

Oral statement on new COVID-19 regulations

Thank you very much Madam Deputy Speaker, I beg to move these regulations are approved.

The new variant of the coronavirus, Madam Deputy Speaker, presents us with a renewed challenge – here in Britain and around the world.

And our strategy throughout has been to suppress the virus until a vaccine can make us safe. And while collectively, our efforts were working on the old variant, when faced with a new variant that is between 50 to 70% more transmissible, there has been no choice but to respond.

And I understand that these regulations that we debate today have serious consequences and I regret the huge costs that they bring.

But I know, just as surely, that these costs are by far outweighed by the costs that we would bear without action.

Madam Deputy Speaker, when I have come to this House before, to ask for the House's support for national restrictions, we've had to take it on trust that there would be an exit before the vaccine is approved.

Today, I come to the House seeking approval of these regulations knowing from the huge pressure on the NHS right now, that this action is necessary today but also with the certain knowledge that we have a way out.

Madam Deputy Speaker, before turning to the details of the regulations I just want to set out that plan for how we get out of them because that is critical.

This country was the first in the world to deploy not one, but 2 vaccines.

And more than 1.3 million have already been vaccinated already including a quarter of the over-80s.

And from the middle of next month we plan to have offered the first dose to everyone in the 4 top-priority groups, and they currently account for more than 4 out of 5 COVID fatalities. And I am not sure this is a point that has fully been addressed, which is, because of the strong correlation between age and fatality from COVID, sadly, it means that we will be able to vaccinate those groups that account for 4 out of every 5 fatalities within the top-4 cohort. Now it does then take 2 to 3 weeks from the first dose to reach immunity but the vaccine, therefore, is the way out of this pandemic – and it's the way to a better year ahead.

But, Madam Deputy Speaker, this hope for the weeks ahead doesn't take away from the serious and immediate threat posed now. And I just want to turn now to what is in the regulations and the actions we need to take now.

The Office for National Statistics has reported that 1 in 50 of the population has the disease – some with symptoms, some without.

The latest figures show that we have 30,074 COVID patients in UK hospitals – and that the NHS is under significant pressure.

Admissions are now higher than at any point in the pandemic. And so, on Monday, all 4 UK Chief Medical Officers [recommended we move the country to COVID-19 alert level 5](#).

In practice, this means they believe that, without action, there is a 'material risk of healthcare services being overwhelmed'.

It's for this reason that we have placed England into a national lockdown, alongside action taken in each of the devolved nations.

And every single citizen needs to take steps to control this new variant, and this personal responsibility is important, and to give the NHS a fighting chance to do its vital work – of saving lives – it is on all of us to support them.

These regulations set out that everyone must stay at home, save for a limited number of reasons permitted in law, including:

- essential shopping
- work – if you cannot reasonably do so from home
- education or childcare – if eligible to attend
- medical needs – including getting a COVID test or getting vaccinated
- exercise
- escaping domestic abuse
- and for support bubbles, where people are eligible

These regulations are based on the existing Tier 4 regulations, with some additional measures, which reinforce the stay at home imperative.

These include:

- stopping the sale of alcohol through takeaway or click-and-collect services
- closing sport and leisure facilities – although allowing playgrounds and allotments to remain open

Now I know that these further restrictions are difficult. But they are unfortunately necessary because we have to absolutely minimise social interaction to try to get this virus back under control.

And these measures came into force first thing this morning under the emergency procedure and will remain in force subject to this House's approval today.

I just want to return for the moment to the support that has been outlined because we are providing an additional £4.6 billion of support to businesses including to those in retail, hospitality and leisure who have been forced to

close their doors once again, on top of, of course, our £280 billion plan for jobs, which includes the extension of the furlough scheme until April.

Madam Deputy Speaker, I will close now just by reiterating that if we don't act now we know that eventually the NHS will not be able to cope.

And I know that no member of this House wants to see the scenes we have witnessed elsewhere in the world, of hospitals overrun or of doctors forced to make the choice of who to treat and who to turn away.

And we know that while the winter weeks will be difficult, we now know what the way out looks like.

And accelerating the deployment of our COVID vaccines, making the most vulnerable groups safe, and everyone playing our part on the way to get us there – that is the route out of this pandemic.

And in the meantime, Madam Deputy Speaker, we must stay at home, protect the NHS and save lives.

And that eventually will carry us to a brighter future.