

PM statement on COVID-19 Winter Plan: 23 November 2020

Mr Speaker, thank you very much and with your permission, I will make a statement on the Government's COVID-19 Winter Plan.

For the first time since this wretched virus took hold, we can see a route out of the pandemic.

The breakthroughs in treatment, in testing and vaccines mean that the scientific cavalry is now in sight

and we know in our hearts that next year we will succeed.

By the Spring, these advances should reduce the need for the restrictions we have endured in 2020

and make the whole concept of a Covid lockdown redundant.

When that moment comes, it will have been made possible by the sacrifices of millions of people across the United Kingdom.

I am acutely conscious that no other peacetime Prime Minister has asked so much of the British people

and just as our country has risen to every previous trial,

so it has responded this time, and I am deeply grateful.

But the hard truth, Mr Speaker, is that we are not there yet.

First we must get through Winter without the virus spreading out of control and squandering our hard-won gains,

at exactly the time when the burden on the NHS is always greatest.

Our Winter Plan is designed to carry us safely to Spring.

In recent weeks, families and businesses in England have, once again, steadfastly observed nationwide restrictions

and they have managed to slow the growth of new cases and ease the worst pressures on our NHS.

I can therefore confirm that national restrictions in England will end on 2nd December, and they will not be renewed.

From next Wednesday people will be able to leave their home for any purpose, and meet others in outdoor public spaces, subject to the Rule of Six.

Collective worship, weddings and outdoor sports can resume, and shops, personal care, gyms and the wider leisure sector can reopen. But without sensible precautions, we would risk the virus escalating into a Winter or New Year surge.

The incidence of the disease is, alas, still widespread in many areas, so we are not going to replace national measures with a free for all, the status quo ante Covid.

We are going to go back instead to a regional tiered approach, applying the toughest measures where Covid is most prevalent.

And while the previous local tiers did cut the R number, they were not quite enough to reduce it below 1,

so the scientific advice, I am afraid, is that as we come out is that our tiers need to be made tougher.

In particular, in tier 1 people should work from home wherever possible.

In tier 2, alcohol may only be served in hospitality settings as part of a substantial meal.

In tier 3, indoor entertainment, hotels and other accommodation will have to close, along with all forms of hospitality, except for delivery and takeaways.

And I am very sorry obviously for the unavoidable hardship that this will cause to business owners who have already endured so much disruption this year.

Mr Speaker, unlike the previous arrangements, tiers will now be a uniform set of rules,

That's to say we won't have negotiations on additional measures with each region, it's a uniform set of rules

We have learnt from experience that there are some things we can do differently

So from the 10pm closing time for hospitality we're going to change that to so that it is last orders at 10 with closing at 11.

In tiers 1 and 2, spectator sports and business events will be free to resume inside and outside – with capacity limits and social distancing –

providing more consistency with indoor performances in theatres and concert halls.

We will also strengthen the enforcement ability of Local Authorities,

including specially trained officers and new powers to close down premises that pose a risk to public health.

Later this week we will announce which areas will fall into which tier, I hope on Thursday,

based on analysis of cases in all age groups, especially the over 60s,

also looking at the rate by which cases are rising or falling,

the percentage of those tested in a local population who have Covid,

and the current and projected pressures on the NHS. I am sorry to say we expect that more regions will fall – at least temporarily – into higher levels than before,

but by using these tougher tiers

and by using rapid turnaround tests on an ever greater scale

to drive R below 1 and keep it there, it should be possible for areas to move down the tiering scale to lower levels of restrictions.

By maintaining the pressure on the virus, we can also enable people to see more of their family and friends over Christmas.

Mr Speaker, I can't say that Christmas will be normal this year,

but in a period of adversity, time spent with loved ones is even more precious for people of all faiths and none.

We all want some kind of Christmas,

we need it,

we certainly feel we deserve it.

But what we don't want is to throw caution to the winds and allow the virus to flare up again, forcing us all back into lockdown in January.

So to allow families to come together, while minimising the risk,

we are working with the Devolved Administrations on a special, time-limited Christmas dispensation,

embracing the whole of the United Kingdom, and reflecting the ties of kinship across our islands.

But this virus is obviously not going to grant us a Christmas truce, it doesn't know it's Christmas Mr Speaker and families will need to make a careful judgement about the risk of visiting elderly relatives.

We will be publishing guidance for those who are clinically extremely vulnerable on how to manage the risks in each tier, as well as over

Christmas.

As we work to suppress the virus with these local tiers,

two scientific breakthroughs will ultimately make these restrictions obsolete.

As soon as a vaccine is approved, we will dispense it as quickly as possible.

But given that this cannot be done immediately, we will simultaneously use rapid turnaround testing, the lateral flow testing that gives results within 30 minutes,

to identify those without symptoms so they can isolate and avoid transmission.

We are beginning to deploy these tests in our NHS

and in care homes in England,

so people will once again be able to hug and hold hands with loved ones, instead of waving at them through a window.

By the end of the year, this will allow every care home resident to have two visitors, who can be tested twice a week.

Care workers looking after people in their own homes will be offered weekly tests from today.

And from next month, weekly tests will also be available to staff in prisons, food manufacturing, and those delivering and administering Covid vaccines.

We are also using testing as the House knows to help schools and universities stay open,

and testing will enable students to know they can go home safely for Christmas and indeed back from home to university.

But there is another way of using these rapid tests,

and that is to follow the example of Liverpool,

where in the last two and a half weeks over 200,000 people have taken part in community testing, contributing to a very substantial fall in infections.

So together with NHS Test and Trace and our fantastic Armed Forces,

we will now launch a major community testing programme,

offering all local authorities in tier 3 areas in England a six week surge of testing.

The system is untried and there are of course many unknowns,

but if it works, we should be able to offer those who test negative the prospect of fewer restrictions,

for example, meeting up in certain places with others who have also tested negative.

And those towns and regions which engage in community testing will have a much greater chance of easing the rules, the tiering, that they currently endure.

Mr Speaker, we will also use daily testing to ease another restriction that has impinged on many lives.

We will seek to end automatic isolation for close contacts of those found positive.

Beginning in Liverpool later this week,

contacts who are tested every day for a week will only need to isolate if they themselves test positive.

If successful, this approach will be extended across the health system next month,

and to the whole of England from January.

And, of course, we are working with the Devolved Administrations to ensure that Wales, Scotland, Northern Ireland also benefit as they should and will from these advances in rapid testing.

But clearly the most hopeful advance of all is how vaccines are now edging ever closer to liberating us from the virus,

demonstrating emphatically that this is not a pandemic without end.

We can take heart from today's news, which has the makings of a wonderful British scientific achievement.

The vaccine developed with astonishing speed by Oxford University and AstraZeneca is now one of three capable of delivering a period of immunity.

We don't yet know when any will be ready and licensed, but we have ordered 100 million doses of the Oxford vaccine, and over 350 million in total, more than enough for everyone in the UK, the Crown Dependencies and the Overseas Territories.

And the NHS is preparing a nationwide immunisation programme, ready next month,

the like of which we have never witnessed.

Mr Speaker, 2020 has been in many ways a tragic year when so many have lost loved ones and faced financial ruin.

This will be still a hard Winter,

Christmas cannot be normal,

and there is a long road to Spring.

But we have turned a corner: and the escape route is in sight.

We must hold out against the virus until testing and vaccines come to our rescue and reduce the need for restrictions.

Everyone can help speed up the arrival of that moment

by continuing to follow the rules,

getting tested and self-isolating when instructed,

remembering hands, face and space,

and pulling together for one final push to the Spring,

when we have every reason to hope and believe that the achievements of our scientists will finally lift the shadow of the virus.

Mr Speaker, I commend this Statement to the House.