

Government outlines further plans to support health and social care system in fight against COVID-19

- Further measures expected to be included in upcoming COVID-19 Emergency Bill include an expansion of video hearings in courts and new powers to make it easier for volunteers to support the fight against COVID-19
- Comes as cross-government approach to tackling virus continues to accelerate, including ensuring detailed guidance is in place to help those self-isolating
- NHS also announce calls to NHS 111 increase by more than a third compared to same period last year, with 500 extra call staff recruited to handle higher demand

Government has today outlined further detail on proposed measures expected to be included in an upcoming COVID-19 Emergency Bill, as plans continue to accelerate ahead of an expected move from 'contain' to 'delay'.

Health Secretary Matt Hancock has outlined how volunteers – who already play a central role in helping the health and social care system function – will be given additional employment safeguards so they can leave their main jobs and temporarily volunteer in the event of a widespread pandemic.

Around 3 million individuals volunteer in a health, community health and social care setting. In the event of a pandemic, we want to be able to maximise the number of volunteers and the amount of time they can commit to supporting the health and social care system – without fear of them losing their jobs. Under these proposed measures, government will ensure the jobs of skilled, experienced or qualified volunteers are protected for up to four weeks to allow them to shore up resilience across the health and social care systems. As part of this, leading business groups will be consulted thoroughly about how best to implement these changes.

Further proposed measures the government are thought to be considering include allowing certain civil proceedings in the magistrates' courts to be conducted via telephone or video, as well as the expansion of audio and video live links in various criminal proceedings. The provisions will ensure individuals who may be forced to self-isolate are still able to appeal to a court, while ensuring courts can continue to operate even in the height of an epidemic so that justice is delivered.

Following last week's [announcement](#) that measures will also consider emergency registration of health professionals who have since retired, the Bill will also look at ensuring that any retired staff who return to work in the NHS will not have their pensions negatively impacted.

Health Secretary Matt Hancock said:

We will do all we can to contain coronavirus, but as we know, COVID-19 is spreading across the world, so I want to ensure government is doing everything in its power to be ready to delay and mitigate this threat.

Public safety is my top priority. Responding to coronavirus is a massive national effort and I'm working with colleagues across government to ensure we have a proportionate emergency bill, with the right measures to deal with the impacts of a widespread COVID-19 outbreak.

We plan for the worst and work for the best, and the NHS is working 24/7 to fight this virus. Calls to NHS 111 have increased by more than a third and we have already put in place 500 extra staff to help with this increase. Every person has a role to play in managing the spread of COVID-19 – whether that's washing your hands more often for 20 seconds or catching your sneezes.

The COVID-19 emergency Bill is also expected to have strong safeguards, including sunseting after two years, and government is clear that it will only use proposed measures if needed – based on clinical and scientific advice.

New NHS data released this week showed that telephone calls to NHS 111 were up by more than a third compared with the same time last year, with an extra 120,000 calls to NHS 111 in the first week of March. Between Thursday 27 February and Thursday 5 March, NHS 111 answered 389,779 calls. To help deal with this demand, the NHS have [announced](#) around 500 additional initial call responders have already been trained, an increase of 20%, and people can also visit NHS 111 online.

Today's developments follow significant government action over the last week, including:

- A PM-led press conference with the Chief Medical Officer Professor Chris Whitty and Chief Scientific Adviser Sir Patrick Vallance announcing the publication of the government's [Coronavirus action plan](#)
- Two Ministerial-led COBRs to oversee the government's response to the COVID-19 outbreak as well as numerous ministerial and clinician-led meetings
- The unveiling of the [latest phase](#) of the government's communications campaign to encourage the public to do their bit to prevent the spread of the virus
- The launch of the government's cross-government 'war room' of communications experts and scientists

As part of the government's cross-government approach, all government departments have started to engage with industry leads in their respective areas as government, with DCMS due to host a meeting with sporting bodies tomorrow and Defra expected to undertake further meetings with supermarkets this week.

The government's public health campaign [launched](#) last week, featuring posters and social media adverts to reinforce the importance of hand-washing, for 20 seconds or more with water and soap, to prevent the spread of the virus. NHS, Public Health England and Local Authority Public Health teams up and down the country continue to work tirelessly to support everyone in need of advice, testing or treatment.

Since January, public health teams and world leading scientists have been working round the clock on the COVID-19 response, and government has been working with partners across the country to provide tailored advice to the public, travellers coming into the country and those most at risk from COVID-19.

Public Health England have already concluded over 21,000 tests so far, with all but 206 coming back negative. Latest figures are published [daily](#).

We have also announced over the last week that 2 individuals who tested positive for COVID-19 have sadly died. Both were older individuals with underlying health issues.

Expert teams continue to actively trace those who have come into contact with a suspected case. Unless an individual has been contacted already or has travelled to an affected area, they should be reassured it is not necessary for them to take any further action.