governors additional scope to:

- Decide what education opportunities they offer. Over 2017 and 2018, we will give governors control of the education budget, so that they can overhaul education and training to match the skills and qualifications

prisoners need in the local labour market.

- Control how family support services work. From autumn 2017, governors will control budgets for family services, like visitors' centres and parenting skills classes, so they can choose the right way to support family relationships.
- Have more say on the goods and services in their prison. As each national contract ends, for example on food or equipment, we will determine how to devolve responsibility to governors.

This process of devolution and deregulation is being supported by learning from the work of the six reform prisons. These prisons will continue to explore and identify options for devolution across the estate as wider reforms are implemented. We have commissioned a formal evaluation to support this with regular feedback being provided to inform policy development ahead of the final report in early 2018.

These reforms are major changes that will result in sustained improvement over a decade. By the end of this Parliament this strategy will have delivered much needed new facilities, empowered governors and introduced modern technology to improve regimes, support reform and combat security threats.

[News story: MOD to attend Who Do You Think You Are Live 2017](#)

Experts from DBS within the MOD are to attend the Who Do You Think You Are Live event at the NEC, Birmingham, between the 6 and 8 April. The show, a spin off from the popular BBC1 TV series, "Who Do You Think You Are?", attracts over 12,000 visitors during the 3 days as it focuses on genealogy. The stand, supported by TNT UK Ltd, will be staffed by a DBS team from the Medals and Records Offices and will offer.

Displays of medals and service records

Medals and records advice, including identification of medals, entitlements, applying for medals and how to find out more, what records the MOD holds and how to access them.

Live post 1921 service record search facility.

The MOD continues to hold all service records where the individual had a discharge date of post 1921, these total around 10 million records, with about 500,000 having seen service in World War 1. Using a sophisticated database that supports the MOD's main archive, an assisted search facility will in many cases enable confirmation of whether or not the MOD holds a record for an individual. This information can then be used to apply for the

record using the forms on gov.uk. To assist the search some or all of the following information is required: surname, initials, date of birth and service number.

Interpretation of service records

If you already have a service record, but are unsure what it says or how to interpret it, then DBS experts will be on hand to assist you.

- John Reynolds from the MOD's record office; a keen army historian and serving reserves officer, John has conducted battlefield tours across the world
- Stuart Hadaway from the air historical branch; Stuart has previously worked at the RAF Museum, Hendon, and is the author of military books, including "Missing believed killed: casualty policy and the missing research and enquiry service 1939 – 1952"
- Sue Pass and Clive Clarke from TNT's navy search service; Sue and Clive have a combined 17 years of experience working in the TNT's navy search service, responding to more than 6000 enquiries a year

Issue of veterans badges

If you are ex-forces and haven't yet got a veterans badge, then you can ask for one on the stand. Following confirmation of a service record identification and a check of the veterans badge database, the veterans badge will be issued. The following information will be required, surname, initials, date of birth and service number.

The DBS team look forward to seeing you!

[News story: PM call with Prime Minister Turnbull of Australia: 23 February 2017](#)

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Part of:

Theresa May spoke to Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull about stability in the Middle East, Brexit and a free trade agreement.

A Downing Street spokesperson said:

The Prime Minister spoke to Prime Minister Turnbull of Australia this morning.

They discussed our co-operation in the campaign to defeat Daesh, and agreed on the importance of creating the conditions for long-term stability in Iraq. Prime Minister May was clear we need to see a political transition in Syria, away from President Assad.

They agreed on the need to tackle Iran's destabilising influence in the Middle East, and the importance of the nuclear deal and ensuring it is rigorously policed and enforced.

On Brexit, Prime Minister Turnbull reiterated Australia's commitment to maintaining a close partnership with the UK as we leave the EU. Both Prime Ministers said they looked forward to holding preliminary conversations on a comprehensive bilateral free trade agreement in due course.

They ended the call by looking forward to seeing each other at the [G20 meeting in Hamburg](#) in July.