

Government funds 93 new gritters as it bolsters transport network for winter amidst COVID-19 pandemic

- minister calls on local authorities to stock-up on salt and grit to keep key routes open
- comes as Highways England rolls out 93 state-of-the-art new gritters as part of the 535-strong winter fleet
- flood risk reduction programme also underway whilst rail network implements winter resilience plans

Roads Minister Baroness Vere has called upon local authorities across the country to ensure key transport routes to COVID-19 test centres are kept open and running smoothly this winter.

Baroness Vere has [written to councils](#) urging them to ensure their supplies of salt and grit are topped up so that essential routes, such as those to hospitals and COVID-19 testing stations, are well maintained as the country prepares for the potential challenge of severe weather alongside COVID-19.

Alongside councils' stocks, Highways England maintains a salt stock of 270,000 tonnes for use on its roads network, with a further 357,000 tonnes held in a national salt reserve. Salt producers, through the Salt Association, have confirmed that production is at sufficient levels to protect road users over the coming months.

The government has also invested over £16 million to help Highways England roll out 93 brand new gritters for use this winter, ensuring traffic can continue to move smoothly on Britain's motorways and major A-roads. The new gritters join a 535-strong winter fleet, including 23 snow blowers capable of removing up to 2,500 tonnes of snow per hour. A further £40 million will be invested by Highways England to help over 250 replacement winter vehicles join the fleet. Transport Secretary, Grant Shapps, said:

We have worked tirelessly with the country's highways teams to make sure our transport networks are kept open and running in whatever weather we encounter. This year, it is more important than ever that Britain is prepared for the winter as we continue to tackle the pandemic. Through this work, we'll ensure key routes to COVID-19 test centres remain open in the coming months.

Jim O'Sullivan, Chief Executive of Highways England, said:

Our winter fleet will be out treating our roads around the clock whenever ice or snow is forecast, but it is still important that

drivers plan their journeys, make sure they are prepared for the winter weather and drive safely in all conditions.

The UK's rail network is also prepared for the more challenging weather conditions, with contingency plans put together so essential workers can rely on the railways. Network Rail and train operators are implementing a range of measures, from deploying specialist cold-weather vehicles such as de-icers at strategic locations, to using inflatable flood defence measures, as well as special timetables ready to implement if needed.

The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs continues to work to reduce the risk of flooding across England, with a £120 million programme of repairs for flood defences following last winter's extreme weather on top of £2.6 billion invested in the construction of new flood and coastal defences since 2015. The Environment Agency is ready to respond to flooding this winter with 250 high volume pumps available and 6,500 trained staff across the country. People can also [check their flood risk](#) and sign up to flood warnings online.

[Welcoming a nationwide ceasefire in Libya](#)

Thank you, Madam President. I would like to start by thanking Acting SRSG Stephanie Williams for what may be her final briefing to the Council in this capacity. Her expert leadership of UNSMIL's dedicated team, and her exceptional personal efforts, have facilitated significant progress towards peace in Libya – more perhaps than we thought was possible earlier this year. So thank you, Stephanie, for all that you've done.

Madame President, the United Kingdom welcomes the agreement by the Libyan Political Dialogue Forum a few days ago to a political roadmap, including elections in December 2021. Libyans now have, for the first time in years, a shared sense of political direction. And I want to pay tribute to the important role played by women delegates at the Forum.

The UK welcomes the courage of the Libyan parties in agreeing a nationwide ceasefire, and the early progress in implementing the agreement, particularly the sense of common endeavour that members of the Joint Military Commission have created, and the momentum that they have maintained, including through their most recent meeting.

As Stephanie has highlighted, though, much remains to be done.

The ceasefire agreement between the Libyan parties specifies that, "within a period of three months" of signing the agreement, "all mercenaries and

foreign fighters shall depart from the Libyan territories – land, air and sea”; and that “until a new unified government assumes its functions, military agreements on training inside Libya shall be suspended and training crews shall depart.” I very much hope that we will hear today from all Security Council members that they support and endorse this position of the Libyan parties.

The message is clear: Libyans want a rapid end to foreign military interference in their country, an end to violations of the Arms Embargo. The Joint Military Commission agreed last week that foreign forces should, as a first step, move at least 5 kilometres back from the frontline. This must now happen, and quickly. And where members of the international community continue fragrantly to flout international law and block progress being made by the Libyans and the United Nations, we must be ready to take firm action, including sanctions.

On the political track, Madam President, we should all support UNSMIL in convening further rounds of the LPDF, and building Libyan agreement around a new, inclusive, interim government, and a firm constitutional basis for these new arrangements. Here again, we must be ready to respond clearly and quickly to those who seek to spoil, derail, or indefinitely delay progress towards the political solution the Libyan people want and deserve.

I would also like to welcome the spirit of compromise that has led to the resumption of oil production and exports across Libya. It is vital now that the international community unites around UNSMIL’s efforts to ensure that the revenues generated by these exports are managed fairly and transparently for the benefit of people across Libya.

We welcome discussions on new security arrangements at oil installations. It is clear that these arrangements must remain firmly in Libyan hands.

Madame President, the United Kingdom is concerned by the continued deterioration in the human rights situation in Libya this year, alongside the worsening COVID-19 outbreak.

We strongly condemn the shocking killing of lawyer Hanan al-Barassi in Benghazi on 10 November – a sombre reminder of the need to protect freedom of expression and the rights of women. We call for this killing, and the disappearance of parliamentarian Seham Sergiwa in July 2019, to be properly, quickly and transparently investigated.

It seems not a week goes by without the discovery of a new mass grave site in Tarhouna. We are also concerned at reports of increasing deaths of migrants at sea and conditions in detention centres. We are committed to accountability, and we call on the authorities throughout Libya to give their full cooperation to the Human Rights Council’s Fact Finding Mission.

Madam President, the recent ceasefire, and the progress on the political track, both brokered by the United Nations, are truly significant. The Libyan parties have demonstrated a readiness to compromise, and to move forward. Now I don’t want to underestimate the challenges that they face. But my message

is clear. The Libyans have shown us the direction in which they want to go: a political roadmap, elections, and a permanent, nationwide end to the conflict which has blighted their lives. They want an end to foreign interference. Now is the time for us – we, the members of the international community – to live up to our obligations, and play our role in helping them get there. And for some, it's time to get out of Libya.

Minister for Equalities delivers International Men's Day speech

“Thank you Madam Deputy Speaker I am pleased to be standing at the Dispatch Box on International Men's Day. I thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting a debate on this important subject and I thank all the hon. and right hon. Members who have made heartfelt contributions today.

“I also welcome the member for Warrington South to her position as shadow Minister.

“International Men's Day is an opportunity to celebrate men and boys in all their diversity, and to shine a spotlight on the issues which affect men, from shared parenting to health and wellbeing.

“This Government is committed to levelling-up opportunity and ensuring fairness for all.

“As Minister for Equalities, I want to ensure no one is left behind, regardless of their sex or background. Both men and women in the UK benefit from us having some of the strongest equality legislation in the world. The Equality Hub will consider sex along with factors like race, sexual orientation, geography and socio-economic background so we can ensure we are levelling up across the country.

“This will support data driven policy to reduce disparity across the Union and make the UK the best place to live, work and grow a business.

“Levelling up is the mission of this government and every one of us should be free and able to fulfil our potential. The Member for Carshalton and Wallington mentioned the Coronavirus, which we all know is the biggest challenge the UK has faced in decades – and we are not alone. All over the world we are seeing the devastating impact of this disease.

“We know that men have been disproportionately impacted by Covid, and that after age, sex is the second largest single risk factor.

“However, not all men are the same, and not all men will be affected in the same way. My report into Covid disparities showed, for example that the job

you do, where you live, who you live with and your underlying health, all make a huge difference to your risk of Covid.

“We recognise how important it is that each individual understands how different factors and characteristics combine to influence their personal risk. The Chief Medical Officer commissioned an expert group to develop a risk model to do just this, and DHSC are working at pace on how to apply the model.

“As well as the impact on lives, Covid has had a huge impact on Britain’s livelihoods. Those livelihoods which give us pride and a way to support our families.

“Because, of course, men and women do not exist separately and in isolation – we are part of families, businesses, and part of our communities. Which is why our support is targeted at those most in need and looks at how issues are impacting individuals not homogenous groups, so that we ensure a fair recovery for everyone.

“As a Treasury Minister, I am particularly proud of our comprehensive package to protect jobs, which the IMF highlighted as ‘one of the best examples of coordinated action globally.’

“We have given unprecedented support, as this house has heard time and time again, through the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme (CJRS) and the Self-employment Income Support Scheme (SEISS), to ensure people can get the support they need, especially those in sectors most affected by COVID-19.

“The members for Watford, Ipswich and West Bromwich East spoke passionately about mental health.

“The challenges this year have no doubt taken their toll on many people’s mental wellbeing.

“It is very understandable during these uncertain and unusual times to be experiencing distress or anxiety or to be feeling low – and we know this affects many men. These are common reactions to the difficult situation we all face. Anyone experiencing distress, anxiety, or feeling low, can visit the Every Mind Matters website and GOV.UK for advice and tailored, practical steps to support wellbeing and manage mental health during this pandemic.

“We know that some men are less likely than women to seek help with their mental health and some can be reluctant to engage with health and other support services. This is why I say to every man that the NHS is open for business. We really want to stress this.

“I would urge any man who is struggling to speak to a GP and seek out mental health support delivered by charities or the NHS. Services are still operating and it’s better to get help early.

“The NHS this week launched its ‘Help Us Help You’ campaign – a major campaign to encourage people who may be struggling with common mental health illnesses to come forward for help through NHS talking therapies, also known

as Improving Access to Psychological Therapies, which are a confidential service run by fully trained experts.

"I would also like to remind people that the 'Help Us Help You' campaigns have sought to increase people coming forward with worrying cancer symptoms, including for testicular cancer and prostate cancer.

"I know the member for Bracknell spoke movingly about his friend who tragically lost his life and urged men to seek the help that they need, as did the member for Glasgow East.

"The current campaign will run throughout the winter to ensure that men feel able to come forward and get tested and treated early.

"I believe the honourable lady asked about rough sleeping. I just wanted to answer her question on what the Government is doing.

"On the 18 July we launched the Next Steps Accommodation Programme which makes funding available to support Local Authorities and their partners to prevent previous rough sleepers from returning to the streets. The programme comprises £161M to deliver 3,300 units of longer-term, move on accommodation in 2020/21. And £105M to pay for immediate support to ensure that people do not return to the streets.

"On 17 September we announced local authority allocations for the short-term funding aspect of this programme. £91.5M was allocated to 274 councils in England to help vulnerable people housed during the pandemic. And recently, on 29 October we announced allocations to local partners to deliver longer-term move on accommodation. More than 3,300 new long term homes for rough sleepers across the country have been approved and this is backed by Government investment of more than £150M. So as she can see there is quite a lot that is being done on this issue which we take very, very seriously indeed.

"Madame deputy Speaker I would like to close by taking a moment to celebrate the contribution men and boys make to our society. The member for Rother Valley talked about men and boys in his constituency feeling like they have been forgotten. It therefore seems opportune to celebrate our fathers and our sons, our brothers and our friends and indeed our colleagues this week, and the progress we have made in supporting them under this Government.

"For example since 2010 we have seen the introduction of Shared Parental Leave, allowing mothers and fathers to share the highs and indeed the lows of caring for their new babies.

"This Government is also committed to making it easier for fathers to take Paternity Leave, as set out in our 2019 Manifesto. And subject to further consultation, we are committed to introducing measures to make flexible working the default for men and women, unless employers have good reason not to.

"As someone who only came back from maternity leave this year myself, I can tell you Madam Deputy Speaker that my husband was able to take paternity

leave and it made my return to work much easier, having two ministerial responsibilities as well as my work in my constituency. So this is a policy that I'm very very passionate about."

Phillip Davies MP

"Would the member also look to make it easier for absent fathers to actually have access to their children and to speed up the process through the family courts, which is often a tortuous one, which causes so much heartache for so many fathers?"

Kemi Badenoch MP

"My honourable friend is right and yes, this is something I think we can look into. I also want to recognise the work that he has done to raise awareness of fathers who feel a sense of alienation from losing access to their children. He will be pleased to see that the statutory guidance of the Domestic Violence Bill currently recognises parental alienation as an example of coercive and controlling behaviour – no doubt in part due to his representations on this issue.

"I would like to thank him and my honourable friend for Mansfield again for their tireless work on these issues, and for securing this debate today.

"I therefore pay tribute to my honourable friend, the member for Mansfield, for his vigorous campaign to support boys from white working-class backgrounds.

"He raised many issues about the way the Equality Act is interpreted, as protecting groups when actually what it protects is characteristics which we all have. I think some of his questions, especially about whether we should have a Minister for Women, are above my pay grade! But I think this is something that I will definitely raise with the Minister for Women and Equalities and with the Prime Minister on his behalf as well.

"I want to assure him that the Commission I sponsor on race and ethnic disparities is currently studying how we improve outcomes for these boys in the towns and regions of our country.

"I'd also like to pay tribute to the Equalities Whip, the member for Finchley and Golders Green, who rarely gets the chance to speak these days as a whip, for his successful campaign to get the HPV cancer jab given to men and boys. We're very proud of the work that he has done.

"I am honoured to have taken part in today's debate on International Men's Day to mark the progress we have made, and to highlight what more needs to be done."

Plans for a flood storage area in York approved by planning chiefs

Proposals to create a flood storage area on the River Foss north of Strensall were approved by York City Council's planning committee today (Thursday).

The new flood storage area will better protect 490 vulnerable homes between Strensall and The Groves area of York from flooding. This scheme, in the rural area 2km north of Strensall, will also reduce flood risk to key transport routes and result in benefits to the environment including tree planting, wetland creation and improvements to river bank habitat.

The purpose of the storage area is to help reduce peak flows in the river, therefore reducing flooding downstream. During heavy rain, the structure fills with water, temporarily holding back flood water and reducing the flood risk to properties along the Foss Corridor, towards York city centre. Once the flood has passed the water in the storage area will subside. For the vast majority of time the structure will not need to be used in this way which means that farming practices will be able to continue in the area.

Project manager Richard Lever, from the Environment Agency, said:

These areas are not like reservoirs and do not store water permanently. They are designed to be dry in normal weather conditions and only fill up for short periods during large flood events.

Unlike other physical flood defences, a flood storage area can be built at some distance from the communities they protect and therefore have less impact than building formal defences.

During a flood event, the level of the River Foss can rise rapidly exposing properties, roads and land to the risk of severe flooding. This is likely to increase with more extreme weather conditions predicted due to climate change. Currently there are no flood defences along the Foss Corridor and a flood storage area is the only viable option.

Out of all the projects included in the Yorks Flood Alleviation Scheme, this proposal will deliver the largest benefits in terms of numbers of properties protected.

Mr Lever said:

As well as reducing flood risk, the storage area will also have environmental benefits. This scheme will facilitate the growth of

valuable wetland habitat, create space for local wildlife and help improve water quality downstream.

Materials for building the embankment for the storage area will be taken from within the site, creating pits which fill with water and act as permanent shallow ponds.

Discussions about the proposals have been held at parish council meetings, public events and with landowners, Yorkshire Wildlife Trust, the Foss Internal Drainage Board and Natural England.

The planning application for the flood storage area will also need to be approved by Ryedale District Council as it falls with the boundary of both councils.

Following the severe flooding in York in Dec 2015, where over 600 properties were flooded, central Government committed £45m to fund projects to better protect properties in the city.

Environment Agency flood schemes protected almost 130,000 properties during the winter 2019/20 flooding, even though water levels were higher in some places than the floods of 2007 when 55,000 properties flooded.

Since 2015, the Government has invested £496m flood defences in Yorkshire – more than any other region – better protecting more than 66,000 properties

For more information about York's Flood Alleviation Scheme [visit](#)

Make sure you are prepared for a flood event and find out if you are at risk [visit](#)

New Transformation Business Group created

Over the past few months, leaders from across HMRC have worked together to set out a 10-year tax strategy and how we will achieve it. To support this, we are creating a Transformation Business Group, to be led by Joanna Rowland in a new Director General role.

Joanna has headed the HMRC programme and project management profession since January 2018 and became interim Director General for our Covid-19 response last August, leading the implementation of the Chancellor's packages to support businesses and jobs such as the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme.

During this time Joanna passed a recruitment panel for substantive promotion to another Director General role and has been confirmed by the Prime Minister and Cabinet Secretary directly into this new role.

The new transformation group will have 3 core functions:

- directly delivering our major cross-cutting programmes, while ensuring collaboration across HMRC's other business groups
- exercising oversight and coordination of the portfolio, both the major changes and the range of projects that will continue to be delivered from other business groups
- leading HMRC's project delivery function, setting standards and ensuring project professionals are trained, developed and perform to those standards

HMRC's Executive Committee (ExCom) will work with senior change leads across the department to agree which programmes require the dedicated oversight of this new group. While the group gets established, its remit will focus on establishing the standards all projects will work to, continuing to oversee the COVID-related projects and taking leadership of the flagship Making Tax Digital programme.

Key to the successful implementation of our long term HMRC strategy will be our ability to lay out, in a clear multi-year roadmap, the combination of policy, process, people and IT changes we need to make.

As we develop planning processes to support this, we will need to work together to ensure the roadmap is complete, coordinated and delivered. The new Transformation Group will support and enable the direct delivery of major cross-cutting programmes together with oversight and coordination of a portfolio of wider change projects which, together, move us forward.

Joanna will report to Angela MacDonald, HMRC Deputy Chief Executive and Second Permanent Secretary, who said:

I'm delighted to announce Jo's appointment, which is critical for delivering the support our customers need in these exceptionally busy and challenging times and will be key in helping us to build trust in our administration of tax and customs.

Jo has done an incredible job leading the delivery of the COVID-19 support schemes over the past few months and has substantial previous experience in leading transformation programmes across government.

Joanna, who will base herself in Portsmouth, commented:

Over the last few months, HMRC has rightly won plaudits for the work we have done to support customers and the UK economy in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. I've been proud to lead our

response and thrilled to see the can-do attitude of our people that has helped us achieve so much in such a short period of time.

I want to carry this energy forward into the longer-term transformation of our department to meet the challenges ahead as we recover and reshape our economy in the post-Brexit world and create a world-leading digital tax and customs authority.