



Department
of Health &
Social Care

*From Lord Markham
Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State*

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By email to: contactholm@parliament.uk

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Dear Noble Lords,

I am writing to you to respond to provide more detailed information on the oral question tabled by The Earl of Clancarty, to ask the Government what steps they will take to support those suffering from long Covid, of which I am grateful for your participation. This was discussed in the House on Tuesday 25 April 2023, and I thank The Earl of Clancarty for raising this important topic.

Further to Baroness Bull's question about providing the option, to purchase a Covid-19 vaccination, I understand that this is not a decision for the Government, and there are no barriers preventing sale of the Covid-19 vaccine privately. As with other private health care including private sales of seasonal flu vaccine, it will be a decision for manufacturers and private health care providers, including pharmacy on whether and if so when to establish a private market. However, I assure the Noble Baroness that the Department of Health and Social Care will continue work closely with relevant parties to assess options for future Covid vaccination supply.

I would also like to set out my understanding that the Government follows the advice of the Joint Committee on Vaccines and Immunisations (JCVI) who have advised that booster vaccinations, provided for free through the NHS are targeted at those at a higher risk of severe Covid-19. We expect JCVI's final advice for the coming autumn and winter season in due course. In the interim the JCVI has advised a precautionary additional spring booster programme covering those at very highest risk in the population. This offer is now open and covers those aged 75 and over, those living in care homes for older people and those aged 5 and over who are immunosuppressed.

In my response to Lord Borwick's question about overrepresented groups among those with long Covid I committed to write back to the Noble Lord with the data. Data provided by the Office of National Statistics shows that for the four-week period ending 05 March 2023, the employment sectors with the highest rate of self-reported long Covid of any duration were:

- Social care workers had the highest rate with 5.33%
- Health care workers had the second highest rate with 4.41%

Noble Lords can also see data, available publicly, for all 14 employment sectors recorded by the Office of National Statistics on their website ([dataset here](#)). My Lords will be pleased to know the NHS has in place a comprehensive health and wellbeing package to support NHS staff with long Covid. Guidelines have been published to help NHS line managers and leaders to understand what long Covid is, and how they can support colleagues who have the condition to return to work. NHS England has also put in place a range of initiatives to support staff health and wellbeing at a national level including dedicated mental health support and programmes to strengthen occupational health

support across the NHS. Information is also available from Your COVID Recovery, an online information and rehabilitation platform designed for and with people with long Covid. It offers general information, advice, and guidance on all aspects of recovering from Covid-19, including physical, emotional, and psychological wellbeing.

Baroness Brinton raised the issue of assessment and treatment of long COVID which I understand she also raised in the long Covid debate on 17 November 2022. I wish to inform the Noble Lady that while it is for clinicians to determine the most appropriate treatment for individual patients, NICE guidelines and relevant clinical evidence are also carefully considered. The NHS, through its national commissioning guidance and [2022/23 NHS Plan for Improving Long COVID Services](#), has implemented a series of measures to provide a more consistent and timely experience for people with long Covid, and to reduce waiting times. If the person cannot self-manage their symptoms using other methods such as [Your Covid Recovery](#), a clinical triage process then follows, determining with part of the health system the person should be referred onto. This will include the management of urgent conditions, referral to paediatric service, mental health support and specialist referral for specific conditions. Furthermore, the lived experience of people with long Covid continue to be vitally important to us. They have and will continue to play a major role in helping us to understand long Covid.

Lord Dodds raised the issue of the origins of the Covid-19 pandemic and future pandemic preparedness. I recognise that there are questions that need to be answered about the origin and spread of Covid-19, so we can ensure we are better prepared for future pandemics. The World Health Organization (WHO) has been clear that they have not abandoned studies into the origins of Covid-19. Noble Lords will understand that determining the source of a disease outbreak is incredibly complex. The UK is supporting the WHO's expert review into the origins of Covid-19 including through provision of technical support to the WHO's expert Scientific Advisory Group on Origins of Novel Pathogens into the origins of Covid-19 via the UK Health Security Agency. I assure the Noble Lords that all possibilities remain on the table until the review is concluded.

Furthermore, on the issue raised by Lord Dodds of future pandemic preparedness, the Department of Health and Social Care continues to plan and prepare for a range of pandemic and emerging infectious disease scenarios, including those caused by respiratory (influenza and non-influenza), contact and vector-borne pathogens, building on lessons learned from exercises and incidents, including the Covid-19 pandemic. Also, regarding the public Inquiry into Covid-19 led by the Noble Baroness Hallett, we have always been clear that there will be opportunities to look back, analyse and reflect on all aspects of Covid-19. The purpose of the Inquiry is to examine the UK's preparedness and response to the Covid-19 pandemic, and to learn lessons for the future to inform the Government's preparedness for future pandemics. The Department is committed to fully supporting the Inquiry process and helping the Inquiry find the truth.

In addition, the health and social care sector has a range of plans and well tested response capabilities in place to respond to pandemics. Pandemic preparedness is an area we keep under constant review and our strategic approach to pandemic preparedness evolves in response to new scientific information, lessons learned from prior pandemics, responses to other infectious disease outbreaks and rigorous exercising to test our response mechanisms. I want to also assure the House that the UK Health Security Agency is a responsive, agile agency with the expertise, influence, and operational excellence to ensure that we can respond quickly and at scale to future infectious disease outbreaks.

Finally, in my response to Lord Hunt of Kings Heath and Baroness Merron's questions, I set out my understanding that 80% of patients are seen within 8-weeks of being referred to a long Covid clinic. In fact, 80% are seen within 12 weeks, and the 8-week number being seen is 67%.

NHS England has set out their approach to tackling waiting times in the NHS Long Covid Improvement Plan and associated [Commissioning Guidance](#). However, I wish to assure Noble

Lords that the clinical triage process at the long Covid services will prioritise those patients who are most in need of urgent care and determine the appropriate care pathways within six weeks of referral.

As with many things in my role, this issue has been a very interesting education piece which I look forward to continuing. I would like to again thank Noble Lords for their valuable and insightful contributions during our exchanges.

I will deposit this letter in the libraries of both Houses.

With my very best wishes,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'M. Markham', with a stylized flourish at the end.

LORD MARKHAM CBE