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Covid-19: Long term plan on living with pandemic to come in spring, says Javid

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The government is to set out a plan for how the UK can manage covid-19 in the long term and to prepare for any future pandemics.

Expected by this spring, the plan will be a cross department collaboration, bringing together all the learning from the current pandemic and an assessment of the most effective strategies for tackling SARS-CoV-2.

Sajid Javid, the health and social care secretary for England, told the House of Commons Health and Social Care committee about the future work, which he will lead, during an evidence session on 25 January.

“We’ve got to find a way to live with [covid-19] in the same way that we live with flu,” he told the committee, while not suggesting that flu was equivalent in terms of mortality. “It’s about understanding we do now have defences that we didn’t have before. And just as flu doesn’t stop society and stop life, we must not let covid do that any more.”

Javid said the “living with covid” plan would be based on three pillars: vaccines, antivirals, and testing. He said the plan would be wide ranging, covering all aspects of the pandemic and its effects on life, from lockdowns and not going to work in the usual way to the measures needed in schools and the higher education sector, as well as on people’s life chances, mental health, and non-covid illness.

It would be likely to have recommendations for a national vaccination service and options to increase surge capacity. “We can’t ask GPs to stop doing their regular work. That can be an emergency response now, but in the future we’ve got to have a national vaccination service that is able to deal with covid vaccines, as well as other vaccines, without drawing in the workforce from the rest of the NHS.”

Javid also signalled a potential U turn in his department’s thinking on mandatory vaccination for NHS staff. In mid-January healthcare unions united in a call for an updated impact assessment on how the policy could negatively affect staffing numbers.¹

Javid told the committee that the decision to make vaccination mandatory for all NHS staff by 1 April was driven by an overriding desire to protect the safety of patients,² and that principle remained. However, he added, “When we made this decision . . . the dominant variant at the time was delta. The dominant variant now, in almost all cases, is omicron. And people have already made representations to say, ‘Look, omicron is not delta, omicron is less severe than delta.’

“I think it is right in light of omicron that we reflect on all this and keep all covid policies properly under review. Omicron is different from delta. Equally, we don’t know what the next variant is going to be, but we are reflecting on all this.”

In making its policy decision Javid said the government had weighed up the benefits of vaccination and the cost of some staff not getting vaccinated. He said, “No one wants anyone, not one person, to leave the NHS because of this reason.”

1 Waters A. Covid-19: Reassess effects of mandatory vaccination on staffing, urge unions. *BMJ* 2022;376:o139. doi: 10.1136/bmj.o139 pmid: 35042696

2 Rimmer A. Covid vaccination to be mandatory for NHS staff in England from spring 2022. *BMJ* 2021;375:n2733. doi: 10.1136/bmj.n2733 pmid: 34758984

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