

Health Secretary Matt Hancock's Sunday Telegraph Op-Ed

The coronavirus outbreak is the biggest public health emergency in a generation.

It calls for dramatic action, at home and abroad, of the kind not normally seen in peacetime.

Our goal is clear. The over-riding objective is to protect life. Sadly 21 people have already died in the UK, and the fact that most had underlying health conditions does not make the grief of their families any lesser, nor our compassion for their family and friends any weaker. We must all do everything in our power to tackle this virus.

We have a plan, based on the expertise of world-leading scientists. Herd immunity is not a part of it. That is a scientific concept, not a goal or a strategy. Our goal is to protect life from this virus, our strategy is to protect the most vulnerable and protect the NHS through contain, delay, research and mitigate.

We are working through our clear action plan. Like all our decisions, the plan is based on the bedrock of the science, with maximum transparency. We will do the right thing at the right time, based on the best available science.

To protect life, we must protect the vulnerable, and protect the NHS and flatten the curve.

From the moment coronavirus emerged, we have followed those goals.

We have acted to contain the spread of the virus so far. We have carried out some of the highest number of tests in Europe, our surveillance testing is among the most sophisticated in the world and the UK's plans for the rapid response to and mitigation of the spread of an epidemic are ranked number one above any other country by the Global Health Security Index.

Most importantly of all, thanks to our record levels of tracing the number of people who came into contact with the first people who caught the virus, the initial growth was slowed significantly, and the growth of the virus in the UK has been slower than many major European countries. This action has already prevented the NHS being put under greater pressure in its hardest season of the year. We have bought valuable time to prepare.

Last week we stepped into the next phase of our response. We took action to advise anyone with symptoms, however mild, to stay at home. This advice from the Chief Medical Officer will be reinforced with a national communications campaign so everyone knows what they can do: how you can play your part.

The new campaign will set out the latest clinical advice, for people to stay

at home for seven days if they develop a high temperature or new continuous cough. We can all keep doing our bit by continuing to wash our hands more often, for 20 seconds or more and having plenty of tissues around to 'catch it, bin it, kill it'. Following this new advice may sound simple, but it could be lifesaving for others around us, especially the most vulnerable.

Today, we take further action, with a call to arms for a drive to build the ventilators and other equipment the NHS will need. We are better equipped thanks to the NHS than most other countries, but we will need many more. We now need any manufacturers to transform their production lines to make ventilators. We cannot make too many.

In the near future we will take further steps. SAGE has advised the next planned effective interventions will need to be instituted soon, including measures to 'shield' older and medically vulnerable people from the virus.

Everyone will need to help to ensure they get the support they need to stay at home, and to protect them from the consequences of isolation: loneliness, and a lack of support. Government, local councils, charities, friends and neighbours will need to be part of the national effort to support the shielded. We will provide expert advice and support as soon as we progress to this phase.

Next week we will publish our emergency bill, to give the Government the temporary powers we will need to help everyone get through this. The measures in it allow for the worst case scenario. I hope many of them won't be needed. But we will ask Parliament for these powers in case they are.

Our generation has never been tested like this. Our grandparents were, during the Second World War, when our cities were bombed during the Blitz. Despite the pounding every night, the rationing, the loss of life, they pulled together in one gigantic national effort.

Today our generation is facing its own test, fighting a very real and new disease. We must fight the disease to protect life. Everyone will be asked to make sacrifices, to protect themselves and others, especially those most vulnerable to this disease.

With our clear action plan, listening to the advice of the best science, and taking the action we all must, I am sure we will rise to this challenge.