

Health Secretary article in The Times

From everything we've seen of our extraordinary vaccine rollout, one fact stands out above all others: the more people who get both doses of a COVID-19 vaccine, the easier and faster our return to normal life will be. The vaccines have given us a wall of defence against COVID-19 that, jab-by-jab, is getting stronger every day and the latest stats show that they have saved at least 100,000 lives in England alone.

When we began the vaccination programme, we asked the JCVI – the independent expert group of clinicians who advise the government on vaccines – to advise us on the order for vaccinations that would save the most lives and protect the most people from severe COVID-19. Their message was clear: start with the oldest and most vulnerable and work your way down.

Now we have protected the most vulnerable, the JCVI took the step earlier this month to advise that vaccines should be offered to 16- and 17-year-olds, bringing us in line with countries like Sweden, while recommending jabs for 12 to 15 year olds with specific underlying health conditions, or those that are household contacts of someone who is immunosuppressed. Right now they are investigating whether vaccinations could be given to all 12- to 15-year olds, as many other countries, including France, Germany and Italy have already started doing. While we await those findings, one thing is already crystal clear: the main consideration for any decision on vaccinating our young people will always be the risks and the benefits to children themselves.

For months now, the Delta variant has been sweeping its way across the world. We've seen how mutations surface and thrive among unvaccinated people. We know that more the population is protected by a vaccine, the more protection society as a whole will have from Covid-19. It is because of this simple principle, that offering all teenagers the jab would solidify our wall of protection and reduce the amount of infections, decreasing the risk of new variants emerging. If the expert clinicians recommend vaccinating 12 to 15 years olds, I and the fantastic NHS and public health teams are doing everything to make sure we're ready with the same sense of urgency we've had at every point in this programme.

We have all see the effort that has gone into the vaccination programme, including the different places we could all go and get the vaccine, bringing together all the volunteers and vaccinators, and having a simple way of booking appointments and proving that you have had the jab. All of this took time to bring together. Last year, before the critical milestone of the first vaccine being approved by our medicines regulator and recommended for deployment by the JCVI, the wheels of government and the health service had been in motion for months. Blueprints and plans were being put in place for the most ambitious peacetime mobilisation of volunteers and health workers in our history to administer jabs across the country.

Looking ahead to the next stage of the vaccine programme today is no

different. I have asked the NHS to be ready to roll out jabs to this age group – pending final advice from the JCVI.

The legwork is being put in across the government, between my Department and the Department of Education, ahead of any decision on both this age group and on the potential for booster vaccines for adults. Discussions have already begun with school vaccination teams to make sure, if the light turns green, they're ready.

As a parent myself, I know that people who wouldn't think twice about getting the jab for themselves will naturally have more questions when it comes to vaccinating their kids. There is no greater priority for a parent than the safety of their child and, you can rest assured: there is no greater priority for me and for the government. We have seen on a daily basis just how safe and just how effective our vaccines are, as we've given first doses to over 88% of 16 and overs, and the medicines regulator has approved the use of the Pfizer and Moderna vaccines for children aged 12 and above.

In any vaccination programme aimed at a young age group like this, parents and guardians will have a critical role to play – offering the kind of counsel you can only get from a parent or guardian. And if 12 to 15 year olds are offered the vaccine, parental or carer consent will be sought, just as we do with other school immunisation programmes.

Jabs at school are fortunately nothing new, and I, like so many others, remember well getting my tetanus, diphtheria and polio jabs at school – which is now a three in one jab – in a packed school hall. Our health service is steeped in experience of vaccination programmes at schools, with a proud tradition that long pre-dates the pandemic. Health leaders are already scoping out what a potential school programme of vaccinations of COVID-19 could look like, when combined with locations like local vaccination sites.

At the same time, the NHS is already agreeing partnerships with providers to recruit and train school aged immunisation teams, hosting online sessions with providers and local authorities to keep them abreast of contingency plans, and publishing a series of training materials in earnest.

It has been really fantastic to see that teenagers have been some of the most enthusiastic advocates of COVID-19 vaccines. In recent weeks, 16- and 17-years olds have been coming out in their droves to do their bit, travelling with schoolmates and family members to get the jab at sites like walk-in centres and GPs.

Anyone with teenagers at home will know just how well clued up they are. They know their stuff and get the huge benefits of being vaccinated. They know it can protect them and protect the adults around them.

So much of this enthusiasm comes from the fact they've seen the chaos COVID-19 can bring first-hand. We should not underestimate the size of the huge sacrifices they've had to make. Young people have endured months of sustained disruption to their learning, forced to adjust to learning at a kitchen table with many tired parents moonlighting as substitute teachers. It

has also been an isolating experience for a great many teens, being denied the kind of formative experiences you can only get when you pass through the school gates.

While we await the advice of our scientific experts, we are doing what responsible government's do and preparing for as many eventualities as possible. Whatever the advice says, I have no doubt we'll continue to see the same sense of public spirit and shared responsibility that young people have exemplified at every point of this pandemic.

[Voucher scheme boost to help thousands more families resolve disputes away from court](#)

- Almost 2,000 extra families to get up to £500 towards cost of mediation – without a means test
- Government invests a further £800K into scheme five months after £1 million launch
- Vouchers will help keep easily resolvable disputes out of Family Courts

Thousands more families are set to benefit from a government mediation scheme that has been helping separating parents resolve disputes away from court.

The scheme, [launched by the Government in March](#), provides separating couples with a £500 voucher for mediation services with the aim of finding amicable solutions to their disagreements and freeing up space in the family courts. It seeks to spare them the trauma of going through often lengthy and costly courtroom battles, which can have a damaging impact on children. Normally each mediation session is charged for unless one of the parties has access to legal aid.

Hundreds of people have already accessed this vital support with around 130 vouchers currently being used every week. Early data from the Family Mediation Council (FMC), who run the programme, has shown that up to three-quarters of participants have been helped to reach full or partial agreement on their dispute.

Ministers are determined to build on this success and have today confirmed an additional £800,000 will go towards the scheme – almost doubling an initial £1 million investment made earlier this year and helping around 2,000 more families.

Courts Minister, Lord Wolfson QC said:

Hundreds of separating couples have already benefitted from this scheme – resolving their disputes without the need for an often lengthy, costly and emotionally taxing court process.

This additional funding will allow even more families to access these services, while helping to lessen the pressure on our family courts as we build back better from the pandemic.

Mediation is often a quicker and cheaper way of resolving disputes, which can spare families the stress of attending court and the impact this can have on children. It involves couples working through their differences – led by a trained and accredited mediator – to reach agreements they are both prepared to accept, such as how to split assets or arranging child contact times, rather than have a judge decide for them. They can then ask a court to consider their agreement and make it into a legally binding and enforceable court order.

In one case, the parents of a three year old boy were able to avoid days in court by using the scheme to agree on future arrangements. Both mum and dad were mistrusting of each other and sceptical about mediation. The scheme helped them to move forward and their child now has parents who can talk to one another about his best interests with healthier relationships all around.

Jane Kerr, an FMC Accredited mediator, said of the scheme:

The mediation voucher scheme has been invaluable in providing clients with access to mediation at a time when money is tight and finances are feeling fraught. I have worked with several couples who were interested in the benefits mediation offered, however were not financially in a position to get started.

Two cases I have worked on over the last few months have concluded successfully with positive progress and outcomes for their children. They were clear examples of families who were in crisis, amid messy separations and who left mediation on a firmer footing with regards to their co-parenting relationship and having worked out practical arrangements.

The scheme is eligible for families seeking to resolve private law or financial matters relating to children – for example, child arrangement orders or financial disputes regarding a child's upbringing.

If a case is eligible for vouchers, the mediator will automatically claim back the contributions from the Government.

The new investment in the scheme follows a [Call for Evidence on dispute resolution](#), launched earlier this month, on the best ways to settle family, business and other civil disputes away from the courtroom.

The move forms part of recent action by the Government to help reduce family

conflict, including [introducing new laws to spare divorcing couples the need to apportion blame](#) for the breakdown of their marriage..

Today's announcement also follows a major overhaul of the family courts announced last year to better protect victims of domestic abuse, including an automatic entitlement for special measures in courtrooms and stronger powers for judges to stop abusers repeatedly dragging their victims to court. Meanwhile, a £76 million investment into the Family Court and tribunal systems will help to boost capacity during the pandemic.

Notes to editors

- The scheme will be administered by the FMC, on behalf of the Ministry of Justice.
- Further information about the scheme and how it works will be provided to parties at their Mediation Information and Assessment Meeting (MIAM), which all those involved in family cases are required to attend, unless they have a valid exemption.
- Mediation can be undertaken by other family members, not just separating parents.
- In June, 2020, we [announced a major overhaul of the family courts](#) to protect domestic abuse victims which included more special protections in courts, stronger powers for judges, and piloting Integrated Domestic Abuse Courts.
- In June, 2020, the [Divorce Act received Royal Assent](#), which will remove the needless 'blame game' that can harm children while ensuring couples have the time to reflect, plan for the future, or if necessary to turn back. This is due to come into force later this year.
- We're investing record amounts across our courts and tribunals, with £142 million to improve buildings – the biggest single investment in court estate maintenance for more than 20 years – and we're spending £113 million on a range of emergency measures to tackle the impact of COVID-19, including the recruitment of at least 1,600 additional staff.

What is family mediation?

- Family mediation is a process in which an independent, professionally trained mediator helps parties work out arrangements for children and finances where there is a dispute.
- The mediator is not there to tell each side what to do, but can help them reach an agreement while trying to improve communication between them. They aren't there to try and keep couples together but help them find a practical way forward after a relationship has broken down.
- Mediation allows the parties to stay in control, as no one will be forced to do or agree to anything against their wishes. Unlike in a courtroom both partners can agree to a solution rather than have a judge decide for them.
- The mediator will work with the parties, either together or separately, to help them find a solution which works for them both.
- Mediation can be less stressful than going to court, especially for children who are involved in proceedings. It is also cheaper than going through the court process, and it is also confidential unlike

proceedings in the family court.

- Currently, funded mediation is available only for those who meet the financial requirements through the Legal Aid scheme. If you don't qualify then you will need to pay for mediation sessions.
- Agreements made in mediation can be made legally binding by a court if necessary and the legal support to do this can be offered.

Next steps to tackle plastic waste

The war on plastic waste is set to be ramped up with fresh plans to stop the supply of a range of single-use plastics that threaten our natural environment.

Single-use plastic plates, cutlery and polystyrene cups are among a raft of items that could be banned in England as part of a new public consultation being launched in the Autumn. These proposals will lead to businesses using more sustainable alternatives and prevent plastic litter from polluting our landscapes.

It is estimated that each person uses a staggering 18 single-use plastic plates and 37 single-use plastic items of cutlery each year in England. The durability of plastic means litter from items used for a few minutes can last for centuries in landfill or as litter in the countryside or ocean. Around the world, more than one million birds and over 100,000 sea mammals and turtles die every year from eating or getting tangled in plastic waste.

Industry is taking action to tackle plastic waste, such as through the UK Plastics Pact, a collaboration between businesses from across the entire plastics value chain, supported by the government and coordinated by the Waste and Resources Action Programme (WRAP). Pact members have identified eight problematic plastic items for elimination and are investigating further items. We want to build on both the progress being made by industry and our action on plastic waste.

The UK government has already taken major steps to tackle plastic pollution, banning microbeads in rinse-off personal care products, dramatically reducing the number of plastic bags being used and restricting the supply of single-use plastic straws, stirrers and cotton buds. These plans will build on the success of those measures and form part of the Government's commitment to prevent all avoidable plastic waste by the end of 2042.

Environment Secretary George Eustice said:

We've all seen the damage that plastic does to our environment. It is right that we put in place measures that will tackle the plastic carelessly strewn across our parks and green spaces and washed up

on beaches.

We have made progress to turn the tide on plastic, banning the supply of plastic straws, stirrers and cotton buds, while our carrier bag charge has cut sales by 95% in the main supermarkets.

Now we are looking to go a step further as we build back greener. These plans will help us stamp out the unnecessary use of plastics that wreak havoc with our natural environment.

Jo Morley, Head of Campaigns at City to Sea, said:

We welcome the news that the government are taking steps to tackle some of the most polluting single-use items. This is a much-needed move, that we as campaigners have been calling for, along with thousands of our supporters and members of the public.

We need now to take a leading role in banning unnecessary single-use plastics to see real benefits for the nation's and the world's wildlife.

Further details of the consultation, including the full list of single-use items under review, will be announced in the upcoming weeks.

The UK is a global leader in combatting plastic waste. Following the huge success of the 5p charge on single-use carrier bags, which cut sales in the main supermarkets by 95% since 2015, we increased the minimum charge to 10p and extended it to all retailers, ensuring we can take billions more bags out of circulation.

Our landmark Environment Bill will give us a raft of new powers to step-up our war against plastic pollution and litter, including:

- Introducing a [Deposit Return Scheme](#) for drinks containers to recycle billions more plastic bottles and stop them being landfilled, incinerated, or littered. Through a small deposit placed on drinks products, the DRS will incentivise people to recycle;
- Our [Extended Producer Responsibility](#) scheme will mean companies will be expected to cover the full cost of recycling and disposing of their packaging. Producers of commonly littered packaging will be made more responsible for their littered packaging, with fees paid to cover the cost of cleaning up and for litter prevention activities; and
- Our plans for [Consistent Recycling Collections](#) for every household and business in England will ensure more plastic is recycled.

We will also introduce a world-leading [plastic packaging tax](#) from April 2022, set at £200 per tonne, on plastic packaging which doesn't meet a minimum threshold of at least 30% recycled content. This will encourage greater use of recycled plastic, leading to increased levels of recycling and plastic waste collection, helping to tackle the problem of plastic waste and protect

our environment.

Statistics on single-use plastics are taken from a [preliminary assessment](#) of the economic impacts of a potential ban on plastic cutlery, plastic plates and plastic balloon sticks, 2018.

[Extra COVID-19 support deployed to parts of the South West](#)

From Friday 27 August additional support will be deployed to some local authorities in the South West of England.

Following the latest review of COVID-19 data, additional support will be deployed to Cornwall, the Isles of Scilly, Devon, Plymouth and Torbay local authority areas in response to a rise in COVID-19 cases in the area.

The decision has been made in partnership with local authorities and is based on the latest data and local insights. Targeted additional support will be provided in response to the growth of COVID-19 cases in the region, while NHS pressures and the number of cases and deaths will be carefully monitored.

The package includes:

- logistical support to maximise vaccine and testing uptake
- further help for local public health campaigns
- temporary use of face coverings in communal areas outside classrooms in secondary schools and colleges
- increased surveillance using multiple methods to monitor the situation.

This additional support will be in place for five weeks from Friday 27 August to allow for targeted local action. Pupils will return to school from next week as planned.

Local residents and visitors to the areas are urged to remain cautious and follow the national guidance, including to get vaccinated, wear face coverings in crowded areas such as public transport, meet outdoors where possible, let fresh air into homes or other enclosed spaces, and consider minimising the number, proximity and duration of social interactions.

Health and Social Care Secretary Sajid Javid said:

Vaccines have built an enormous wall of defence that spans the length of the country, allowing us to regain our lost freedoms – from seeing our loved ones to going on holiday. The vaccines have already helped to prevent over 24 million infections and saved more than 105,000 lives.

While vaccines have tipped the odds in our favour, we have to keep listening to the data. To control the spread of the virus we're working closely with local authorities and the directors of public health in Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly, Devon, Plymouth and Torbay, supporting the great work that's already underway, to make sure testing is widely available and as many people as possible are protected by the vaccine.

I would urge anyone whether they live in, work in or are just visiting these beautiful areas, to test regularly and make sure you come forward for your jab at the earliest opportunity.

Public Health England data shows that the vaccination programme has substantially weakened the link between cases, hospitalisations and deaths. Vaccinated people are far less likely to get COVID-19 with symptoms and even more unlikely to get serious COVID-19, to be admitted to hospital, or to die from the virus.

Background

Surveillance methods will include genotype assay testing, genome sequencing and wastewater sampling.

The full list of areas in the South West where additional support will be offered is:

- Cornwall Council
- Council of the Isles of Scilly
- Devon County Council
- Plymouth City Council
- Torbay Council

And includes the district authority areas:

- East Devon District Council
- Exeter City Council
- Mid Devon District Council
- North Devon District Council
- South Hams District Council
- Teignbridge District Council
- Torridge District Council
- West Devon Borough Council

[Guidance note on NGS applications for](#)

food authenticity testing

News story

Government Chemist's foreword to Defra's Authenticity Methodology Working Group's view on the use of Next Generation Sequencing for food authenticity testing



Next Generation Sequencing (NGS) is a powerful tool for rapidly and cost-effectively identifying and characterising plant, animal and microbial species present in mixed food samples.

The application of NGS to food authenticity, adulteration and safety testing is a constantly evolving field with its own unique set of challenges that need to be explored. Further work needs to be conducted to better understand the performance characteristics and establish relevant performance criteria and metrics, to enable results generated in different laboratories to be compared and interpreted with equal confidence.

Following concerns raised from food industry members on the use of NGS for the quantitative determination of food ingredients, the Government Chemist engaged with Defra's Authenticity Methodology Working Group (AMWG) [1] and its Technical Sub-Group (AMWG-TSG), resulting in the AMWG producing a view [2] on the use of NGS for food authenticity testing [3].

Download Defra's Authenticity Methodology Working Group's view on the use of Next Generation Sequencing for food authenticity testing

Dr Julian Braybrook

Government Chemist

18 August 2021

Notes

[1] An independent expert group that provides scientific and technical advice to support Defra's food authenticity programme.

[2] The views/opinions expressed by AMWG were correct at the time of the note (November 2020).

[3] Government Chemist representatives: Selvarani Elahi, Deputy Government Chemist, is the Chair of AMWG and Dr Malcolm Burns, Head of GMO unit, Principal Scientist and Special Advisor to the Government Chemist, is a Member of AMWG; they both participated in the AMWG-TSG meeting on NGS and subsequent discussions, inputting into the AMWG view on NGS.

Download the foreword

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