

PM Commons statement on coronavirus: 2 November

Mr Speaker with your permission, I will make a statement on the measures we must now take to contain the autumn surge of Coronavirus, protect our NHS and save lives.

On Saturday evening the Chief Medical Officer and the Chief Scientific Adviser described the remorseless advance of this second wave.

The extraordinary efforts being made by millions of people across the country especially by those in very high alert areas

have made a real difference, suppressing the R rate below where it would otherwise have been.

But the R is still above one in every part of England

as it is across much of Europe

and the virus is spreading even faster than the reasonable worst-case scenario.

There are already more Covid patients in some hospitals now than at the height of the first wave,

2,000 more this Sunday than last Sunday.

While the prevalence of the virus is worse in parts of the North, the doubling time in the South East and the Midlands is now faster than in the North West.

Even in the South West, where incidence remains low, current projections mean they will start to run out of hospital capacity in a matter of weeks.

And the modelling presented by our scientists suggests that without action, we could see up to twice as many deaths over the winter as we saw in the first wave.

Faced with these latest figures, there is no alternative but to take further action at a national level.

I believe it was right to try every possible option to get this virus under control at a local level, with strong local action and strong local leadership.

And I reject any idea that we are somehow slower in taking measures than our European friends and partners.

In fact, we are moving to national measures when the rate both of deaths and

infections is lower than they were in France.

We are engaged in a constant struggle to protect lives and livelihoods, and we must balance the restrictions we introduce against the long term scars they leave,

whether for businesses and jobs, or our physical and mental health.

No-one wants to impose measures unless absolutely essential, so it made sense to focus initially on the areas where the disease was surging

and not to shut businesses, pubs and restaurants in parts of the country where incidence was low.

I want to thank the millions who have put up with local restrictions, sometimes for months on end.

I want to thank them, and to thank the local leaders who have understood the gravity of the position.

And we will continue as far as possible to adopt a pragmatic and local approach in the months ahead.

But we are fighting a disease Mr Speaker, and when the data changes course, we must change course too.

To those in this House who believe we should resist further national measures,

let me spell out the medical and moral disaster we face.

If we allow our health system to be overwhelmed – exactly as the data now suggests –

then that would not only be a disaster for thousands of Covid patients, because their survival rates would fall,

we would also reach a point where the NHS was no longer there for everyone.

The sick would be turned away because there was no room in our hospitals.

That sacred principle – of care for anyone who needs it, whoever they are and whenever they need it – could be broken for the first time in our lives.

Doctors and nurses could be forced to choose which patients to treat, who would live and who would die.

And this existential threat to our NHS comes not from focusing too much on Coronavirus, but from not focusing enough.

If we fail to get Coronavirus under control, it is the sheer weight of demand from Covid patients that would deprive others of the care they need.

Cancer treatment, heart surgery, other life-saving procedures: all this could be put at risk if we do not get the virus under control.

And even though we are so much better prepared than before, with stockpiles of PPE and ventilators, the Nightingales on standby, and 13,000 more nurses than last year,

I am afraid the virus is doubling faster than we could ever conceivably add capacity.

Even if we doubled capacity, the gain would be consumed in a single doubling of the virus.

And so on Wednesday the House will vote on regulations which, if passed, will mean that

from Thursday until 2nd December, in England,

people will only be permitted to leave home for specific reasons, including:

- For education;
- For work, if you cannot work from home;
- For exercise and recreation outdoors, with your household or on your own, or with one person from another household or support bubble;
- For medical reasons, appointments and to escape injury and harm;
- To shop for food and essentials
- And to provide care for vulnerable people, or as a volunteer.

Essential shops will remain open and click and collect services will continue, so people do not need to stock up.

But I am afraid that non-essential shops, leisure and entertainment venues and the personal care sector will all be closed.

Hospitality must close except for takeaway and delivery services.

Places of worship can open for individual prayer, funerals and formal childcare but sadly not for services.

However Remembrance Sunday events can go ahead, provided they are held outside, and observe social distancing.

Workplaces should stay open where people can't work from home – for example in construction or manufacturing. Elite sport will also be able to continue.

Single adult households can still form exclusive support bubbles with one other household, and children will still be able to move between homes if their parents are separated.

The clinically vulnerable and those over 60 should minimise their contact with others.

And while we will not ask people to shield again in the same way, the clinically extremely vulnerable should only work from home.

Mr Speaker, I am truly sorry for the anguish these measures will impose, particularly for businesses which had just got back on their feet,

businesses across the country who have gone to such trouble to make themselves Covid secure,

to install Perspex screens, to do the right thing.

Each of these actions has helped to bring the R down, and their hard work and your hard work will stand them in good stead,

but for now it is clear that we must do more together.

So the government will continue to do everything possible to support jobs and livelihoods

in the next four weeks as we have throughout.

We have protected almost 10 million jobs with furlough,

and we are now extending this scheme throughout November.

We have already paid out £13.7 billion to help the self-employed,

and I can announce today that for November we will double our support from 40 to 80 per cent of trading profits.

My Rt Hon Friend the Chancellor will also extend the deadline for applications to Covid loan schemes from the end of this month to the end of next

to ensure that small businesses can access additional loans if required.

We are not going back to the full-scale lockdown of March and April,

and there are ways in which these measures are less prohibitive.

We have for instance a moral duty to keep schools open now that it is safe to do so, because we must not allow this virus to damage our children's futures.

So schools will remain open, as will colleges, universities, childcare and early years settings – and I am pleased this will command support Mr Speaker across the House.

It is also vital that we continue provision for non-Covid healthcare so people should turn up to use the NHS, to get their scans, turn up for appointments and collect their treatments.

Mr Speaker let me stress that these restrictions are time limited.

After four weeks, on Wednesday 2nd December, they will expire

and we intend to return to a tiered system on a local and regional basis according to the latest data and trends,

and the House will have a vote to agree the way forward.

We have updated the devolved administrations on the action we are taking in England and will continue to work with them on plans for Christmas and beyond.

And while scientists are bleak in their predictions over the short-term, they are unanimously optimistic about the medium and long-term.

And if the House asks me Mr Speaker what is the exit strategy,

what is the way out – let me be as clear as I can:

it is to get the R down now – to beat this autumn surge

and to use this moment to exploit the medical and technical advances we are making to keep it low.

We now have not only much better medication and the prospect of a vaccine the immediate prospect of many millions of cheap, reliable and rapid turnaround tests – with a result in minutes.

Trials have already shown that we can help suppress the disease in hospitals, schools and universities by testing large numbers of NHS workers, children, teachers and students.

These tests, crucially, identify people who are infectious but do not have symptoms,

allowing them immediately to self-isolate and stop the spread of the disease, and allowing those who are not infectious to continue as normal.

This means that, unlike in the spring, it's possible to keep these institutions open and still stop the spread of the disease.

And so over the next few days and weeks, we plan a steady but massive expansion in the deployment of these quick turnaround tests

which we will be manufacturing in this country

applying them in an ever-growing number of situations,

from helping women to have their partners with them in labour wards when they're giving birth,

to testing whole towns and even cities.

The army has been brought in to work on the logistics and the programme will begin in a matter of days.

Mr Speaker, we have dexamethasone – the first validated life-saving treatment for the disease, pioneered in this country.

We have the real prospect of a vaccine in the first quarter of next year and we have ever more sophisticated means of providing virtually instant tests.

I believe that these technical developments, taken together, will enable us to defeat this virus by the spring,

as humanity has defeated every other infectious disease.

And I am not alone in this optimism

but I cannot pretend that the way ahead is easy, or without painful choices for us all.

And so for the next four weeks I must ask the people of this country to come together, to protect the NHS, and to save many thousands of lives.

And Mr Speaker I commend this statement to the House.