

Communities Secretary's Statement on Housing and Construction

Good afternoon,

As Housing Secretary, I'm going to set out our comprehensive plan to safely restart, reopen and renew the housing market.

But first, I want to update you on the latest data on the coronavirus response.

- 2,094,209 tests for coronavirus have now been carried out in the UK, including 87,063 tests carried out yesterday;
- 229,705 people have tested positive, that's an increase of 3,242 cases since yesterday;
- 11,327 people are in hospital with COVID-19, down 15 per cent from 13,273 last week;
- And sadly, of those tested positive for coronavirus, across all settings, 33,186 have now died. That's an increase of 494 fatalities since yesterday.

These figures includes deaths in all settings not just in hospitals.

Before turning to the housing market I want to remind people of how we will address this phase of our fight against Covid-19. Firstly, in order to monitor our progress, we are establishing a new COVID Alert Level System, with five levels, each relating to the level of threat posed by the virus.

The alert level will be based primarily on the R value and the number of coronavirus cases.

And in turn that alert level will determine the level of social distancing measures in place.

The lower the level the fewer the measures; the higher the level the stricter the measures.

The social distancing measures remain critical in our efforts to control the virus.

Throughout the period of lockdown which started on March 23rd we have been at Level 4 – meaning a Covid19 epidemic is in general circulation, and transmission is high or rising exponentially.

Thanks to the hard work and the sacrifices of the British people in this lockdown, we have helped to bring the R level down, now that we are in a position to begin moving to Level 3, we will do so in time, in careful steps.

We have set out the first of three steps we will take to carefully modify the measures and gradually ease the lockdown, and begin to allow people to return to their way of life – but crucially doing so while avoiding what would be a disastrous second peak that could overwhelm the NHS.

After each step we will closely monitor the impact of that on the R and the number of infections, and all the available data will be used, and we will only take the next step when we are satisfied that it is completely safe to do so.

The first step – from this week:

- Those who cannot work from home should now speak to their employer about going back to work.
- You can now spend time outdoors and exercise as often as you like.
- You can meet one person outside of your household in an outdoor, public place provided you stay two metres apart.

The second step – from 1 June, at the earliest, as long as the data allows, we will aim to do the following:

- Primary schools to reopen for some pupils, in smaller class sizes;
- Non-essential retail to start to reopen, when and where it is safe to do so;
- Cultural and sporting events to take place behind closed doors, without crowds.

And then Step 3 – no earlier than 4 July, and again, only if the data says it safe to do so, we aim to allow:

More businesses and premises to open, including potentially those offering personal care such as leisure facilities, public places, and places of worship. And on that last point, I have been speaking to faith leaders and will convene later this week a taskforce to establish when and how places of worship can open safely for some of the practices where social distancing can take place, such as private prayer, potentially private prayer being able to be carried out earlier than 4 July.

Many of these businesses and organisations will need to operate in new ways to ensure they are safe, and we will work with those sectors and individuals on how to do this.

Having taken the first step in carefully adjusting some of the measures and our advice to people on what to do, we have also updated what we are asking people to do, which is to Stay Alert, to Control the Virus and Save Lives.

For many people the appropriate course still means staying at home as much as possible. But there are a range of other actions we're advising people to take when they do go out to work or for other activities.

Limiting contact with other people;

Keeping distance if you go out – two metres apart where possible;

Washing your hands regularly;

Wearing a face covering when you are in enclosed spaces where it's difficult to be socially distant – for example in some shops or on public transport;

and if you or anyone in your household has symptoms, you all need to self-isolate.

If everyone stays alert and follows these rules, we can control coronavirus by keeping the R down and reducing the number of infections. This is how we can continue to save lives, and livelihoods, as we begin as a nation to recover from coronavirus.

And as we begin to recover from coronavirus, it's essential that we cautiously open essential parts of our economy, where it is safe to do so.

Earlier today in Parliament, I made a statement setting out our clear, coherent and comprehensive plan to restart, reopen and renew the housing market and our construction industry.

I'm sure that this will be of interest to many people at home who are hoping to move house, and I'd like to set out what this means in more detail.

From today anyone in England can move house if they follow new guidance we have published on gov.uk.

When the lockdown was announced in March, we changed the rules so that people could only move home if they thought it was "reasonably necessary".

That meant that more than 450,000 buyers had to put their plans on hold.

And each month 300,000 tenancies come up for renewal as well.

A significant proportion of these will result in people needing to or wanting to move home. The pressure to move for some was becoming acute, with serious legal, financial and health implications.

During an already very difficult time, these people have been stuck in limbo. Now they can carry on with their house moves and add some certainty to their lives.

So, from today:

- Estate agents' offices can re-open;
- Viewings – whether virtual or in person – are permitted;

- Show homes can open;
- And removal companies and the other essential parts of the sales and letting process are re-started with immediate effect.

For most people moving home is not a luxury. People decide to move home because their personal circumstances change.

The changes that I have announced today are happening safely in order to control the virus and to protect the public.

We have published very detailed guidance, informed by public health advice, to explain how this can be achieved, with all parties observing hygiene measures and social distancing guidelines.

People have asked why they would be able to look around a stranger's house, but not visit their parents or loved ones at home.

Now I understand why that might seem confusing at first glance – especially when people have been separated from their loved ones for so long.

But our guidelines makes clear that in the first instance that viewings should happen virtually. When viewings do happen in person, we've set out a clear plan to ensure the safety of those already in the property intself, those considering moving in and the estate agents and lettings agents.

These requirements include:

Visits being by appointment only, open house viewings not taking place, and speculative viewings where buyers or tenants are not serious yet, are highly discouraged.

All parties following strict social distancing guidelines

All internal doors should be opened where possible

The current occupier vacating the property for the duration of the visit, going out for their daily exercise, going out to the shops or standing in the garden, if that is possible.

All involved in the process washing their hands upon entering the property. And, once the viewing has taken place, all surfaces in the property including the door handles, should be thoroughly cleaned.

There are of course exceptions. For those who are self-isolating or have coronavirus, they should not be moving or going back to work or allowing trades people or professionals into their home.

Where this is the case, all parties involved in house buying or selling should prioritise agreeing amicable sensible arrangements to change move dates for the individuals concerned. That has been happening across the country in recent weeks and it will need to continue.

We would also ask those who are clinically vulnerable and those who are shielding to consider very carefully their personal situation and to seek personal and specific medical advice before deciding whether to commit to or proceed with moving home.

If you are in this situation, and you decide that you must go ahead, all professionals involved must be made aware so that they can put in place any additional precautionary measures to provide further protection for your health and further legal protection to make sure the transaction goes as smoothly as can be expected.

A vibrant housing market means more than buying and selling homes. We need to get back to building again and Britain needs that.

It is something that this Government has always been committed to. Something that our ambitious First Homes programme will do later this year, with a 30% discount on new homes for key workers including nurses and teachers and police officers as well as local first time buyers.

We want them to be ready as soon as possible and that's just one of the reasons I am keen to get construction up and running.

To help with this today I am announcing further steps to support safe house building by allowing more flexible working hours on construction sites, where it's appropriate and with local consent.

I am allowing sites to apply to extend their working hours, again with immediate effect, to 9pm Monday to Saturday in residential areas and beyond that in on-residential areas and setting out a very clear Government position that these applications should be approved by local councils unless there are very compelling reasons why this is not appropriate.

Varied start and finish times will make it easier for sites to observe social distancing, take the pressure off public transport like the tube in London, and keep Britain building.

There are countless examples of the industry behaving responsibly and proactively during this pandemic.

I'd like to thank today Taylor Wimpey, who now have now got construction safely underway on the majority of their sites and have started removing staff from the furlough scheme and getting back to work on full pay.

They are offering a discount of 5% for NHS staff and care workers on new homes – a great way to recognise the contribution that our front line heroes are making to the country.

So thank you to them.

It's also time that the planning system makes more use of digital technology to operate remotely and efficiently during this pandemic.

I am determined that the planning inspectorate be at the forefront of this

work – I welcome the inspectorate now undertaking its first ever virtual hearings.

I am asking them to make all hearings virtual within weeks so that the planning system can resume and be made more permanently more accessible and user-friendly.

This is the most comprehensive restarting of an industry in the first phase of our roadmap with few if any transactions there is no visibility and no precedent with which to accurately judge the state of the housing market, but history tells us that in each economic recovery in modern British economic life the housing market has been key to recovery and revival.

As Housing Secretary, I will do everything I can to support the millions of people employed in the construction and the housing industries, to help their sector bounce back, while always prioritising their safety and wellbeing.

Almost 100 separate organisations have already signed up to the Charter for Safe Working Practice, pledging that they will share the responsibility to ensure that their sites operate safely and in accordance with Government advice.

I'd like to thank all of all of those who have signed and encourage the whole industry to join them.

Today we reopen, we restart and renew the housing market and construction industry to protect lives, to save jobs and to begin rebuilding our economy.

Thank you.