

Prime Minister's statement on coronavirus (COVID-19): 31 October 2020

Good evening and apologies for disturbing your Saturday evening with more news of Covid and I can assure you I wouldn't do it unless it was absolutely necessary.

First I will hand over to Chris and then Patrick who will present the latest data.

Thank you very much Patrick, and Chris. I am afraid that no responsible PM can ignore the message of those figures.

When I told you two weeks ago that we were pursuing a local and a regional approach to tackling this virus, I believed then and I still believe passionately that it was the right thing to do.

Because we know the cost of these restrictions, the damage they do, the impact on jobs, and on livelihoods, and on people's mental health.

No one wants to be imposing these kinds of measures anywhere.

We didn't want to be shutting businesses, pubs and restaurants in one part of the country, where incidence was very low, when the vast bulk of infections were taking place elsewhere.

Our hope was that by strong local action, strong local leadership, we could get the rates of infection down where the disease was surging, and address the problem thereby across the whole country.

And I want to thank the millions of people who have been putting up with these restrictions in their areas for so long. I want to thank local leaders who have stepped up and local communities.

Because as you can see from some of those charts, the R has been kept lower than it would otherwise have been, and there are signs that your work has been paying off

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

But as we've also seen from those charts, we've got to be humble in the face of nature

And in this country alas as across much of Europe the virus is spreading even faster than the reasonable worst case scenario of our scientific advisers

Whose models as you've just seen now suggest that unless we act we could see

deaths in this country running at several thousand a day

A peak of mortality alas far bigger than the one we saw in April

Even in the South West, where incidence was so low, and still is so low, it is now clear that current projections mean they will run out of hospital capacity in a matter of weeks unless we act.

And let me explain why the overrunning of the NHS would be a medical and moral disaster beyond the raw loss of life

Because the huge exponential growth in the number of patients – by no means all of them elderly, by the way – would mean that doctors and nurses would be forced to choose which patients to treat

Who would get oxygen and who wouldn't

Who would live and who would die,

And doctors and nurses would be forced to choose between saving covid patients and non-covid patients

And the sheer weight of covid demand would mean depriving tens of thousands, if not hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of non-covid patients of the care they need

It is crucial to grasp this that the general threat to public health comes not from focusing too much on covid, but from not focusing enough, from failing to get it under control

And if we let the lines on those graphs grow in the way they could and in the way they're projected to grow, then the risk is that for the first time in our lives, the NHS will not be there for us and for our families

And even if I could now double capacity overnight – and obviously I am proud that we have massively increased capacity, we do have the Nightingales, we've got 13,000 more nurses now than last year, we have many more doctors – but it still would not be enough, because the virus is doubling faster than we could conceivably add capacity

And so now is the time to take action because there is no alternative.

From Thursday until the start of December, you must stay at home.

You may only leave home for specific reasons, including:

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

I'm afraid non-essential shops, leisure and entertainment venues will all be

closed – though click and collect services can continue and essential shops will remain open, so there is no need to stock up.

Pubs, bars, restaurants must close except for takeaway and delivery services.

Workplaces should stay open where people can't work from home – for example in the construction or manufacturing sectors.

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.

If you are clinically vulnerable, or over the age of 60, you should be especially careful to follow the rules and minimise your contacts with others.

I know how tough shielding was, and we will not ask people to shield again in the same way again. However we are asking those who are clinically extremely vulnerable to minimise their contact with others, and not to go to work if they are unable to work from home.

I am under no illusions about how difficult this will be for businesses which have already had to endure hardship this year. I am truly, truly sorry for that.

This is why we are also going to extend the furlough system through November. The furlough scheme was a success in the spring. It supported people and businesses in a critical time. We will not end it. We will extend it until December.

There will be some differences compared to March.

These measures above all will be time-limited, starting next Thursday 5 November. They will end on Wednesday 2 December, when we will seek to ease restrictions, going back into the tiered system on a local and regional basis according to the latest data and trends.

Christmas is going to be different this year, very different, but it is my sincere hope and belief that by taking tough action now, we can allow families across the country to be together.

My priority, our priority, remains keeping people in education – so childcare, early years settings, schools, colleges and universities will all remain open. Our senior clinicians still advise that school is the best place for children to be.

We cannot let this virus damage our children's futures even more than it has already. I urge parents to continue taking their children to school and I am extremely grateful to teachers across the country for their dedication in enabling schools to remain open.

And it is vital that we will keep provision for non-Covid healthcare groups going.

So please – this is really important – unless your clinicians tell you otherwise, you should continue to use the NHS, get your scans, turn up for your appointments and pick up your treatments. If at all possible, we want you to continue to access these services, now and through the winter. Indeed it's only by taking this action that we can protect the NHS for you.

On Monday I will set out our plans to parliament. On Wednesday, parliament will debate and vote on these measures which, if passed, will as I say come into force on Thursday.

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

We should remember we are not alone in what we're going through. Our friends in Belgium, France and Germany have had to take very similar action.

So as we come together now to fight this second wave, I want to say something about the way ahead

Because people will reasonably ask when will this all end

And as I have said before I am optimistic that this will feel very different and better by the spring

It is not just that we have ever better medicine and therapies, and the realistic hope of a vaccine in the first quarter of next year

We now have the immediate prospect of using many millions of cheap, reliable and above all rapid turnaround tests

Tests that you can use yourself to tell whether or not you are infectious and get the result within ten to 15 minutes

And we know from trial across the country in schools and hospitals that we can use these tests not just to locate infectious people but to drive down 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

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 whole cities

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

Working with local communities, local government, public health directors and organisations of all kinds to help people discover whether or not they are infectious, and then immediately to get them to self-isolate and to stop the spread

And I can tell you tonight that the scientists may be unanimously gloomy about the immediate options

But they are unanimously optimistic about the medium and the long term future

We will get through this – but we must act now to contain this autumn surge

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

It is less prohibitive and less restrictive

But from Thursday the basic message is the same

Stay at home. Protect the NHS. And save lives.