

New measures in response to the acceleration of coronavirus

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

This deadly virus continues to advance across the world.

The World Health Organization has confirmed that the number of new cases in Europe is now higher than during the peak in March.

Here, the latest ONS figures indicate 6,000 new infections a day, almost double the previous week.

As the Chief Medical Officer and the Chief Scientific Adviser said earlier today, we are seeing a rise in cases across all age groups. This pattern is emerging across the entirety of our United Kingdom.

And earlier this afternoon the Prime Minister held discussions with the First Ministers of the devolved administrations and the Deputy First Minister of Northern Ireland to make sure that wherever possible we are united in our efforts to drive this virus down.

We know that the epidemic is currently doubling around every 7 days and that if we continue on this trajectory, we could see 50,000 cases a day by mid-October.

So there can be no doubt that this virus is accelerating.

And we must all play our part in stopping the spread.

Mr Speaker, I'd like to update the House on decisions the government has taken so far.

Self-isolation package

The first line of defence is, of course, the social distancing that every single one of us has the responsibility to follow.

This includes the basics: hands, faces and space and the rule of 6.

A crucial part of this is people self-isolating if they are at risk of passing on the virus.

People who have tested positive, and their close contacts, must self-isolate.

This is the primary way that we, together, break the chains of transmission.

Now, I know that self-isolation can be tough for many people, especially if you are not in a position to work from home.

And I don't want anyone having to have to worry about their finances while they are doing the right thing.

So we will introduce a new £500 Isolation Support Payment for people on low incomes who can't work because they've tested positive or are asked to self-isolate by NHS Test and Trace.

It will start next Monday. It will apply directly in England.

And the UK government will be providing funding through the Barnett formula to the devolved administrations so that similar support can be given in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

Mr Speaker, just as we are strengthening our support for those who self isolate, we propose to strengthen the sanctions for those who do not.

The vast majority of people who are asked to self-isolate do.

But these rules are so important that we must ensure that nobody breaks them.

We are therefore proposing a new legal duty to self isolate – again for people who test positive or who are asked to do so by NHS Test and Trace.

This is backed by fines of up to £10,000, for repeat offences and serious breaches.

We will step up enforcement too.

NHS Test and Trace will make regular checks on those who are self-isolating.

And we will crack down on employers who try to prevent staff from following the rules.

Over the past few months, self-isolation has been instrumental in breaking the chain and blunting the force of this virus.

We know that it works. And with winter ahead, we will support everyone to do what is right to help stop the spread of this virus.

Testing prioritisation

The next line of defence is testing and contact tracing.

We are doing more testing per head than almost any other major nation.

Our daily testing capacity is now at a record high – 253,521 – and it continues to grow.

And on Thursday, we announced that 2 new Lighthouse Labs will be set up in Newcastle, and Bracknell, increasing capacity further.

But as the House knows, alongside this record expansion, demand has gone up too.

And so we need to prioritise the tests for those who need them most.

To save lives, protect the most vulnerable and make sure our health and care services, and our schools, can operate safely.

Today we have published [our list of where tests are being prioritised](#), setting out how we will make sure tests are allocated where they are needed most.

First, to support acute clinical care.

Second, to support and protect people in care homes.

Third, NHS staff, including GPs and pharmacists.

Fourth, targeted testing for outbreak management and surveillance studies.

Fifth, testing for teaching staff with symptoms, so we can keep schools and classes open.

And then the general public when they have symptoms, prioritising those in areas of high incidence.

And I want to reinforce this important point.

The system relies on people coming forward for tests if – and only if – they have symptoms of coronavirus or have been specifically advised to by a health professional.

The testing capacity we have is valuable. And we must, together, prioritise it for the people who need it the most.

Local action

The next part of our defence is local action.

We have been vigilant in monitoring the data and putting in place targeted local measures so we can come down hard on the virus wherever we see it emerging.

In the summer, when the virus was in retreat, we were able to relax some of the measures that we had put in place.

But now, as the virus is spreading once more, we have had to act.

On Thursday, I updated the House on the changes we were making in parts of the North East.

And on Friday, we introduced new rules for parts of the North West, West Yorkshire and the Midlands.

We have seen some concerning rates of infection in these areas.

Liverpool, for instance Mr Speaker, now has over 120 cases per 100,000

population and in Warrington it is about 100.

As a result, working with local councils, we are putting in place stronger restrictions to protect local people.

In parts of Lancashire, Merseyside, Warrington and Halton we are putting in place new measures from tomorrow.

As with our strategy overall, our goal is to protect education, and employment as much as possible, while bearing down on the virus.

Residents should not socialise with people outside their own households or support bubble.

Hospitality will be restricted to table service only. And operating hours will be restricted, so venues must close between 10pm to 5am.

From tomorrow, in Wolverhampton, Oadby and Wigston, and the whole of Bradford, Kirklees and Calderdale, people should not socialise outside their household or support bubble.

We know from experience that local action can work when local communities come together, to follow the rules, tackle the virus, and keep themselves safe.

And I know how hard this is. We are constantly looking for how we can ensure measures bear down on the virus as much as possible, while protecting both lives and livelihoods.

And I have heard the concerns about the impact of local action on childcare arrangements.

For many, informal childcare arrangements are a lifeline – without which, they couldn't do their jobs.

So today, I am able to announce a new exemption for looking after children under the age of 14, or vulnerable adults, where that is necessary for caring purposes.

This covers both formal and informal arrangements.

It does not allow for playdates or parties, but it does mean that a consistent childcare relationship, that is vital for somebody to get to work, is allowed.

I'd like to thank colleagues from across the House, including the Right Honourable member for Berwick-upon-Tweed.

And the Honourable Members for Sunderland Central and North West Durham for working with us on this important issue.

I hope this change will provide clarity and comfort to so many people who are living with these local restrictions.

It shows the benefits of cross party working across the House, and listening to concerns, as we all do our best to tackle this dreadful disease together.

Conclusion

Mr Speaker, the virus is spreading.

We are at a tipping point.

I have today set out the measures the government is taking so far.

We are working right now on what further measures may be necessary.

And the Prime Minister will update the House tomorrow with any more action that we need to take.

This is a moment where we once again, must come together, to tackle this deadly disease.

And I commend this statement to the House.