

Oral statement on review of coronavirus tiering restrictions in England

Thank you very much, Mr Speaker. Mr Speaker, as we enter the coldest months we must be vigilant and keep this virus under control.

Yesterday, 25,161 cases were reported and there are 18,038 people in hospital with coronavirus in the UK.

We must keep supressing this virus.

And this isn't just a matter for government or for this house – it's a matter for every single person.

And these are always the most difficult months for people's health – and for the NHS.

And especially with the vaccine already here, we must be cautious as we accelerate the vaccine deployment as per the winter plan.

We've come so far, we mustn't blow it now.

Review

Mr Speaker, when we reintroduced the tiered system, we resolved to review the data every 2 weeks in each area.

The sophisticated COVID surveillance system we now have in place means that we can act swiftly and decisively when needed.

At the weekend, we held an emergency review for London, Essex and parts of Hertfordshire where cases are accelerating fast.

Yesterday, we held the first formal review.

And I must report to the House that across the world cases are rising once more.

In Europe, restrictions are being reintroduced.

In America, case rates have accelerated.

In Japan, cases are rising once again.

Yesterday, the Welsh government made the decision to tighten restrictions across the whole of Wales.

No one wants tougher restrictions any longer than necessary.

But where they are necessary, we must put them in place to prevent the NHS from being overwhelmed and protect life.

Mr Speaker, even in a normal year, this is the busiest time for the NHS.

As Chris Hopson, the Chief Executive of NHS Providers, reminded us this morning: “controlling infection rates is about limiting patient harm”.

And this is a moment when we act with caution.

Places moving up

In the South East of England, cases are up 46% in the last week.

Hospital admissions are up by more than a third.

In the East of England, cases are up two thirds in the last week and hospital admissions are up by nearly half.

It is therefore necessary to apply Tier 3 measures across a much wider area of the East and South East of England, including:

- Bedfordshire
- Buckinghamshire
- Berkshire
- Peterborough
- the whole of Hertfordshire
- Surrey – with the exception of Waverley
- Hastings and Rother, on the Kent border of East Sussex
- and Portsmouth, Gosport and Havant in Hampshire

These changes will take effect from one minute past midnight on Saturday morning.

And I know that Tier 3 measures are tough.

But the best way for everyone to get out of them is to pull together: not just to follow the rules, but do everything they possibly can to stop the spread of the virus.

Where we've seen places get the virus under control and come out of Tier 3, it's where everyone has taken responsibility on themselves to make that happen.

We've seen case rates fall across large parts of England.

And I know that many places in Tier 3 have seen their rates reduce.

In most places, I have to tell you Mr Speaker, we are not quite there yet.

And the pressures on the NHS remain.

But we are able to move some places down a tier.

We assess these decisions according to the 5 published indicators:

- case rates
- case rates amongst the over 60s
- test positivity
- rates of change
- and hospital pressure

And today, I am placing in the library of the House an assessment of each area and publishing the data on which we make these decisions.

For the vast majority of places currently in Tier 3, we're not making a change today.

Places moving down

However, Mr Speaker, I am pleased to say that some places can go down a tier.

In Bristol and North Somerset, rates have come down from 432 per 100,000 to 121 – and falling.

And I can therefore announce that Bristol and North Somerset will come out of Tier 3, into Tier 2, on Saturday.

Rates in Herefordshire have also come down, to 45 in 100,000 and are falling, and we can therefore bring Herefordshire out of Tier 2 and into Tier 1.

I want to pay tribute to everyone who's been doing the right thing and getting rates down, whether or not your area has come down a tier today. It's so vital that everyone sticks at it and does the right thing, especially over this Christmas period.

And it's important to remember that this can be a silent disease.

One in 3 people who has the disease has no symptoms but can still pass it on.

Everyone therefore has a personal responsibility to play their part in keeping this pandemic under control.

I know that other areas are so eager to move down tiers and the best thing we can all do is act with responsibility to get the virus under control.

Vaccine and close

Mr Speaker, these restrictions are thankfully not the only tool we have now to fight the disease.

We are further expanding our testing programme, and later today the Education Secretary will set out further action on school testing in the new year.

And of course, the vaccine roll-out is accelerating.

I can update the House that over 200 vaccination sites are now open in all

parts of the UK with more opening their doors and bringing hope to communities over the coming days.

And I know that everyone will be as thrilled as I am every time they are contacted by a friend or a loved one getting the jab.

It was a wonderful sight to see the global map of vaccine deployment with the UK proudly standing out as the site of the first vaccinations.

It's a huge logistical challenge, but the vaccine offers us promise of a better year ahead.

But until the great endeavour of vaccine deployment reaches enough people to make this country safe, we must keep doing what it takes to protect our NHS – and protect those we love.

That means all of us doing our bit. Following the rules and taking personal responsibility to help contain the spread of the virus so we can get through this safely, together.

And I commend this statement to the House.