

# Business Secretary's statement on coronavirus (COVID-19): 17 April 2020

Good afternoon. I am joined today by the government's Chief Scientific Adviser, Sir Patrick Vallance and Dr Yvonne Doyle who is the medical director of Public Health England.

Before I talk about some decisions taken today, and Sir Patrick provides an update on the latest data, I would like to set out the steps we are taking to defeat coronavirus.

Our step-by-step action plan is aiming to slow the spread of the virus so fewer people need hospital treatment at any one time, protecting the NHS's ability to cope.

At each point we have been following scientific and medical advice and we have been deliberate in our actions – taking the right steps at the right time.

We are also taking unprecedented action to increase NHS capacity by dramatically expanding the numbers of beds, key staff and life-saving equipment on the front-line to give people the care they need when they need it most.

This is why we are instructing people to stay at home, so we can protect our NHS and save lives.

I can report that through the government's ongoing monitoring and testing programme, as of today:

A total of 438,991 people in the UK have now been tested for coronavirus, that includes 21,328 tests carried out yesterday.

Of those, 108,692 people have tested positive.

That is an increase of 5,599 cases since yesterday.

18,978 people are currently in hospital with coronavirus in the UK.

And sadly, of those hospitalised with the virus, 14,576 have now died.

That is an increase of 847 fatalities since yesterday.

We must never forget that behind every statistic is a family member or a friend.

And all our thoughts and prayers are with the families and loved ones of those who have lost their lives.

These figures are a powerful reminder to us all of the importance of

following the government's guidance.

And as the Foreign Secretary outlined yesterday, the current social distancing measures will remain in place for at least the next 3 weeks.

And there are 5 tests that must be satisfied before we will consider it safe to adjust any of the current measures.

First, we must protect the NHS's ability to cope. We must be confident that we are able to provide sufficient critical care and specialist treatment right across the UK.

Second, we need to see a sustained and consistent fall in the daily death rate from coronavirus, so we can be confident that we have moved beyond the peak.

Third, we need to have reliable data from the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE) showing that the rate of infection is decreasing to manageable levels across the board.

Fourth, we need to be confident that the range of operational challenges, including testing capacity and PPE, are in hand, with supply able to meet future demand.

Fifth, and most importantly, we need to be confident that any adjustments to the current measures will not risk a second peak of infections that overwhelm the NHS.

The worst thing we could do now, is ease up too soon and allow a second peak of the virus to hit the NHS and hit the British people.

So I want to thank each and every person across the UK who is following and supporting the government's advice to stay at home, in order that we protect our NHS and, ultimately, save lives.

I know we are asking you to make sacrifices. And it is challenging. But we need to keep going. Working together, we will defeat this invisible enemy.

Now is not the time to let up. The risk still persists – not only for yourself, but for the people around you. So we must stay vigilant.

But of course, the point we hope to get to, one of the ways we can defeat this virus, is to find a vaccine.

Just as Edward Jenner developed the smallpox vaccine in the eighteenth century, we need to apply the best of British scientific endeavour to the search for the coronavirus vaccine.

To that end I can announce today, that the government has set up a [Vaccines Taskforce](#) to co-ordinate the efforts of government, academia and industry towards a single goal:

To accelerate the development of a coronavirus vaccine.

This taskforce is up and running and aims to ensure that a vaccine is made available to the public, as quickly as possible.

The taskforce, reporting to me and the Health Secretary, is led by Sir Patrick and Professor Jonathan van Tam.

It comprises representatives from government, industry, academia and regulators.

Members include Government Life Sciences Champion Sir John Bell, as well as AstraZeneca, and the Wellcome Trust.

The taskforce will support progress across all stages of vaccine development, at pace.

It will back Britain's most promising research, positioning the UK as a leader in clinical vaccine testing and manufacturing.

The taskforce will co-ordinate with regulators to facilitate trials which are both rapid and well supervised.

And it will work with industry in the UK and internationally, so we are in a position to manufacture vaccines at scale.

This will build on the Prime Minister's announcement last month of a further £210 million for the Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations (CEPI), the international fund to find a vaccine.

I can confirm that the government has green lighted a further 21 research projects to help fight coronavirus.

In total, these projects will receive £14 million from a £25 million government research investment and include backing the development of a vaccine at Imperial College London.

This follows support for 6 projects, announced last month, including vaccine development led by Professor Sarah Gilbert at the University of Oxford's Jenner Institute. This is already carrying out preclinical trials and, with government support, will shortly move into a clinical trial phase.

And we are looking forward. So when we do make a breakthrough, we are ready to manufacture it by the millions.

One tool in this fight will be the UK's first Vaccines Manufacturing Innovation Centre based in Harwell.

A project that will help build our capacity to develop and mass produce vaccines here in the UK.

The government will be accelerating the building of this facility.

The Bioindustry Association is also working closely with our taskforce and bringing together a whole range of businesses keen to use their expertise to

mass produce vaccines, as soon as one is ready.

I want to pay a heartfelt tribute to all the scientists and researchers, working tirelessly, on these projects.

Yet even with all their efforts, we should be under no illusions.

Producing a vaccine is a colossal undertaking.

A complex process which will take many months.

There are no guarantees.

But the government is backing our scientists, betting big to maximise the chances of success.

I am proud of how, again and again, Britain has stepped up and answered the call to action.

An enormous challenge being tackled through a vast national effort.

Where problem-solvers, from science, business and government join forces to beat this invisible killer.

We cannot put a date on when we will get a vaccine.

But we live in a country with a rich history of pioneering science.

And with the government backing our scientists we have the best chance to do this as quickly as possible.