

Press release: Minister for Europe visits Poland

Sir Alan Duncan will attend the first ever Polish-British Belvedere Forum, which brings together experts from both countries to discuss future relations, and deliver a speech to its official opening.

He will also hold talks with Foreign Minister Witold Waszczykowski, and Defence Under-Secretary of State Tomasz Szatkowski, where they will discuss European security and defence, NATO and UK-Poland ties.

Sir Alan said:

The UK and Poland enjoy a close and enduring relationship. Our shared history is important. But our shared future matters even more.

The first ever Polish-British Belvedere Forum is a clear demonstration of that closeness, and will encourage, accelerate and deepen our ties.

I am proud that we have a dynamic Polish community in the UK – which is important to all of us – and I look forward to continuing to develop our close relationship on my trip to Warsaw.

We are leaving the EU, but we are not leaving Europe, and my message to our friends and allies in Poland is that we want to build a real partnership, and maintain the strongest possible links, including through a bold and ambitious free trade agreement with the EU.

The Belvedere Forum, which takes place tomorrow [March 9], is a new annual event that brings together more than 100 British and Polish experts from business, academia, media and politics to discuss opportunities, interests and cooperation between our two countries.

The UK and Poland governments agreed to establish the Belvedere Forum in 2016. This year's forum, the first of its kind, will look at British-Poland relations up to 2025, and takes place at the prestigious Belvedere Palace in Warsaw.

Further information

[News story: Spring Budget 2017: 21 things you need to know](#)

1. The economic forecast

Growth in the UK economy picked up through 2016. Employment has reached a record high of 31.8 million people.

The Office for Budget Responsibility (OBR) now forecasts that the UK economy will grow by 2% in 2017. The OBR also forecast that the economy will grow at a slightly slower rate in 2018, before picking up to 2% in 2021.

2. Cutting borrowing and stabilising the public finances

Britain has a debt of nearly £1.7 trillion – around £62,000 for every household in the country.

In 2009-10 the UK borrowed £1 in every £5 that was spent. This year it is set to be £1 in every £15.

Borrowing is forecast to be reduced by nearly three quarters by 2016-17.

3. £2 billion for adult social care over the next three years

This will help councils to provide high quality social care to more people and help to ease pressure on the NHS.

4. £425 million investment in the NHS in the next three years

£325 million will be invested in a first set of the best local Sustainability and Transformation Plans (STPs).

STPs are the NHS's plans for improving patient services in local regions, developed collaboratively by NHS service leaders and their local partners.

£100 million will go to A&E departments in 2017-18, to help them manage demand ahead of next winter, and help patients get to primary care faster. For example, it will provide more on-site GP facilities and more space in A&E units for assessment of patients when they arrive.

5. Investment in technical education for 16 to 19 year olds rising to over £500 million

New T-levels for 16 to 19 year old technical students will be introduced from autumn 2019. Students will be able to choose from 15 different routes such as construction, digital or agriculture.

The number of hours of training for these students will increase by over 50%. As part of the course, all students will take part in an industry work placement.

The government will also provide maintenance loans for students doing higher-level technical courses at National Colleges and Institutes of Technology – like those available to university students.

6. £300 million investment for new academic research placements

£90 million will provide 1,000 new PhD places, including in science, technology, engineering and maths.

£210 million will create new fellowships, including programmes to attract top global talent to conduct research in areas such as bioscience and biotechnology, quantum technologies, and satellite and space technology.

7. Loans for part time and doctoral students from 2018

The government will provide maintenance loans for people entering part time degrees, and doctoral loans of up to £25,000 to support higher-level study.

8. £536 million for new free schools and to maintain existing schools

£320 million will go to new free schools. Free schools are funded by the government but set up by groups like parents, charities or community and faith groups.

£216 million will be invested in school maintenance.

9. Free transport for children from poorer families who go to selective schools

Children aged 11 to 16 who get free school meals or whose parents are on the Maximum Working Tax Credit will get free transport to their closest selective school, if it is between two and 15 miles away from their home.

Children aged 8 to 16 are already entitled to free transport to their closest suitable school, if they live more than three miles away.

10. Tax-Free Childcare will soon be available to working parents

[Tax-Free Childcare](#) will provide up to £2,000 a year in childcare support for each child under 12.

Parents will be able to receive up to £4,000 for disabled children up to the age of 17.

Parents of younger children will be able to apply for the scheme first, with all eligible parents able to access the scheme by the end of the year.

Working parents in England will also be able to apply for an additional 15 hours of free childcare for three and four year olds, bringing the total to 30 hours a week.

11. New ways to protect consumers

The government will investigate ways to protect consumers from unnecessary costs and inefficiencies, including:

- preventing consumers being charged unexpectedly when a subscription is renewed or a free trial ends
- making terms & conditions simpler and clearer including in digital contracts, like when you sign up to a social network
- fining companies that mislead or mistreat consumers

12. £270 million to launch the Industrial Strategy Challenge Fund

Initial funding will support research and innovation in universities and businesses, in areas like:

- developing artificial intelligence and robotics that will work in extreme environments, like offshore energy, nuclear energy and space
- designing and manufacturing better batteries for new electric vehicles that will help improve our air quality
- improving medicine manufacturing technologies to speed up patient access to drugs

13. Improving transport with the National Productivity Investment Fund (NPIF)

The government is funding improvements to transport infrastructure, including:

- £690 million for new local transport projects, to improve congestion on roads and public transport
- £220 million to improve congestion points on national roads, with £90 million going to the North and £23 million to the Midlands
- supporting local projects in the next twelve months like improvements on the A483 corridor in Cheshire and on the Leicester Outer Ring Road

14. A new strategy to make the UK a world leader in 5G technology

£16 million for a national 5G Innovation Network to trial new 5G technology.

And £200 million for local projects to build fast and reliable full-fibre broadband networks.

15. A three-year NS&I Investment Bond with a market-leading interest rate of 2.2%

The bond will be available for 12 months from April 2017.

The government announced the NS&I Investment Bond at [Autumn Statement 2016](#). It will be open to everyone aged 16 and over with the flexibility to save between £100 and £3,000 over three years.

16. The Lifetime ISA will be available from 6 April this year

The Lifetime ISA will allow younger adults to save up to £4,000 each year and receive a bonus of up to £1,000 a year on these contributions. Funds can be withdrawn tax-free to put towards a first home or saved until a person turns 60.

17. Marking International Women's Day

A new £5 million fund will go to projects celebrating the 100th anniversary of the Representation of the People Act next year, and to educate young people about its significance. The Representation of the People Act (1918) was the first legislative step towards equal voting rights for men and women.

Working with businesses and the public sector, the government will also invest £5 million to increase the number of returnships, helping people back into employment after a career break.

And another £20 million will support organisations working to combat domestic violence and abuse or supporting victims. This increases the total funding for implementing the government's Ending Violence Against Women and Girls Strategy to £100 million by the end of Parliament.

18. Small Businesses and landlords under the VAT threshold will have an extra year to prepare for Making Tax Digital (MTD)

Unincorporated businesses (businesses owned privately by one or more people) that have an annual turnover below the VAT registration threshold will have until April 2019 to prepare before MTD becomes mandatory.

Under [MTD](#), businesses will use digital software to keep tax records and update HMRC quarterly.

19. £435 million to support businesses affected by the business rates relief revaluation

This means no small business that is coming out of small business rates relief will pay more than £600 more in business rates this year than they did in 2016-17.

Funding for local authorities will allow them to provide £300 million of discretionary relief to provide help to businesses most affected by the revaluation.

And from April 2017, pubs with a rateable value up to £100,000 will be able to claim a £1,000 business rates discount for one year.

20. The main rate of [National Insurance contributions](#) (NICs) for the self-employed will increase

Currently, the self-employed may have to pay both Class 4 and Class 2 NICs:

- Class 4 NICs at 9% are paid on profits between £8,060 and £43,000
- Class 2 NICs are paid on profits of £5,965 or more

From 2018, Class 2 NICs will be abolished. Class 4 NICs will rise to 10% in April 2018 and to 11% in April 2019.

Taken together, only a self-employed person with profits over £16,250 will have to pay more as a result of these changes.

This better reflects the fact that the differences in contributory benefit entitlement between the self-employed and employees are now small, following the introduction of the new State Pension in April 2016.

In the summer, the government will also consider whether there is a case for greater consistency in parental benefits between the employed and self-employed.

21. Tax-free dividend allowance will be reduced from £5,000 to £2,000 from April 2018

This will reduce the tax difference between the self-employed and those working through a company. Typically, general investors will need over £50,000 worth of stocks and shares outside an ISA to be affected.

[Press release: East coast surge prompts people to sign up for flood warnings](#)

More than 2,000 people in Lincolnshire and Northamptonshire signed up for flood warnings in just two days when flooding threatened the east coast in January.

The number of local registrations jumped by 7 per cent, Environment Agency figures have shown.

Nearly all the new sign-ups occurred on Thursday 12th and Friday 13th January 2017 when forecasters predicted that high tides combined with weather conditions could cause widespread coastal flooding.

Fortunately the event passed without flooding any homes in either county, but the Environment Agency is reminding everyone to sign up, as figures show that only 18 per cent of the total number of properties at risk in the area are fully registered.

Anyone can check whether they are at risk and register for warnings by

calling Floodline on 0345 988 1188. You can also make sure your contact details are up-to-date and choose how you'd prefer to be contacted – by mobile, text, landline or email – if flooding was expected.

Ben Thornely, Area Incident Manager, said:

We're glad to see people listened to our advice during the surge. It means another 2,000 families will have early warning should flooding be expected – early warning that could give them extra time to protect themselves and their homes.

That's why we're encouraging everyone to sign up now – before the next surge or storm.

The service is free, and it's the most simple, specific and timely way to find out when you're at risk. You can tell us how best to reach you with vital information that's updated every 15 minutes.

All it takes is a simple phone call or you can visit www.gov.uk/flood to find out more.

Notes for editors:

- In January, the amount of fully-registered properties increased by 7 per cent, from 28,500 to 30,500.
- However, only 18% (30,500) of the 169,500 of properties at flood risk in Lincolnshire and Northamptonshire are registered with Floodline.
- People who proactively contact Floodline to provide their contact details and preferred method of contact are considered to be fully-registered.

Press release: International Women's Day

The last few years have seen a lot of progress for women and girls.

We have seen the gender pay gap in the UK fall to its lowest level, and got more women sitting on the boards of Britain's top businesses than ever before. We have pledged to eliminate all violence against women and girls, backed by £80m funding across Government. And in 2014, as the then

Development Secretary, I held the first ever Girls Summit to push for an end to the brutal practices of female genital mutilation and forced marriage.

The Westminster political scene has seen progress on gender equality. We have our second female Prime Minister. Women now make up an unprecedented third of the House of Commons, as well as a third of the Cabinet. And there are a number of cross-party campaigns encouraging women to get into politics so that, increasingly, women can directly shape the policies affecting our country.

This International Women's Day there is much to celebrate – but we have to continue to be bold if we are to deliver real change for women around the world.

The UK's role as a world leader on gender equality is a personal priority for me and I am very proud to be a founding member of the United Nations' first High Level Panel on Women's Economic Empowerment.

Economic empowerment for women is not just about pursuing gender equality. It is also actually in everyone's long term economic interests. A report by McKinsey Global Institute report estimated that if women in every country played an identical role in markets to men, \$28 TRILLION could be added to the global economy by 2025.

That figure represents millions of potential female entrepreneurs, inventors and business leaders who are currently being airbrushed out of the picture. No woman should be held back from fulfilling their ambitions in life.

So we can't just wait for equality to happen – we need to keep pushing for it.

That is why I am also proud that the UK is leading by example, and becoming one of the first countries to introduce gender pay gap reporting requirements. This law will mean all large employers have to publish their GPG figure, shining a light on where women are being held back.

This extra transparency on data will mean employers can take action to address their pay gap. That could mean helping women return to work after they have started a family, or traditionally male-dominated industries doing more to attract women into their professions.

I am confident that British employers will embrace gender pay gap reporting and, more importantly, will deliver positive change for their female employees as a result.

So there is a lot to be proud of, but there is still a lot of work left to do. We need to pick up the pace as we approach this year's International Women's Day, but I remain convinced we can rise to the challenge, and create a world where women and girls can achieve anything.

This message from Secretary of State for Education and Minister for Women and Equalities Justine Greening first appeared in [Politics Home](#).

RAF Sportswomen Top of Their Game

RAF SPORTSWOMEN TOP OF THEIR GAMES

Wales-based RAF servicewomen are competing at the top levels in a range of sports, either representing the Service, civilian teams and even their countries.

SAC Sian Williams, 26, serves as a Logistics Mover at MOD St Athan. For the majority of the time, however, she trains and plays for the senior women's Welsh international rugby team and RAF Women's Rugby. She has 25 caps for Wales and is currently training for Women's Rugby World Cup in 2017, a tournament she has fond memories of.



"The highlight of my career so far has definitely been playing against New Zealand in the 2013 World Cup," said Sian. "It was a privilege to represent Wales and play against the best."

SAC Catherine Sharples, 43, is a reservist with Number 614 (County of Glamorgan) Squadron, where she serves as a photographer. She plays for Newport County's women's football team and is a regular goalscorer. She has played football for over twenty years and credits the RAF with helping to keep her fit enough to play alongside colleagues less than half her age. She said:

"One of the reasons I became a reservist is the military's emphasis on fitness. I was already fit when I joined, scoring light blue on the fitness test, but over two years of service now see me regularly achieve dark blue scores, which has only helped my speed and endurance on the pitch."



LAC Olivia Blok, 27, is a civil engineer in civilian life but serves in personnel support in the RAF Reserves. She has been a triathlon and duathlon competitor for the past four years and puts in between 10-15 hours a week training in swimming, cycling and running. She enjoys the emphasis that the RAF puts on fitness and competition and hopes to represent the Service in the near future.



“That’s definitely something I’m working towards if the opportunity is there,” said Olivia. “I was honoured to represent the United Kingdom in my age group at the European Duathlon Championships in 2014 and it would be great to do so for the RAF or UK again.”

Finally, Kate Gale, 24, is a reservist soon to become a regular as she is about to start Initial Officer Training. She plays for Cardiff City women’s basketball and after seeing a poster for RAF ladies team, she signed up and hasn’t looked back. In the course of a year, she has made fast friends and has been selected to play for the RAF at the inter-services tournament in May.



“I’ve always taken my fitness and sports seriously as a reservist,” said Kate. “But playing competitive basketball for the RAF has taken my motivation to another level. The training days can be long and intense but are all the more enjoyable for it, and in a funny way will help prepare me for officer training. I’m really looking forward to continuing RAF basketball as a regular.”

Images by SAC Cathy Sharples

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