



18 August 2021

Dear Prime Minister,

ANTIVIRALS TASKFORCE OBJECTIVES AND DELIVERABLES

I write to outline the objectives and deliverables of the Antivirals Taskforce (ATF) over the next 6-12 months, and how ATF governance structures will support delivery, as requested in **NR** letter of 23 April, and subsequent request of 30 July. A slide pack accompanies this letter with additional details.

You launched the ATF in April 2021 with the clear objective of having at least two effective novel antiviral treatments ready for deployment by autumn 2021, that can be taken orally in an outpatient setting. I joined as Chair in late May to lead this important national effort. It is a privilege to do so. As you know, the development of antiviral treatments is integral to our longer-term response to COVID-19 and will enhance pandemic preparedness in the years ahead. Antivirals are particularly important for ensuring those who are immunosuppressed, or for whom the vaccine may not be effective, are protected against severe disease caused by COVID-19. Antivirals will also play a key part, alongside therapeutics and vaccines, in protecting the population where a current or future Variant of Concern reduces vaccine efficacy. Even if vaccines hold up against emerging variants there will remain a cohort of people who cannot be protected by vaccination. Antivirals are likely to be the least invasive and most available protection for those who contract COVID-19 in the years to come.

Having at least two novel oral antivirals ready to deploy by autumn 2021 will depend upon safety and efficacy data required to get regulatory approval. Delivery beyond this demands pace, focus and pragmatism, and I have convened a small Steering Group with high calibre experts to complement the civil servant team to drive this work forward. The Steering Group provides focussed planning and direction to realise the ATF's core objective within our ambitious timeline. I am pleased to be working with some of the most eminent clinical and scientific experts in the UK and am drawing on their knowledge to make informed recommendations to Ministers.

For the next six months, I have agreed three core deliverables with the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care. We will:



Identify at least two novel antiviral treatments with strong potential for trial results by autumn. We convened an Antiviral Expert Group under the leadership of Professor Sir Michael Jacobs (Royal Free Hospital, London) who identified and stratified patients in potential target populations (use/case analysis). This incorporated both treatment and prophylactic scenarios. We worked closely with this group and the independent UK Covid Therapeutics Advisory Panel to identify promising antiviral candidates. Three antiviral candidates met our criteria and have been prioritised for inclusion in phase 1 for autumn. I am pleased to report that we have now reached positive commercial agreements with two of the companies involved and will submit these for Ministerial approval in early September. The agreements, when assessed against the use/case analysis provide volumes consistent with coverage for the most vulnerable people this winter. The antiviral candidates are of course still subject to MHRA approval which is an independent decision-making process.

Support priority antiviral candidates to progress rapidly in clinical trials, move through to regulatory approval and onto deployment, and be made available to UK patients. We have agreed an ambitious deployment plan to ensure antivirals are available to people in the most need through the NHS and in their own homes, this autumn. We will deploy via a large, community-based trial. This will allow us to optimise access and collect further data to help ensure that deployment in the longer term uses antivirals to best effect, avoiding some of the issues seen in previous wide-spread use of antivirals such as for influenza. NHS England will lead on the deployment plan and will require support from Test and Trace given the need to identify and process eligible patients (and their close contacts) as quickly as possible, including encouraging patients to obtain a PCR test with rapid results. I am delighted to say that Dr Keith Ridge, Chief Pharmaceutical Officer for England has agreed to be SRO for this important work and is fully engaged in delivery. The Devolved Administrations have similarly agreed that antivirals should be available across the UK and that they will stand up the necessary infrastructure to enable access to the antivirals that the ATF is seeking to procure. Members of the VTF are embedded in our teams as we work toward this, to allow us to build on their successful approach at every opportunity.

In doing so, identify opportunities to increase investment in the UK life sciences sector, increase readiness for future pandemics and cement the UK's role as a leading place for life sciences research and innovation in line with the Life Sciences Vision. The ATF has received programme business case approval from HMT for £621.5m in 2021/22, although it is now clear from commercial negotiations that additional funding will be needed to procure the antivirals we want when measured over the next two winters. Government will need to continue to invest in antivirals for the longer-term management of COVID-19 if they are to become part of our endemic response in a similar way to influenza. We have the opportunity now to procure sufficient volumes for this winter and next, which will protect the most vulnerable, as well as playing a wider role in managing transmission and infection. We are discussing the funding options with HMT both as part of the Spending