

Face coverings to be mandatory in shops and supermarkets from 24 July

Thank you very much Mr Deputy Speaker, and with permission, I would like to make a statement about coronavirus.

Thanks to one of the greatest national efforts in peace time, this deadly virus continues to diminish.

Yesterday's figures show 530 new cases, down 90% since the peak.

162 patients are currently in mechanical ventilator beds with coronavirus – down around 95% since the peak.

The latest number of deaths recorded in all settings across the UK is 11 – the lowest figure since 13 March.

And according to today's ONS data, for the third consecutive week, total deaths are lower than normal for this time of year.

Due to this substantial progress, we have been able to restore freedoms and carefully and methodically restore the fabric of this country.

However, we cannot let our progress today lead to complacency tomorrow and so we must remain vigilant to keep this virus under control.

Our strategy is to protect the NHS, get the virus down, and keep the virus down, while restoring as much of normal life as possible and our tactic is to replace national lockdown with ever more targeted local action as we work hard to defeat this virus once and for all.

Our NHS Test and Trace system gets stronger all the time and since launch 6 weeks ago, 144,000 people have now been asked to self-isolate, who otherwise simply wouldn't have known that they had to.

Where we find clusters or outbreaks we take local action – tackling over 100 incidents a week. Mostly these are small, in an individual care home, or pub, or factory. But we are also prepared to take action on a wider basis if that's what it takes, just as we did in Leicester.

Four permanent test sites and 10 Mobile Testing Units have been deployed across the city, meaning that Leicester now has the highest rate of testing in the country.

We have launched one of the biggest communications programmes that Leicester has ever seen – including targeted social media posts, website banners, radio ads, billboards and even bin stickers. And we have been working closely with all parts of the local community, including community leaders, local businesses, and the local football and cricket clubs, to get the message out.

We've also established a process for making decisions to lift the lockdown, with the first decision point later this week.

Mr Deputy Speaker, local action is one way in which we control the spread of the virus, while minimising the economic and social costs.

Another is to minimise the risk as we return more to normality. In recent weeks, we have reopened retail and footfall is rising. We want to give people more confidence to shop safely, and enhance protections for those who work in shops.

Both of these can be done by the use of face coverings. Sadly, sales assistants, cashiers and security guards have suffered disproportionately in this crisis.

The death rate of sales and retail assistants is 75% higher among men, and 60% higher among women than in the general population. So as we restore shopping, so we must keep our shopkeepers safe.

There is also evidence that face coverings increase confidence in people to shop.

The British Retail Consortium has said that together with other social distancing measures, face coverings can make shoppers feel even more confident about returning to the high street. And the Chair of the Federation of Small Businesses has said that small firms know that mandatory face coverings have a part to play, and I quote, "in the nation's recovery both physically and financially"... And that he is "sure this [measure] will be welcomed".

We have therefore come to the decision that face coverings should be mandatory in shops and supermarkets.

Last month, we made face coverings mandatory on public transport and in NHS settings.

This has been successful in giving people more confidence to go on public transport and to a hospital setting when they need to.

Providing people with additional protection when they are not able to keep 2 metres from others, particularly people they do not normally come into contact with.

Under the new rules, people who do not wear a face covering will face a fine of up to £100, in line with the sanction on public transport and just as with public transport, children under 11 and those with certain disabilities will be exempt.

The liability for wearing a face covering lies with the individual.

Should an individual without an exemption refuse to wear a face covering, a shop can refuse them entry and can call the police if people refuse to comply, the police have the formal enforcement powers and can issue a fine.

This is in line with how shops would normally manage their customers and enforcement is of course a last resort, and we fully expect the public to comply with the rules as they have done throughout the pandemic.

I want to give this message to everyone who has been making vital changes to their daily lives, for the greater good.

Wearing a face covering does not mean that we can ignore the other measures that have been so important in slowing the spread of this virus.

Washing your hands. Following the rules on social distancing and just as the British people have acted so selflessly throughout this pandemic, I have no doubt they will rise to this once more.

Mr Deputy Speaker, as a nation, we have made huge strides in getting this virus, which has brought grief to so many, under control.

We are not out of the woods yet.

So let's all of us do our utmost to keep this virus cornered, and enjoy summer safely.

And I commend this statement to the House.