

# World first COVID-19 vaccine booster study launches in UK

- Initial results trialling seven vaccines expected in September to inform plans for booster programme
- Clinical trials on agenda for G7 Health Ministers' Meeting in early June which Health Secretary announces will be hosted in Oxford
- Announcements come ahead of International Clinical Trials Day (Thursday 20 May 2021)

Thousands of volunteers will receive a booster COVID-19 vaccine in a new clinical trial launching today, Health Secretary Matt Hancock has announced.

The Cov-Boost study, led by University Hospital Southampton NHS Foundation Trust and backed by £19.3 million of government funding through the Vaccines Taskforce, will trial seven vaccines and will be the first in the world to provide vital data on the impact of a third dose on patients' immune responses.

It will give scientists from around the globe and the experts behind the UK's COVID-19 vaccination programme a better idea of the impact of a booster dose of each vaccine in protecting individuals from the virus.

The study will take place at 16 NIHR-supported sites across England, and also within Health and Care Research Wales and NHS Research Scotland sites. It will include a total of 2,886 patients and participants are to begin being vaccinated from early June.

All participants will be monitored throughout the study for any side effects and will have bloods taken to measure their immune responses at days 28, 84, 308 and 365, with a small number having additional blood tests at other times. All sites will have an electronic diary for all participants that will send alerts to the team in real time if needed and a 24-hour emergency phone to a doctor on the study, who can provide further clinical advice.

The initial findings, expected in September, will help inform decisions by the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation (JCVI) on plans for a booster programme from autumn this year, ensuring the country's most vulnerable are given the strongest possible protection over the winter period.

The Health Secretary has also announced that the 2021 G7 Health Ministers' Meeting will be held in-person at Oxford University on 3-4 June. As part of the UK's G7 Presidency, we are bringing together health leaders from the world's leading democracies to agree life-saving action in the critical areas of clinical trials, global health security, antimicrobial resistance, and digital health to help protect us all from future pandemics.

Health and Social Care Secretary, Matt Hancock said:

The UK vaccination programme has been a phenomenal national effort, with seven in 10 UK adults now having had their first COVID-19 jab. It is vital that we continue to support the world-renowned British research sector that has contributed to its success.

We will do everything we can to future-proof this country from pandemics and other threats to our health security, and the data from this world-first clinical trial will help shape the plans for our booster programme later this year.

I urge everyone who has had both doses of a COVID-19 vaccine, and is eligible, to sign up for this study and play a part in protecting the most vulnerable people in this country and around the world for months and years to come.

The trial will look at seven different COVID-19 vaccines as potential boosters, given at least 10 to 12 weeks after a second dose as part of the ongoing vaccination programme. One booster will be provided to each volunteer and could be a different brand to the one they were originally vaccinated with.

Vaccines being trialled include Oxford/AstraZeneca, Pfizer/BioNTech, Moderna, Novavax, Valneva, Janssen and Curevac, as well as a control group. The trial has received ethics approval by the NHS Research Ethics Committee, as well as approval from the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency.

The study will open for applications from volunteers shortly via the study's website and will be recruiting participants through the NHS COVID-19 Vaccine Research Registry.

Participants will be adults aged 30 years or older as these will have been those immunised early on in the vaccination programme – for example, adults aged 75 and over or health and care workers.

The trial was commissioned by the Department of Health and Social Care through the National Institute for Health Research (NIHR) and funded by the Vaccine Taskforce, with the study being undertaken by the Southampton team at sites across the UK as part of the National Immunisation Schedule Evaluation Consortium (NISEC).

The team leading the trial is committed to including participants from a wide variety of backgrounds, and individuals from ethnic minorities are encouraged to apply to take part.

Chief Investigator and Director of NIHR Southampton Clinical Research Facility Professor Saul Faust said:

This trial will give the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation the important data to inform their recommendations of how to protect the population against any future wave.

It is fantastic that so many people across the country have taken part in vaccine trials up to now so that we can be in a position to study the effects of boosters, and we hope that as many people as possible over the age of 30 who received their first dose early in the NHS programme will be able to take part.

The UK's vaccination programme continues at record pace, with over 57.8 million vaccines administered in total – 36.9 million first doses, which amounts to seven in 10 UK adults being given one jab – and 20.8 million second doses, which gives people even stronger protection.

The government is preparing for a booster programme based on clinical need and will publish further details in due course. The final policy will be informed by advice from the JCVI and take into account the results of clinical trials.

Minister for COVID-19 Vaccine Deployment Nadhim Zahawi said:

With over 57 million vaccines administered since the beginning of the rollout, the programme continues its fantastic trajectory.

Having taken part in a COVID-19 vaccine clinical trial myself, I would encourage everyone eligible to volunteer – whatever your religion, ethnicity or background, it's a fantastic opportunity to get involved with such an historic initiative.

Earlier this year, the government announced the launch of the ComCov clinical trial, which aims to determine the effects of using different vaccines for the first and second dose – for example, using Oxford/AstraZeneca's vaccine for the first dose, followed by Pfizer/BioNTech's vaccine for the second.

Initial results from this trial have shown that mixing the doses slightly increases the frequency of mild-to-moderate symptoms following vaccination, but there were no serious outcomes.

Further results from this clinical trial – including on the immune response in people who have two different vaccine doses – are expected over the coming months.

Professor Andrew Ustianowski, National Clinical Lead for the UK NIHR COVID-19

## Vaccine Research Programme

Throughout the pandemic, the National Institute for Health Research, the NHS and all of our research partners have helped to rollout vital studies to help us learn how to treat COVID-19 and develop effective vaccines.

The Cov-Boost study marks the next step forward in our efforts of understanding how to best protect the population and inform future vaccine booster programmes.

Since the launch of the NHS COVID-19 Vaccine Research Registry, thousands of volunteers have been recruited to key vaccine studies, and we are confident we can call upon our nearly half a million strong community to help recruitment to this important trial.

## Notes to Editors:

### About the National Institute for Health Research

The National Institute for Health Research (NIHR) is the nation's largest funder of health and care research. The NIHR:

- Funds, supports and delivers high quality research that benefits the NHS, public health and social care
- Engages and involves patients, carers and the public in order to improve the reach, quality and impact of research
- Attracts, trains and supports the best researchers to tackle the complex health and care challenges of the future
- Invests in world-class infrastructure and a skilled delivery workforce to translate discoveries into improved treatments and services
- Partners with other public funders, charities and industry to maximise the value of research to patients and the economy

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## [Future of Britain's railways:](#) [Williams-Shapps Plan for Rail](#)

Today (20 May 2021), we are announcing our plan for the transformation of Britain's railways. The [Williams-Shapps Plan for Rail](#) fully reflects the independent recommendations of Keith Williams, to whom the government is

grateful for his thorough work since 2018.

Williams identified serious issues facing the railways before Covid struck; the pandemic has exacerbated some of these and added more. The government has provided unprecedented support to keep the railways running during the pandemic. Now, we look to the future – today we are setting out an ambitious plan to ensure that the system is ready to meet these challenges.

Today's railway is fragmented – numerous bodies with different incentives lead to a lack of joined-up thinking. No single organisation is accountable for integration, planning and leadership across infrastructure, passenger services and freight operations.

Even before Covid, the franchising model for passenger services had become unsustainable, with multiple failing franchises, delayed competitions and dwindling market confidence. East Coast and Northern had already failed and the government had to step in.

To meet these challenges this government is introducing the biggest reform to the railway in 3 decades. We are committed to delivering a rail system that is the backbone of a cleaner, greener public transport system, offering passengers a better deal and greater value for money for taxpayers. That means getting the trains to run on time, providing a better quality of service and having a firm control of the sector's costs.

To bring about change on the scale that is needed:

We will end 3 decades of fragmentation by bringing the railways back together under a new public body with a single, national leadership and a new brand and identity, built on the famous double arrow. Great British Railways (GBR) will run and plan the network, own the infrastructure, and collect most fare revenue. It will procure passenger services and set most fares and timetables.

We will make the railways easier to use by simplifying fares and ticketing, providing more convenient ways to pay with contactless, smartphone and online, and protecting affordable walk-on fares and season tickets. Rail services will be better coordinated with each other and better integrated with other transport services such as trams, buses and bikes.

We will keep the best elements of the private sector that have helped to drive growth. GBR will contract private partners to operate the trains to the timetable it sets. These contracts will include strong incentives for operators to run high-quality services and increase passenger demand.

The contracts are not one-size-fits-all, so as demand recovers, long-distance routes will have more commercial freedom to attract new passengers. Freight is already a nimble, largely private sector market and will remain so, while benefiting from the national coordination, new safeguards and rules-based access system that will help it thrive.

We will grow, not shrink, the network, continuing to invest tens of billions of pounds in new lines, trains, services and electrification.

We will make the railways more efficient. Simpler structures and clear leadership will make decision-making easier and more transparent, reduce costs and make it cheaper to invest in modern ways to pay, upgrade the network and deliver new lines. The adversarial blame culture will end and everyone across the sector, including train operators, will be incentivised to work towards common goals, not least managing costs.

These changes will transform the railways for the better. They will also make the sector more accountable to taxpayers and government. Government ministers will have strong levers to set direction, pursue government policies and oversee delivery to ensure the railways are managed effectively and spend public money efficiently. Great British Railways will be empowered – a single, familiar brand with united, accountable leadership.

These reforms represent a bold new offer to passengers – of punctual and reliable services, simpler tickets and a modern, green and innovative railway that meets the needs of the nation. In summary, our ambitious rail transformation programme will deliver 10 key outcomes:

- a modern passenger experience
- a retail revolution
- new ways of working with the private sector
- economic recovery and financial sustainable railways
- greater control for local people and places
- cleaner, greener railways
- bold, new opportunities for rail freight
- increased speed of delivery and efficient enhancements
- skilled, innovative workforce
- a simpler industry structure

This is not renationalisation, which failed the railways, rather it is simplification. While Great British Railways acts as the guiding mind to coordinate the whole network, our plan will see greater involvement of the private sector – private companies will be contracted to run the trains, with stronger competition to run services.

Our reforms will also unleash huge new opportunities for the private sector to innovate in areas such as ticket retailing and data that can be used by passengers to better plan their journeys.

We look forward to building this new vision for Britain's railways in collaboration with the sector. We are proud to set out plans to support our railways and serve our country with a system that is efficient, sustainable and run in the public interest.

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# CMA gives Virgin and O2 merger green light

Press release

Following a provisional clearance last month, the CMA is now allowing the proposed merger of Virgin Media and Virgin Mobile with O2 to go ahead.



Both Virgin and O2 sell wholesale services to a number of mobile operators in the UK. Virgin supplies wholesale leased lines to mobile operators and O2 provides its mobile network to companies that do not have their own.

The CMA was initially concerned that, following the merger, Virgin and O2 could raise prices or reduce the quality of these wholesale services. If this were to happen, it could lead to other companies being forced to offer lower quality mobile services or increase their retail prices which would negatively impact consumers.

The merger was referred to a group of independent CMA Panel members for an in-depth Phase 2 investigation. The Group has concluded that the deal is unlikely to lead to any substantial lessening of competition for a number of reasons:

- The costs of leased lines are only a relatively small element of rival mobile companies' overall costs, so it is unlikely that Virgin would be able to raise leased-line costs in a way that would lead to higher charges for consumers.
- There are other players in the market offering the same leased-line services, including BT Openreach – which has a much greater geographical reach than Virgin – and other smaller providers. This means the merged company will still need to maintain the competitiveness of its service or risk losing wholesale custom.
- As with leased-line services, there are a number of other companies that provide mobile networks for telecoms firms to use, meaning O2 will need to keep its service competitive with its wholesale rivals in order to maintain this business.

Martin Coleman, CMA Panel Inquiry Chair, said:

O2 and Virgin are important suppliers of services to other companies who serve millions of consumers. It was important to make sure that this merger would not leave these people worse off. That's why we conducted an in-depth investigation.

After looking closely at the deal, we are reassured that competition amongst mobile communications providers will remain strong and it is therefore unlikely that the merger would lead to higher prices or lower quality services.

More information is available on the [Liberty Global plc / Telefónica S.A. merger inquiry case page](#).

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## **Action plan to increase socio-economic diversity in the Civil Service**

Nearly three out of four senior civil servants are from privileged backgrounds with those from disadvantaged backgrounds sometimes struggling to gain promotion, new research from the Social Mobility Commission shows today.

A comprehensive analysis of over 300,000 civil servants shows just 18% of the Senior Civil Service (SCS) come from disadvantaged backgrounds, and 72% from privileged backgrounds. One in four of those in the current 6,000-strong Senior Civil Service went to independent school.

The research drawn from both the Civil Service People Survey 2019 and over 100 in-depth interviews with current staff provides a valuable insight into who gets on in Whitehall and how, highlighting obstacles to career progression on the way.

Based on these results the Commission has drawn up a detailed action plan for the Civil Service to ensure that those from disadvantaged backgrounds have an easier route to the top.

"Civil servants from disadvantaged backgrounds are significantly under-represented in the organisation and even if they do 'get in' they can struggle to 'get on'," said Steven Cooper, interim Co-Chair of the Social Mobility Commission. "I have been impressed by the level of transparency



shown by the Civil Service in embarking on this joint project and sharing their previously unpublished data with us. The focus now should be on considering and swiftly implementing the action plan.”

Officials that get promoted from junior grades are more likely to have policy rather than operational posts, work in departments near the political centre of power like the Treasury and live in London. Only 12% of those working at the Treasury are from a low socio-economic background compared to 45% at the Department for Work and Pensions. Similarly, only 22% of civil servants in London are from working class backgrounds compared to 48% in the north-east.

The SMC report ‘Navigating the labyrinth’ by Sam Friedman, incoming Professor of Sociology at the London School of Economics, describes in detail “the behavioural code” to ensure promotion in the Civil Service. It suggests that those who do progress exhibit “a studied neutrality”. This is defined as having the right accent or “received pronunciation”, an emotionally detached and understated way of presenting oneself and an “intellectual approach” to culture and politics.

Those from disadvantaged backgrounds can be intimidated and alienated by this behavioural code, though many realise that the only way to get on is to adopt it. The complex journey to the top is described by interviewees as a “velvet drainpipe”.

“An important part of progressing through the labyrinth of the Civil Service is mastering the unwritten rules; what jobs to take, where to work, how to negotiate opportunities, and above all how to behave,” said Dr Friedman. “And strikingly it is those from privileged backgrounds who hold the upper hand in unpicking these hidden rules.”

The Commission’s comprehensive action plan to improve career progression in the Civil Service which it hopes will be adopted by employers throughout the country includes:

- reporting of socio-economic data within all departments – by location, gender, ethnicity, disability and LGBT
- using national benchmarks to assess progress with the aim of ensuring a representative Civil Service
- greater scrutiny of the SCS and five-year targets to increase representation from those from low socio-economic backgrounds

Other recommendations include introducing laws to ensure that socio-economic background is a protected characteristic and permanently adopting virtual working of Parliament to enable MPs and ministers, with Civil Service hubs, to be based outside London.

The Commission notes recent positive progress in some of these areas, including government’s plans to move more roles out of London, more senior civil servants and greater non-operational roles, such as policy making, outside of the capital.

## **Other key findings:**

**London has the least socio-economically diverse workforce compared to other regions, but the most opportunity for progression**

- The London-based workforce is significantly less socio-economically diverse than the rest of the country – 66% are from high socio-economic backgrounds (SEB) compared to 41% in the north-east, and only 22% in London are from working class backgrounds compared to 48% in the north-east
- The three most socio-economically exclusive work regions are in the south of England, and two of the three most socio-economically diverse areas in the north of England
- There are far more top-grade posts located in London than elsewhere. While 20% of civil servants work in London, the capital is home to 66% of all SCS. In contrast, 12% of civil servants are based in the north-west but it houses only 3% of SCS

## **SCS has remained exclusive**

- The composition of the SCS is roughly unchanged since 1967, the last time this data was collected. Then, 19% were from low socio-economic backgrounds and 67% from privileged backgrounds – although this finding should be read with caution, as it partly reflects the contraction of working-class jobs since the 1960s. See page 19-20

## **Some departments are more exclusive than others**

- HM Treasury and the (formerly named) Department of Culture, Media and Sport are the most socio-economically exclusive departments (12% and 13% of staff were from low SEBs respectively.) Department for Work and Pensions and HM Revenue and Customs are the most inclusive departments (45% and 42% of staff were from low SEBs respectively)
- 26% of HM Treasury staff and 22% of the (formerly named) Foreign & Commonwealth Office staff (rising to 48% among FCO SCS) were privately educated, compared to just 5% in HMRC and 4% in the DWP

## **Civil servants from advantaged backgrounds often downplay their socio-economic privilege**

- 1 in 4 civil servants who self-assess as coming from low SEBs actually had advantaged upbringings. The proportion of those misaligning increases at higher grades (29% at SCS versus 23% and 24% at executive officer and administrative assistant/officer levels)

**Female civil servants from working class backgrounds are more likely than men from the same socio-economic bracket to believe their background will hamper their progression.**

- There is little difference in the overall socio-economic composition of male and female civil servants, but low SEB women are more under-represented at senior grades. For instance, women in the SCS are more

likely than men to be from high SEBs (73% compared to 71%)

### **Ethnic minorities in low socio-economic backgrounds face barriers getting into the civil service**

- Except for those of Asian origin, civil servants from ethnic minorities are more likely to be from advantaged socio-economic backgrounds. For example, 27% of Black African/African Caribbean AA/AOs are from low SEBs compared to 61% from high SEBs

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## **Great British Railways: for the passenger**

- Williams-Shapps Plan for Rail to reform Britain's railways and launch a new era for passengers
- biggest change in 25 years sees creation of new public body Great British Railways – a single, familiar brand with united, accountable leadership
- simpler, modern fares delivered, starting with new flexible season tickets on sale from 21 June and a new Great British Railways website for all tickets and clearer compensation
- reforms support delivery of a financially sustainable railway as country recovers from coronavirus (COVID-19), with new contracts focused on punctuality and improved efficiency, making it easier and cheaper to plan maintenance, renewal and upgrades

A quarter-century of fragmentation on the railways will end as they come under single, accountable national leadership, as the government today (20 May 2021) unveils a new plan for rail that prioritises passengers and freight.

A new public body, Great British Railways (GBR), will integrate the railways, owning the infrastructure, collecting fare revenue, running and planning the network, and setting most fares and timetables.

GBR will simplify the current mass of confusing tickets with new flexible season tickets and a significant roll-out of more convenient Pay As You Go, contactless and digital ticketing on smartphones. A new GBR website will sell

tickets and a single compensation system for operators in England will provide a simple system for passengers to access information and apply for refunds.

There will remain a substantial and often greater role for the private sector. GBR will contract private partners to operate most trains to the timetables and fares it specifies, with a model similar to that used by Transport for London in its successful Overground and Docklands Light Railway services.

The new Passenger Service Contracts will include strong incentives for operators to run high-quality services and increase passenger numbers. They will not be one-size-fits-all: as demand recovers, operators on some routes, particularly long-distance, will have more commercial freedom. Affordable walk-on fares and season ticket prices will be protected.

The Williams-Shapps Plan for Rail, published today, sets out the path towards a truly passenger-focused railway, underpinned by new contracts that prioritise punctual and reliable services, the rapid delivery of a ticketing revolution, with new flexible and convenient tickets and long-term proposals to build a modern, greener and accessible network.

Prime Minister Boris Johnson said:

I am a great believer in rail, but for too long passengers have not had the level of service they deserve.

By creating Great British Railways and investing in the future of the network, this government will deliver a rail system the country can be proud of.

Grant Shapps Transport Secretary said:

Our railways were born and built to serve this country, to forge stronger connections between our communities and provide people with an affordable, reliable and rapid service. Years of fragmentation, confusion and over-complication have seen that vision fade and passengers failed. That complicated and broken system ends today.

The pandemic has seen the government take unprecedented steps to protect services and jobs. It's now time to kickstart reforms that give the railways solid and stable foundations for the future, unleashing the competitive, innovative and expert abilities of the private sector, and ensuring passengers come first.

Great British Railways marks a new era in the history of our railways. It will become a single familiar brand with a bold new vision for passengers – of punctual services, simpler tickets and a

modern and green railway that meets the needs of the nation.

Keith Williams, Chair of the Williams Review, said:

Our Plan is built around the passenger, with new contracts which prioritise excellent performance and better services, better value fares and creating clear leadership and real accountability when things go wrong.

Our railway history – rich with Victorian pioneers and engineers, steam and coal, industry and ingenuity – demands a bright future. This plan is the path forward, reforming our railways to ensure they work for everyone in this country.

COVID-19 has caused deep, structural challenges to the railway, with use still far below pre-pandemic levels. This strategy re-emphasises our commitment to rail, with tens of billions of pounds invested in more electrification, new and reopened lines and a rail revolution.

GBR will drive significant efficiencies in the railways' inflated costs, reducing complexity and duplication, increasing flexibility, changing working practices and making it easier and cheaper to invest. Reform is the only way to protect services and jobs in the long term.

In the short and medium term, we will work closely with the sector on measures to encourage passengers back to rail. To reflect changes in the traditional commute and working life, the government has today announced that a new national flexi season ticket will be on sale this summer, with potential savings of hundreds of pounds a year for 2 and 3 day-a-week commuters. Tickets will be on sale on 21 June, ready for use on 28 June.

The new Passenger Service Contracts will also help to build a more financially stable industry. By removing barriers to new market entrants, including by no longer basing competitions on complex and uncertain revenue forecasts, private operators will be challenged to provide a competitive and customer-focused offer, delivering greater value-for-money for the taxpayer.

Local communities will work closely with GBR on designing services with local leaders given greater control over local ticketing, timetables and stations. The new model will encourage innovative bidders, such as community rail partnerships who want to bid for the GBR contract to operate their local branch lines.

The journey to this new passenger-focused model has begun today. New National Rail Contracts will be announced this year. They will be in operation for 2 years and act as a bridge to reform.