

New action to prevent the spread of coronavirus in Bolton

Mr Deputy Speaker, with permission, I'd like to make a statement on coronavirus.

As a country we have made huge strides in our fight against this invisible killer.

Today's ONS figures show that the weekly coronavirus deaths have dropped to the lowest number since mid-March.

And the latest daily number of recorded deaths is 3.

However, Mr Deputy Speaker, we have seen a concerning rise in the number of positive cases, particularly amongst younger people.

And these figures serve as a salutary reminder that this virus is still very much with us and remains a threat.

So it is critical that we maintain our collective commitment to controlling this disease.

And social distancing is the first line of defence.

While young people are less likely to die from this disease, be in no doubt that they are still at risk.

The long-term effects can be terrible, and of course they can infect others.

Six months on, many people are still suffering chronic fatigue, muscle pain and breathing difficulties.

Previously fit and healthy people reduced to barely being able to function.

A King's College survey, published today, shows that 300,000 people in the UK have reported symptoms lasting for more than a month and 60,000 people have been ill for more than 3 months.

And Mr Deputy Speaker, I want to address the point, which is of course good news, that the number of people sadly dying from coronavirus in this country is currently low.

We've seen all across the world how a rise in cases, initially among younger people, then spreads – leading to hospitalisations and fatalities.

In Spain, where the rise in cases started around 2 months ago, hospitalisations have risen 15 times since mid-July.

The number of daily deaths has reached 184.

In France, hospitalisations have more than tripled in the same period.

So this must be a moment of clarity for us all.

This is not over.

Just because we've come through one peak, it doesn't mean we can't see another coming towards our shores.

But together, we can tackle it.

So long as we remember that in a pandemic, our actions today have consequences tomorrow, for the people we love, for our communities, and for our country.

Mr Deputy Speaker, each and every citizen has a responsibility to follow social distancing and help stop a second peak.

And after social distancing, the next line of defence is test and trace.

Test and trace

Over the past 6 months we've built the biggest testing system of any major European country, and one of the biggest testing systems in the world.

And today, I can tell the House that we have met our target to provide testing kits to all care homes for older people and people with dementia, that have registered to get tests.

But I will not rest.

We are working flat out to expand our testing capacity even further.

Using existing technology, we are expanding our capacity right now.

And we are investing in new testing technology too.

Last week, I was able to announce £500 million for next-generation tests, like saliva tests and rapid turnaround tests that can deliver results in just 20 minutes.

The ability to get rapid, on-the-spot results will significantly increase the weapons in our armoury, in our fight both against coronavirus, and for economic recovery.

We are rolling out these tests right now and plan to use them to relieve capacity constraints, to expand asymptomatic testing to find the virus, and to give people the confidence that a negative test result brings.

Local action

Next, Mr Deputy Speaker, where it's necessary we will not shy from taking targeted local action.

In June, I established the Joint Biosecurity Centre, to provide the best possible data analytics, using information from all possible sources.

Our local action is driven by the data.

We now publish daily local data on cases so that everyone can see the data on which these decisions are taken.

And this shows that our approach is working.

For instance, in both Leicester and Luton, the weekly case rate has more than halved during August.

I want to thank the people of Leicester, including the Honorable Gentleman opposite and of Luton, and the other areas where we've taken local action, who have followed social distancing and helped bring the virus under control.

Sometimes local action requires us to act fast and respond to changing circumstances.

And unfortunately, after improving for several weeks, we have seen a very significant rise in cases in Bolton.

Bolton is now up to 120 cases per 100,000, the highest case rate in the country.

I am publishing the data behind the decisions we have taken.

I must therefore tell the House that, working with the local council, we are taking further local action.

The rise in cases in Bolton is partly due to socialising by people in their 20s and 30s. We know this from contact tracing.

And through our contact-tracing system, we have identified a number of pubs at which the virus has spread significantly.

We are therefore taking the following action in Bolton, starting immediately.

We will restrict all hospitality to takeaway only and we will introduce a late night restriction of operating hours, which will mean all venues will be required to close from 10pm to 5am.

We introduce urgently further measures that put the current guidance – that people cannot socialise outside their household – into law.

I want us to learn the lesson from Spain and America and France – not have to learn the lesson all over again ourselves through more hospitalisations and more deaths – and take this action locally in Bolton. But, crucially, we all have a part to play.

Young people don't just spread the virus to each other. They spread the virus to their parents and their grandparents.

They spread it to those they come into contact with. And to others who they love.

I know social distancing can be hard and how it will be extra tough for students who will soon be starting university.

But please stick with it and play your part in getting this virus under control.

Mr Deputy Speaker, we are also putting in place extra measures, including visitor restrictions to restrict the spread of the virus into care homes and hospitals in Bolton and I want to thank the leadership of Bolton Council, who are doing an outstanding job in very difficult circumstances.

And I want to thank colleagues who represent Bolton in this House with whom I have discussed these measures.

And I want to say this directly to everyone living in Bolton: I know how anxious this can be.

And I know the impact that these measures will have.

We are asking you to take a step back, at a time when we all just want to get on with our lives and what we love, and back to normal.

But we need to take this crucial step to keep this virus at bay.

Because as we have seen elsewhere, if we act early, and control the virus, then we can save lives.

Technology and vaccines

Mr Deputy Speaker, as well as controlling the virus using the tools we have now, we will do everything in our power to bring to bear the technologies of the future.

Over the past few months we have seen the pivotal role that technology has played in our response.

Like next-generation rapid testing and machine-learning tools to help the NHS predict where vital resources might be needed, and the discovery here in the UK of the only 2 treatments known to save lives from coronavirus.

We want to keep this momentum going.

And so today, we are also allocating £50 million from our AI in Health and Care Award.

And this fund aims to speed up the testing and evaluation of some of the most promising AI technologies.

Because through bringing new technologies to the frontline, we can transform how we deliver critical care and services across the country.

Finally, Mr Deputy Speaker, the best way out of this coronavirus pandemic remains a vaccine.

We have already announced that we will roll out the most comprehensive flu vaccination programme in history this winter.

We now have agreements with 6 separate vaccine developers for early access to 340 million doses of coronavirus vaccines.

And we will use every method at our disposal to get as many people protected as possible.

Conclusion

Mr Deputy Speaker, this is a virus that feeds on complacency.

And although time has passed since the peak we saw in the spring, the threat posed by the virus has not gone away.

Now, with winter on the horizon, we must all redouble our efforts so we can get this virus on the back foot, and I commend this statement to the House.