

Transport Secretary's statement on coronavirus (COVID-19): 23 May 2020

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Good afternoon, and welcome to today's Downing Street press conference.

I'm pleased to be joined today by Dr Jenny Harries

Latest data

Let me start by updating you on the latest information from the government's COBR data file.

As of today (23 May 2020):

3,348,507 tests for coronavirus have now been carried out in the UK, including 116,580 tests yesterday.

257,154 people have tested positive, that's an increase of 2,959 cases since yesterday.

9,331 people are currently in hospital with coronavirus in the UK, down 11% since last week.

And tragically 36,675 people have now died. That's an increase of 282 fatalities since yesterday and that's across all settings.

Not just a list of statistics, but a devastating reminder of the cruelty of coronavirus.

Our thoughts are with the friends and families of the victims.

Transport context

As we start to relax the restrictions, we must plan our route to recovery...

Allowing people to resume their lives where possible...

Getting businesses up and running again...

And building beyond coronavirus.

In the short term, we will need to bring back more public transport to keep families safe.

That process has already begun.

Rail and tube services increased at the beginning of this week – and they'll ramp up more next month.

And to ensure that more buses, trams and light-rail networks return to service today I can announce new investment of £283 million to start moving back to a full timetable.

However, I do want to stress this funding does not mean we can go back to using public transport whenever we like.

Remember...

Those who can should still work from home...

Those who can should still avoid all public transport.

Even a fully restored service will only be capable of carrying – at best – one fifth of normal capacity, once social distancing is taken into account.

So only if you need to travel, and you can't cycle, or walk or drive, should you take a bus, tram or train.

But please; avoid the rush hour.

Marshals

We're managing the transport network to make it as safe as possible.

This week saw the deployment of nearly 3,500 British Transport Police, Network Rail and Transport for London employees.

These marshals worked with the public to prevent services from becoming overcrowded.

From 1 June at the earliest – as we move to Phase 2 of the unlock – we will start to deploy twice as many marshals with the assistance of groups like the charity – Volunteering Matters.

These Journey Makers will help provide reassurance, advice and friendly assistance to commuters.

The last time we did this, at the 2012 Olympics, it was a great success.

While these are altogether more serious times – if we show the same public-spirited concern for one another, it will go a long way towards helping transport and passengers cope.

ZipAbout

As I have said, it's essential we stagger journeys and avoid the rush-hour.

That's why, at a recent roundtable, we asked the tech sector to come up with innovative proposals to help passengers avoid congestion.

One good example is 'Passenger Connect' from Birmingham start-up ZipAbout.

A personalised information service which tells rail users how disruption and crowding may affect their journey, while providing alternatives and helping people to maintain social distancing.

The service has been successfully piloted over the past 12 months and it will be rolled out soon.

Building for the future

We're not just dealing with the immense challenges of the present.

We're building for the future too.

Transport is not just about how we get from place to place.

It also shapes the places; for good or bad...

Towns. Cities. Whole nations.

We now have an opportunity to use the power of transport to improve long-standing national weaknesses, and create something better.

Rebalancing the economy

The UK's unbalanced economy is one such weakness.

Our mission is to level-up Britain.

The COVID-19 outbreak must be the catalyst to get it done.

Levelling up. And speeding up.

So, while roads and railways are less busy, we're accelerating vital projects.

Take the North, for example.

This bank holiday weekend, we're carrying out vital work to fix Leeds station.

Continuing to build a new platform...

... Installing new points and switches...

... And improving the track to Wakefield.

Just part of 490 separate engineering projects happening around the country this bank holiday weekend.

Work that would normally take months of weekend closures are much quicker on these quieter railways.

Beeching cuts

And we're getting on with plans to reverse some of the so-called Beeching rail cuts too.

Dr Beeching wrote a report back in the 1960s which led to the closure of one-third of our railway network.

2,363 stations, 5,000 miles of track identified for closure.

Many of the places removed from the map never recovered.

That report was perhaps the origin of the 'left-behind town'.

But we're working to reverse Beeching.

The process has already started in Blyth in the North East and Fleetwood in the North West...

I visited in January, and also took the opportunity to visit Horden Peter Lee to see the building work.

There used to be a train station 200 yards away, but it was closed, and the town cut off by the Beeching axe.

This new station will connect a community of over 50,000 people, improving their quality of life.

And today, the [next 10 schemes to benefit are announced](#).

It's development funding...

... But if they stack up, then we're going to build them fast.

Amongst the many schemes is the reinstatement of the Ivanhoe line in the East Midlands, from Leicester to Burton, via Coalville and Ashby.

And branch lines on the Isle of Wight, and a new station at Wellington in Somerset.

Roads

But no matter how great we make the railway of the future, millions will still rely on the car.

That's why today I'm publishing the [preferred route to complete the dual carriageway on the A66 from Scotch Corner to Penrith](#).

The first new all dual-carriageway across the Pennines in 50 years.

This is a £1 billion programme that will transform capacity by upgrading junctions and widening the road.

These road and rail schemes will be the first of many...

Binding our country together, and connecting people with jobs.

Towns and cities

But it isn't just the balance between regions that we need to reshape.

It's hard to see millions who – until a few weeks ago – commuted by train into Manchester, London, Birmingham every day – immediately going back to the same old ways.

So we have to reshape our towns and cities too...

The Prime Minister once said:

Cities are where inspiration and innovation happens ... because people can bump into each other, spark off one another, compete, collaborate, invent and innovate. That's when we get the explosion, or flash of creativity and innovation.

And yet – with social distancing – it makes all that rather more difficult...

So we have to find new ways of making it happen.

Therefore – as conditions allow and not until July – we will be looking to support creative ways for businesses to reopen, whilst maintaining social distancing.

We know restaurants and bars will want to start trading again, and we will work with them so we can enjoy an outdoor summer in a safe and responsible environment.

Car parking

For those who live too far to cycle and walk, and must drive to major conurbations, we will repurpose parking in places just outside town centres...

... so people can park on the outskirts and finish their journeys on foot or bike or even e-scooter.

Our aim with many of these measures is not merely to get through the lifting of restrictions, and then return to how things were...

... But to come out of this recovery stronger, by permanently changing the way we use transport.

Cycling

Take the bike for example, previously we announced the introduction of a scheme to help bring bicycles back to a roadworthy condition...

... relieving the pressure on public transport, and improving the nation's health.

Today I can provide the detail of the new £50 bicycle maintenance voucher.

Available from next month, the scheme will help up to half-a-million people drag bikes out of retirement....

... Speeding up the cycling revolution...

... Helping individuals become fitter and healthier...

... And reducing air pollution, which remains a hidden killer.

Clean air should be as big a priority for us in the 21st century as clean water was to the Victorians in the 19th.

The measures discussed today will help...

... more passengers use trains, buses and trams safely....

... More commuters to take up active travel....

... And more people to benefit from infrastructure improvements in the Northern Powerhouse, and across the country.

They give us all an opportunity to harness the power of transport...

Not just to help us return to the lives in the post-COVID-19 world...

... But to make our economy more resilient.

Our population healthier.

And to change our nation for the better.

See also

[Transport Secretary announces new measures to “keep passengers safe now and level up for the future”](#), news story, 23 May 2020