

Foreign Secretary's statement on coronavirus (COVID-19): 29 April 2020

Welcome to today's Downing Street Press Conference.

I'm pleased to be joined by Professor Jonathan Van Tam, Deputy Chief Medical Officer, and also Professor Yvonne Doyle, Medical Director at Public Health England.

Let me just start by saying, I think on behalf of us all, huge congratulations to the Prime Minister and to Carrie on the wonderful news of the birth of their baby boy. I've spoken to the Prime Minister and I can tell you that both mum and son are doing really well.

Next, let me give an update on the latest data on coronavirus from our COBR data file.

I can report that, through the Government's ongoing monitoring and testing programme, as of today, there have now been:

818,539 tests for the virus across the UK, including 52,429 tests that took place yesterday.

165,221 people have tested positive, and that's an increase of 4,076 cases on yesterday's number.

As the Health Secretary announced yesterday, from today, we are moving to an improved daily reporting system for deaths, so that deaths in all settings are included, wherever the individual has tested positive for COVID-19, rather than just those in hospitals.

And those figures show that, up to yesterday, on the new measure, we have recorded an additional 3,811 deaths in total and I think it is just important to say that those additional deaths were spread over the period from the 2nd March to 28th April, so they don't represent a sudden surge in the number of deaths.

Sadly today's figures show an additional 765 deaths compared to yesterday. I will let Professor Doyle talk us through the data in detail. I think we must never lose sight of the fact that behind every statistic, there are many human lives that have been tragically lost before their time.

We also pay tribute, of course, to those caring for the sick, and yesterday at 11am the whole country observed a minute's silence, a moment to reflect on the sacrifice of all of our frontline workers who have died whilst dedicating themselves to caring for others and serving others.

On 16 April, I set out five principles that would guide our approach to the transition away from the current set of social distancing measures in place, and into a second phase.

We continue to see evidence in the data of a flattening of the peak of the virus, which is only happening because we have delivered on two of the central pillars of our strategic approach to defeating coronavirus.

First, we reinforced our NHS capacity, through the Nightingale hospitals, extra critical care capacity, more ventilator beds and extra doctors and nurses on the frontline.

And, second, we introduced social distancing measures, at the right time, guided by the scientific and medical evidence.

The public's overwhelming support for those rules has helped to save lives and protect the NHS from becoming overwhelmed.

We are still coming through the peak, and this, as I have said before, is a delicate and dangerous moment in this crisis.

So, I know that a lot of people have made a lot of sacrifices, which is why it is so important that we don't let up now and risk undoing all of that hard work.

So as we look to the future, our 5 tests remain key.

First, we must continue to boost NHS capacity, preventing it from being overwhelmed.

Second, we need to see a sustained and consistent fall in the number of deaths.

Thirdly, we must see further reductions in the rate of infection to manageable levels, across all the relevant areas and settings.

Fourth, we must be confident that the NHS will be able to cope with future demands, including as a result of any changes to existing measures or new measures we need to take.

Fifth, and this is probably the most critical of all, we need to be confident that any adjustments to the current measures will not risk a second peak of infections that could overwhelm the NHS.

A second spike would be harmful to public health, resulting in many more deaths from Covid-19.

That itself would lead to a second lockdown, inflicting further prolonged economic pain on the country.

And, as the Governor of the Bank of England, Andrew Bailey, said last week, that would not just be economically dangerous, it would inflict a serious blow to public confidence.

This issue of a second spike and the need to avoid it – it's not a theoretical risk, and it is not confined to the UK.

Having relaxed restrictions in Germany over the past week, they have seen a rise in the transmission rate of coronavirus. And Chancellor Merkel has said publically, and she has made it clear, that they might need a second lockdown in Germany if the infection rate continues to rise.

So, this risk is very real, and it is vital that we proceed carefully, guided by the scientific advice, so that our next step through this crisis is a sure-footed one.

We mustn't gamble away the sacrifices and progress we've made.

We must continue to follow the scientific evidence,

And we must continue to take the right decisions at the right moment in time.

We are working on all of the potential options for a second phase.

There is light at the end of the tunnel – whether you are an NHS worker on the front line working tirelessly shift after shift, or a parent at home with young children.

But we need to be patient and careful as we come through this moment of maximum risk.

So, we will wait for SAGE's next review of the data in early May.

We're ramping up the testing, with capacity now at over 73,000 per day, and 52,429 tests carried out per day, and eligibility for those tests has now been expanded further, to include anybody who needs to go to work and can't work remotely, and who has symptoms.

It also includes anyone over 65 with symptoms and all care home residents, as well as care home staff.

And at the same time as we ramp up the testing capacity, we'll keep working on our tracking and tracing capability which will be a key component in the next phase of the crisis.

We will continue to source ventilators and personal protective equipment at home and abroad.

Paul Deighton is leading the national effort to increase domestic production and supply.

We continue to source PPE from abroad setting ourselves out as the international buyer of choice. In the last 10 days, we have secured over 5 million masks from China, we've had three flights with gowns from Turkey – because we know that every single one of those items of PPE is needed by those working so hard on the front line.

Both in the NHS and also in our care homes.

Our international effort is not confined to procurement.

I can tell you we have also made huge progress in returning UK nationals, who otherwise would have been at risk of being stranded abroad.

Since the outbreak in Wuhan, we have helped and estimated 1,3million Britons return on commercial flights.

And we have done that by working with the airlines and with those governments to make sure that the flights can run and that the airspace is kept open.

And we have brought back over 200,000 Brits back from Spain, 50,000 back from Australia, and over 11,000 from Pakistan. To name but just three countries.

As well as those commercial flights, we have also chartered flights, where commercial options weren't possible,

And we have now reached the stage where we have brought back over 20,000 British nationals on 21 flights.

That includes over 9,000 UK nationals back from India, 2,000 home from South Africa, and 1,200 from Peru.

In terms of repatriations it is worth also just bearing in mind that on the 17th March, when we changed our travel advice for those travelling on cruise ships, there were something like 19,000 British passengers on 60 cruise ships sailing around the world.

And as border restrictions were put in place by country after country, we faced a daunting task in getting our people home.

But, we stuck at it, and 6 weeks later, we have now got all 19,000 British passengers back home safe and sound.

That was an enormous effort, and we recognise that the job is not done yet.

And we will continue this unprecedented effort, with further charter flights from New Zealand, Pakistan and Bangladesh, amongst others, over the next week or so.

So, I must pay tribute to the outstanding work of the consular teams working night and day at the FC0 in London and at our Embassies and High Commissions around the world.

Finally, the Health Secretary announced last week that UK trials have started, as we draw on the incredible scientific talent we have in this country to pursue a vaccine.

And that effort too has an international dimension to it.

So, today, we announced that the UK will provide GAVI the international vaccine alliance with the equivalent of £330 million each year over the next 5 years as we seek to develop a vaccine both to protect the British people, but also to help immunise millions of the poorest and most vulnerable people around the world,

Combining the depth of our innovative know-how, with the big-hearted determination that has characterised our national effort to defeat the coronavirus.