

# COVID – 19: we'll beat this challenge together

By Alister Jack, Secretary of State for Scotland:

This week, the Prime Minister set out just what a huge challenge we are facing as we tackle coronavirus. This is a global pandemic, and COVID-19 will continue to spread across the world and across the UK over the next few months. It is the worst public health crisis we have faced in a generation, more dangerous than 'normal' flu.

I know that sounds, frankly, terrifying. People are scared. I am worried too. Not for myself, but for my elderly friends, family members, and constituents, and for those who have underlying health problems. As the Prime Minister was so honest about on Thursday, the stark fact is that many of us will lose precious loved ones before their time. Scotland's first fatality this week is a sobering reminder of that.

But the UK Government has a clear plan, based on the science, that we are working through to ensure that we protect ourselves, each other and the NHS. On Thursday we moved to the next phase in that plan, going from containment to doing what we can to delay the spread, to alleviate pressure on our health services. At all times we are continuing to follow the best medical and scientific advice.

The government is doing everything it can, but we all have an individual responsibility to play our part in our efforts to delay the spread of the virus in our communities.

The current medical advice is that if you have symptoms (a high temperature or a new, continuous cough) you should self-isolate for seven days. Over 70s should not go on cruises, and we advise against school trips abroad. And, crucially, it is still vital that people wash their hands, regularly and properly, with water and soap for 20 seconds. We all need to take these sensible precautions, and make sure others are doing so too.

The UK Government is working closely with the Scottish Government on this public health emergency, as people in Scotland rightly expect. The First Minister is attending the regular COBR meetings chaired by the Prime Minister, and Health Secretary Matt Hancock and myself met the Scottish Health Secretary late on Thursday night to discuss the situation and ensure we are doing all we can. In his Budget on Wednesday, the Chancellor outlined a package of measures to support the UK's coronavirus action plan. That will include extra funding for the Scottish Government.

Other countries have closed schools, but we have decided against this for now. The scientific advice is clear that the potential benefit is smaller than the measures we are introducing now and it would mean many frontline workers including doctors and nurses having to stay home to look after their

children. But we are, of course, keeping this under review. It is important to stress that every decision we are making in this country will be made at the right time to limit the spread of this disease as best.

The Scottish Government has recommended a ban on gatherings of more 500 people. We are working closely with our scientific and medical advisors our own plans to end mass gatherings from this week. We are concerned about the burden such large events put on our public services, which would take them away from their efforts in dealing with Coronavirus.

We do face difficult weeks and months ahead, we need to be frank about that. But we Scots are resilient, we take responsibility for our own actions, and we look out for others. Make sure you play your part in tackling the crisis – follow the expert medical and scientific advice, and look out for those friends and neighbours who might need help. Together, we will get through this.