



Department  
of Health &  
Social Care

*From the Rt Hon Matt Hancock MP  
Secretary of State for Health and Social Care*

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Catherine McKinnell MP  
Chair of the Petitions Committee  
House of Commons  
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15 April 2020

Dear Catherine,

Thank you for your letter of 30 March 2020 following the evidence session you held with my Government colleagues and the Deputy Chief Medical Officer for England. Your letter posed a number of follow-up questions which I have responded to in the attached document.

I appreciate that there is extensive public interest in the Government's response to the coronavirus pandemic and I am grateful for the work of your Committee in condensing these views for the attention of myself and Government colleagues.

The Coronavirus outbreak is the biggest public health emergency in a generation. It calls for decisive action, at home and abroad, of the kind not normally seen in peacetime. That is why we are doing everything we can to tackle the pandemic and mitigate its impact.

Yours ever,

**MATT HANCOCK**



## Department of Health & Social Care

### Response from the Department of Health and Social Care

#### Petitions Committee

#### The Government's response to Coronavirus

#### **Background**

On 13 March 2020, the Petitions Committee opened an inquiry into the Government's response to Coronavirus. The inquiry follows the understandably high level of public interest in the Government's response to the outbreak.

On 25 March 2020, the Petitions Committee held a remote evidence session with Government Ministers and the Deputy Chief Medical Officer. Attendees included:

- Rt Hon Nick Gibb MP, Minister of State for School Standards (Department for Education).
- Justin Tomlinson MP, Minister for Disabled People, Health and Work (Department for Work and Pensions)
- Dr Jenny Harries OBE, Deputy Chief Medical Officer for England.

On 30 March 2020, Catherine McKinnell MP, Chair of the Petitions Committee, wrote to the Department of Health and Social Care, Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government, and the Department for Work and Pensions individually with a series of follow-up questions.

This submission responds to the questions posed to the Department of Health and Social Care by the Chair of the Petitions Committee.

#### **Advice on social distancing and shielding**

**What further lockdown measures are being considered, and what conditions will result in them being brought in? How long could the restrictions go on for?**

The Government's response to this virus and all clinical guidance is led by science and a world-renowned team of clinicians, public health experts and scientists – including epidemiologists – working round the clock to keep us safe. The single most important action

we can all take, in fighting coronavirus, is to stay at home in order to protect the NHS and save lives.

When we reduce our day-to-day contact with other people, we will reduce the spread of the infection. That is why the Government has introduced measures including:

- Requiring people to stay at home, except for very limited purposes.
- Closing certain businesses and venues.
- Stopping all gatherings of more than two people in public (excluding people in the same household).

Guidance on our existing measures can be found here:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/full-guidance-on-staying-at-home-and-away-from-others/full-guidance-on-staying-at-home-and-away-from-others>

The Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE) has been providing Ministers and officials with free and frank advice throughout, based on external scientific evidence and a wide source of essential information. We have published the statements and the accompanying evidence to demonstrate how our understanding of COVID-19 has continued to evolve as new data emerges, and how SAGE's advice has quickly adapted to new findings that reflect a changing situation. This can be found at:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/coronavirus-covid-19-scientific-evidence-supporting-the-uk-government-response>.

The Government's existing measures last for three weeks from 23 March, at which point the Government will look at them again and relax them if the evidence shows this is possible. These existing measures aim to reduce the spread of infection, and we will review the effectiveness of these before considering whether to lift these or introduce further measures.

## **Testing and developing a vaccine**

### **When testing capacity is increased who will testing be available for and will it be free?**

Testing is a crucial part of the UK's response to the coronavirus pandemic and we are working on multiple fronts to deliver additional testing capacity into the system.

We are working hard to ensure we can adequately test for and respond to COVID-19. As part of this, we are continuing to prioritise tests for patients in hospitals who need them, and critical key workers, starting with the NHS and social care. Once widespread testing is available, we hope to make it available to the whole population as needed.

As the Secretary of State has said, we endeavour to deliver testing to all those that need it. We are exploring the delivery models for testing across all pillars and decisions on access and costs will be made on that basis.

### **Impact on vulnerable people**

#### **What support will be provided to already vulnerable people, including their children, if they become ill or have to self-isolate?**

Some people with specific health conditions are at very high risk of severe illness from coronavirus (COVID-19). These people are termed clinically extremely vulnerable and will be or already have been sent a letter. If they have received a letter, they can register at <https://www.gov.uk/coronavirus-extremely-vulnerable> to tell us whether or not they need support. If they have not received a letter and are concerned they should be included, they should discuss their concerns with their GP.

If they develop symptoms of COVID-19 (high temperature above 37.8 °C and/or new and continuous cough), they should seek clinical advice using the [NHS 111 online](#) coronavirus service or call NHS 111 if they don't have internet access. People in this group are advised to do this as soon as they get symptoms. In an emergency, they should call 999 if they are seriously ill, but should not visit their GP, pharmacy, urgent care centre or a hospital.

Further information is available online at:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/guidance-on-shielding-and-protecting-extremely-vulnerable-persons-from-covid-19/guidance-on-shielding-and-protecting-extremely-vulnerable-persons-from-covid-19#what-should-you-do-if-you-develop-symptoms-of-coronavirus-covid-19>

Those who are vulnerable on the grounds of frailty, disability, pregnancy or social vulnerability may receive help from the network of NHS Volunteer Responders. NHS Volunteer Responders are able to support with the following four tasks:

- Collecting shopping or medication.
- Transporting people from hospital to home.
- Transporting equipment and supplied between health/social care settings.
- Telephone check-ins.

**Mencap, a learning disability charity, want to know what reassurance you can give to disabled people and carers on the potential impact of the powers within the Coronavirus Bill and what impact it could have on their health and wellbeing?**

We acknowledge that Local Authorities will be under exceptional pressures during this difficult time and may need to focus their resources on securing care for people with the most acute needs, even if this means not meeting some of their duties under the Care Act. Nevertheless, we expect Local Authorities to do everything they can to continue delivering care as now for as long and as far as possible. Measures in the Coronavirus Act will only be triggered if it becomes apparent that Local Authorities are at risk of not being able to keep the most vulnerable people safe and will only be brought in for the shortest time possible.

The COVID-19: Ethical Framework for Adult Social Care has been developed to provide support to ongoing response planning and decision-making to ensure that ample consideration is given to a core set of ethical values and principles when organising and delivering social care for adults. The Ethical Framework is available at <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-ethical-framework-for-adult-social-care>. We have also developed guidance on how Local Authorities can use the new Care Act easements to ensure the best possible care for people during this exceptional period. This is available at <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-changes-to-the-care-act-2014/care-act-easements-guidance-for-local-authorities>.

The Coronavirus Act 2020 does not affect the safeguarding protections in the Care Act and Local Authorities should continue to offer the same level of safeguarding oversight.

The Act also introduces temporary amendments to the Mental Health Act 1983 (MHA). Our primary concern is the safety of patients and these emergency changes will only be switched on if the mental health sector is experiencing unprecedented resource constraints, which are resulting in patients' safety being put at significant risk. Even when enacted, the powers would only be used when local systems decide that they are absolutely necessary. The Government is producing guidance for practitioners in the event that the powers contained in the Coronavirus Act 2020 to allow temporary flexibilities in the MHA are introduced and will include specific considerations relating to the needs of people from vulnerable groups, including autistic people and disabled people. The detention criteria in the MHA will remain the same and patients cannot be detained unless they are suffering from a mental disorder putting themselves or others at risk.

**Given the concern about the NICE rapid guidance on critical care, Mencap, a learning disability charity, want to know what reassurance you give that people with learning disabilities will have their right to treatment respected?**

NICE's COVID-19 rapid guideline on critical care was developed to support critical care teams in their management of patients during this very difficult period of intense pressure. Following further discussion with those potentially affected, NICE updated the guideline on 31 March to clarify that any patient aged under 65, or patient of any age with stable long-term disabilities (for example, cerebral palsy), learning disabilities or autism should have an individualised assessment of frailty, and that the Critical Frailty Score should not be used.

NICE has always made clear that clinicians should take any decisions about care in conjunction with patients and their carers where possible.

**Good Things Foundation, a digital inclusion charity and Stonepillow, a homeless charity, want to know whether you agree that, after health and social care workers, those running community organisations that support vulnerable members of society should be a priority for antibody testing and PPE?**

We are working hard to ensure we can adequately test for and respond to COVID-19. As part of this, we are continuing to prioritise tests for patients in hospitals who need them, and critical key workers, starting with the NHS and social care. Once widespread testing is available, we hope to make it available to the whole population as needed.

As the Secretary of State has said, we endeavour to deliver testing to all those that need it. We are exploring the delivery models for testing across all pillars and decisions on access and costs will be made on that basis.

### **Advice and support for individuals**

**Will more detailed and practical guidance on self-isolation, household isolation, shielding and social distancing be provided for people in different circumstances, so they can best protect themselves and others and manage their lives while they do so?**

**How can people manage symptoms at home and what can they expect if they need medical care?**

The Government has issued a range of practical guidance to support individuals during the COVID-19 pandemic. This includes guidance on the social distancing measures that must be followed by everyone, as well as separate advice for individuals or households who are self-isolating or managing symptoms at home, including when to seek medical care. Guidance has also been issued on shielding the most vulnerable.

Public Health England is in continuous communication with government departments to inform decisions about the development of guidance that is sectors specific or to cover special circumstances that need tailored information.

Further information can be found on the gov.uk website.

Guidance on social distancing and for vulnerable groups:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-guidance-on-social-distancing-and-for-vulnerable-people>

Guidance for households with possible coronavirus (COVID-19) infection:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-stay-at-home-guidance/stay-at-home-guidance-for-households-with-possible-coronavirus-covid-19-infection>

Guidance on shielding and protecting people defined on medical grounds as extremely vulnerable from COVID-19:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/guidance-on-shielding-and-protecting-extremely-vulnerable-persons-from-covid-19/guidance-on-shielding-and-protecting-extremely-vulnerable-persons-from-covid-19>

**The Deputy Chief Medical Officer said that the Government had developed easy read guidance for people with learning disabilities about what is happening and what they need to do to protect themselves. Where can people find these resources?**

Public Health England has developed easy read guidance about COVID-19, which sets out what it is and how people can protect themselves. The guidance is available online at:

[https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/874281/COVID-19\\_easy\\_read.pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/874281/COVID-19_easy_read.pdf)

**What is the Government doing to ensure that all emergency and daily coronavirus briefings are accessible, including translation into British Sign Language?**

We worked with the BBC to introduce a British Sign Language (BSL) interpreter on Monday 16 March to accompany the Prime Minister's daily coronavirus press conference. The BSL interpreter is available on the BBC News Channel and BBC iPlayer. We will continue to work with the broadcasters to ensure there is a BSL interpreter in our daily updates on coronavirus and are prioritising the exploration of additional methods to ensure that all disabled people have access to pertinent communication in accessible formats.

### **Protecting keyworkers**

**What is being done to protect the health of keyworkers, including frontline NHS and supermarket staff?**

We are taking urgent action to ensure dedicated frontline NHS and social care staff – who are working tirelessly to tackle this outbreak – feel supported. The full weight of the Government is behind this effort and we are working closely with industry, the NHS, social care providers and the army to ensure the right equipment is delivered to the right people.

In addition, a suite of guidance is available to help protect those working in health and care settings as well as other key workers, such as those working in the food business. This includes infection prevention and control advice for health and social care workers involved

in receiving, assessing and caring for patients who are a possible or confirmed case of COVID-19, as well as information on appropriate personal protective equipment.

For supermarkets, the guidance highlights the need to avoid crowding and create adequate spacing between individuals. Effective measures to support this will vary by store and location but could include monitoring the number of customers within store and limiting access to avoid congestion.

Further information can be found online.

Guidance for health professionals:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/coronavirus-covid-19-list-of-guidance#guidance-for-health-professionals>

Guidance for residential care, supported living and home care:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-residential-care-supported-living-and-home-care-guidance>

Guidance for food businesses on coronavirus (COVID-19):

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/covid-19-guidance-for-food-businesses/guidance-for-food-businesses-on-coronavirus-covid-19>