

PM statement on coronavirus: 18 March 2020

Good afternoon. And thanks for coming or for indeed tuning in to these daily updates. I want to introduce, I'm sure you know Jenny Harries, Deputy Chief Medical Officer for England, and you know Sir Patrick Vallance, Chief Scientific Advisor.

I want to tell you where we got to in our national fightback against the coronavirus. Today the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies met to discuss the latest evidence on the spread of the virus and the effects of the measures we have already taken to slow its spread. And Patrick is going to update us in a second about that.

I want to repeat that everyone – everyone – must follow the advice to protect themselves and their families, but also – more importantly – to protect the wider public. So stay at home for seven days if you think you have the symptoms. Remember the two key symptoms are high temperature, a continuous new cough.

Whole household to stay at home for 14 days if one member in that household thinks he/she has the symptoms. Avoid all unnecessary gatherings – pubs, clubs, bars, restaurants, theatres and so on and work from home if you can. Wash your hands.

And we have already announced in the last few days we will massively scale up our testing capacity in the weeks ahead so we hit 25,000 tests a day.

A huge public information campaign is being rolled out so people get all the information they need to protect themselves and others.

We are asking retired healthcare professionals to come back and help us cope, help the NHS to cope, with this unprecedented challenge.

And we will continue as we have from the beginning to do the right thing at the right time and to follow the best scientific advice.

And we come today to the key issue of schools where we have been consistently advised that there is an important trade off. And so far the judgment of our advisers has been that closing schools is actually of limited value in slowing the spread of the epidemic.

And that is partly because counterintuitively schools are actually very safe environments. And in this disease and epidemic children and young people are much less vulnerable.

And hitherto the advice has been that we should keep schools open if possible in order to reduce the pressure on the NHS and on all other public services. But I think you'll agree I have always been very clear that this is a balanced judgment and one that we have kept under constant review.

So looking at the curve of the disease and looking at where we are now – we think now that we must apply downward pressure, further downward pressure on that upward curve by closing the schools.

So I can announce today and Gavin Williamson making statement now in House of Commons that after schools shut their gates from Friday afternoon, they will remain closed for most pupils – for the vast majority of pupils- until further notice. I will explain what I mean by the vast majority of pupils.

The objective is to slow the spread of the virus and we judge it is the right moment to do that.

But of course, as I've always said, we also need to keep the NHS going and to treat the number of rising cases. So we need health workers who are also parents to continue to go to work.

And we need other critical workers with children to keep doing their jobs too – from police officers who are keeping us safe to the supermarket delivery drivers, social care workers who look after the elderly and who are so vital. We will be setting out more details shortly about who we mean in these groups.

So we therefore need schools to make provision for the children of these key workers who would otherwise be forced to stay home. And they will also need to look after the most vulnerable children.

This will mean there will of course be far fewer children in schools and that will help us to slow the spread of the disease. And these measures are crucial to make sure the critical parts of the economy keep functioning and public services keep functioning.

So we are simultaneously asking nurseries and private schools to do the same, and we are providing financial support where it is needed. We are making provisions to supply meals and vouchers for children eligible for free school meals. And where some schools are already doing this, I want to make it clear we will reimburse the cost. And of course this does mean that exams will not take place as planned in May and June. Though we will make sure that pupils get the qualifications they need and deserve for their academic career.

Now I know that these steps will not be easy for parents or teachers. And for many parents, this will be frustrating, and it will make it harder for them to go out to work.

And of course that is one of the reasons we haven't wanted to go ahead and that's why we are working now on further measures to ensure that we support not just businesses but also individuals and their families to keep our economy going as Rishi Sunak the Chancellor outlined yesterday.

I also need to remind parents that, as we have already advised, children should not be left with older grandparents, or older relatives, who may be particularly vulnerable or fall into some of the vulnerable groups and I know that will be difficult too. And I want to thank families for their sacrifice at this difficult time. I want to thank whole country for the efforts people

are making to comply with these measures.

I particularly want to thank the teachers, head teachers and all the support staff who keep schools going who will make these exceptional arrangements work, for the benefit of us all.

By looking after the children of key workers they will be a critical part of our fightback against Coronavirus. As I have said, we will take the right steps at the right time, guided by the science.

We believe the steps we have already taken, together with those I am announcing today, are already slowing the spread of the disease.

But we will not hesitate to go further, and faster, in the days and weeks ahead.

And we will do whatever it takes to so that we beat it together.