# WRITTEN STATEMENT

# BY

# THE WELSH GOVERNMENT

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| **TITLE**  | **COVID-19 and Respiratory Testing Plans: Spring and Summer 2023** |
| **DATE**  | **29 March 2023** |
| **BY** | **Eluned Morgan MS, Minister for Health and Social Services** |

Wales’ long-term COVID-19 transition plan [*Together for a Safer Future*](https://www.gov.wales/wales-long-term-covid-19-transition-pandemic-endemic), published in March 2022, highlighted the vital role our Test, Trace, Protect (TTP) programme played during the pandemic in reducing the transmission of coronavirus.

The pandemic has not gone away – we continue to experience waves of infection and new variants of the virus are emerging. We remain in a Covid Stable situation – the virus is not putting the same pressure on our health and care system as it was at the start of the pandemic, and vaccines and other pharmaceutical interventions, including antivirals, have been effective in preventing serious illness.

Vaccines continue to be our best defence against Covid-19 and booster doses have significantly improved the protection offered by vaccines. It is important that all those who are eligible continue to take up their offer of a vaccine and treatments. The spring booster programme will be launched on 1 April.

As we continue to move towards a future where we live alongside coronavirus, it is important our TTP programme also evolves so it provides a more responsive and sustainable model of health protection.

We are working with partners in health and social care to develop agile health protection teams, which can respond to varying levels of activity through the year according to national and regional demand. This means responding not only to Covid-19 but adopting an “all-hazards” approach that includes planning for future pandemics.

As part of this transition and agile approach, based on clinical advice, I have agreed that from 1 April testing for Covid-19 and other respiratory infections should be reduced for the spring and summer. The prevalent variants of coronavirus and the high rates of immunity in the population has meant that Covid-19 is currently a milder infection in most individuals. Other circulating respiratory viruses, such as influenza and RSV, have fallen to lower levels since the peak in December.

Routine testing will be paused for all symptomatic health and social care workers, care home residents, prisoners and staff and residents in special schools over the spring and summer.

Updated guidance will advise that people should be led by their symptoms when managing respiratory viruses. To protect our most vulnerable citizens from severe illness, testing will continue to support decisions around Covid-19 antiviral treatment in the community and settings such as care homes, to support the management of outbreaks in high-risk closed settings, where clinically indicated in secondary care settings and for surveillance purposes.

It will remain essential for the NHS and social care to adhere to the current guidance on [Infection prevention and control measures for acute respiratory infections](https://publichealthwales.nhs.wales/services-and-teams/harp/infection-prevention-and-control/guidance/infection-prevention-and-control-measures-for-acute-respiratory-infections-ari-including-covid-19-for-health-and-care-settings-wales1/) and for us all to follow the basic rules of good hygiene to protect ourselves and others.

In addition to the changes to our TTP programme, discussions have taken place between the four UK Chief Medical Officers (CMOs) regarding the UK Covid-19 alert level. This alert level system has been in operation since May 2020. Its function is to clearly communicate, to the public and across governments, the current level of direct Covid-19 risk. Since September 2022, we have been at level 2. The four UK CMOs have agreed it is appropriate to pause the alert level system. It will be suspended on 30 March.

While it is important to continue our transition to live safely with coronavirus, the threat has not gone away and we regret the UK Government’s decision to pause the Covid Infection Survey run by ONS while its long-term future is decided.

It is therefore vital we continue our surveillance plans in the community and high-risk settings to closely monitor case rates and analyse data about existing and emerging variants so we are able to quickly remobilise our response if necessary.