

PM Commons statement on coronavirus: 22 September 2020

Mr Speaker, with your permission, I will make a statement on our response to the rising number of Coronavirus cases

and how we must act now to avoid still graver consequences later on.

At every stage in this pandemic we have struck a delicate balance between saving lives by protecting our NHS

and minimising the wider impact of our restrictions.

And it is because of the common sense and fortitude of the British people that earlier this year we were able to avert an even worse catastrophe,

forming a human shield around our NHS,

and then by getting our country moving again by reopening key sectors of our economy and returning children to school.

But we always knew that while we might have driven the virus into retreat, the prospect of a second wave was real.

And I am sorry to say that – as in Spain and France and many other countries – we have reached a perilous turning point.

A month ago, on average around a thousand people across the UK were testing positive for Coronavirus every day.

The latest figure has almost quadrupled to 3,929.

Yesterday the Chief Medical Officer and Chief Scientific Adviser warned that the doubling rate for new cases could be between seven and 20 days with the possibility of tens of thousands of new infections next month.

I wish I could reassure the House that the growing number of cases is merely a function of more testing,

but a rising proportion of the tests themselves are yielding a positive result.

I also wish I could say that more of our people now have the antibodies to keep the virus off,

but the latest data suggest that fewer than 8 per cent of us are in this position.

It is true that the number of new cases is growing fastest amongst those aged 20-29,

but the evidence shows that the virus is spreading to other more vulnerable age groups,

as we have seen in France and Spain

where this has led to increased hospital admissions and, sadly, more deaths.

In the last fortnight, daily hospital admissions in England have more than doubled.

Tens of thousands of daily infections in October would, as night follows day, lead to hundreds of daily deaths in November and those numbers would continue to grow unless we act.

And as with all respiratory viruses, Covid is likely to spread faster as autumn becomes winter.

Yesterday, on the advice of the four Chief Medical Officers, the UK's Covid alert level was raised from 3 to 4, the second most serious stage, meaning that transmission is high or rising exponentially.

So this is the moment when we must act.

If we can curb the number of daily infections, and reduce the Reproduction rate to 1,

then we can save lives, protect the NHS, and the most vulnerable,

and shelter the economy from the far sterner and more costly measures that would inevitably become necessary later.

So we are acting on the principle that a stitch in time saves nine.

The Government will introduce new restrictions in England,

carefully judged to achieve

the maximum reduction in the R number

with the minimum damage to lives and livelihoods.

I want to stress that this is by no means a return to the full lockdown of March.

We are not issuing a general instruction to stay at home.

We will ensure that schools, colleges and universities stay open – because nothing is more important than the education, health and well-being of our young people.

We will ensure that businesses can stay open in a Covid-compliant way.

However, we must take action to suppress the disease.

First, we are once again asking office workers who can work from home to do so.

In key public services – and in all professions where homeworking is not possible, such as construction or retail – people should continue to attend their workplaces.

And like Government, this House will be free to take forward its business in a Covid-secure way

which you, Mr Speaker, have pioneered.

Second, from Thursday all pubs, bars and restaurants must operate table-service only, Mr Speaker, except for takeaways.

Together with all hospitality venues, they must close at 10pm.

To help the police to enforce this rule, I am afraid that means alas closing, and not just calling for last orders. Simplicity is paramount.

The same will apply to takeaways – though deliveries can continue thereafter.

I am sorry this will hurt many businesses just getting back on their feet, but we must act to stop the virus from being transmitted in bars and restaurants.

Third, we will extend the requirement to wear face coverings to include staff in retail,

all users of taxis and private hire vehicles,

and staff and customers in indoor hospitality, except when seated at a table to eat or drink.

Fourth, in retail, leisure, tourism and other sectors, our Covid-secure guidelines will become legal obligations.

Businesses will be fined and could be closed if they breach these rules.

Fifth, now is the time to tighten up the rule of six.

I'm afraid that from Monday, a maximum of 15 people will be able to attend wedding ceremonies and receptions.

Though, up to 30 can still attend a funeral as now.

We will also have to extend the rule of six to all adult indoor team sports.

Finally, we have to acknowledge that the spread of the virus is now affecting our ability to reopen business conferences, exhibitions and large sporting events

so we will not be able to do this from 1 October.

And I recognise the implications for our sports clubs, which are the life and soul of our communities,

and my RH Friends the Chancellor and Culture Secretary are working urgently on what we can do now to support them.

Mr Speaker, these rules measures will only work if people comply.

There is nothing more frustrating for the vast majority, the law-abiding majority that do comply than the sight of a few brazenly defying the rules.

So these rules will be enforced by tighter penalties.

We have already introduced a fine of up to £10,000 for those who fail to self-isolate and such fines will now be applied to businesses breaking Covid rules.

The penalty for failing to wear a mask or breaking the rule of six will now double to £200 for a first offence.

We will provide the police and local authorities with the extra funding they need,

a greater police presence on our streets,

and the option to draw on military support where required to free up the police.

The measures I have announced all apply in England and the Devolved Administrations are taking similar steps.

I spoke yesterday with each of the First Ministers and again today and I thank them for their collaboration:

the health of everyone in these islands depends on our common success.

Already about 13 million people across England are living under various local restrictions, over and above national measures.

We will continue to act against local flare-ups, working alongside councils and strengthening measures where necessary. And I want to speak directly to those who were shielding early in the pandemic and may be anxious about being at greater risk. Following advice from our senior clinicians, our guidance continues to be that you do not need to shield – except in local lockdown areas – and we will keep this under constant review. I must emphasise that if all our actions fail to bring the R below 1,

then we reserve the right to deploy greater firepower,

with significantly greater restrictions.

I fervently want to avoid taking this step, as do the Devolved Administrations,

but we will only be able to avoid it if our new measures work and our behaviour changes.

Mr Speaker, we will spare no effort in developing vaccines, treatments and new forms of mass-testing

but unless we palpably make progress, we should assume that the restrictions I have announced will remain in place for perhaps six months.

For the time being, this virus is a fact of our lives and I must tell the House and the country that our fight against it will continue.

We will not listen to those who say let the virus rip;

nor to those who urge a permanent lockdown;

we are taking decisive and appropriate steps to balance saving lives with protecting jobs and livelihoods.

I know all of this will have profound consequences for our constituents,

so the government will give the House every opportunity to scrutinise our decisions.

In addition to regular statements and debates,

Hon Members will be able to question the government's scientific advisers more regularly,

gain access to data about their constituencies, your constituencies

and join daily calls with my RH Friend the Paymaster General.

After six months of restrictions,

it would be tempting to hope that the threat has faded,

and seek comfort in the belief that if you have avoided the virus so far then you are somehow immune.

I have to say that it is that kind of complacency that could be our undoing.

If we fail to act together now we will not only place others at risk

but jeopardise our own futures with the more drastic action that we would inevitably be forced to take.

Mr Speaker, no British government would wish to stifle our freedoms in the ways that we have found necessary this year.

Yet even now we can draw some comfort from the fact that

schools and universities and places of worship are staying open,

shops can serve their customers,

construction workers can go to building sites,

and the vast majority of the UK economy can continue moving forwards.

We are also, Mr Speaker, better prepared for a second wave,

with the ventilators, the PPE, the dexamethasone, the Nightingale Hospitals, and a hundred times as much testing.

So now it falls to each of us and every one of us to remember the basics – wash our hands, cover our faces, observe social distancing – and follow the rules.

Then we can fight back against this virus,

shelter our economy from even greater damage,

protect the most vulnerable in care homes and hospitals,

safeguard our NHS

and save many more lives.

And I commend this statement to the House.