

Heat Wave Response – Oral Statement

Mr Speaker, I would like to make a statement on this week's heatwave.

Coningsby, in Lincolnshire, broke records yesterday when it registered a provisional reading of 40.3 degrees Celsius.

According to the Met Office, no fewer than 34 locations around the United Kingdom exceeded the country's previous highest temperature of 37.8 Celsius, set in 2019.

We have seen a collective national endeavour to prepare for and manage the effects of the heat – from town hall to Whitehall and across various industries, to keep people safe and infrastructure functioning.

From water companies and rail engineers to public servants right across the land, everyone has pulled together – with members of the public responding in a way that was responsible, and took the pressure off vital public services.

Our national resolve has been exemplified by our Fire & Rescue Services – for many of whom, yesterday was their busiest day since World War 2. They were undoubtedly stretched but coped magnificently and the systems put in place to make sure that the fire service can operate on a national basis as well as locally worked well.

In tinderbox conditions they have dealt with dozens of wildfires around the country over the past 24 hours. Fifteen Fire & Rescue Services declared Major Incidents and handled emergency calls the length and breadth of the country.

Sadly, at least 41 properties have been destroyed in London, 14 in Norfolk, five in Lincolnshire, and smaller numbers elsewhere. On behalf of the Prime Minister and the Cabinet, I would like to pass on our sincere condolences to those who have lost their homes or business premises and I know my Right Honourable friend the Secretary of State is working closely with local authorities on this.

Throughout recent days, the Prime Minister has monitored our work and has been specifically briefed on a number of occasions – we did so again this morning. The Prime Minister was briefed during the wildfires by Mark Hardingham, Chair of the National Fire Chiefs Council, and the Civil Contingencies Secretariat; and he has passed on his thanks to all the brave firefighters who have sought to control the flames in such debilitating conditions.

I would also like to pay tribute to the fire control staff, officers and support teams for their essential work; and the other agencies that have made such tremendous efforts in recent days – the NHS, our emergency call handlers, Police and Maritime & Coastguard Agency among many others.

Honourable Members will be relieved to know that some pressure on services

will ease now that the fiercest heat has subsided. Many incidents are now being scaled back.

Thunderstorms are likely this afternoon but for much of the country, more clement dry conditions are the pattern in coming days. The Met Office, however, stresses that the summer is likely to bring further hot weather and wildfire risk will remain elevated.

That is why we are treating this heatwave as an exacting test of our national resilience and contingency planning.

As always, there is no room for complacency.

Mr Speaker, we have seen what you can achieve when you prepare properly and then work closely together.

Owing to the technical expertise of the weather forecasters, who predicted with admirable precision the peak of the heatwave and how high the temperatures would be, the Government was able to launch an advance campaign of comprehensive public advice.

And our early data shows how, well before the heatwave arrived, people were taking on board this advice from the UK Health Security Agency, the NHS, the chief and deputy chief medical officer, emergency services, and key agencies on the ground.

And because of our established local networks and colleagues in the Devolved Administrations, we had people spread across the UK ready to step in when it mattered.

I am particularly grateful to the cooperation and support we received from the Scottish Government, Welsh Government and Northern Ireland Executive. We need to manage these national events together.

Mr Speaker, I would like now to give some examples of how people taking the right action helped to mitigate the effects of the extreme weather.

Starting with heeding advice: fully five times as many people accessed NHS England internet pages on how to manage the symptoms of heat exhaustion, in the critical week beginning July 11.

Moving on to our vital 999 call services, we had feared that they would come under untold pressure. Yet as the mercury climbed inexorably on July 18, fewer 999 calls were made than the week before; and more 111 calls – again suggesting the public had heeded the advice, this time to avoid using 999 unless in emergencies.

On to travel, and once again people were playing for the team. The public stayed at home to avoid the heat, not venturing far. The data bears this out: on Monday, footfall at major London stations was around 35% of normal post-pandemic levels. Yesterday [TUES], Network Rail reports, passenger train numbers were around 40% down on the previous week.

We did not forget those who cannot easily leave their homes, asking people to look out for elderly and vulnerable family members and neighbours.

Tragically however, 13 people are believed to have lost their lives after getting into difficulty in rivers, reservoirs and lakes while swimming in recent days – seven of them teenage boys. I would like to pass on our sincere condolences to the families of the victims for their terrible loss.

Of course we still have to work through the longer-term consequences of the heatwave.

The true picture will not come until all incidents are analysed, all emergency teams are debriefed, and all incident logs and data reconciled.

There is a great deal of data yet to come in from colleagues in the devolved administrations, and from the local authorities and agencies around the country.

We do recognise that we are likely to experience more of these incidents: and that we should not underestimate their speed, scope and severity.

Britain may be unaccustomed to such high temperatures but the UK, along with our European neighbours, must learn to live with extreme events such as these.

The Government has been at the forefront of international efforts to reach Net Zero, but the impacts of climate change are with us now. This is why we have a National Adaptation Programme under the leadership of the Environment Department.

As we have seen in recent days, we will continue to face acute events driven by climate change. It is the responsibility of Cabinet Office Ministers to coordinate work across Government when these events take place.

This government will continue to build our collective resilience. To this end, the National Resilience Strategy about which I was asked about on Monday, will be launched at the earliest possible opportunity by the incoming administration.

In the meantime, I will continue to coordinate work of teams across government in building resilience, to make sure the country is ready to meet the challenges of the autumn, the winter and beyond – and it is in that spirit that I commend this Statement to the House.