

Enhancing cooperation between the Arab nations and bringing peace and stability to the region

Thank you, Your Excellency. I want to congratulate you, Mr Chairman, and Tunisia, on organising this meeting with the League of Arab States. I would also like to thank the Secretaries-General for their briefings today. We agree with others that sustainable long-term peace and prosperity is best achieved through coordinated efforts to prevent and resolve conflict.

It is also only right in this, the 75th anniversary year of their foundation, to recognise the primary role of the United Nations, the League and other multilateral organisations in creating and supporting the international rules-based system that provides a foundation for coordinated and collective action to address our biggest challenges. An achievement that is brought into sharp relief in a year where we have all suffered, and continue to suffer, from a global pandemic.

The League has played and continues to play an important role in promoting regional peace and security. Enhancing cooperation and friendship between the Arab nations, and between the region and the rest of the world. Throughout its history it has been a voice of moderation and mediation during times of regional conflict. Building on this, and deepening inclusive political processes with female participation, will enable us all to confront the urgent challenges that we share in the region and that still demand the international community's immediate attention.

Turning to some specifics and beginning with Syria, a negotiated political settlement remains the only sustainable solution to the conflict and the United Kingdom continues to support UN Special Envoy Pedersen's efforts to that end. We will not consider funding reconstruction without a political process firmly underway, and we welcome the League's continued suspension of Syria. Resolution 2254 requires: a nationwide ceasefire; unhindered aid access; releasing those arbitrarily detained; conditions for safe refugee return; and free and fair elections pursuant to a new constitution. Instead, the Asad regime's policies continue to devastate the Syrian economy, deny aid to those in need, and endorse repeated violations of international humanitarian and human rights law.

With regards to the Middle East peace process, the United Kingdom remains committed to a two state solution, leading to a safe and secure Israel living alongside a viable and sovereign Palestinian State, based on the 1967 lines and with Jerusalem as the shared capital of both states. The United Kingdom is clear that all actions that undermine this objective must cease, including terrorism, incitement, settlement expansion, and demolitions. The United Kingdom has welcomed recent Arab-Israeli normalisation agreements, which show that dialogue triumphs over hostility. The closer ties and benefits of these agreements must also be extended to the Palestinians. We encourage the

parties to harness the new regional dynamic, and through dialogue and compromise, to move towards a lasting solution to the conflict.

In Libya, we welcome the UN-brokered ceasefire and continue to stand ready to support the political roadmap agreed by the Libya Political Dialogue Forum, working towards elections in December 2021. We welcome the efforts of the League to support a peaceful resolution to the conflict, including through their support to the Berlin process. It is clear that that the Libyan people have had enough of instability, violence, and external military interference in their affairs. It is incumbent on the international community to play our role in helping Libyans on their path to peace and stability.

The United Kingdom is deeply concerned by the ongoing conflict in Yemen and its devastating humanitarian crisis. We fully support the peace process led by the UN Special Envoy Griffiths, and urge all the parties to engage constructively. A political settlement is the only way to bring long-term stability to Yemen and to address the worsening humanitarian crisis.

Finally, Mr Chairman, looking ahead, the region shares with the rest of the world two challenges in the short and longer term: COVID-19 recovery and reversing climate change. As we build back better towards a long-term, sustainable, peaceful, and prosperous future, we look forward to deepening and developing the relationship between the United Nations and the League of Arab States.

Thank you.

[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.