

Most vulnerable offered second dose of COVID-19 vaccine earlier to help protect against variants

- Second COVID-19 vaccine dose to be offered to the most vulnerable earlier to help protect against variants
- Strengthened surge testing, genome sequencing and enhanced contact tracing measures deployed across the North West to control spread
- Military providing planning and logistical support

The country's most vulnerable are to be offered their second COVID-19 vaccine earlier, the government has announced, as part of plans to tackle rising cases of the B.1.617.2 variant of concern first identified in India.

Appointments for a second dose of a vaccine will be brought forward from 12 to 8 weeks for the remaining people in the top 9 priority groups who have yet to receive their second dose. This is to ensure people across the UK have the strongest possible protection from the virus at an earlier opportunity.

The move follows updated advice from the independent experts at the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation (JCVI), which has considered the latest available evidence on the variant and has recommended reducing the dosing interval to help protect the nation from the variant.

People should continue to attend their second dose appointments and nobody needs to contact the NHS. The NHS will let those who should bring their appointment forward know, when they are able to do so. Those aged under 50 will continue to get their first dose, with their second dose at 12 weeks, as has been the deployment strategy so far.

Health and Social Care Secretary Matt Hancock said:

It's vital we do everything we can and use every resource we have to ensure we continue to keep the nation safe. We have implemented measures at record pace to get on top of this new variant and control the spread.

Everyone has a role to play in this effort – accept the invite to get a jab when it comes, and if you live in one of the areas where we've introduced surge testing, get your free PCR test. Let's work to fight this together.

The move will be supported by targeted new activity to accelerate vaccine uptake amongst eligible cohorts in Bolton and Blackburn with Darwen.

In Bolton, this includes:

- increasing the delivery of vaccines through the 3 existing local vaccination sites and existing vaccine bus
- establishing an additional vaccine bus that will also target walk-in appointments
- NHS professionals supporting rapid deployment of additional workforce, with St John's Ambulance providing volunteers on a roving basis to target local businesses reaching out to those unable to take time off work
- extending pop-up sites, including at a community wedding venue
- expanding community engagement plans with supporting communications and direct engagement with local communities

In Blackburn with Darwen, this includes:

- extending opening hours at Burnley vaccination centre
- extending capacity at Blackburn Crypt vaccination centre, with plans being developed to take Pfizer vaccine
- increasing community pharmacy provision
- expanding a proactive communications campaign engaging local communities
- developing additional pop-up sites as needed

While there is no evidence to show this variant has a greater impact on severity of disease or evades the vaccine, the speed of growth is of note and the government is working quickly to ensure the appropriate action is being taken.

The latest data on the B1.617.2 variant, published by PHE last night, shows the number of cases across the UK has risen from 520 last week to 1,313 cases this week. Most cases are in the North West of England, with some in London.

Minister for COVID-19 Vaccine Deployment Nadhim Zahawi said:

Our vaccines are preventing tens of thousands of hospitalisations and deaths due to COVID-19 and there's early evidence to show the vaccine prevents serious illness from the variants in circulation too.

This move is a belt-and-braces approach to ensure as many people as possible have the full protection a vaccine has to offer – make sure to book in your jab when contacted.

Working in partnership with local authorities, strengthened local operations within BL3 postcodes in Bolton and other parts of England are helping to control the spread of COVID-19 variants. Genomic sequencing and enhanced contact tracing is deployed across the North West, with additional surge testing in locations where variants of concern have been identified to rapidly break chains of transmission.

Currently, postcodes in Bolton, Sefton (Formby), Blackburn with Darwen and Lancashire have additional surge testing in place for residents to contain cases of the B1.617.2 variant. Testing will be ramped up this weekend in

these areas to meet local needs, which will include additional mobile testing units, door-to-door testing and extra PCR test kits for community testing sites.

In Bolton, a new 100-strong Surge Rapid Response Team has been on-site all week. This team is supporting the local authority through door-to-door testing and encouraging residents to take a PCR test. The military, led by Colonel Russell Miller, is supporting efforts from a planning and logistics perspective.

£2 million funding has also been agreed for a pilot across the Greater Manchester region, testing ways to encourage people to comply with self-isolation rules if they test positive. The pilot will include 'support and engagement teams' who will work with households within 24 hours of a positive test to develop a personalised plan for their self-isolation.

This could include practical and emotional support for anyone who needs it, including children and vulnerable adults, or alternative accommodation where required. There will also be enhanced, targeted support and engagement for cultural communities. The pilot is expected to reach 13,000 people over 12 weeks.

Additional measures will be implemented in areas where clusters of cases have been detected to stop further spread. These include:

- enhanced testing and contact tracing, including enhanced community and surge testing in areas defined by the local authorities and regional teams
- increased genome sequencing of positive cases
- increased community engagement, including ensuring that messages are accessible in languages that are used by communities
- working closely with communities and community leaders to ensure that individuals are supported to test and self-isolate
- encouraging uptake for the age and risk groups currently prioritised for vaccination

The Department of Health and Social Care has also confirmed that surge testing is being deployed in Hackney where cases of the variant have been detected.

The government and its scientific experts are monitoring the evolving situation and rates of variants closely, and will not hesitate to take additional action as necessary.

The government continues to work closely with pharmaceutical companies to develop new vaccines specifically for the different variants.

[Latest data on the B.1.617.2 variant of concern](#)