

# Controlling the spread of COVID-19: Health Secretary's statement to Parliament

I want to thank you Mr Speaker, for allowing me to make a statement at this time.

Mr Speaker, the coronavirus pandemic is the most serious public health emergency that our nation has faced for a generation.

Our goal is to protect life.

Our actions have meant that the spread of the virus has been slowed in the UK.

And I pay tribute to the officials at Public Health England and the NHS for their exemplary approach to contact tracing and their work so far.

However, the disease is now accelerating and 53 people have sadly now died.

Our hearts go out to their families.

Our policy is to fight this virus with everything we've got.

Last week, my RHF the Chancellor confirmed a £30 billion package of financial firepower, including a £5 billion contingency fund to ensure that the NHS and social care system have the resources they need.

We will give the NHS whatever it needs. We will do whatever it takes.

We will get through this by working through our action plan to contain, delay, research and mitigate the virus.

And that plan has 2 overriding aims.

To protect the NHS by building it up and flattening the curve. And to protect life by safeguarding those who are most vulnerable.

We will do the right thing at the right time, based on the best scientific advice.

Earlier I attended a COBR meeting chaired by the Prime Minister to decide on the next steps in our plan.

I can report to the House that we have agreed a very significant step in the actions we're taking, from within that plan, to control the spread of the disease.

These actions will change the ordinary lives of everyone in this country.

We appreciate that they are very significant and I understand that people will be concerned.

But we have come to the view that they are necessary to save lives and to stop this disease.

First, based on the updated scientific advice, we are today advising that if you or anyone in your home has a high temperature or a new and continuous cough, then you should stay at home for 14 days.

If at all possible, you should not go out even to buy food and essentials.

Instead you should ask others for assistance with your daily necessities.

The exception to this is for exercise. Even then, you should keep at a safe distance from others.

If it's not possible to receive deliveries at home, then you should do what you can to limit your social contact when you leave the house to get supplies.

Even if you or anyone in your household don't have symptoms, there is more that we have to ask of you.

Today we are advising people against all unnecessary social contact with others and all unnecessary travel.

We need people to start working from home if they possibly can.

We should steer clear of pubs, clubs, cinemas and restaurants.

We should only use the NHS when we really need to.

This advice is directed at everyone, but it's especially important for the over 70s, for pregnant women and for those with some health conditions.

It's especially true of London, which the evidence suggests is several weeks ahead of the rest of the country.

These measures will be disruptive, but they will save lives.

In a few days' time – by this coming weekend – we will need to go even further to ensure that those with the most serious health conditions are largely shielded from social contact for around 12 weeks.

We want to ensure that this period of maximum shielding coincides with the peak of maximum transmission.

And while the risks of transmission at mass gatherings such as sporting events are relatively low, from tomorrow we will be withdrawing our support for mass gatherings.

This will free up critical workers we need to deal with the emergency and ensure a consistent approach to social contact.

Second, we are increasing our testing capabilities yet further.

The UK has tested more people than almost any other major economy outside of China, South Korea and Italy.

We have already increased the number of tests to 5,000 a day and this is now on its way to 10,000 and then radically further.

Third, we are boosting the NHS.

Ventilation is mission critical to treating this disease and we have been buying up ventilation equipment since the start of the crisis.

But we need more.

And today the Prime Minister hosted a call with the nation's advanced manufacturers, asking them to join a national effort to produce the ventilators we need.

We've set up a dedicated team to do this, and we are hugely encouraged by the scale of the response so far.

Later today the NHS itself will set out the very significant steps it is taking to prepare.

Fourth, Mr Speaker, on Thursday we will introduce the Coronavirus Emergency Bill.

This Bill will give us the powers to keep essential services running at a time when large parts of the workforce may be off sick.

Some of these measures will be very significant and a departure from the way we do things in peacetime.

These are strictly temporary and proportionate to the threat we face, and I hope that many will not have to be used at all.

They will only be activated on the basis of scientific advice and will only be in place for as long as is clinically necessary.

Finally, of course we are ramping up our communications effort so that people know what steps they need to take to protect themselves, others and the NHS.

Mr Speaker, tackling coronavirus is a national effort, and everyone has a part to play.

The more people follow the public health advice, the less need to bring in draconian actions that I am keen to avoid.

And of course, do not forget the simple things we can all do.

Washing your hands. Following the public health advice if you have symptoms. Looking out for the most vulnerable in the community.

Mr Speaker, the measures I have just outlined are unprecedented in peacetime.

We will fight this virus with everything we've got.

We are in a war against an invisible killer and we have got to do everything we can to stop it.

And I commend this statement to the House.