

Renewing regional coronavirus restrictions in England

Mr Speaker, with permission I'd like to make a statement on coronavirus.

We are approaching the end of a year where we have asked so much of the British people.

And in response to this unprecedented threat to lives and to livelihoods, the British people have well and truly risen to the challenge by coming together to slow the spread and support each other.

I know how difficult this has been, especially for those areas that have been in restrictions for so long. The national measures have successfully turned the curve, and begun to ease the pressure on the NHS.

Cases are down by 19% from a week ago and daily hospital admissions have fallen 7% in the last week.

January and February are always difficult months for the NHS. So it is vital we safeguard the gains we've made.

We must protect our NHS this winter. We have invested in expanded capacity – not just the Nightingales, but in hospitals across the land – and we have welcomed thousands of new staff.

Mr Speaker, this morning's figures show the number of nurses in the NHS is up 14,800 compared to just a year ago – well on our way to delivering our manifesto commitment of 50,000 more nurses.

Together, while we invest in our NHS, we must also protect our NHS. So it will always be there for all of us, during this pandemic and beyond.

New measures

Mr Speaker, I am so grateful for the resolve that people have shown throughout this crisis.

Thanks to this shared sacrifice, we have been able to announce that we will not be renewing our national restrictions in England.

And we have been able to announce UK-wide arrangements for Christmas, allowing friends and loved ones to reunite, and form a 5-day Christmas bubble. And I know that this news will provide hope for so many.

But we must remain vigilant. There are still, today, 16,570 people in hospital with coronavirus across the UK, and 696 deaths were reported yesterday.

That means 696 more families mourning the loss of a loved one, and the House

mourns with them. So, as tempting as it may be, we cannot simply flick a switch and try to return life straight back to normal.

Because if we did this, we would undo the hard work of so many and see the NHS overwhelmed, with all that that would entail.

We must keep suppressing the virus, while supporting education, the economy and of course the NHS, until a vaccine can make us safe. That is our plan.

We will do this by returning to a tiered approach, applying the toughest measures to the parts of the country where cases and pressure on the NHS are highest, and allowing greater freedom in areas where prevalence is lower.

While the strategy remains the same, the current epidemiological evidence, and clinical advice, shows we must make the tiers tougher than they were before to protect the NHS through the winter and avert another national lockdown.

So we've looked at each of the tiers afresh and strengthened them, as the Prime Minister set out on Monday.

In tier 1 if you can work from home, you should do so.

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

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

Allocation of tiers

Mr Speaker, I know that people want certainty about the rules they need to follow in their area.

These decisions are not easy. But they are necessary.

We have listened to local experts, and been guided by the best public health advice, including from the Joint Biosecurity Centre.

We set out the criteria in the [COVID-19 Winter Plan](#), and we published the data on which the decisions are made.

As the Winter Plan sets out, the 5 indicators are:

- the case rates in all age groups
- in particular, cases among the over 60s
- the rate at which cases are rising or falling
- the positivity rate
- and the pressures on the local NHS

When setting the boundaries for these tiers, we have looked not just at geographical areas but the human geographies which influence how the virus

spreads, like travel patterns and the epidemiological situation in neighbouring areas.

While all 3 tiers are less stringent than the national lockdown that we are all living in now, to keep people safe, and to keep the gains being made, more areas than before will be in the top two tiers.

This is necessary to protect our NHS and keep the virus under control.

Turning to the tiers specifically: the lowest case rates are in Cornwall, the Isle of Wight and the Isles of Scilly, which will go into tier 1.

In all 3 areas have had very low case rates throughout and I want to thank residents for being so vigilant during the whole pandemic.

I know that many other areas would want to be in tier 1. I understand that.

My own constituency of West Suffolk has the lowest case rate for over 60s in the whole country.

And I want to thank Matthew Hicks and John Griffiths, the leaders of Suffolk and West Suffolk Councils, and their teams, for this achievement.

But despite this, and despite the fact Suffolk overall has the lowest case rate outside Cornwall and the Isle of Wight, our judgement, looking at all of the indicators, and based on the public health advice, is that Suffolk needs to be in tier 2 to get the virus further under control.

Now I hope that Suffolk, and so many other parts of the country, can get to tier 1 soon, and the more people stick to the rules, the quicker that will happen.

We must make the right judgements guided by the science.

The majority of England will be in tier 2, but in a significant number of areas, I'm afraid, they need to be in tier 3 to bring case rates down.

I know how tough this is, both for areas that have been in restrictions for a long time, like Leicester and Greater Manchester, and also for areas where cases have risen sharply recently, like Bristol, the West Midlands and Kent.

The [full allocations](#) have been published this morning and laid as a [written ministerial statement](#) just before this statement began.

I understand the impact that these measures will have, but they are necessary given the scale of the threat that we face.

We will review the measures in a fortnight, and keep them regularly under review after that.

I want to thank everybody who's in the tier 3 areas for the sacrifices that they are making, not just to protect themselves and their families, but their whole community.

And regardless of your tier, I ask everyone: we must all think of our own responsibilities to keep this virus under control.

We should see these restrictions not as a boundary to push but as a limit on what the public health advice says we can do safely in any area.

But, frankly, the less any one person passes on the disease, the faster we will be able to get this disease under control together. And that is on all of us.

Testing

Mr Speaker, we must all play our part while we work so hard to deliver the new technologies that will help us get out of this. In particular, vaccines and testing.

The past fortnight has been illuminated by news of encouraging clinical trials for vaccines. First, from Pfizer/BioNTech and then from Moderna. And then of course earlier this week, from the Oxford/AstraZeneca team.

If these vaccines are approved, the NHS stands ready to roll them out, as soon as safely possible. Alongside vaccines, we have made huge strides in the deployment of testing.

Our roll-out of community testing has been successful because it means we can identify more people who have the virus but don't have symptoms and help them to isolate, breaking the connections that the virus needs to spread.

As part of our COVID-19 Winter Plan, we will use these tests on a regular basis. For instance, to allow visitors safely to see loved ones in care homes, to protect our frontline NHS and social care colleagues, and to allow vital industries and public services to keep running safely.

Mr Speaker, we have seen in Liverpool, where now over 300,000 people have been tested, how successful this community testing can be, and I want to pay tribute to the people of Liverpool, both for following the restrictions and for embracing this community testing.

It has been a big team effort across the whole city. And the result is that in the Liverpool City Region the number of cases has fallen by more than two-thirds.

In the borough of Liverpool itself, where the mass testing took place, cases have fallen by three-quarters.

It hasn't been easy and, sadly, many people in Liverpool have lost their lives to COVID. But thanks to people sticking to the rules, and to the huge effort of community testing, Liverpool's cases are now low enough for the whole City Region to go into tier 2.

This shows what we can do when we work together. We can beat the virus.

And I want to pay tribute to the people of Liverpool, to NHS Test and Trace, the University, the Hospital Trust, and Mayor Joe Anderson and so many

others, who have demonstrated such impressive leadership, responsibility, and a true sense of public service.

We are now expanding this community testing programme even further, to launch a major community testing programme, honing in on the areas with the greatest rate of infection.

This programme is open to all local authorities in tier 3 areas in the first instance and offers help to get out of the toughest restrictions as fast as possible.

We will work with local authorities on a plan to get tests where they're needed most and how we can get as many people as possible to come forward and get certainty about their condition.

The more people who get tested then the quicker that a local area can move down through the tiers, and get life closer to normal.

Conclusion

Mr Speaker, viruses can take a short time to spread, but a long time to vanish, and sadly there is no quick fix.

They call upon all our determination to make the sacrifices that will bring it to heel and all our ingenuity to make the scientific advances that will get us through.

Hope is on the horizon but we still have further to go. So we must all dig deep. The end is in sight. We mustn't give up now.

We must follow these new rules and make sure that our actions today will save lives in future and help get our country through this.

And I commend this statement to the House.