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Covid-19: Government promises an “uninterrupted supply” of PPE this winter

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NHS leaders have welcomed a commitment by the government to guarantee an “uninterrupted supply” of personal protective equipment (PPE) this winter as the service braces itself for an increase in covid-19 cases.

A new national PPE strategy¹ from the government has promised that four month stockpiles of items such as face masks, visors, and gowns will be in place from November to provide “a continuous flow” to healthcare staff. The government said it had over 32 billion PPE items on order.

More equipment will be available for general practices and social care as well as NHS hospitals, the strategy promises.

The expansion is designed to avoid the huge capacity and supply problems that blighted the NHS’s attempts to handle the first wave of coronavirus cases earlier this year, and prompted *The BMJ* to launch its #properPPE campaign to ensure staff had adequate protection.²

Responding to the announcement, the deputy chief executive of NHS Providers, Saffron Cordery, said, “Having a more robust stockpile of items which were dangerously lacking in the initial peak of the pandemic is of comfort as the NHS enters a second wave alongside winter pressures. The planned provision of PPE to social and primary care settings is a vast improvement, and long overdue.”

The Department of Health and Social Care said that 70% of the expected demand for PPE will be met by UK manufacturers from December. It said it had struck more than 300 deals with suppliers including the Royal Mint, the Royal Mail, and eBay to boost stocks.

The government added that when purchasing PPE, it was moving from a system of quality control to quality assurance earlier in the supply chain to ensure that the right equipment is acquired first time.

The strategy also commits to understanding the needs of people using PPE. “We are listening to the reported practical difficulties with the use of some PPE experienced by women and black, Asian and minority ethnic people, among others, and are taking action to make sure user needs are adequately tackled in future provision,” it says.

Cordery said this was a vital commitment, but added, “The underlying problem that PPE is manufactured to fit the average measurements of Caucasian males must be tackled urgently. There is an opportunity to do this now given the growth in the number of new domestic manufacturers.”

The government said that its work to improve the PPE supply chain would “support and align” with its aims to grow UK industry and create jobs. It added that it would be seeking “high environmental standards and ethical labour practices” when tendering contracts.

Health secretary Matt Hancock said, “At the start of the pandemic, meeting demand for PPE was a challenge. That’s why we have worked every day since to ensure we have an uninterrupted supply to meet the challenges in the coming months and protect those who are protecting us.”

1 Department of Health and Social Care. Personal protective equipment (PPE) strategy: stabilise and build resilience. 28 September 2020. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/921787/PPE_strategy_v4.5_FINAL.pdf

2 Godlee F. Protect our healthcare workers. *BMJ* 2020;369:m1324. doi: 10.1136/bmj.m1324 pmid: 32327409