

Coronavirus action plan: Health Secretary's statement to Parliament

Mr Speaker, with permission I would like to make a statement on the government's [coronavirus action plan](#).

The situation facing the country is increasingly serious.

Globally and at home, the number of cases continues to rise. As of 9am today there were 51 confirmed cases in the UK. It is becoming more likely that we will see widespread transmission here in this country.

Our approach is to plan for the worst and work for the best.

Yesterday I attended a COBR meeting chaired by the Prime Minister, in which we finalised our 4-part action plan to contain, delay, research and mitigate the virus.

This plan has been jointly agreed between the UK government and the devolved administrations.

Copies of the plan have been sent to Members of both Houses and made available in hard copy.

The plan is driven by the science and guided by the expert recommendations of the 4 UK Chief Medical Officers and the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies.

Our plan sets out what we know so far about the virus and the disease it causes, what long-term planning we have undertaken to prepare for a pandemic, what actions we have taken so far in response to the current coronavirus outbreak and, crucially, the role the public can play in supporting our response, both now and in the future.

Mr Speaker, the UK is well prepared for infectious disease outbreaks of this kind.

The international data continue to indicate that for most people, this disease is mild and the vast majority recover in full.

We have responded to a wide range of disease outbreaks in the recent past. The NHS has been preparing for a pandemic virus for over a decade.

We have world-class expertise to make sense of the emerging data.

We have a strong base on which to build.

And while COVID-19 is a new virus, we have adapted our response to take account of that fact.

Our plan sets out a phased response to the outbreak.

Phase one is to contain. This is the phase we are currently in.

Contain is about detecting the early cases, following up with close contacts, and preventing the disease from taking hold in this country for as long as is reasonably possible.

This approach also buys time for the NHS to ramp up its preparations.

If the number of global cases continues to rise – especially in Europe – the scientific advice is that we may not be able to contain this virus indefinitely.

At that point we will activate the delay phase of our plan.

Delay is about slowing the spread, lowering the peak impact of the disease and pushing it away from the winter season.

We are mindful of scientific advice that reacting too early or overreacting carries its own risks.

So, subject to the primary goal of keeping people safe, we will seek to minimise social and economic disruption.

Mr Speaker, the third part of the plan is research.

Research has been ongoing since we first identified COVID-19 and I pay tribute to scientists at Public Health England who were among the first in the world to sequence its genome.

Research is not just about developing a vaccine, which we are actively pursuing, but which will be many months away at the earliest.

Research is also about understanding what actions will lessen the impact of coronavirus including what drugs and treatments – existing and new – will help those who are already sick.

The fourth phase is mitigate.

We will move on to this phase if coronavirus becomes established in the UK population.

At that point, it would be impossible to prevent widespread transmission, so the emphasis will be on caring for those who are most seriously ill and keeping essential services running at a time when large parts of the workforce may be off sick.

Our plans include not just the most likely case, but the reasonable worst case.

We will identify and support the most vulnerable.

If necessary, we will take some of the actions set out in today's plan to

reduce the impact of absentees and to lessen the impact on our economy and supply chains.

We prepare for the worst and work for the best.

We commit to ensuring that the agencies responsible for tackling this outbreak are properly resourced, have the people, equipment and medicines they need and that any new laws they need are brought forward as and when required.

This is a national effort.

We need everyone to listen to and act on the official medical advice.

We need employers to prioritise the welfare of their staff.

And the single most important thing that everyone can do, and I make no apologies for repeating this Mr Speaker, is to use tissues when you cough or sneeze and wash your hands more often.

It's in your interest, in your family's interest and in the national interest.

We will get through this Mr Speaker. Everyone has a part to play.

And I commend this statement to the House.