

Foreign Secretary's statement on coronavirus (COVID-19): 16 April 2020

Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab:

Good afternoon,

Welcome to the daily coronavirus press conference from Downing Street.

I'm joined by Sir Patrick Valance, the Government's Chief Scientific Advisor, and Professor Chris Whitty, the Government's Chief Medical Officer.

Sir Patrick will provide an update on the latest data on coronavirus.

But, first, let me update you on the steps we are taking to defeat the coronavirus, and the decisions we have taken today.

Step-by-step, our action plan aims to slow the spread of the virus.

So that fewer people need hospital treatment at any one time, and that is the way we can protect the NHS from being overwhelmed.

At every step along this way, we have followed, very carefully and deliberately, the scientific and medical advice that we have received.

So that we take the right steps at the right moment in time.

At the same time, we are dramatically expanding NHS capacity, in terms of the numbers of beds, key staff and life-saving equipment on the front-line, so people get the care they need, at the point in time that they need it most.

And that's also why we have directed people to stay at home. To deny coronavirus the opportunity to spread, to protect the NHS and save lives.

Now, today's data shows that:

327, 608 people in the UK have now been tested for the coronavirus;

103,093 people have tested positive;

And sadly, of those with the virus, 13,729 have now died.

These are heart-breaking losses for every family affected.

And it remind us exactly why we need to follow the social distancing guidance.

Earlier today, I chaired meetings of the Cabinet and COBR to consider the advice from SAGE on the impact of the existing social distancing measures.

There are indications that the measures we have put in place have been

successful in slowing down the spread of the virus.

But, SAGE also say that it is a mixed and inconsistent picture and, in some settings, infections are still likely to be increasing.

SAGE assess that the rate of infection, or the R value, is almost certainly below 1 in the community.

That means that on average each infected person is, in turn, infecting less than one other person. But, overall, we still don't have the infection rate down as far as we need to.

As in other countries, we have issues with the virus spreading in some hospitals and care homes.

In sum, the very clear advice we have received is that any change to our social distancing measures now would risk a significant increase in the spread of the virus. That would threaten a second peak of the virus, and substantially increase the number of deaths.

It would undo the progress made to date, and as a result, would require an even longer period of the more restrictive social distancing measures. So early relaxation would do more damage to the economy over a longer period.

I want to be clear about this. The advice from SAGE is that relaxing any of the measures currently in place would risk damage to both public health and our economy.

Patrick and Chris will be able to go into further detail on all of this shortly.

But based on this advice, the Government has determined that current measures must remain in place for at least the next 3 weeks.

Now, in terms of the decisions that lie ahead, we want to be as up front with the British people as we possibly can.

So, let me set out 5 specific things which the Government will need to be satisfied of before we will consider it safe to adjust any of the current measures.

First, we must protect the NHS's ability to cope.

We must be confident that we are able to provide sufficient critical care and specialist treatment right across the UK.

The NHS staff have been incredible.

We must continue to support them as much as we can.

Second, we need to see a sustained and consistent fall in the daily death rates from coronavirus so we are confident that we have moved beyond the peak.

Third, we need to have reliable data from SAGE showing that the rate of infection is decreasing to manageable levels across the board.

Fourth, we need to be confident that the range of operational challenges, including testing capacity and PPE, are in hand, with supply able to meet future demand.

Fifth, and this is really crucial, we need to be confident that any adjustments to the current measures will not risk a second peak of infections that overwhelm the NHS.

The worst thing we could do now is ease up too soon and allow a second peak of the virus to hit the NHS and hit the British people.

It would be the worst outcome, not just for public health, but for the economy and for our country as a whole.

So, the current restrictions will remain in place.

The Government will continue to monitor the data on the impact of the virus.

We will soon be able to test 100,000 people every day.

That will give us greater understanding of the scope of infection across the country.

It will also help us plan how to change the measures when we are ready to.

When we are confident on these five points.

Guided by science and data, we will look to adjust the measures to make them as effective as possible in protecting public health, while allowing some economic and social activity to resume.

We will only do it, when the evidence demonstrates that is safe to do it.

It could involve relaxing measures in some areas, while strengthening measures in other areas.

But in formulating the right balance we will be at all times guided by the scientific advice and the evidence.

I should add at this point that we recognise all the economic and social impact the current measures are having.

That is why we put in place an unprecedented package of support for jobs and businesses, as well as for hospices and charities who are doing so much to support the most vulnerable in our society.

And, I know that many people would like to hear more detail, some people are calling for exact dates, on what will happen next, and when.

We are as being as open as we responsibly can at this stage.

And it would not be responsible to pre-judge the evidence that SAGE will have and review in just a few weeks' time.

I know some people will look at other countries, and ask why the UK isn't doing what they're doing.

I can reassure people that we carefully follow what is happening in other countries.

We will always look to learn any lessons in how they are approaching their response.

And I'm talking to Foreign Ministers on a daily basis, I know Chris and Patrick are doing the same with their opposite numbers around the world. Ultimately, we have to do what is right for the British people, based on the advice of our experts, Grounded in the conditions here in the UK, and we will make those decisions at the right time for this country.

That's what we have done so far.

That's what we will continue to do.

I appreciate the impact of these measures is considerable on people and businesses across the country. The costs being shouldered.

The sacrifices people are making.

Being isolated from friends and family.

Whole Households, cooped up inside, all week long.

Parents having difficult conversations with their young children, who just don't understand why they can't visit grandparents or go outside and meet up with friends as they normally do.

Families struggling managing home-schooling, and balancing that with working from home.

I know there are people very concerned about their household finances.

Uncertain about their jobs.

Worried for their small businesses that remain closed. We get it.

We know it's rough going at this time

Every time I come to this lectern, and I read out the grim toll of people who have so sadly passed away.

I walk away from here, and I think about what their sons and their daughters must be going through right now.

Their brothers and sisters.

Their grandchildren.

All the loved ones left with their unbearable, long-term, grief.

It makes me and it makes this government focus even harder on what we must do.

And, I know that, together, united, we must keep up this national effort for a while longer.

We've just come too far, we've lost too many loved ones, we've already sacrificed far too much to ease up now, especially when we're beginning to see the evidence that our efforts are starting to pay off.

And your efforts are paying off.

There is light at the end of the tunnel.

But, we're now at both a delicate and dangerous stage of this pandemic.

If we rush to relax the measures in place, we would risk wasting all the sacrifices and all the progress we have made. And that would risk a quick return to another lockdown.

With all the threat to life a second peak of the virus would bring, and all the economic damage a second lockdown would carry.

So we need to be patient a while longer.

So please please stay home, save lives and protect the NHS.

So we can safely return to life as close to normal as possible, as soon as possible.

It's been an incredible national team effort.

Now is not the moment to give the coronavirus a second chance. Let's stick together, let's see this through.

And let's defeat the coronavirus for good.

Further information