
- New hospital unveiled and NHS volunteers schemed launched
- Delay to the Comprehensive Spending Review
- Hancock’s ministerial statement to the House of Commons
- COVID-19 Bill
- Minister of State for Care writes to recruitment agencies regarding COVID-19
- Future immigration system – MP compares those outlined as keyworker against points-based immigration plans
- Adjournment debate on the staffing of A&E departments

New hospital unveiled and NHS volunteers schemed launched

On 24 March, the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care provided an update on the government’s response to COVID-19 at a virtual press conference with a number of important developments for the NHS. He was joined by Prof Stephen Powis, National Medical Director at NHS England and NHS Improvement and Dr Jenny Harries the deputy chief medical officer.

- NHS Volunteer Responders was launched, with the government seeking 250,000 volunteers to “help NHS employees with shopping, delivery of medicines and to support those who are being shielded”.
- 11,788 former clinicians have answered the call to return to work, including 2,260 doctors, over 2,500 other health professionals and pharmacists and 6147 nurses. From next week, 5,500 final year medics and 18,700 final year student nurses will move to the frontline. In total that’s over 35,000 more staff.
- Next week a new temporary hospital, the NHS Nightingale Hospital, will open up at the Excel Centre. It will comprise two wards, each of 2,000 people.
- On testing, the Secretary of State confirmed that 3.5 million antibody tests had been purchased and a new testing facility opens in Milton Keynes on 24 March.
- Over the past 24 hours, over 7 million pieces of personal protective equipment (PPE), including FFP3 masks, have been shipped.
- A tried-and-tested drug treatment for COVID-19 is not available given that it is a new virus, but there are a number of drugs which may have an impact, such as malaria drugs. There is interest in how these drugs can be used. Clinical trials have been set up to look at where these drugs do and do not work.
• Testing is highlight important in fighting COVID-19. Sick patients in hospitals should be tested first, but after that staff should be tested.

• People need to stay in household units, so couples in separate households should stay apart if possible or relocate together for the period of the outbreak.

• It is not clear if different lockdown principles in different countries have had an impact.

**Comprehensive Spending Review delayed**

• Chancellor Rishi Sunak has confirmed that the Comprehensive Spending Review would be delayed from July due to coronavirus. No new date has been given.

**Hancock’s ministerial statement to the House of Commons**

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care used his statement and responses to questions to confirm the following:

• Guidance for employers would be published on 24 March.

• Key workers should go to work unless they were self-isolating.

• 1.5 million vulnerable people would be contacted to implore that they ‘shield’ themselves from the virus over the coming months.

• All social care settings should have PPE by the end of the week

• That there was a programme of work to ensure that the most vulnerable, including domestic violence victims, were supported.

• Those least able to pay already were exempt from prescription charges.

• The government is buying millions of tests.

• Expressed gratitude to universities who provided testing kits.

• Standard staff ratios in intensive care units are being altered as a result of the coronavirus.

**Other notable interventions**

• The chair of the Health and Social Care Select Committee, Jeremy Hunt MP, thanked the Secretary of State for the “superhuman efforts” he has undertaken to resolve PPE issues over the last week. Jeremy also raised concerns about testing with the evidence that we appear to be testing no more people than a week ago despite the commitment to test 25,000 people a day and asked if the government could provide a firm date when all suspected COVID-19 cases could be tested in the community. The Secretary of State could not confirm a firm date as the government is “in the middle” of buying the tests that are needed but hoped to provide further detail in the coming days and weeks.
• Former health minister, Stephen Hammond MP, asked about the Public Health England change of guidelines and the concern this has caused a number of frontline staff and also whether the additional monitoring equipment required to go alongside ventilators was being purchased. The Secretary of State confirmed that both issues “were in hand”.

• Sir Ed Davey MP, the acting Co-Leader of the Liberal Democrats, asked whether there was enough PPE for health and social care workers. The Secretary of State confirmed there was and the no-deal preparations had helped in this regard, furthermore the government was purchasing further stock to replenish the no-deal stock.

• Dr Andrew Murrison MP asked whether the additional PPE which will be supplied to care home settings will meet FFP3 standards. The Secretary of State stated “it’s got to be the right stuff according to the clinical guidelines”.

• Ruth Edwards MP highlighted how NHS workers were putting their lives on the line and the government will need to recognise their bravery once the outbreak has been dealt with. The Secretary of State stated that the nation owed a debt of gratitude to the NHS and we must constantly search for ways to show it.

• Matt Western MP highlighted the concern regarding the lack of FFP3 masks and suggested that masks provided to the construction industry would be suitable to be provided to healthcare workers. The Secretary of State said he would look into that but it needs to be clinically right and he would therefore take it up with the Chief Medical Officer.

• Aaron Bell MP raised the concern of a retired nurse in his constituency regarding the impact of her returning to work on her pension. The Secretary of State stated that the Budget and the COVID-19 Bill went a long way to addressing these problems but if there was any further concerns he would look into them.

• Scott Benton MP asked about free parking for NHS workers and the Secretary of State confirmed this was an issue that was being looked into.

COVID-19 Bill

The Coronavirus Bill passed its third reading without a division yesterday in the Commons and went to the House of Lords. Several amendments were tabled, including:

• A clause which provides an opportunity for the House of Commons to express a view on the continued operation of the bill’s temporary provisions every six months.

• A new clause intended to safeguard public health by ensuring every person in the United Kingdom is able to access NHS care without incurring a financial penalty or immigration sanction.

• An amendment that uprates statutory sick pay to the level of 90 per cent of the worker’s normal earnings and makes provision for maximum and minimum rates.
• Sir Jeffrey M Donaldson put forward an amendment on how to identify and help support those who are victims of human trafficking and slavery during the outbreak.

• An amendment has also been tabled which requires local authorities to discharge their Care Act duties and in particular meet needs for care and support which would currently be ‘eligible’ needs where it is reasonably practicable for them to do so.

• You can find out more about the Bill and its implications for health in our member briefing.

• Incoming chair of the NHS Confederation, Lord Adebowale (Crossbench), reiterated widespread concerns about the provision of PPE, availability of testing for NHS staff, the accessibility of dedicated emergency funds, and the accessibility of public transport for NHS staff, in addition to the training and support received. Discussing the accessibility of emergency funds for public services, Lord Adebowale said: “We welcome the £5 billion emergency fund in the Budget for public services, but we need to ensure that money can be accessed quickly to manage additional workloads and to cover absences due to staff sickness. Relaxing the rules on primary care network underspends would be a positive enabler of this.”

Minister of State for Care writes to recruitment agencies regarding COVID-19

Helen Whately has called for recruitment agencies in the health and care sector to work in constructive partnership with the NHS during a time of heightened need. The letter has been sent to recruitment agencies working in the health and care sector in England.

Key points from the letter:

• It is vitally important that agency workers are aware of the coronavirus guidance for NHS and social care staff found on the NHS England website, and that you take measures to ensure that workers provided to NHS and social care providers are following government guidance regarding self-isolating

• It is imperative that health and social care professionals are not placed in a setting where they might present a risk to patients or other members of staff

• During a time where illness, and self-isolation, may impact many agency workers, agencies should be mindful of their responsibility to continue to pay statutory sick pay to agency workers, where the agency is the employer

• Specifically, for the NHS you should continue working in line with the NHS England and NHS Improvement approved frameworks, observing the responsibility to provide a replacement worker in the event of a short-term cancellation. This is more important than ever during this time of heightened demand.
• The department has been working closely with industry representatives, including the Recruitment and Employment Confederation (REC), on constructive measures to ensure that temporary staffing agencies can work with the NHS to support high quality patient care.

• The department is also working closely with NHS England & NHS Improvement, framework providers, and representatives of the social care sector on further specific guidance which will be released in the near future.

Future immigration system – MP compares those outlined as keyworkers against points-based immigration plans

On 23 March, Steve Double MP told the Chamber that COVID-19 showed just how critical some of the workers deemed to be “low skilled” are to the running of the country. He asked the Home Secretary to review the proposals to reflect what we have learned in light of COVID-19. The Home Secretary responded:

“We’ve never said people at lower skill levels are unimportant, and as we know right now through this crisis everybody is making a tremendous contribution and effort to keep all services functioning and running. While at the same time ensuring care and compassion for workers and service provision that is essential right now. We will absolutely through the points-based immigration system, as I have already committed to keep all aspects of that under review.”

The points-based immigration system is due to begin in January 2021 but there has been a delay in further steps of the Immigration Bill being presented in Parliament due to COVID-19. The Cavendish Coalition have particular concerns for the implications for the social care workforce.

Adjournment debate on the staffing of A&E departments (23 March)

Chris Bryant MP (Labour, Rhondda), who tabled this adjournment debate, argued that A&E departments were particularly vulnerable to the coronavirus outbreak due to existing workforce shortages. Bryant noted:

“Other countries have a much higher number of A&E consultants per 1,000 people than we do in the UK. We are aiming to get to one for every 7,000 people, and in most other countries it is one to every 4,000. We still have not reached one to every 7,000, so that is a problem.”

Bryant also repeated concern about PPE shortages, a lack of coronavirus testing for NHS staff, and the impact of panic buying on A&E staff’s ability to purchase essentials.

Contributing to the debate on behalf of the government, Minister of State for Care Helen Whately MP outlined progress made in expanding the NHS workforce before the coronavirus
outbreak. Whately told the House:

“Before coronavirus hit us, we had already committed to increasing the NHS workforce, particularly boosting the staff it needs in pressure points such as emergency departments. For instance, we have committed to funding an extra 1,500 undergraduate medical school places per year, which is a 25% increase. We are opening five new medical schools across England, often in areas that currently do not have medical training facilities, so we are going to be able to get doctors to the places that most need them. We have also committed to 50,000 more nurses in the NHS, and we are increasing the funding for nursing, midwifery and some allied health professional students studying at English universities to at least £5,000 per academic year, and up to £8,000 a year.”