

Communities Secretary's statement on coronavirus (COVID-19): 6 May 2020

Good afternoon,

Welcome to the coronavirus press conference from Downing Street.

I'm joined this afternoon by Professor Yvonne Doyle Medical Director for Public Health England and Dr Nikki Kanani Deputy Medical Director of Primary Care for NHS England.

Today's data shows that:

- 1,448,010 tests for coronavirus have now been carried across Great Britain, including 69,463 tests carried out yesterday
- 201,101 people have tested positive, that's an increase of 6,111 cases since yesterday
- 13,615 people are currently in hospital with coronavirus in Great Britain, down from 13,922 the yesterday
- And sadly, of those tested positive for coronavirus, across all settings, 30,076 have now died. That's an increase of 649 fatalities since yesterday.

Behind that number is a heart-breaking loss for the loved ones of all those who have died, and once again our thoughts and prayers are with their families and friends.

Professor Yvonne Doyle will provide an update on the latest data on coronavirus.

But first, as Communities Secretary I would like to take this opportunity to give an update the work being done locally during the pandemic to keep people safe, to provide support people's jobs and businesses and to prepare for the re-opening and recovery of our local economies.

That's why it is appropriate that today we are joined by regional journalists who are doing so much to keeping people informed about how the national effort is being co-ordinated in their communities.

A free country needs a free press and the national, the regional and the local newspapers are under significant financial pressure.

I'd like to echo the words of the Culture Secretary recently in encouraging those who can, to buy a newspaper.

I have said before that the battle against coronavirus would be won in every city, town and village across the country.

This is a national effort taking place at a local level.

My department, the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, has played a vital role in bringing people together to tackle the virus.

We've provided local authorities with over £3.2 billion during this pandemic so that they can continue to support the communities that need it through this most challenging time and respond to the immediate pressures they are facing due to coronavirus, while also protecting and preserving vital public services.

And at the start of March I established a taskforce to support Local Resilience Forums – known as LRFs – standing them up at a local level across the country, to prepare each and every community for a range of scenarios.

There are 38 LRFs in England which are made up of emergency services, a range of government agencies, health bodies and local authorities.

They are headed by the most senior and experienced local leaders of the emergency services, councils, the NHS and others who together are leading their communities through this crisis with the full support of central government.

Recognising the unprecedented challenge that we faced, I took the decision to embed within them some of the finest military planners in the world from our armed forces and I am very grateful for their work.

This combined expertise and leadership is ensuring a comprehensive, co-ordinated and consistent response across the country.

Responding to the urgent need for personal protective equipment to reach the frontline of the care sector, we've mobilised LRFs to help distribute PPE and thus far they have delivered over 67 million items in England alone, since early April.

Together with local councils, they are also assisting us in supporting some of the most vulnerable individuals in their communities and to date they have helped to ensure that a million boxes of food and essentials have now been delivered to those people identified by the NHS as extremely clinically vulnerable to coronavirus, the "shielded".

With more than 290,000 boxes being distributed every week, this has been a huge team effort, and I would like to take this opportunity to thank everyone involved for the role that they have played and will play in the weeks ahead.

We are also working very closely with Mayors to make sure that we have a coordinated approach to tackling coronavirus at a local level.

The government has also been determined to ensure that the vital work keeping people safe in their homes also continues.

So, with the support of the Mayors for London, the Liverpool City Region, Greater Manchester, Sheffield and the West Midlands, and others, we were able to announce the Building Safety Pledge.

These Mayors have come together because they have a number of high rise buildings with highly flammable cladding in their respective regions, and the pledge that we agreed, sends a very clear message that vital building safety work must continue, despite the coronavirus pandemic.

And we have been joined by 25 local authorities, including 18 in London, have also given their fulsome support.

As work on many of these critical sites was paused early on, it is now slowly starting to reassume as a result of this initiative.

And I would urge any building owner or contractor to do so, as soon as practicable, where it is safe to begin work once again.

Now coronavirus will not stop our mission to level-up, to unite and to unleash the potential of this country.

The Prime Minister will set out on Sunday our approach the second phase of this pandemic.

As we look ahead to supporting businesses as they are able to re-open, my department will lead our work on how our local economies can adapt, evolve, recover and grow.

I will continue to support mayors and local government leaders, who will play critical roles in this work.

Every local economy now needs a plan to re-start and recover.

We will be informing those plans with our own detailed work in areas such as:

1. How workplaces, from factories to construction sites to offices can be adapted.
2. How outdoor spaces, leisure and businesses, from parks, to high streets, to markets can be managed.
3. And how public transport networks, from the tube, to trams, to buses, can operate.

In each case, guided by scientific and medical advice, we want to ensure appropriate and safe social distancing, providing the public with the confidence to return to work, and to return to public spaces, to public transport and to school, knowing that it's always safe to do so.

We are considering how we can create more room in the town centre for pedestrians.

How we can make it easier to cycle or walk to work.

And we will work with towns and places whose economies have been hardest hit intensively as the recovery begins.

And our commitment to infrastructure investment remains undimmed.

For example, over two thirds of HS2 sites are open.

We want infrastructure and construction work to begin again wherever it is safe to do so.

It is clear to everyone that the pandemic is putting huge pressure on economies the world over.

And there is no denying the challenges lie ahead in our own country.

But we cannot, and will not, let this pandemic halt our work to improve connectivity, to provide vital social and cultural infrastructure and to boost economic growth across the regions.

That's is how we will begin to rebuild and recover from this national emergency.

We are working to ensure the right support is available to local businesses.

And last week high street businesses began to receive the £22 million package designed to mitigate some of the effects of coronavirus.

With grants of us to £25,000 being paid into bank accounts of those business.

And of course the 100 towns benefiting from our £3.6 billion Towns Fund will continue to receive our support.

And we will be working at pace with them in the months ahead.

Local authorities have now paid out over £8.6 billion in grants to around 700,000 businesses.

As Local Government Secretary I'd like to congratulate those councils that have worked extremely hard sometimes around the clock to get those grants out to the businesses that desperately need them.

I'd like to congratulate Chichester, Ealing and Hyndburn councils who are the three highest performing councils so far in England.

Businesses are also receiving discounts of almost £10 billion on their rates bills in response to COVID-19, with the hardest hit by the pandemic, such as shops, cafes and pubs, paying no business rates whatsoever this financial year.

Together with existing reliefs, this means that 1.1 million ratepayers are no longer paying business rates this year.

This week the Chancellor and I announced an additional 5% uplift – up to £617 million – available to local councils to fund small businesses that rent space in shared offices, industrial units or innovation centres, as well as regular market traders, B&Bs that pay council tax rather than business rates and also to support small charities.

And local councils will now how have flexibility to make pragmatic decisions

to keep those business going so they can bounce back once they are able to do so.

Moving forward, our mission is to do everything we can to help people get back to work safely, to reunite friends and family and reintroduce the things that make life worth living in a safe way, as soon as it is safe to do so.

Finally, on Friday, we will be celebrating as a country the 75th anniversary of VE Day.

My department had been helping to plan some of the public celebrations, but we know that sadly we will now all need to mark this important occasion from home instead.

Cabinet colleagues have been speaking with a veteran organised by The Royal British Legion and I had the pleasure earlier this week of speaking to Leslie, a 98-year-old World War Two veteran, on the phone.

Leslie was full of warmth and wisdom, telling me how he spent VE Day in Siena having fought his way through North Africa and Italy, and how he would be spending Friday, more sedately, celebrating, at home.

As he said to me, that as we rebuilt and recovered then, he is certain we'll do so again this year.