

Business Secretary's statement on coronavirus (COVID-19): 17 April 2020

Good afternoon. I am joined today by the government's Chief Scientific Adviser, Sir Patrick Vallance and Dr Yvonne Doyle who is the medical director of Public Health England.

Before I talk about some decisions taken today, and Sir Patrick provides an update on the latest data, I would like to set out the steps we are taking to defeat coronavirus.

Our step-by-step action plan is aiming to slow the spread of the virus so fewer people need hospital treatment at any one time, protecting the NHS's ability to cope.

At each point we have been following scientific and medical advice and we have been deliberate in our actions – taking the right steps at the right time.

We are also taking unprecedented action to increase NHS capacity by dramatically expanding the numbers of beds, key staff and life-saving equipment on the front-line to give people the care they need when they need it most.

This is why we are instructing people to stay at home, so we can protect our NHS and save lives.

I can report that through the government's ongoing monitoring and testing programme, as of today:

A total of 438,991 people in the UK have now been tested for coronavirus, that includes 21,328 tests carried out yesterday.

Of those, 108,692 people have tested positive.

That is an increase of 5,599 cases since yesterday.

18,978 people are currently in hospital with coronavirus in the UK.

And sadly, of those hospitalised with the virus, 14,576 have now died.

That is an increase of 847 fatalities since yesterday.

We must never forget that behind every statistic is a family member or a friend.

And all our thoughts and prayers are with the families and loved ones of those who have lost their lives.

These figures are a powerful reminder to us all of the importance of

following the government's guidance.

And as the Foreign Secretary outlined yesterday, the current social distancing measures will remain in place for at least the next 3 weeks.

And there are 5 tests that must be satisfied before we will consider it safe to adjust any of the current measures.

First, we must protect the NHS's ability to cope. We must be confident that we are able to provide sufficient critical care and specialist treatment right across the UK.

Second, we need to see a sustained and consistent fall in the daily death rate from coronavirus, so we can be confident that we have moved beyond the peak.

Third, we need to have reliable data from the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE) showing that the rate of infection is decreasing to manageable levels across the board.

Fourth, we need to be confident that the range of operational challenges, including testing capacity and PPE, are in hand, with supply able to meet future demand.

Fifth, and most importantly, we need to be confident that any adjustments to the current measures will not risk a second peak of infections that overwhelm the NHS.

The worst thing we could do now, is ease up too soon and allow a second peak of the virus to hit the NHS and hit the British people.

So I want to thank each and every person across the UK who is following and supporting the government's advice to stay at home, in order that we protect our NHS and, ultimately, save lives.

I know we are asking you to make sacrifices. And it is challenging. But we need to keep going. Working together, we will defeat this invisible enemy.

Now is not the time to let up. The risk still persists – not only for yourself, but for the people around you. So we must stay vigilant.

But of course, the point we hope to get to, one of the ways we can defeat this virus, is to find a vaccine.

Just as Edward Jenner developed the smallpox vaccine in the eighteenth century, we need to apply the best of British scientific endeavour to the search for the coronavirus vaccine.

To that end I can announce today, that the government has set up a [Vaccines Taskforce](#) to co-ordinate the efforts of government, academia and industry towards a single goal:

To accelerate the development of a coronavirus vaccine.

This taskforce is up and running and aims to ensure that a vaccine is made available to the public, as quickly as possible.

The taskforce, reporting to me and the Health Secretary, is led by Sir Patrick and Professor Jonathan van Tam.

It comprises representatives from government, industry, academia and regulators.

Members include Government Life Sciences Champion Sir John Bell, as well as AstraZeneca, and the Wellcome Trust.

The taskforce will support progress across all stages of vaccine development, at pace.

It will back Britain's most promising research, positioning the UK as a leader in clinical vaccine testing and manufacturing.

The taskforce will co-ordinate with regulators to facilitate trials which are both rapid and well supervised.

And it will work with industry in the UK and internationally, so we are in a position to manufacture vaccines at scale.

This will build on the Prime Minister's announcement last month of a further £210 million for the Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations (CEPI), the international fund to find a vaccine.

I can confirm that the government has green lighted a further 21 research projects to help fight coronavirus.

In total, these projects will receive £14 million from a £25 million government research investment and include backing the development of a vaccine at Imperial College London.

This follows support for 6 projects, announced last month, including vaccine development led by Professor Sarah Gilbert at the University of Oxford's Jenner Institute. This is already carrying out preclinical trials and, with government support, will shortly move into a clinical trial phase.

And we are looking forward. So when we do make a breakthrough, we are ready to manufacture it by the millions.

One tool in this fight will be the UK's first Vaccines Manufacturing Innovation Centre based in Harwell.

A project that will help build our capacity to develop and mass produce vaccines here in the UK.

The government will be accelerating the building of this facility.

The Bioindustry Association is also working closely with our taskforce and bringing together a whole range of businesses keen to use their expertise to

mass produce vaccines, as soon as one is ready.

I want to pay a heartfelt tribute to all the scientists and researchers, working tirelessly, on these projects.

Yet even with all their efforts, we should be under no illusions.

Producing a vaccine is a colossal undertaking.

A complex process which will take many months.

There are no guarantees.

But the government is backing our scientists, betting big to maximise the chances of success.

I am proud of how, again and again, Britain has stepped up and answered the call to action.

An enormous challenge being tackled through a vast national effort.

Where problem-solvers, from science, business and government join forces to beat this invisible killer.

We cannot put a date on when we will get a vaccine.

But we live in a country with a rich history of pioneering science.

And with the government backing our scientists we have the best chance to do this as quickly as possible.

Pakistan charter flights to return thousands of stranded Brits

Flights will run from Islamabad and Lahore to both London and Manchester. The flight schedule is:

- Islamabad to London Heathrow on 21, 22, 23 April
- Islamabad to Manchester on 24, 25, 26, 27 April
- Lahore to London Heathrow on 22, 24 April
- Lahore to Manchester on 26 April

The flights are expected to cost £527 and are free for Under 2s.

To book their seats, and find out more information, British travellers should visit the [Pakistan travel advice page on GOV.UK](#).

More than 7,500 British nationals who do not usually reside in Pakistan have already returned to the UK from Pakistan by commercial means, as the FCO has worked with the Government of Pakistan to keep routes running and airports operating.

Foreign Office Minister of State for South Asia and the Commonwealth, Lord (Tariq) Ahmad of Wimbledon, said:

Thousands more British travellers stranded in Pakistan can now fly home thanks to these 10 charter flights. I understand this has been a difficult period for those wanting to return and I am grateful for their patience.

These extra flights will bring around 2,500 more people home – joining the 7,500 British nationals who do not reside in Pakistan who returned on commercial flights following extensive co-operation between the UK and Pakistan governments.

This has been a hugely challenging operation and I'm grateful for the hard work of all those involved in making it happen.

British High Commissioner to Pakistan, Christian Turner, said:

I know how stressful and difficult the suspension of Pakistan's international flights has been, leaving so many British travellers unable to get home. There has been a huge effort from the teams across the Pakistan network to help people to return to the UK.

And while we have got over 7,500 people back to the UK already, these charter flights will help us to get thousands more back home next week.

1. The charter flights are for UK travellers who normally reside in the UK and their direct dependants. Seats will be reserved for those deemed vulnerable.
2. To book flights and register details, British nationals should use the city-specific webpages listed on the FCO [Pakistan travel advice: return to the UK page](#).
3. Movement within Pakistan is currently very restricted. Those who are eligible to fly will be sent information on how to get to airports and flight itineraries directly when their seat is confirmed.
4. Details regarding luggage allowance, flight costs and carriers will be available on the booking portal.
5. The British High Commission continues to provide consular support to any British nationals who remain in India. Consular helpline numbers: +92 (0)51 201 2000.

Open letter to fishing, seafood and aquaculture industries

To all those who contribute to our fishing, seafood and aquaculture industries,

Thank you.

As a nation we are all undoubtedly going through one of the greatest health challenges of a generation and over the past few weeks the Government has taken some unprecedented steps; instructing people to stay at home, to protect our NHS and save lives.

I know these are challenging times for us all and I would like to pay particular tribute to those of you who are, where possible, continuing to work and help feed our nation – your work is vital.

Coronavirus has affected every part of our economy and this has been felt particularly severely by our fishing, seafood and aquaculture industries – where so much of our great produce is sold around the world.

Sectors right across the economy shoulder a similar burden and the Chancellor has been clear from the start that we will do whatever it takes to support people through such unprecedented times, announcing economy-wide support for business and the self-employed. I will continue to work with industry so fishermen and fisheries businesses understand how to access this support.

On Thursday we announced [further measures to support the seafood sector, with a specific fund to secure the long-term future of the English fishing industry](#), by helping fishing and aquaculture businesses to meet the fixed costs they face, such as insurance, equipment hire and port costs.

The Marine Management Organisation (MMO) will administer this £10 million fund, contacting eligible registered owners and licence holders directly. A proportion of the fund will go to support initiatives to encourage the public to buy locally-caught fish. Further guidance on the detail of the scheme will be published in the coming days.

To the public, I urge you to support your local fishermen at this time. I am particularly pleased to see home delivery initiatives to connect consumers with local fishmongers, fishermen and merchants. The Marine Management Organisation is working closely with industry to help facilitate these arrangements.

I also want to mention the invaluable work carried out by specialist charities for fishing communities. Details of these organisations are available on the Marine Management Organisation's website.

I am immensely grateful for all those in the fishing, seafood and aquaculture industries who continue to operate in these testing times, or who have reduced operations to limit the spread of the disease.

Yours sincerely,

Victoria Prentis MP Parliamentary Under Secretary of State, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs

Government launches Vaccine Taskforce to combat coronavirus

- A new Vaccine Taskforce will drive forward, expedite and co-ordinate efforts to research and then produce a coronavirus vaccine and make sure one is made available to the public as quickly as possible
- 21 new research projects combating coronavirus will receive government funding from a £14 million pot investment to rapidly progress treatments and vaccines
- this follows the government's £250 million pledge to develop a vaccine, putting the UK at the forefront of international efforts to fight the virus

Rapid development and production of a coronavirus vaccine will be driven by a new government-led Vaccine Taskforce, Business Secretary Alok Sharma announced today (Friday 17 April).

The taskforce, led by [Chief Scientific Adviser Sir Patrick Vallance](#) and Deputy Chief Medical Officer Professor Jonathan van Tam, will support efforts to rapidly develop a coronavirus vaccine as soon as possible by providing industry and research institutions with the resources and support needed. This includes reviewing regulations and scaling up manufacturing, so that when a vaccine becomes available, it can be produced quickly and in mass quantities.

Representatives from government, academia and industry are coming together to form the taskforce. Members will include government Life Sciences Champion Sir John Bell, as well as [AstraZeneca](#), and the [Wellcome Trust](#).

The taskforce will focus on 5 strands of activity including:

- supporting the discovery of potential coronavirus vaccines by working with the public and private sector, rapidly mobilising funding, supporting leading academics and identifying ways to fast-track clinical trials
- preparing the UK as a leader in clinical vaccine testing and manufacturing, working with companies already at the forefront of

vaccine development

- reviewing government regulations to facilitate rapid and safe vaccine trials
- developing funding and operational plans for the procurement and delivery of vaccines
- building on the UK's research and development expertise to support international efforts to find a coronavirus vaccine

The taskforce is also working closely with the Bioindustry Association, which has set up an industry-led group, to accelerate vaccine development and manufacturing.

Business Secretary Alok Sharma said:

UK scientists are working as fast as they can to find a vaccine that fights coronavirus, saving and protecting people's lives. We stand firmly behind them in their efforts.

The Vaccine Taskforce is key to coordinating efforts to rapidly accelerate the development and manufacture of a potential new vaccine, so we can make sure it is widely available to patients as soon as possible.

Today's announcement is part of the UK's wider efforts to support and accelerate the development of a vaccine for coronavirus. This includes the UK already pledging £250 million from the government aid budget, the biggest donation by any country, to the international programme to develop a coronavirus vaccine under the [Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations](#) (CEPI).

Health Secretary Matt Hancock said:

We're doing everything possible to save lives and beat this disease, and that includes working flat out with businesses, researchers and industry to find a vaccine as quickly as possible.

The UK is world-leading in developing vaccines. We are the biggest contributor to the global effort – and preparing to ensure we can manufacture vaccines here at home as soon as practically possible.

Chief Scientific Adviser Patrick Vallance said:

The UK is home to world leading scientists, researchers and companies who are all at the forefront of vaccine development and manufacturing.

The taskforce will ensure that any potential coronavirus vaccine, when available, can be produced quickly and at scale so it can be

made available to the public as quickly as possible.

The government also announced today 21 new coronavirus research projects set to benefit from a share of around £14 million in government funding.

One new project led by the University of Oxford will trial an anti-malarial drug believed to have anti-inflammatory properties to determine whether it could diminish the effects of COVID-19 on people in high risk groups. GP surgeries across the UK have been invited to take part in this ground-breaking trial, to ascertain whether it could reduce the need for affected patients to go to hospital and speed up their recovery.

Other projects receiving vital government funding from this new pot include:

- Imperial College London testing a vaccine against coronavirus that aims for the body to produce more protective antibodies
- Public Health England developing a new antibody that could offer protection against infection and disease progression of coronavirus
- Public Health England studying how COVID-19 can be transmitted from person-to-person by determining how long it can survive in the air and on different materials found in hospitals and households like fabric, plastics, metals and ceramics

This follows an initial £10.5 million allocated to 6 promising coronavirus projects in March, 2 of which are enabling pre-clinical and clinical vaccine trials, as well as supporting researchers to develop manufacturing processes to produce a vaccine at a million-dose scale.

Additionally, funding under the international CEPI programme is helping scientists and researchers, including those in the UK, continue to lead global efforts to develop a workable coronavirus vaccine. Pioneering British researchers at the University of Oxford are among its recipients, alongside the universities of Edinburgh, Liverpool, Southampton and Bristol. UK aid is working with CEPI to ensure any coronavirus vaccine, once developed, is available and affordable to the NHS.

Chief Medical Officer Professor Chris Whitty said:

The UK has some of the best vaccine scientists in the world, but we need to take account of the whole development process. This taskforce will ensure the UK can take an end-to-end view. This includes funding research, like the recent NIHR/UKRI call, and ensuring manufacturing capability to deliver a COVID19 vaccination as quickly as possible.

UK Research and Innovation Chief Executive, Professor Sir Mark Walport said:

The research community's response to the COVID-19 crisis has been outstanding. In a matter of weeks, researchers have formed projects

to develop potential vaccines, repurpose existing drugs and explore the potential for new medicines, and to examine how the virus is transmitted and causes wide variation in symptoms. Pre-clinical trials of vaccines and clinical trials of drugs are already underway.

The pace at which this work has been carried out is tribute to the UK's world-class research base and its dedication to the fight against this disease.

The UK has a long-term commitment to vaccines investment and is the largest funder to [Gavi](#), the global vaccine alliance. Gavi will play a key role in making any new coronavirus vaccine available and affordable to the world's poorest countries, which will help to slow the global spread of the disease and protect the British public from a deadly second wave of the disease. Gavi has helped to immunise over 760 million children worldwide in the last 20 years.

Notes to editors

Altogether 27 research projects have received a share of a £25 million investment. This follows a government research call to accelerate coronavirus studies and support the UK's world-class scientists and researchers to further the development of vaccines and treatments, as well as improve diagnosis and understanding of the disease.

Find out more about the [research projects announced today](#).

This announcement is part of a £25 million research response, which was announced in February. The first round of projects were announced on 23 March and the second round of projects announced today. The funding is being managed by [UK Research & Innovation](#) (UKRI) and the Department of Health and Social Care through the [National Institute for Health Research](#) (NIHR).

Through the Joint Initiative on Research in Epidemic Preparedness (JIREP) in collaboration with Wellcome, the UK government has provided up to £5 million to the initiative, which was announced on 6 March 2020. [Details of these UK aid-backed research projects](#) were announced yesterday.

[Government to extend testing for coronavirus to more frontline workers](#)

- Symptomatic staff working in a greater number of professions will now be able to access coronavirus testing
- Testing will allow those currently unable to return to work because they

or a member of their family or household have symptoms of coronavirus to know whether they do have the virus

- Frontline workers now eligible for testing will include the police, the fire service, frontline benefits workers and those working with vulnerable children and adults among others
- Where there is extra testing capacity, testing will be expanded to other groups of workers that need it, including those delivering critical medical, energy, utility, transport and food supplies

Access to testing for those with symptoms of coronavirus will be extended across England to include additional frontline workers and symptomatic members of their family or household to allow the key worker to return to work.

Thanks to increased testing capacity the government is extending testing to a wider group of frontline workers in addition to patients, NHS or social care workers who need one.

This follows the launch of the government's partnership with universities, research institutes and companies to begin rollout of the network of new Lighthouse Labs and drive-through testing sites across the UK, with over 20 testing sites opened to date.

This network is providing thousands more polymerase chain reaction (PCR) swab tests, which are used to identify if someone currently has the virus, for frontline workers. This means those who test negative for coronavirus can return to work as soon as possible to support essential services.

The government is already working with local resilience forums to get additional critical workers in their areas tested, including police officers, fire and rescue service employees, and those running the justice system.

The full list of eligible workers now includes:

- all NHS and social care staff, including hospital, community and primary care, and staff providing support to frontline NHS services (for example accommodation, catering) and voluntary workers
- police, fire and rescue services
- local authority staff, including those working with vulnerable children, adults and victims of domestic abuse, and those working with the homeless and rough sleepers
- defence, prisons and probation staff, and judiciary
- frontline benefits workers

Anyone who is eligible – has symptoms of coronavirus a high temperature or new continuous cough – and would like to be tested should speak to their employer. The relevant employers will be provided with information on how to make an appointment with the programme either from their local resilience forum or direct from the Department of Health and Social Care.

See the updated guidance on getting tested: [Coronavirus \(COVID-19\): getting tested](#)

Government departments, national agencies and local resilience forums can refer other critical workers in their area for testing, but this will be determined by need and testing capacity available.

Where there is extra testing capacity, we will also expand testing to other groups of workers that need it. This will include those delivering critical medical, energy, utility, transport and food supplies in both the public and private sector.

Secretary of State for Health and Social Care Matt Hancock said:

“I am determined to ensure that everyone who needs a coronavirus test should be able to have access to one. Today’s expansion of testing will allow even more vital workers to return to the front line.

“We have built up capacity in the system with new testing and diagnostic facilities backed by Britain’s world-class scientists and industry partners. This means we are now able to give even more workers who support and protect us the ability to know if they have coronavirus if they have been demonstrating symptoms.

“Testing is key in our battle against coronavirus and we will continue to prioritise patients, NHS and social care workers but we now have the ability to provide more people with the certainty they need to get back to the front line when it is safe to do so.”

The government is working with local resilience forums across the country to offer tests to additional critical workers or members of their family or household with symptoms which means that they are currently isolating and unable to return to work.

The devolved administrations will operate their own eligibility criteria.

To build capacity the government is also developing mobile testing units and a home test kit that can be delivered to someone’s door so they can test themselves, and their family, without leaving the house.

This follows further increased testing capacity at Public Health England (PHE) labs and NHS hospitals, which has meant that testing is taking place both for key NHS staff and patients.

In time a new website will enable eligible individuals to book a test directly. It will be another significant step forward in the coronavirus national testing programme.