

## [News story: Perceptions of qualifications in England: wave 16](#)

Commenting on today's release, Dr Michelle Meadows, Deputy Chief Regulator, said:

We are pleased that many of the improvements observed last year in respect of GCSEs, AS and A levels, in particular in relation to levels of trust, perceived marking accuracy, and fairness of the review and appeals system, have been maintained in this wave.

Levels of understanding with respect to the new 9 to 1 GCSE grading scale, new review and appeal arrangements, and around identifying and reporting malpractice are positive and reflect the extensive communication and engagement programmes we have undertaken over the past few years.

We recognise the need to continue to engage with stakeholders as reforms bed in. To that end, we have launched [new films and other resources related to GCSE science](#) ahead of this summer's exam series and will be doing more to explain other aspects of the reform programme in the months ahead.

These first results in relation to Applied Generals provide a benchmark against which we can seek improvements in the years ahead.

The planned programmes of work set out in [our Corporate Plan](#), published earlier this month, will help to support further improvements in stakeholders' perceptions of GCSEs, AS and A levels, and Applied Generals over time.

---

## [News story: Foreign Secretary announces £9m to save our oceans](#)

Britain will use its position as a leading maritime nation to help Commonwealth Small Island Developing states (SIDS) drive economic development and make the most of their marine environments.

Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson, will announce £9 million over two years to help Commonwealth Small Island Developing states (SIDS) use their marine resources to sustainably grow their economies. The funding which will be delivered through the Commonwealth Marine Economies programme will also safeguard healthy seas and build resilience against environmental disasters.

## **Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson said:**

Britain is using its seafaring prowess to help reverse the decline of our oceans.

Our oceans are the largest living space on Earth with a delicate and complex biodiversity. They are not only integral to the economy, but crucial to supporting the cultures, food and security of the world.

We must as a Commonwealth protect our marine inheritance. That's why today's £9 million will help Commonwealth small island states sustainably develop their maritime environment to create jobs and drive growth.

The Foreign Office is on course to safeguard over four million square kilometres of ocean by 2020 through its Overseas Territories Blue Belt programme. The programme's scientific expeditions around St Helena have discovered a potential new species of octopus. Evidence is now being put to the international scientific community for formal validation.

Through projects in the SIDS such as seabed mapping, sustainable tourism and identifying marine pollution hotspots, the UK will share its world-renowned expertise to help SIDS tackle climate change, reduce poverty and boost the blue economy.

Many Commonwealth countries are at the coalface of climate change, even though their populations account for a tiny fraction of the world's greenhouse emissions. Mr Johnson wants to build global political momentum to ensure that this generation leaves the environment in a better state than we found it.

## **Notes to Editors**

- The Commonwealth Marine Economies Programme works in 17 Small Island Developing States (SIDS) in the Caribbean and Pacific, and is delivered by three world-leading UK agencies: the UK Hydrographic Office (UKHO), The Centre for Environment, Fisheries and Aquaculture Science (CEFAS), and the National Oceanography Centre (NOC).
- The Blue Belt Programme works in the UK's Overseas Territories and is run by the Centre for Environment, Fisheries and Aquaculture Science (CEFAS) and the Marine Management Organisation.
- The funding will come from the Conflict, Stability and Security Fund which provides funding for cross-government projects and programmes.

## **Further information**

---

# Press release: UK Government rallies Commonwealth to unite on marine waste with ambitious plan to end sale of plastic straws, stirrers and cotton buds

The Government has announced the end to the sale of plastic straws, drink stirrers and plastic-stemmed cotton buds at the start of the Commonwealth Heads of Government Summit.

The Prime Minister will also call on all other Commonwealth countries to join in the fight against plastic pollution.

Subject to the consultation, which the Environment Secretary will launch later this year, the Government is prepared to ban the sale of these items in England under plans to protect our rivers and seas and meet our 25 Year Environment Plan ambition to eliminate avoidable plastic waste. This forms part of the wider government waste strategy – including the government's current call for evidence on how we can use the tax system to address single use plastics waste.

In order to eliminate these items from use the Government will work with industry to develop alternatives and ensure there is sufficient time to adapt. It will also propose excluding plastic straws for medical reasons.

Single-use plastic items such as straws, stirrers and plastic-stemmed cotton buds have a significant impact on our environment, both on land and in our seas and rivers when they are either littered or discarded incorrectly after use – with a recent study showing 8.5 billion plastic straws are thrown away each year in the UK.

The announcement comes as the Prime Minister has urged all Commonwealth countries to sign-up to the newly-formed [Commonwealth Clean Oceans Alliance](#) and take action, be this by a ban on microbeads, a commitment to cutting down on single use plastic bags, or other steps to eliminate avoidable plastic waste.

To drive this forward the UK government has committed a £61.4 million package of funding to boost global research and help countries across the Commonwealth stop plastic waste from entering the oceans in the first place.

Prime Minister Theresa May said:

Plastic waste is one of the greatest environmental challenges facing the world, which is why protecting the marine environment is central to our agenda at the Commonwealth Heads of Government

Meeting.

The UK government is a world leader on this issue, and the British public have shown passion and energy embracing our plastic bag charge and microbead ban, and today we have put forward ambitious plans to further reduce plastic waste from straws, stirrers and cotton buds.

Alongside our domestic action, this week we are rallying Commonwealth countries to join us in the fight against marine plastics, with £61.4million funding for global research and to improve waste management in developing countries.

The Commonwealth is a unique organisation, with a huge diversity of wildlife, environments and coastlines. Together we can effect real changes so that future generations can enjoy a natural environment that is healthier than we currently find it.

Environment Secretary Michael Gove said:

Single-use plastics are a scourge on our seas and lethal to our precious environment and wildlife so it is vital we act now. We have already banned harmful microbeads and cut plastic bag use, and now we want to take action on straws, stirrers and cotton buds to help protect our marine life.

We've already seen a number of retailers, bars and restaurants stepping up to the plate and cutting plastic use, however it's only through government, businesses and the public working together that we will protect our environment for the next generation – we all have a role to play in turning the tide on plastic.

There are over 150 million tonnes of plastic in the world's oceans and every year one million birds and over 100,000 sea mammals die from eating and getting tangled in plastic waste.

Today's announcement is the latest move in the government crackdown on plastic, following the plastic [microbeads ban](#) hailed as one of the world's strongest bans, the 5p plastic bag charge – [which has led to 9 billion fewer bags distributed](#), and last month's pledge to introduce a [deposit return scheme](#), or DRS, for single use drinks containers, including bottles and cans.

It sits alongside the [25 Year Environment Plan](#) commitment to eliminate

avoidable plastic waste. The Treasury has also launched a call for evidence on how charges and changes to the tax system could be used to reduce single use plastics.

---

## [Speech: Russian account of Salisbury is a re-write of Orwell's 1984](#)

Thank you very much, Mr President. Thank you very much to the High Representative who has read out the findings and thank you also, on behalf of the United Kingdom, to the OPCW and its staff themselves.

The Council invited us to keep it updated, Mr President. Thank you for agreeing to this meeting today. We wish to brief on the latest stage in the investigation but I will also cover briefly findings, attribution and a refutation of some of the public statements that have been made by Russia against my country.

This meeting is being held immediately after one in The Hague, that the High Representative referred to, of the Executive Council of the OPCW and I would just like to stress, if I may Mr President, that the report itself has been circulated without any redaction or amendment to the states parties and to underscore the point I'd like to stress that the report to Executive Council members is exactly the same the report that the United Kingdom itself received. As the High Representative has set out the OPCW's findings confirm the United Kingdom's analysis of the identity of the toxic chemical. It supports our finding that a military-grade nerve agent was used in Salisbury. As our investigation has found, and OPCW has verified, the highest concentrations of the agent were found on the handle of Mr Skripal's front door. It is therefore, Mr President, the chemical that we said it was and this has been confirmed by an independent mechanism.

I'd like to just say a word about the use of the term Novichok. This is a term we use to describe these chemicals. We take the Russian term for such nerve agents. The OPCW report itself does not use the term Novichok but the point I wish to stress is that it is the chemical that we said it was. And so there shouldn't be any lack of clarity on that point. The report sets out the full forensic chain of custody. It sets out how there could be no contamination. It explains how environmental samples were analysed by two laboratories and biomedical samples by two further laboratories. Finally, the report notes the absence of any significant amounts of impurities in the chemicals that were detected. "High purity" is the description given in the Executive Summary in paragraph 11. This suggests, in turn, that a highly sophisticated laboratory, i.e. a state laboratory, made the chemicals.

The identification of the nerve agent used is an essential piece of technical evidence in the ongoing investigation. But the Porton Down analysis and the

OPCW report do not identify the country or laboratory of origin of the agent used in this attack. So I would like to explain Mr President, the wider picture which has led the United Kingdom to assess that there's no plausible alternative explanation than Russian State responsibility for what happened in Salisbury.

In our view, Mr President, only Russia had the technical means, operational experience and the motive to target the Skripals.

If I may turn first to technical means. A combination of credible open-source reporting and intelligence shows that in the 1980s the Soviet Union developed a new class of fourth generation nerve agents. These were known in Russia, and then more broadly, as Novichoks. The key institute responsible for this work is a branch of the State Institute for Organic Chemistry and Technology at Shikhany. The code word for the offensive chemical weapons programme, of which Novichoks were one part, was FOLIANT. It is highly likely that Novichoks were developed to prevent detection by the West and to circumvent international chemical weapons controls. The Russian State has previously produced Novichoks and would still be capable of doing so today. Within the last decade, Russia has produced and stockpiled small quantities of Novichoks. Russia's chemical weapons programme continued after the collapse of the Soviet Union. By 1993, when Russia signed the Chemical Weapons Convention, it's likely that some Novichoks had passed acceptance testing. This meant they could be used by the Russian military. Russia's CWC declaration failed to report work on Novichoks. Russia further developed some Novichoks after ratifying the Convention and in the mid-2000s President Putin himself was closely involved in the Russian chemical weapons programme. It is highly unlikely Mr President, that any former Soviet Republic other than Russia pursued an offensive chemical weapons programme after independence. No terrorist group or non-state actor would be able to produce this agent in the purity described by the OPCW testing and this is something Russia has acknowledged.

Secondly Mr President, I'd like to refer to operational experience. Russia has a proven record of conducting state sponsored assassinations including on the territory of the United Kingdom. The independent inquiry into the death of Alexander Litvinenko concluded in January 2016 that he was deliberately poisoned with polonium; that the FSB had directed the operation; and that President Putin probably approved it. During the 2000s, Russia commenced a programme to test means of delivering chemical warfare agents and to train personnel from special units in the use of such weapons. This programme subsequently included investigation of ways of delivering nerve agents including by application to door handles. Within the last decade, as I said, Russia has produced and stockpiled small quantities of Novichoks under this programme.

Thirdly, motive: Sergei Skripal was a former Russian military intelligence officer from the GRU. He was convicted of espionage in 2006. It is highly likely that the Russian intelligence services view at least some of its defectors as legitimate targets for assassination. We have information indicating Russian intelligence service interest in the Skripals and this dates back at least as far as 2013 when email accounts belonging to Yulia

Skripal were targeted by GRU cyber-specialists.

Mr President, none of these stocks and production have been declared in Russia's CW declaration. It is clear that Russia is in breach of its obligations to declare its CW programme.

I'd now like to turn if I may, Mr President, to an update on the Skripals themselves and their medical condition and the consular situation and then also on the investigation itself.

The Russians asked us to pass on the offer to provide consular services to Yulia and their request to see her and we have done that. Yulia herself said in a statement on 11 April: "I have access to my friends and family. I have been made aware of my specific contacts at the Russian Embassy who have kindly offered me their assistance in any way they can. At the moment I do not wish to avail myself of their services but if I change my mind I know how to contact them".

A medical update from the Medical Director Salisbury District Hospital. In the four weeks since the incident in the city centre, the Skripals have received round-the-clock care from clinicians and they have been able to draw on advice and support from the world's leading experts in this field.

Because of the Skripal's right to privacy, I will not go into great detail about the treatment we have been providing but we can say the following: Nerve agents work by attaching themselves to a particular enzyme in the body which then stops the nerves from working properly. This results in symptoms such as sickness, hallucinations and confusion. The hospital, in treating the patients, was able to stabilise them, ensuring that the patients could breathe and blood could continue to circulate. They then needed to use a variety of different drugs to support the patients until they could create more enzymes to replace those affected by the poisoning. The hospital also used specialised decontamination techniques to remove any residual toxins. Both patients have responded exceptionally well to the treatment that we have been providing but both patients are at different stages in their recovery.

Turning to decontamination in the investigation, as we have said before this has been one of the most comprehensive and complex investigations into the use of chemical weapons ever undertaken. It has involved 250 police detectives. They have been supported by a range of experts and partners and they have gone through more than 5,000 hours of video footage and they have interviewed more than 500 witnesses.

The British government announced on 17 April that decontamination work in Salisbury is starting this week. It will take some months to complete. In total, nine sites, including three in the city centre, have been identified as requiring specialist decontamination. This will involve a complex process of testing, the removal of items which could be contaminated and that might in turn harbour residual amounts of the agent, and it also involves chemical cleaning and re-testing. All waste will be safely removed and incinerated. Each site will not be released until decontamination is complete.

Mr President, we've heard a number of allegations against the UK and against the findings from the Russian Federation. I would like to deal briefly if I may with some of the most egregious.

One accusation that we faced today and in recent days was that Yulia had not been poisoned, that the British government had in fact drugged her and put her in a coma and then injected her with the poisons that were found. Mr President, this is more than fanciful. It is outlandish. That sort of thing may happen in Russia but I can assure the Council it does not and will not happen in the United Kingdom.

Secondly Mr President, the Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov has claimed that traces of the toxic chemical BZ were found in the samples analysed by the OPCW and this disclosed the location of one of the independent laboratories that OPCW used. The OPCW themselves have not disclosed the identity of the labs nor have they produced any information about BZ samples in the Executive Summary that they released to the public. So it is an interesting question Mr President: how and why does Russia think it knows who tested the samples and what result they found? By making this confidential information public, Russia has in turn breached the confidentiality that states-parties owe the OPCW under the Chemical Weapons Convention. On the substance of that allegation Mr President, the OPCW Director General explained in his statement today that a separate sample, separate from the samples taken from the Skripals and their environment, a separate sample with BZ in it was sent with the samples taken from Salisbury to the designated laboratories for testing. This is called a control sample and it is a routine procedure carried out in these tests so the OPCW can test whether the labs findings are accurate. The Director-General has confirmed unreservedly that there was no BZ in any of the samples taken by OPCW in Salisbury. I believe, Mr President, that Russia is fully familiar with this procedure so I would be grateful to know what motive Mr Lavrov had in setting out this obfuscation.

Mr President, Russia continues to ask to be involved in the UK's independent investigation. It is quite clear that they are both suspected of involvement and that their behaviour has undermined their credibility on this. As I said before, this is an arsonist-turned-firefighter trying to investigate his own fire. Russia has failed to establish any good reason, under the CWC or otherwise, why they should be involved in the UK's independent police investigation.

But if I may Mr President, I repeat what I said at the first briefing in this Council that I took part in on Salisbury. We did go to the Russian Federation, before we went to OPCW, to ask them if this was a rogue attempt by one of their agents and if so, to cooperate with us in trying to get to the bottom of it and resolve the case. And the Russian Federation did not agree to that request Mr President, rather they refused to take it seriously.

On 13 April, the Russian Federation transmitted to the United Kingdom a list of questions under Article IX of the Chemical Weapons Convention. We will respond as soon as possible and certainly within the 10 days stipulated in the Convention. We will respond to Russia who made the request but we will share our response with all states parties and if I can under the CWC, Mr

President, I will of course share it with members of the Council. Russia said that requests were urgent and they have asked us for an answer by no later than 17 April which we have not done because we have 10 days. But we regret that Russia did not consider it urgent when we asked them for an explanation on 12th March. Our questions, Mr President, remain unanswered.

Mr President, that concludes the briefing I have to offer the Council today. We are at the Council's disposal to answer any questions. We are also very willing to continue to keep the Council updated if the Council would like that. We're happy to do that in person or possibly, so as not to disrupt your timetable, in writing. I should mention also that we held an open briefing for all Member States yesterday in the General Assembly and they had a number of questions that we were able to answer.

Thank you Mr President.

Right of reply by Ambassador Karen Pierce, UK Permanent Representative to the UN, at the Security Council Briefing on the OPCW findings on the attack on Salisbury

Wednesday, 18 April

Thank you very much Mr President. I will be brief. I was asked a number of questions by the Russian Ambassador.

I have nothing to add to what I said in relation to the OPCW report that has just been published, the way the samples were taken. I have nothing to add to what I said on the consular side. I would like to stress that the investigation in the United Kingdom is indeed independent of the government. On selective adherence to the OPCW or the Chemical Weapons Convention, we are a State party in very good standing.

On Porton Down, we, the UK does not possess chemical weapons. Porton Down is a defensive establishment. It conducts research. It provides scientific and technical support to the UK government in relation to protection against chemical weapons. Protective research is permitted under the Chemical Weapons Convention. Porton Down is in full compliance with the Convention and it is subject to regular inspection by OPCW and any member state is invited, is able, to conduct an inspection at any time. We received 16 questions from the Russian Federation under Article IX, Mr President, of the [CWC]. The rules and articles of the [CWC] make it clear that we have 10 days to respond and we will respond, Mr President.

On President Putin, I am happy to clarify that I was referring to the early 2000s. On Litvenenko, the polonium trail literally led all the way back to Russia. I repeat something I've said before, Mr President; we respect Russia as a country, we have no quarrel with the Russian people but will always speak out against Russian authorities' reckless and illegal behaviour whether it takes place in Syria or it takes place in Salisbury.

Finally Mr President, when it gets to Christmas I would like to buy my colleague the Russian Ambassador a subscription to an English book club but

as it isn't Christmas allow me to return the literary favour today. The Russian account of UK behaviour and what is happening on the ground in either Salisbury or Syria is a rewrite of George Orwell's 1984, updated for the modern day and modern Russian methods.

Thank you.

---

## **Speech: Syria: International Impartial and Independent Mechanism**

Thank you very much, Mr Chairman, and we associate ourselves with the statement made earlier by the European Union. This first report of the International Impartial and Independent Mechanism is extremely welcome. It's an important initiative from Lichtenstein and Qatar and we join other colleagues in congratulating Catherine Marchi-Uhel, on her professionalism in setting it up.

The establishment of the IIIM was an important step forward in ensuring accountability for the horrific atrocities that have been committed in Syria. These include torture in Asad's prisons, the unlawful targeting of civilians and civilian objects, including medical facilities, and as everyone knows, the use of chemical weapons. It's up to all of us to support the IIM in building and bringing cases against perpetrators before any competent tribunal.

The UK strongly supports the IIIM. We co-sponsored the UNGA resolution in December 2016 that set it up and we have contributed over a quarter million dollars to its start-up costs. We will make a further contribution later this year and I take this opportunity to encourage all Member States financially to support this important mechanism.

The barbaric chemical weapons attack in Douma on the Syrian people 11 days ago cost up to 75 lives including those of young children. But it was only the latest atrocity in this seven year conflict. We must ensure that those responsible for this crime are held to account. And I would like to take this opportunity to take a few moments now to set out the UK's response along with French and American allies to the attack on Douma. Mr Chairman, the military action we took last week was a strictly limited operation. We have published our legal position on our action. As it sets out, the action was taken to alleviate the extreme humanitarian suffering of the Syrian people by degrading the Asad regime's chemical weapons capability and by deterring their further use. We determined that there was no practicable alternative to the use of force if lives were to be saved and that the strikes were necessary and proportionate, the minimum necessary.

Mr President, it cannot be illegal to use force to prevent the killing of

such numbers of people. We hope our actions will also uphold the international norms prohibiting the use of chemical weapons. I would like to stress this is not about intervening in a civil war or about regime change. And it was not about a one-off use of chemical weapons by the Asad regime. Four cases, including one of Sarin, were documented by JIM before it was shut down in 2017. We cannot allow the use of chemical weapons, which as everyone knows are prohibited under international law, to become normal, either within Syria or elsewhere.

In 2014 Russia vetoed a resolution calling for the situation in Syria to be referred to the ICC so that there could be accountability for all the atrocities that we have seen in Syria. To date, Russia has vetoed 12 Security Council resolutions aimed at alleviating the plight of the Syrian people. This makes the work of the IIIM even more important.

We commend the work that it has already undertaken to establish cooperation with Syrian civil society, international organizations including the UN Commission of Inquiry and Member States. We encourage the IIIM to investigate CW attacks, particularly in the absence of any international attribution mechanism for CW.

We must demonstrate that those who have committed the most serious crimes of international concern can have no place to hide. There must be no impunity for the horrendous acts taking place on a daily basis in Syria. There must be justice for the victims. It may take a long time. Sadly, I fear it will take a long time but there must be justice. I'd like to close if I may Mr President by just endorsing what the French ambassador had to say about next steps on the political side and assuring the General Assembly that the United Kingdom will devote every effort to that end.

Thank you.