

PM statement in the House of Commons: 11 May 2020

Mr Speaker, with permission, I will make a statement about the next steps in our battle against coronavirus, and how we can, with the utmost caution, gradually begin to rebuild our economy and reopen our society.

For the last two months, the British people have faced a grave threat with common sense, compassion and unflinching resolve.

We have together observed the toughest restrictions on our freedoms in memory, changing our way of life on a scale unimaginable only months ago.

All our efforts have been directed towards protecting our NHS and saving lives.

Tragically, many families have lost loved ones before their time and we share their grief. Yet our shared effort has averted a still worse catastrophe, one that could have overwhelmed the NHS and claimed half a million lives.

Every day, dedicated doctors, nurses, and social care workers, army medics and more have risked their own lives in the service of others, they have helped to cut the Reproduction rate from between 2.6 and 2.8 in April to between 0.5 and 0.9 today.

The number of covid patients in hospital has fallen by over a third since Easter Sunday.

Our armed forces joined our NHS to build new hospitals on timetables that were telescoped from years to weeks, almost doubling the number of critical care beds, and ensuring that since the end of March, at least a third have always been available.

Our challenge now is to find a way forward that preserves our hard won gains, while easing the burden of the lockdown.

And I will be candid with the House: this is a supremely difficult balance to strike.

There could be no greater mistake than to jeopardise everything we have striven to achieve by proceeding too far and too fast.

We will be driven not by hope or economic revival as an end in itself, but by data, and science and public health.

And so the Government is submitting to the House today a plan which is conditional and dependent as always on the common sense and observance of the British people, and on continual re-assessment of the data.

That picture varies across the regions and Home Nations of the United

Kingdom, requiring a flexible response. Different parts of the UK may need to stay in full lockdown longer but any divergence should only be short-term because as Prime Minister of the UK, I am in no doubt that we must defeat this threat and face the challenge of recovery together.

Our progress will depend on meeting five essential tests: protecting the NHS, reducing both the daily death toll and the infection rate in a sustained way, ensuring that testing and PPE can meet future demand – a global problem, but one that we must fix, and avoiding a second peak that would overwhelm the NHS.

A new UK-wide Joint Biosecurity Centre will measure our progress with a five-stage Covid Alert System, and the combined effect of our measures so far has been to prevent us from reaching Level Five, a situation that would have seen the NHS overwhelmed, and to hold us at Level Four.

Thanks to the hard work and sacrifice of the British people by following the social distancing rules, we are now in a position where we can move in stages to where I hope the scientific advice will tell us that we are down to Level Three.

But this will only happen if everyone continues to play their part, to stay alert and to follow the rules.

We must also deal with the epidemic in care homes, where a tragic number of the elderly and vulnerable have been lost and while the situation is thankfully improving, there is a vast amount more to be done.

And of course we need a world-leading system for testing and tracking and tracing victims and their contacts so I'm delighted that Baroness Harding, the chair of NHS Improvement, has agreed to take charge of a programme that will ultimately enable us to test hundreds of thousands of people every day.

All this means we have begun our descent from the peak of the epidemic, but our journey has reached the most perilous moment where a wrong move could be disastrous.

So at this stage, we can go no further than to announce the first careful modifications of our measures, Step 1 in moving towards Covid Alert Level 3, a shift in emphasis that we can begin this week.

Anyone who cannot work from home should be actively encouraged to go to work.

And sectors that are allowed to be open should indeed be open, but subject to social distancing.

These include food production, construction, manufacturing, logistics, distribution, scientific research.

And to support this, to explain this again, we are publishing guidance for businesses on how to make these workplaces safe. Covid secure.

People who are able to work from home, as we've continually said, should

continue to do so, and people who cannot work from home should talk to their employers about returning this week and the difficulties they may or may not have.

Anyone with covid symptoms obviously – or in a household where someone else has symptoms – should self-isolate.

We want everyone travelling to work to be safe, so people should continue to avoid public transport wherever possible because we must maintain social distancing which will inevitably limit capacity.

Instead people should drive or better still walk or cycle.

With more activity outside our homes, we would now advise people to wear a cloth face covering in enclosed spaces where social distancing is not always possible, and you are more likely to come in contact with people you do not normally meet.

The reason is face coverings can help to protect each other and reduce the spread of the disease, particularly if you have coronavirus like symptoms.

But this does not mean – and I must stress this – this does not mean wearing medical face masks, 2R or FFP3, which must be reserved for people who need them.

We have all lived so far with onerous restrictions Mr Speaker on outdoor spaces and exercise, and this is where my honourable friend interjects as I know he's a keen swimmer and unfortunately we can't do anything for swimming pools but we can do something for lakes and the sea. and this is where we can go significantly further because there is a lower risk from outdoors than indoors.

So from Wednesday there will be no limits on the frequency of outdoor exercise people can take.

You can now walk, sit and rest in parks, you can play sports and exercise, and you can do all these things with members of your own household, or with one other person from another household, provided you observe social distancing and remain 2 metres apart from them.

And I do hope that's clear Mr Speaker. I'm conscious people want to come back and ask questions in more detail and I'd be very happy to answer.

We shall increase the fines for the small minority who break the rules, starting at £100 but doubling with each infringement up to £3,600.

You can drive as far as you like to reach an outdoor space, subject to the same rules and the laws and guidance of the Devolved Administrations.

I am sorry to say however, Mr Speaker, that we shall continue to ask those who are clinically vulnerable – including pregnant women and people over 70, or those with pre-existing chronic conditions – to take particular care to minimise contact with those outside their households.

And we must continue to shield people who are extremely vulnerable. They should, I am afraid, remain at home and avoid any direct contact with others.

I know that easing restrictions for the many will only increase the anguish of those who must remain shielded, so the Government will look at every possible way of supporting the most vulnerable.

Mr Speaker, all of our precautions will count for little if our country is re-infected from overseas, so I give notice that we shall introduce new restrictions at the UK border, requiring 14 days of self-isolation for international arrivals, while respecting our common travel area with Ireland.

Every day, we shall monitor our progress, and if we stay on the downward slope, and the R remains below 1, then – and only then – will it become safe to go further, and move to the second step.

This will not happen until 1st June at the earliest, but we may then be in a position to start the phased reopening of shops; to return children to early years' settings, including nurseries and childminders; to return primary schools in stages, giving priority to the youngest children in reception and year 1, and those in year 6 preparing for secondary school; and to enable secondary school pupils facing exams next year to get at least some time with their teachers.

Our ambition – and I stress this is conditional Mr Speaker – is for all primary school pupils to return to the classroom for a month before the summer break.

To those ends, we are publishing guidance on how schools might reopen safely.

Step two could also include allowing cultural and sporting events behind closed doors for broadcast, which I think would provide a much needed boost to national morale.

But nothing can substitute for human contact and so the Government has asked SAGE when and how we could safely allow people to expand their household group to include one other household, on a strictly reciprocal basis.

Finally, and no earlier than July, we may be able to move to step three – if and only if supported by the data, and the best scientific advice.

We would then aim to reopen some remaining businesses, including potentially hospitality, cinemas and hairdressers as well as places of worship and leisure facilities.

And this will depend on maintaining social distancing and new ways of providing services, so we will phase and pilot any re-openings to ensure public safety.

And I must be clear again: if the data goes the wrong way, if the Alert Level begins to rise, we will have no hesitation in putting on the brakes, delaying or reintroducing measures – locally, regionally or nationally.

Mr Speaker, our struggle against this virus has placed our country under the kind of strain that will be remembered for generations.

But so too has the response of the British people, from dedicated shopworkers keeping our supermarkets open, and ingenious teachers finding new ways of inspiring their pupils, to the kindness of millions who have checked on their neighbours, delivered food for the elderly, or raised astonishing amounts for charity.

In these and in so many other ways, we are seeing the indomitable spirit of Britain

And Mr speaker let me summarise by saying that people should Stay Alert by working from home if you possibly can, by limiting contact with other people, by keeping your distance 2 metres apart where possible – by washing your hands regularly, and if you or anyone in your household has symptoms, you all need to self-isolate.

Because if everyone stays alert and follows the rules, we can control the virus, keep the rate of infection down and the keep number of infections down.

And this Mr Speaker is how we can continue to save lives, and livelihoods, as we begin to recover from coronavirus, and I commend this statement to the House.