

Health Secretary sets out government “battle plan” for COVID-19

- Every government department to have a designated Ministerial virus lead to help oversee Government response to the global threat of COVID-19
- Cross-government ‘war room’ of communications experts and scientists also set up ahead of public information blitz in coming weeks
- Further COBRs planned this week, with Ministerial COBR meetings upgraded to be held more frequently, if required

All four parts of the UK will work together against the potential of a COVID-19 epidemic in the UK, under the government’s new approach to pandemic preparation.

Every department will have a designated Ministerial virus lead to help oversee the cross-government response to the outbreak, with the Government increasing the number of COBRs meetings.

The Prime Minister will chair a meeting of COBR on Monday as part of this coordinated response, and has today received a situation briefing by the Chief Medical Officer and the Secretary of State from the Department of Health and Social Care.

Other Government departments will increase their preparations as part of the comprehensive approach to Coronavirus, which has been led so far by DHSC working with NHS England and Public Health England.

Leading scientific experts and senior civil servants will also increase the number of high-level meetings to support Ministers in their preparations.

The move comes as government prepares to jointly publish an updated action plan on the response of the health care system and the public to COVID-19 together with the Governments in the devolved nations. The document, expected to be published later this week, will outline the steps government will take to manage COVID-19 if it there is a sustained UK epidemic.

The plan will be based on the government’s existing contingency plans for responding to a pandemic flu outbreak, but has been adapted to take account of the differences between COVID-19 and pandemic influenza – ensuring government has been able to quickly develop an effective response while leaving further room to adapt the plan over time.

Prime Minister Boris Johnson said:

We must prepare for Coronavirus and listen to the advice of the Chief Medical Officer – especially about the importance of washing our hands with soap. We should be doing that for 20 seconds, and more often than we would normally think was necessary. This will make a real difference in stopping this virus spread.

Coronavirus may very well be a challenge in the weeks and months ahead. But I have no doubt that with the help of the NHS and its incomparable staff this country will get through it – and beat it.

Health Secretary Matt Hancock said:

The UK is a world leader in preparing for and managing disease outbreaks and I have every confidence in our nation's ability to respond to the threat of COVID-19.

Public safety is our top priority. Our battleplan will ensure that as this escalates, every part of government is working together to share the responsibility of tackling the health, economic, and social impacts of COVID-19.

The government and the NHS are working 24/7 to fight this virus, but cannot do this alone. Every single person has a role to play in helping to manage the spread of the virus – whether that's washing your hands more often, catching your sneezes, and following clinical advice by calling NHS 111 not going to A&E if you develop symptoms.

While we are currently in the 'containment' phase where isolated cases are transferred to hospital and detailed contact tracing is carried out, the next phase could see broader measures introduced to keep the public safe and relieve the pressure on the NHS.

These could include looking at emergency registration of health professionals who have retired, the introduction of emergency indemnity coverage for health care workers to provide care or diagnostic services and relaxation of rules around staff to pupil ratios in education and childcare settings.

More widely, government is considering whether to encourage more home working and discourage unnecessary travel as part of a 'social distancing' strategy that would delay the peak of the outbreak until later in the year, potentially helping combat the virus in warmer weather conditions.

The Prime Minister has also ordered a war room to be convened in the Cabinet Office, featuring a cross-Whitehall team of communications experts to roll out the public information campaign and respond quickly to cross-department issues.

The campaign will launch this week, and will feature 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 are working tirelessly to support everyone in need of advice, testing or treatment.

The new measures, which have been ordered by Downing Street and the Health

Secretary as part of the battleplan, are:

- Coronavirus to be a standing item on the weekly Cabinet agenda, with the PM continuing to oversee the Government approach;
- All DHSC ministers will be involved in the efforts to tackle COVID-19;
- Regular press briefings led by the Secretary of State and Chief Medical Officer Chris Whitty; and
- All departments to designate a Junior Minister to be responsible for their department's COVID-19 action, for instance on schools or businesses.

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, travelers coming into the country and those most at risk from COVID-19.

Public Health England have already concluded over 10,000 tests so far, and all but 23 have been negative. Latest figures are [published daily](#) at 2pm.

Expert teams are actively tracing 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.