

Communities Secretary Robert Jenrick on COVID-19 response: 18 April 2020

Good afternoon,

Welcome to the coronavirus press conference from Downing Street.

I'm joined by Steve Powis, national medical director of NHS England.

Steve will provide an update on the latest data on coronavirus shortly.

But, first, let me update you on the steps we are taking to defeat it, and the decisions we have taken today.

Our fight against this virus is happening all across the country, in every home, in every community.

Today's data shows that:

460,437 tests for coronavirus have now been carried out across Great Britain, including 21,389 tests carried out yesterday

114,217 people have tested positive, that's an increase of 5,526 cases since yesterday

17,759 people are currently in hospital with coronavirus in Great Britain, down from 18,711 yesterday

And sadly, of those hospitalised with the virus, 15,464 have now died. That's an increase of 888 fatalities since yesterday.

These are heart-breaking losses for every family affected.

Every part of our government, from Whitehall to your local town hall is working together in this national effort.

And nowhere is that clearer than on the front lines in our communities.

And today as Community Secretary I want to provide an update.

Councils are delivering essential supplies to clinically vulnerable people – those we have asked to shield themselves, paying out financial relief to businesses to enable their local economies to weather the storm as much as is possible, ensuring our bins continue to be collected, ensuring that schools remain open for the children of key workers and vulnerable families are kept in regular contact, and they are helping rough sleepers off the streets to protect them from the virus.

This effort, alongside the endeavours of all our public servants, is making a difference in this fight.

But I know it is our responsibility in government to make sure that those front-line workers have the resources they need to keep up this essential work.

At the beginning of this emergency I told local councils that we would give them the resources they need to do the job. And I meant it.

And that is why today I am providing an additional £1.6 billion of new funding to support councils with the pressures they face as they respond to COVID-19.

This funding takes the total amount given to councils to help them through the pandemic to over £3.2 billion.

We are backing councils to ensure vital services such as adult social care, children's services, support for vulnerable people and waste collection continue despite the increased pressures.

We are also helping councils with inevitable cashflow challenges by deferring £2.6 billion in business rates payments to central government and paying them £850 million in social care grants up front this month.

Working with councils and charities, we've made huge progress in protecting the vulnerable during this national emergency.

Our plans to shield the most clinically vulnerable people have progressed well.

Three weeks ago I reported at this press conference that the first government organised boxes of supplies had been delivered by wholesalers to those at highest risk across the country. Today 250,000 have been delivered. The packages include cereal, fruit, tinned goods, teabags, biscuits, toiletries and other essentials.

And this coming week we expect to be delivering 300,000 boxes – all from a standing start just a few weeks ago.

And our call centre is making up to 130,000 calls a day to those who are shielded, to see if they need this service, to see if they still need it or want to move to a priority delivery slot at their local supermarket.

In addition to this, councils are organising their own calls, often led by volunteers, including our 750,000 NHS volunteers, to check in and chat with the shielded.

And they have organised their own efforts to support those who may not have one of the clinical conditions to be shielded but are nonetheless vulnerable or isolated. And there are truly extraordinary efforts underway in this regard, in every village, parish, town, ward, estate and city, the length and breadth of the country.

We have all been humbled by the gestures, large and small, by people across the country to show support for those working so hard to protect the NHS and

to save lives. None more so than Captain Tom Moore, who has raised an astonishing £23 million this week for NHS charities.

I can't think of a more worthy person to be the guest of honour at the opening of the new Nightingale hospital in Harrogate next week – also, fittingly, the county of his birth, Yorkshire.

I am sure everyone will join me in thanking Captain Tom for his truly heroic effort.

I have also been proud of the effort of councils to help vulnerable people in their areas, including securing safe accommodation for rough sleepers.

And our plan to protect rough sleepers has resulted in over 90% being offered safe accommodation.

I want to thank all those who have made this possible, including local councils, charities and other organisations and those continuing to help the small number of people still regrettably on our streets today.

Of course, this is not the end of rough sleeping. And there is a great deal of work to be done and my departments and I will be at the heart of that.

I want to also say something about support for our high streets and local businesses by local councils.

I'm delighted that so many cafes, restaurants and other businesses have taken up the opportunity to switch to offering delivery, takeaway and click and collect services. This expands the supply of food available to people alongside the supermarkets, as well as allowing businesses that would otherwise have closed to remain open and keep paying staff.

This simple freedom has been taken up by enterprising people the length across the UK. The same enterprising people whose ingenuity, sometimes assisted by government in modest ways like this, will help us to rebuild our economy.

Councils have worked hard to pay out over £1 billion worth of business grants from government.

But it's vital that we all ensure that all eligible businesses get the support that it needs, and I urge councils who have been slower in making progress to their accelerate efforts in the days to come.

Let me address two other topics that I know are of concern to people.

Firstly, there have been examples of some parks around the country closing.

This cannot be right.

While the virus does not discriminate, we know that the lockdown is much harder for people who don't have a lot of living space, who don't have a garden, and who don't have anywhere for their children to run around.

People need parks.

That's why I have made it clear to councils that all parks must remain open.

For the health of the nation, people should be able to safely enjoy fresh air and green space.

And, for the health of the nation, people must abide by social distancing rules and not congregate in groups in parks.

Secondly, there have been some reports of mourners being turned away at funerals.

The tragedy of the death of Ismail Mohamed Abdulwahab, a 13 year old boy from Brixton, was compounded by the fact that his family were unable to attend his funeral.

That is not right and it shouldn't have happened.

For clarity – funerals can go ahead with close family present.

Social distancing measures must be respected, but families must have the opportunity to say a respectful goodbye to those that they love.

We will be publishing more guidance on this shortly. And I'm also asking councils to keep open or indeed reopen cemeteries and graveyards. Not for people to congregate in. That must not happen. But for people to make that private visit. To seek solace in a word at the grave of someone you have loved. Or to privately lay flowers. There have been times in my life when I have needed to do that. I'm certain there are people who need to do it today.

These are small steps. But small mercies can make a big difference.

And local councils, at their best, can help to make life, even in times like this, more liveable and more humane.

They represent and can harness the networks of familiarity and loyalty upon which a society is based.

The sense that we belong together. And that we will stand by each other in a real emergency.

Those relationships can only be built from below, by people, to people, in communities.

To all the unsung heroes of local councils. For all you are doing for us all.

Thank you.