

[Russia: UK condemns arbitrary detention of Alexey Navalny](#)

Press release

The UK has condemned the 30-day detention of Russian opposition activist Alexey Navalny, who was poisoned by Novichok in 2020.



Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab said:

It is appalling that Alexey Navalny has been detained on arbitrary charges. The UK Government calls for his immediate and unconditional release.

Mr Navalny is the victim of a nerve agent attack, and the Russian authorities should investigate and explain the use of a chemical weapon on Russian soil.

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[First meeting of the new Build Back Better Business Council](#)

The Prime Minister and the Chancellor chaired the first meeting of the new Build Back Better Business Council this afternoon. The Business Secretary, Trade Secretary and Vaccines Minister also attended the meeting.

The Prime Minister opened by thanking the businesses for their efforts throughout the pandemic, highlighting the importance of businesses and

government continuing to work together.

He updated the Council members on the vaccine roll-out, with the Chancellor reiterating that the single most important economic policy for the here and now is rolling out the vaccine as quickly as possible.

The Prime Minister spoke about how the steps we have taken in the pandemic have rightly focussed on the need to shield our economy from the deepest economic downturn in centuries, however, we also need to look ahead to our economic recovery and the wider task of renewing the UK.

The Prime Minister outlined the need to seize opportunities of Brexit, support job creation, cement the UK's position as a science superpower, deliver an upgrade to infrastructure and launch a green industrial revolution – ensuring that we build back better, fairer, greener, and faster.

The Chancellor laid out the three key pillars of the government's plan to drive growth beyond the pandemic: investing in infrastructure, skills and innovation. He set out that improved infrastructure leads to improved productivity, skills are the single best way to drive human productivity and key in addressing regional disparity, and investment in innovation is critical to deliver new growth, ideas and services.

The Council discussed the government's plan and offered their individual perspectives on the best ways to promote economic recovery and growth going forwards. The Council agreed to continue to provide feedback on the proposal in the coming months and consider the role that businesses can play.

The Business Secretary gave an update on the Better Regulation Cabinet Committee, reinforcing how this would be about improving standards and fostering a more supportive business environment. The Trade Secretary spoke about the Office for Investment and the work government is doing to identify and encourage investment into the UK.

The Prime Minister closed the meeting by thanking the businesses for their great ideas and committed to working closely with them in the future to draw upon the members' collective expertise.

Health and Social Care Secretary's statement on coronavirus (COVID-19): 18 January 2021

Welcome to Downing Street for today's coronavirus briefing. And I'm joined by Professor Steven Powis, the Medical Director of NHS England and by Dr Susan Hopkins, the Chief Medical Adviser to Public Health England and NHS Test and

Trace.

And I want to bring you up to date with the latest data on the disease and on our vaccine plan in order to combat it.

Today, 37,535 positive cases of coronavirus were recorded. The NHS is under significant pressure in all parts of the country.

There are 37,475 people in UK hospitals with coronavirus – that is the highest that it's been throughout the pandemic and someone is admitted to hospital every 30 seconds.

And sadly, today 599 more deaths were recorded. That's 599 more people who have died from this terrible disease and left loved ones and their families in mourning.

And I know the pain that this disease causes – and I'm determined to do everything we possibly can to defeat it, and I know that is what you want too.

And our vaccine delivery plan is absolutely at the core of this, it is our way out. It's also the biggest medical deployment in British history and it's one of the biggest civilian operations that this country's ever undertaken.

Our approach is, of course, to save as many lives as possible – as quickly as possible and to reduce the pressure on the NHS.

We're on track to deliver our plan to vaccinate the most vulnerable groups by the middle of February, the groups that account for 88% of COVID deaths.

And I'm very glad to report that, as of midnight last night, we have now vaccinated 4,062,501 people across the United Kingdom, and we're currently vaccinating more than double the rate – per person per day – than any other country in Europe.

Latest data show that we've now vaccinated more than half of those over 80 as well as half of our elderly care home residents.

And we all know these are the groups most vulnerable to COVID and we know that every jab counts and I am really pleased that we've been able to meet this milestone.

Some areas of the country have done even better. There are some parts where the vast majority of octogenarians have been vaccinated and there are some places – for instance Slough – who have vaccinated all of their care home residents.

And so, I want to thank all those who've been doing this enormous task and in particular Slough, and other places around the country, who have reached the critical goal of making sure that every body in a care home can be vaccinated.

And this means that, in those areas, where the vast majority of people in the

top two priority groups have been vaccinated, from today, we can start moving on to the over 70s, and those under 70 who are clinically extremely vulnerable.

We're doing this because it's the best way both to maximise the pace of the rollout and deliver according to the clinical prioritisation. All with the goal of saving as many lives as possible, as quickly as possible and reducing the pressures on the NHS.

And I want to say to anybody aged over 80 but hasn't yet had their jab, I want to say we will reach you. The NHS will contact you and you will have your invitation to be vaccinated within the next 4 weeks.

And I'm absolutely determined to do all that I possibly can to support people in care homes, while we get this vaccination done as soon as possible.

Over the weekend I announced £120 million to support staffing levels in social care, and that's in addition to the £149 million we recently made available to support the regular staff testing in care homes.

And I want to thank everyone working in social care for the incredible way that you've stepped up for those who you care for – you make us all proud.

And I know – that as we continue to live under these difficult restrictions – people want to know the way forward for everyone.

Our vaccine programme continues to accelerate and expand – and another 10 large-scale vaccination centres came on stream in England just this morning.

But in the meantime we must all continue to play our part. We must stay at home wherever possible and take vital steps like the basics of hands, face and space, letting fresh air in – and keeping to the rules on social distancing.

Don't blow it now. We're on the route out. We're protecting the most vulnerable, we're getting the virus under control. Together, I know that we can do it.

And we've got to stick at it and especially with our plans for all adults in the UK to be offered a COVID vaccine by September.

And just before I end, I just want to say this: there are many more ways that everybody can help in this great national effort.

Of course, following the rules is the single most important thing that people can do. But more formally, people are helping by being a community volunteer, or signing up for clinical trials for vaccines and for therapeutics.

Or, the 50,000 people who've now signed up for the Sun's 'Jabs Army' – smashing the target, in the battle against this disease.

And I want to thank each and everyone of you, and the Sun newspaper for leading in this part of the national effort.

But also informally too – and this is something that I know so many people are already doing in every part of the country – and I see it every day, and people talk to me about it all of the time.

And it really inspires me, how people are helping in adversity. Like a grandson, helping their grandma to book an appointment online, or neighbours dropping off essentials on the doorstep, or the community groups that are getting together to help drive people to a vaccination centre so that people can get that all important jab.

I find it really heartening, and the kind actions we're seeing from so many people – especially when people need help.

So, thank you for all that you are doing for your loved ones, for your communities, for your friends and colleagues and neighbours.

Being there for each other is so important in these difficult days – and that spirit that can help us all get to the brighter times that I know are ahead.

Thank you for watching so far and now we are going to turn straight to the questions.

National free school meals voucher scheme opens to orders

Schools can begin ordering free school meal vouchers for eligible pupils from today as the Government's national scheme launches, adding to the support available for disadvantaged families.

An online service for schools, the scheme allows schools to place orders for supermarket gift cards on behalf of parents and carers whose children are eligible for free school meals.

The vouchers are worth £15 a week per child and families can receive codes by email to redeem themselves, or as a gift card provided by post, collection or delivery to families without internet access.

The national scheme, run through Edenred, also ran between March and August last year, with £380 million worth of voucher codes redeemed into supermarket gift cards during that time.

Education Secretary Gavin Williamson said:

There should be no doubt in this Government's commitment to free school meals support for children who need the most help.

The centrally-funded national voucher scheme gives schools another option in providing that support – but they can of course continue providing locally-arranged solutions or high-quality lunch parcels where this is most convenient for their families. These costs will be reimbursed.

As was the case over Christmas, vulnerable families will continue to receive meals and other essentials over February half term via councils through the £170 million Covid Winter Grant Scheme launched last year.

From today, schools can order vouchers for the four-week period between 18 January and 12 February.

Edenred have reported that, as of 13:15 this afternoon, more than 4,600 orders have been placed by schools through the national voucher scheme worth a total of £9.18m.

In addition to the national scheme, schools can continue providing free meals to eligible pupils via lunch parcels, through catering suppliers, or via locally arranged solutions. This might include vouchers for a local shop or supermarket not currently included in the national scheme.

During February half term, vulnerable families will continue to receive meals and other essentials through the £170 million Covid Winter Grant Scheme as they did during the Christmas holidays. Launched in November last year, the Grant Scheme is helping families struggling with the costs of fuel and food and is ringfenced, with 80% earmarked to support families until the end of March 2021.

As was the case over Christmas, it will fund support through local authorities – this might include vouchers, meal parcels or holiday clubs.

The Government has also provided a further £16m funding for food distribution charities and has expanded its Holiday Activities and Food Programme which has provided healthy food and enriching, engaging activities to disadvantaged and vulnerable children since 2018. It will run across England at Easter, summer and Christmas in 2021, backed by £220 million.

The Department for Education continues to work with LACA, the body representing school caterers to ensure lunch parcels and meals all meet high standards. Guidance developed by LACA and Public Health England is being updated to reflect the additional funding that has been provided to support schools and school caterers in following this approach.

Information for parents and carers:

- If your school is providing vouchers through the national voucher, they will email or post a 16-digit eCode that you can redeem online from a selection of supermarket 'eGift cards'.
- Alternatively, if you do not have an email address or access to the internet, your school can print off the voucher, or 'eGift card', and

post it to your home address, or arrange a collection or delivery if easy and safe to do so.

- Take the eGift card in-store and present it at the till to pay for food and groceries up to the value of the eGift card. This can be presented at the till in-store either on a smartphone screen or printed on a piece of paper, just like a gift card.
- More details can be found in the [step-by-step guide](#) for parents.
- FAQs for parents and carers can be found [here](#).
- You can check if your child is eligible for free school meals [here](#).

Information for schools:

- Schools should have already received an email from Edenred advising them to activate their account, or to reset their password if they have already used the platform.
- If a school did not receive an email from Edenred, or wants to change their admin details, they can do this [here](#).
- Schools will be notified whether to begin ordering on Monday, Tuesday or Wednesday (18-20 January). These initial order dates are being allocated in three batches to help manage demand on the site.
- The Department will reimburse costs for locally arranged vouchers up to £15 and provide £3.50 on top of a school's regular funding for those providing parcels. Costs can be claimed back to 4 January, recognising the schools will of provided support since that point.
- Ten retailers have signed up to the Edenred scheme: Aldi, Sainsbury's, Tesco, Asda, Morrison's, Iceland, the Company Shop Group, Waitrose, McColls and M&S. This gives families greater choice of where to redeem their eCodes.
- Schools can either order eCodes to be sent by email to a parent or carer to redeem into a supermarket gift card, or they can have gift codes posted directly to parents who may not have access to a printer.
- Department for Education [guidance](#) explains how schools can order vouchers and distribute them to families – this includes eCodes, which can be sent directly to families, or gift cards which can be posted by schools to those who do not have access to a printer.
- More details will be provided shortly on how schools who prefer to use locally-arranged vouchers can claim back these costs. These will need to be valid claims based on eligible children and support provided over the specified timeframe, including covering costs back to 4 January, but no other additional criteria will be applied.

[UK Government helps more than 57,000 businesses in Wales](#)

- More than 55,000 loans worth more than £1.5 billion have been offered

under the Bounce Back Loans Scheme

- More than 2,200 loans worth £503 million have been offered under the Coronavirus Business Interruption Loan Scheme
- 97,000 people in Wales have benefitted from the Self Employment Income Support Scheme.

Businesses in Wales benefited from more than £2 billion of UK government-backed loans to protect and support jobs.

More than 57,000 loans have supported businesses across all sectors, protecting jobs. But the retail and construction sectors have benefitted the most, demonstrating how government support helped those businesses that were impacted hardest by the pandemic.

Similarly, the self-employment income support scheme has benefitted business people across all sectors, with 97,000 people in Wales benefitting from SEISS, with an average claim of £2,400.

Secretary of State for Wales, Simon Hart, said:

The pandemic has created huge uncertainty for employees, the self-employed and business owners, but the support UK Government has provided has brought stability to thousands businesses across Wales.

Firms large and small in Wales have received more than £2 billion in UK government-backed loans to protect jobs and these businesses will help drive the economy as we look to build back stronger from the pandemic.

The Chancellor of the Exchequer, Rishi Sunak, said:

Throughout this crisis, we have provided more than £280 billion of support to protect jobs and livelihoods up and down the country.

We are committed to continuing to ensure jobs are protected and opportunity is created. Companies across Wales have benefitted from support through government-backed loans, including a chain of pet supply superstores, Pet Place, based in Conwy.

Sion Pritchard, managing director of Pet Place, said:

We've always designed our online presence to supplement the revenue our physical stores generate, so the sudden and vast increase in

online orders presented a major challenge. While we've been able to successfully redeploy our resources, we wouldn't have been able to move so quickly or meet the working capital demands of such an exercise without the emergency funding from CBILS, particularly given the level of investment we've put into our stores in the last year.

Our overall business has been by no means immune to the economic effects of the current pandemic but, with the support of CBILS and our lenders, we've been able to meet them head on while keeping our employees safe and our suppliers paid in full.

At the start of Winter, the Chancellor announced that more than a million businesses who took out a Bounce Back Loan will now receive further protection from the Covid crisis through flexible repayments, under the new Pay as You Grow system, which gives businesses more time to repay. Since then, the Government has extended the loans schemes until March, and given businesses the ability to 'top-up' their loans if they need to.

The Government has invested more than £280 billion throughout the pandemic to protect millions of jobs and businesses, including extending the self-employed and furlough schemes through to April to give businesses the certainty they need to plan over the coming months.