

# Government launches COVID-19 Antivirals Taskforce to roll out innovative home treatments this autumn

- New Antivirals Taskforce could identify and deploy innovative COVID-19 treatments as early as autumn
- Treatments could be taken at home after a positive test or exposure to COVID-19 to reduce transmission and speed up recovery
- Drugs could help combat a rise in infections or new variants over the winter flu season

A new Antivirals Taskforce has been launched by the government to identify treatments for UK patients who have been exposed to COVID-19 to stop the infection spreading and speed up recovery time.

The taskforce will search for the most promising novel antiviral medicines that can be taken at home and support their development through clinical trials to ensure they can be rapidly rolled out to patients as early as the autumn.

The taskforce will also look at opportunities to onshore the manufacture of antiviral treatments.

The aim is to have at least 2 effective treatments this year, either in a tablet or capsule form, that the public can take at home following a positive COVID-19 test or exposure to someone with the virus.

This will be another vital tool to combat any future increase in infections and limit the impact of new variants, especially over the flu season later this year.

Prime Minister Boris Johnson said:

The success of our vaccination programme has demonstrated what the UK can achieve when we bring together our brightest minds.

Our new Antivirals Taskforce will seek to develop innovative treatments you can take at home to stop COVID-19 in its tracks. These could provide another vital defence against any future increase in infections and save more lives.

Health and Social Care Secretary Matt Hancock said:

The UK is leading the world in finding and rolling out effective treatments for COVID-19, having identified dexamethasone, which has saved over a million lives worldwide, and tocilizumab.

In combination with our fantastic vaccination programme, medicines are a vital weapon to protect our loved ones from this terrible virus.

Modelled on the success of the vaccines and therapeutics taskforces, which have played a crucial part in our response to the pandemic, we are now bringing together a new team that will supercharge the search for antiviral treatments and roll them out as soon as the autumn.

I am committed to boosting the UK's position as a life science superpower and this new taskforce will help us beat COVID-19 and build back better.

The antivirals could be used alone or in combination with one another in order to increase effectiveness and reduce the risk of further mutations.

The new taskforce will sit alongside the government's existing Therapeutics Taskforce, which will continue its vital work to identify and supply treatments found to be effective in clinical trials, for all stages of a patient's exposure and response to COVID-19.

Since the beginning of the pandemic, the UK has proven itself to be a world-leader in identifying and rolling out effective treatments for COVID-19 – including the world's first treatment dexamethasone, which has since saved 22,000 lives in the UK so far and an estimated million worldwide.

The UK's renowned life sciences sector makes it the ideal base for the brightest of global innovators to research and progress cutting-edge treatments for COVID-19 through the clinical trials process here in Britain.

Sir Patrick Vallance, Government Chief Scientific Adviser, said:

The speed at which vaccines and therapeutics such as dexamethasone have been identified and deployed against COVID-19 has been critical to the pandemic response.

Antivirals in tablet form are another key tool for the response. They could help protect those not protected by or ineligible for vaccines. They could also be another layer of defence in the face of new variants of concern.

The taskforce will help ensure the most promising antivirals are available for deployment as quickly as possible.

Dr Nikita Kanani, Medical Director of Primary Care for NHS England, said:

Alongside caring for 400,000 COVID-19 patients since the start of the pandemic, the NHS has saved lives around the world through its

contribution to developing the first ever treatment for COVID-19, dexamethasone, as well as administering the first vaccine for the virus, outside of clinical trials.

The NHS has put research into reality at record speed during the pandemic and this taskforce will now help us to identify and roll out even more new, convenient treatments for patients with COVID-19.

A competition to identify a chair for the Antivirals Taskforce will be launched shortly, and further details on the structure of the taskforce will be set out in due course.

On 16 June, the government-funded [RECOVERY trial became the first to identify the benefits of dexamethasone in reducing mortality](#) by 20% in patients requiring oxygen support and 35% for ventilated patients, following a readout from the RECOVERY trial and later supported by the WHO and REMAP-CAP.

Through securing a supply chain and stockpile of the drug, we were able to ensure quicker distribution to tackle the effects of COVID-19.

[Dexamethasone has since shown to have saved 22,000 lives in the UK so far](#) and an estimated million worldwide.

More recently, [the REMAP-CAP trial demonstrated the benefits of tocilizumab and sarilumab](#), as well as the RECOVERY trial, which found [tocilizumab reduced the relative risk of death for patients on oxygen by 14%, when administered in addition to dexamethasone](#).

The Therapeutics Taskforce alongside RAPID C-19 worked swiftly to ensure that patients were able to receive treatment where clinically appropriate straight away.

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## [\*\*Iceland becomes 10th nation to join UK-led Joint Expeditionary Force\*\*](#)

Defence Secretary Ben Wallace and Iceland's Ambassador to the UK Sturla Sigurjónsson today signed a Note of Joining that welcomes Iceland into the JEF alongside the UK, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Latvia, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Norway and Sweden.

Iceland's deep understanding of the North Atlantic and High North environment and its civilian expertise will strengthen the JEF.

**Defence Secretary Ben Wallace said:**

I'm delighted to welcome Iceland into the Joint Expeditionary Force. As a group of northern European democracies with shared values and committed to a collective response to threats to Euro-Atlantic security, it is natural for us to stand shoulder-to-shoulder with Iceland.

**Iceland Minister for Foreign Affairs and International Development Cooperation Gudlaugur Thór Thórdarson said:**

We are pleased to be joining the JEF group of likeminded countries for a deeper regional consultation and cooperation on security and defence, as well as on possible coordinated civil emergency and humanitarian assistance.

Iceland looks forward to engaging in a more comprehensive strategic dialogue within JEF and an eventual contribution on a civilian basis.

**Chief of Joint Operations Vice Admiral Sir Ben Key said:**

Since its establishment in 2014, the JEF has demonstrated that together, we are stronger. Iceland's inclusion expands the JEF's expertise and bolsters its collective support of Northern European security.

Iceland's entry into the JEF also reflects its growing bilateral relationship with the UK on defence and security issues. Our two nations, both NATO Allies, share security concerns about the North Atlantic and the High North region. In 2019 the RAF patrolled over Iceland for the first time since the Second World War as part of the NATO Icelandic Air Policing mission.

**What is the JEF?**

The Joint Expeditionary Force (the JEF) is a UK-led coalition of ten countries who share a commitment to democracy, human rights and the rule of law as well as a long history of operating together. We also share a determination to global and regional peace and maintaining the security of northern Europe.

The JEF is able to operate wherever in the world any two of its members choose to deploy together. Our particular focus is on the High North, the North Atlantic and the Baltic regions, where the JEF can complement national as well as NATO's deterrence posture in the region. It is designed to be as flexible as possible and has utility across a broad spectrum of operational

activities, including humanitarian assistance and Defence diplomacy.

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## [Civil news: tender for face-to-face education advice contracts](#)

News story

A tender opportunity is open for face-to-face education advice services.



The Legal Aid Agency (LAA) is launching a tender for face-to-face education advice contracts.

Any interested parties that can meet the minimum tender requirements are able to bid for the tender contracts.

We have identified a need to increase capacity and are seeking to place additional contracts in this category of law.

There is therefore no limit to the number of contracts we are seeking to award.

We are particularly interested in receiving tenders from organisations who are willing and able to accept direct referrals from the Civil Legal Advice (CLA) telephone helpline on Thursday and/or Friday each week.

### **Timescales**

The deadline for submitting tenders is 5pm on 20 May 2021.

Services under the new contracts will begin as soon as possible in June and no later than 1 July 2021.

Contracts will end on 31 August 2022, subject to the LAA's right to extend this contract for up to a further year.

## Where can I find out more?

Detailed information on the tender is available in the [Information for Applicants](#) document on our tender pages.

## Further information

[Latest tender announcements](#)

[Civil tender activity](#)

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# [Work starts to repair Northumberland river bank](#)

Press release

The Environment Agency will start work this month to repair a heavily eroded river bank in Haydon Bridge.



Work will start this month to repair a heavily eroded section of river bank on the River South Tyne in Northumberland.

The bank, downstream of the road bridge in Haydon Bridge, is not a formal flood defence but if further erosion occurs, it could impact the riverside footpath and gardens to the rear of Rocksprings Crescent as well as flood defences further downstream.

The work will involve strengthening the river bank below the riverside footpath and then re-planting with trees to further stabilise it.

Tom Pitman, Environment Agency Project Manager, said:

Repairing this section of eroded river bank will reduce flood risk to the neighbouring footpath and gardens and protect flood defences downstream.

The restricted access to the area means much of the repair work will have to be done from within the river. This presents a risk to our team, who may need to pause work when river levels are high.

We'll also take precautions to minimise disruption to the local environment. Fish will be safely removed from the affected area prior to the work taking place and fish passage will be maintained at all times.

The Environment Agency expects the repair work to be completed by the summer if weather conditions remain fair.

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## [Measures to boost safety on All Lane Running motorways accelerated](#)

- Transport Secretary confirms radar technology will be in place before any new stretch of 'All Lane Running' motorway is opened
- pledge comes as Highways England publishes report detailing progress made to boost safety, while setting out ways in which improvements will be sped up
- 2015 to 2019 figures show fatal casualties are less likely on 'All Lane Running' motorways than conventional ones

Every new 'All Lane Running' (ALR) motorway will open with technology in place to spot stopped or broken-down vehicles quickly, while all existing ALR motorways will have the technology fitted 6 months earlier than originally planned.

The pledge comes as Highways England publishes the Smart motorways stocktake first year progress report 2021 setting out the progress it has made against an action plan published last year to boost safety and backed by a £500 million investment. The first-year progress report includes commitments to speed up the completion of safety measures, as well as the latest safety data.

ALR motorways – which don't have hard shoulders – are fitted with technology and features not seen on conventional motorways, such as set-back emergency areas, and red X signs on gantries to close live lanes. Radar detection to

spot stopped vehicles is also being rolled out.

To accelerate improvements, by the end of September 2022, Highways England will:

- install radar technology on all existing stretches of ALR motorway, 6 months earlier than planned
- upgrade special cameras 10 months earlier than planned, so that they can be used to spot and prosecute motorists ignoring red X signs and illegally driving down closed lanes, putting themselves and others in danger
- install around 1,000 additional approach signs 6 months earlier than planned, alerting drivers to their nearest place to stop in an emergency

Work to [update the Highway Code to provide more guidance about driving on ALR motorways](#) will also be brought forward and is due to be published this year, ahead of schedule.

Data from the progress report, covering the 5 years from 2015 to 2019 inclusive, shows that ALR motorways are one of the safest types of road in the country. Drivers on a conventional motorway are 33% more likely to be involved in a fatal accident than drivers on an ALR motorway.

The data also demonstrates that the fatality rate on strategic road network A roads is three and a half times that on ALR motorways.

The figures have been compiled on a 5-year basis because single-year figures are too low, and fluctuate too much to draw conclusions from. For the year 2019, there were 9 fatalities on ALR motorways, one less than in 2018, and a total of 15 fatalities on motorways without a permanent hard shoulder, 4 more than in 2018.

The increase in fatalities in 2019 was accounted for by so-called 'Dynamic Hard Shoulder' motorways, where the hard shoulder operates only part-time. All these motorways are being withdrawn and replaced with ALR motorways.

Despite the data, we know drivers can feel less safe driving along motorways without a hard shoulder, which is why Highways England is pressing ahead to provide reassurance and boost safety measures.

Transport Secretary Grant Shapps said:

Despite the data showing that fatalities are less likely on All Lane Running motorways than on conventional ones, this doesn't mean all drivers necessarily feel safe on them.

That is why I tasked Highways England last year with delivering an action plan to raise the bar on safety measures even higher. This progress report shows the extensive work already carried out, but we want to do more.

Alongside the raft of measures already undertaken, today I am



announcing that all new All Lane Running motorways will open with stopped vehicle detection technology in place, as well as a programme to speed up the roll-out of the technology on previously built stretches of All Lane Running motorways to next year. This will help us further reduce the risk of accidents on the country's roads.

So-called smart motorways started to be built in 2001 and I am determined to ensure that technology and exacting standards are in place.

Highways England's Acting Chief Executive Nick Harris said:

I want Highways England to continue to be an organisation that listens and puts the safety of road users first.

We've made good progress delivering the improvements set out in the 2020 stocktake, but we are not complacent and are examining ways to improve safety further.

We will continue implementing the findings, and will work with drivers to make increasingly busy motorways safer for everyone who uses them.

Today's announcement builds on the progress made by Highways England on the [Smart motorway safety evidence stocktake and action plan](#) published by the Transport Secretary in March 2020. This committed to more measures to help drivers and their passengers feel safer and be safer, backed by a £500 million investment.

In the past year, Highways England has made good progress on the action plan, including launching their biggest ever [road safety campaign](#), setting out what to do in the event of breaking down on a high-speed road.

Work has also been completed to make Emergency Areas more visible along with improved signage, and radar technology is now being rolled out along sections of ALR motorway across the country. Additionally, Highways England and the Home Office have continued work so motorists who drive along lanes closed by a red X can be caught and prosecuted.

Independent road safety campaigner, Meera Naran, whose 8-year-old son Dev, died in a motorway accident on the M6 in 2018, said:

This is a positive step in the right direction in making our roads safer through the use of available technology.

I'm determined to ensure there is an ongoing commitment from ministers and executives that we continue to improve road safety and implement all the changes from the action plan.