

Coronavirus update on areas in local COVID alert levels

Thank you very much Mr Speaker. And Mr Speaker, with permission, I'd like to make a statement on coronavirus.

The threat remains grave and serious.

In Europe, positive cases are up 40% from one week ago. And in Italy, Belgium and the Netherlands, they have doubled in the last fortnight.

And here, we sadly saw the highest figure for daily deaths since early June.

Mr Speaker, let us be under no illusions about the danger posed by this virus. Coronavirus is deadly. And it is now spreading exponentially in the UK.

We must act to prevent more hospitalisations, more deaths and more economic damage. Because we know from recent history that this virus keeps growing, unless we act, together, to get it under control.

Local action strategy

Our strategy is to suppress the virus, supporting the economy, education and the NHS and local action is at the centre of our response.

This virus is not evenly spread, and the situation is particularly severe in some parts of the country.

Through the JBC and through NHS Test and Trace, we have built up a detailed picture of where, and how, this virus is spreading.

This week's NHS Test and Trace statistics show that testing capacity is up, testing turnaround times are down, and the distance travelled for tests is down too.

And thanks to this capacity and analysis, we have been able to take a more targeted approach, keeping a close eye on the situation in local areas.

Bearing down hard through restrictions on a local level, where they are necessary.

I know that these restrictions are difficult for people. I hate the fact that we have to bring them in. But it is essential that we do bring them in.

Both to keep people safe, and to prevent greater economic damage in the future. But when a virus is moving fast, we cannot stay still. And if we act collectively, we know we can control the virus, because we have done it before.

I believe in the people of this country. And I believe – in fact, I know – that the people of this country want to control this virus, to protect their loved ones, their lives and their livelihoods. And I believe from the bottom of my heart that acting together, we can.

We must take firm and balanced decisions to keep this virus under control. This is the only way to protect lives and livelihoods.

We must act now. Delayed action means more deaths from COVID.

It means more non-COVID deaths. And means more economic pain later. Because this virus comes down slower than it goes up. So we should stop it going up in the first place.

Unless we suppress the virus, we cannot return to the economy we had. Unless we suppress the virus, we cannot keep non-COVID services going.

And unless we suppress the virus, we cannot keep the elderly and the vulnerable safe and secure.

Mr Speaker, I didn't come into politics to put restrictions on how people live their lives. I want people to have as much freedom as possible, subject to not harming others.

But the nature of this virus means that anyone of us can inadvertently pass it on without even knowing.

That is the liberal case for action. And I believe that the British people get that.

But I want that action to be as targeted as feasible. Local action is one of the best weapons we have.

Mr Speaker, we have seen how local action can flatten the curve, for example in Leicester and Bolton.

Local COVID alert levels

This is the principle that sits behind our new, simpler system of local COVID alert levels. I am pleased that the House approved these measures earlier this week.

Yesterday, I chaired a meeting of the Local Action Committee Gold Command.

This brings together the best data, and the best clinical and public health expertise, to look at how the virus is spreading.

Local COVID alert level very high: discussions

Turning first to the parts of the country where the prevalence of the virus is highest. Discussions are ongoing with local leaders, on moving from high to very high.

These are areas where transmission rates are rising at the sharpest rate. And where we see a very real risk to the local NHS.

The Liverpool City Region moved into the very high level yesterday, and I want to thank the local leadership for their public service, and cross-party teamwork in the face of this virus.

We have developed a substantial package of support for areas that enter this third tier.

This includes more support for local test and trace, more funding for local enforcement and the Job Support Scheme alongside the offer of help from the armed services.

And in other areas currently in the second tier, where discussions are ongoing, no further decisions have yet been made, but we need to make rapid progress.

London

Mr Speaker, turning to other areas of the country currently in the medium level, where rates are rising fast.

First, in London, infection rates are on a steep upward path, with the number of cases doubling every 10 days.

The 7-day average case rate today stands at 97, rising sharply.

We know from the first peak that the infection can spread fast and put huge pressures on the NHS. So we must act now, to prevent the need for tougher measures later on.

So, working with the Mayor, cross-party council leadership, local public health officials and the national team.

We have together agreed that London needs to move to local COVID alert level high.

I want to take a moment to thank all involved for their exemplary hard work. The collegiate nature of decision making, the collaborative approach.

And the constructive work, all focused on the public health and economic wellbeing of our citizens. And to Londoners, and all who work in our great capital.

I want to say thank you, for what you have done to suppress this virus once.

We now all need to play our part in getting under control once again.

I know the sacrifices this means. But I know, if we work together, then we can defeat this.

Working with local leaders in Essex and Elmbridge, we are also moving them to

the high local alert level.

And I want to pay tribute to the leadership of Essex County Council and in Elmbridge, who are working so hard to suppress the virus.

Mr Speaker, infection rates are also rising sharply in Barrow-in-Furness, York, North East Derbyshire, Erewash and Chesterfield.

In all of these places, cases are doubling in less than a fortnight.

For all of the areas entering the high alert level, the change will come into effect one minute past midnight on Saturday morning.

And this includes Barrow-in-Funess, York, North East Derbyshire, Erewash and Chesterfield too.

The central change is that people cannot now meet other households socially indoors. This applies in any setting, at home, or in a restaurant, or in any other venue.

The rule of 6 still applies in any outdoor setting.

And although you may continue to travel to open venues, you should reduce the number of journeys where possible.

I know that these measures are not easy. But I also know that they are vital.

Conclusion

Mr Speaker, responding to this unprecedented pandemic requires difficult choices. Some of the most difficult choices any government has had to make in peacetime.

We make these decisions with a heavy heart. With the sole aim of steering our nation through troubled waters.

Things will get worse before they get better. But I know that there are brighter skies and calmer seas ahead. That the ingenuity of science will find a way through.

Until then, we must come together. Because we all have a part to play to defeat this dreadful disease.

And I commend this statement to the House.