

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

Good afternoon,

I am sorry to report that the situation has deteriorated since I last spoke to you three days ago.

Yesterday afternoon, I was briefed on the latest data showing the virus spreading more rapidly in London, the South East and the East of England than would be expected given the tough restrictions which are already in place.

I also received an explanation for why the virus is spreading more rapidly in these areas. It appears this spread is now being driven by the new variant of the virus, which we first learned about earlier this week.

Our advisory group on New and Emerging Respiratory Virus Threats – NERVTAG – has spent the last few days analysing the new variant.

There is no evidence the variant causes more severe illness or higher mortality, but it does appear to be passed on significantly more easily.

NERVTAG's early analysis suggests the new variant could increase R by 0.4 or greater. Although there is considerable uncertainty, it may be up to 70% more transmissible than the old variant.

This is early data. It is subject to review. It is the best we have at the moment, and we have to act on information as we have it because this is now spreading very fast.

The U.K. has by far the best genomic sequencing ability in the world, which means we are better able to identify new strains like this than any other country.

The Chief Medical Officer last night submitted our findings so far to the World Health Organisation and we will continue to be totally transparent with our global partners.

There is still much we don't know. While we are fairly certain the variant is transmitted more quickly, there is no evidence to suggest that it is more lethal or causes more severe illness. Equally there is no evidence to suggest the vaccine will be any less effective against the new variant.

Our experts will continue their work to improve our understanding of the variant.

So we are learning more about this variant as we go.

But we know enough already to be sure that we must act now.

I met ministers on the Covid Operations Committee last night and again first thing this morning, and Cabinet met at lunchtime to agree the following actions.

First, we will introduce new restrictions in the most affected areas – specifically those parts of London, the South East and the East of England which are currently in tier 3.

These areas will enter a new tier 4, which will be broadly equivalent to the national restrictions which were in place in England in November.

That means:

Residents in those areas must stay at home, apart from limited exemptions set out in law. Non-essential retail, indoor gyms and leisure facilities, and personal care services must close. People must work from home if they can, but may travel to work if this is not possible, for example in the construction and manufacturing sectors. People should not enter or leave tier 4 areas, and tier 4 residents must not stay overnight away from home. Individuals can only meet one person from another household in an outdoor public space.

Unlike the November national restrictions, communal worship can continue to take place in tier 4 areas.

These measures will take effect from tomorrow morning.

All tiers will continue to be regularly reviewed in line with the approach previously set out, with the next formal review point taking place on 30 December.

Second, we are issuing new advice on travel.

Although the new variant is concentrated in tier 4 areas, it is nonetheless present at lower levels around the country.

We are asking everyone, in all tiers, to stay local.

People should carefully consider whether they need to travel abroad and follow the rules in their tier.

Those in tier 4 areas will not be permitted to travel abroad apart from limited exceptions, such as for work purposes.

Third, we must, I am afraid, look again at Christmas.

As Prime Minister, it is my duty to take the difficult decisions, to do what is right to protect the people of this country.

Given the early evidence we have on this new variant of the virus, and the potential risk it poses, it is with a heavy heart that I must tell you we

cannot continue with Christmas as planned.

In England, those living in tier 4 areas should not mix with anyone outside their own household at Christmas, though support bubbles will remain in place for those at particular risk of loneliness or isolation.

Across the rest of the country, the Christmas rules allowing up to three households to meet will now be limited to Christmas Day only, rather than the five days as previously set out.

As before, there will be no relaxation on 31 December, so people must not break the rules at New Year.

I know how much emotion people invest in this time of year, and how important it is for grandparents to see their grandchildren, and for families to be together.

So I know how disappointing this will be, but we have said throughout this pandemic that we must and we will be guided by the science.

When the science changes, we must change our response.

When the virus changes its method of attack, we must change our method of defence.

As your Prime Minister, I sincerely believe there is no alternative open to me. Without action, the evidence suggests infections would soar, hospitals would become overwhelmed and many thousands more would lose their lives.

I want to stress we are not alone in this fight – many of our European friends and neighbours are being forced to take similar action.

We are working closely with the devolved administrations to protect people in every part of the UK.

Of course there is now hope – real hope – that we will soon be rid of this virus.

That prospect is growing with every day that passes and every vaccine dose administered.

The UK was the first country in the western world to start using a clinically approved vaccine.

So please, if the NHS contacts you then get your vaccine – and join the 350,000 people across the UK who have already had their first dose.

Yes, Christmas this year will be very different, but we must be realistic.

We are sacrificing our chance to see loved ones this Christmas, so we have a better chance of protecting their lives so we can see them at future Christmases.

As sure as night follows day, we will beat back this virus.

We will defeat it.

And we will reclaim our lives.

Statement from Chief Medical Officer, Professor Chris Whitty about new strain of Covid-19

Press release

New strain of Covid-19 reported to World Health Organisation



Chief Medical Officer for England, Professor Chris Whitty said:

As announced on Monday, the UK has identified a new variant of Covid-19 through Public Health England's genomic surveillance.

As a result of the rapid spread of the new variant, preliminary modelling data and rapidly rising incidence rates in the South East, the New and Emerging Respiratory Virus Threats Advisory Group (NERVTAG) now consider that the new strain can spread more quickly.

We have alerted the World Health Organisation and are continuing to analyse the available data to improve our understanding.

There is no current evidence to suggest the new strain causes a higher mortality rate or that it affects vaccines and treatments although urgent work is underway to confirm this.

Given this latest development it is now more vital than ever that the public continue to take action in their area to reduce transmission.

English sparkling wine leading global innovation

English sparkling wine is fast becoming a leader on the global stage – not just for its exceptional quality and dedicated producers, but also with the industry's thirst to drive innovation.

Backed by £6m of government investment, the industry is embracing innovation that combines methods cultivated for the first vines in Roman times, with the latest technology to protect our countryside and land.

This investment has supported the creation of digital weather stations and systems to recognise and remove potentially harmful debris and micro-organisms from grapes, extending shelf life and reducing waste and lowering CO2 emissions.

Our wine growers are also using traditional methods to boost their harvests. Nyetimber, one of the largest producers of sparkling wine in England, uses Southdown sheep to graze among its vineyards in the South of England when the vines are dormant. The keen four-legged helpers maintain grass on the estate, managing weeds and enriching the soil by supporting the natural and diverse nutrient cycle.

Food Minister Victoria Prentis said:

It's fantastic that English sparkling wine is being increasingly recognised as the premium drink of choice to celebrate Christmas here in the UK.

Growers and producers in England set a high bar internationally, thanks to their thirst for innovation and due to unique methods of managing their estates. It is truly inspiring to see ecologically-friendly and surprising ways to make sure the vineyards are well-maintained and that the soil is as nutrient-rich as possible.

Simon Robinson, Chairman, Wines of Great Britain (WineGB) said:

Our fast growing industry is poised at a truly exciting stage of its development. There are now more than 700 vineyards across England and Wales, more than 200 of which will be open to welcome visitors when Covid restrictions are lifted.

Our highest tier of sparkling wines continue to gain international acclaim for their quality and are competing toe to toe with Champagnes on a world stage. This year we focussed on increasing awareness in this hero style, now referred to as our Classic Method sparkling wines. We can also boast a widely acclaimed industry sustainability scheme adopted by an ever increasing number of vineyards and wineries.

With support from government and inward investment from individuals and even Champagne houses, we are growing our reputation as one of the world's most exciting emergent wine regions. There has never been a better time to celebrate Christmas with a bottle of English or Welsh sparkling wine.

Since the Roman times vines have been cultivated across England, with the Domesday Book referring to Southern English vineyards as early as the 11th century.

Our climate complements slow-ripening grapes giving them their unique, delicate flavour – one of many reasons this beverage is so distinctive.

Today, sparkling wine makes up to 72% of all wine produced in the UK and is served regularly at high-profile occasions, such as Royal state dinners and the Prime Minister's official receptions. In 2018 and in early 2019, England became one of the fastest expanding wine regions in the world.

Government investment in the wine industry has included support for:

- frost fans or protective storage and production solutions,
 - new wineries and cellars,
 - new testing suites and visit centres,
 - research projects into weather forecasting for vineyards,
 - creating online retail platforms for online sales,
 - building digital weather stations or providing weather forecast services, to help predict and mitigate impacts of adverse weather on vines,
 - helping to expand winery areas, equipment and tourist facilities, further creating jobs and increasing productivity.

Through Innovate UK, Government funding has been provided for projects that continue to create multiple forward-looking industry solutions – such as the new system to recognise and remove potentially harmful debris and micro-organisms from grapes, which results in extended grape shelf life and reduced waste and CO2 emissions.

As we leave the Common Agricultural Policy behind and move towards our new system, we will continue to build on these initiatives, for example through a new Research & Development package for England, to unlock innovation and to encourage agri-food businesses to become more involved in innovative solutions.

The government will also continue to support our wine industry in taking

further steps forward, such as helping them with cross-industry collaboration to encourage events and tourism. The wine sector will also be eligible to apply for grants through the Farming Investment Fund.

English sparkling wine is globally acclaimed, winning top awards such as the prestigious Winemaker of the Year Award at the 2018 International Wine and Spirits Competition awards. The Government-funded Food is GREAT campaign also promotes the unique qualities of English sparkling wine to international audiences – from the US to Japan – through consumer experiences, trade shows and Embassy and Consulate receptions.

[Tough new rules crackdown on sellers to save important cultural items for the public](#)

- The increased protections will help prevent some of the nation's greatest treasures from being lost to overseas buyers
- New rules will see an end to 'gentleman's agreement' in first shake up of export deferral system in over 65 years

Culture Minister Caroline Dinenage has announced that new protections will be introduced for museums and galleries trying to save our most important treasures from overseas buyers.

Following a public consultation, the introduction of legally binding offers will see an end to the 'gentleman's agreement' that has caused issues for UK museums and galleries when a seller pulls out at the last minute, causing fundraising efforts to be wasted and the work to be lost to public collections.

Under the current system, a pause in the export of national treasures overseas can be ordered by the Culture Minister to give UK museums and buyers the chance to raise funds and keep them in the country. If a UK institution puts in a matching offer on an item subject to an export deferral, and the owner has agreed to sell, it is down to the seller to honour that commitment.

Although a rare occurrence, in the last five years, eight items have been lost to UK collections when a seller refused to honor the 'gentleman's agreement' resulting in months of vital fundraising work by national institutions going to waste. For example, in 2017 the National Gallery raised £30 million to acquire a work which was subsequently pulled from sale by the owner.

The new rules announced today will mean that this can no longer happen. The introduction of legally binding offers will mean that once a UK institution

has stepped forward, and an owner has agreed to sell, then they must proceed with the sale.

Culture Minister, Caroline Dinenage, said:

Our museums and galleries are full of treasures that tell us about who we are and where we came from. The export bar system exists so that we can offer public institutions the opportunity to acquire new items of national importance.

It is right that this crackdown will make it easier for us to save items and avoid wasted fundraising efforts by our museums. It will mean that more works can be saved for the nation and go on display, educating and inspiring generations to come.

National Gallery Director, Dr Gabriele Finaldi, said:

I welcome the new rules that remove the ambiguities that have led to major works of art being lost to the nation. The clarity will be beneficial to museums and vendors alike.

Funds from the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport have also been made available for the development of a new digital system for export licences, which will be overseen by Arts Council England. This will allow sellers to apply for their export licence online, saving time, effort and expense for exporters. The new system is expected to be live by Autumn 2021.

The new rules, which will come into force on 1 January 2021, will be the first changes to the export bar system in over 65 years and reaffirm the Government's commitment to the protection of our national treasures, owners' rights, world-class museums, and the UK's reputation as a successful international art market in light of the ongoing covid-19 pandemic.

Items that have been saved through the current system include the sledge and flag from Ernest Shackleton's Nimrod Antarctic Expedition of 1907-09, which has been acquired by the National Maritime Museum and the Scott Polar Research Institute. Salvador Dali's Lobster Telephone and Mae West Lips Sofa which were acquired by the National Galleries of Scotland and the Victoria and Albert Museum. Lawrence of Arabia's steel and silver dagger which found a home at the National Army Museum, and the notebooks of Charles Lyell, Darwin's mentor that were acquired by the University of Edinburgh.

In the ten year period to 2018-19, 39% of items at risk of leaving the UK – worth a total of £103.3 million – were saved for the nation by UK institutions.

ENDS

Notes to editors:

Until 1939, the UK had no legal controls on the export of works of art, books, manuscripts and other antiques. The outbreak of the Second World War made it necessary to impose controls on exports generally in order to conserve national resources.

Items that are being sold abroad are assessed at the point of application for an export licence by the Reviewing Committee on the Export of Works of Art and Objects of Cultural Interest, which establishes whether an object is a national treasure because its departure from the UK would be a misfortune on the basis that it meets the 'Waverley criteria'.

These are:

Is it closely connected with our history and national life? Is it of outstanding aesthetic importance? Is it of outstanding significance for the study of some particular branch of art, learning or history?

The export control process has always sought to strike a balance, as fairly as possible, between the various interests concerned in any application for an export licence.

The rules will apply to applications for export licences made on or after 1 January 2021. The form can be downloaded from the Arts Council's website.

[New sites to test how connecting people with nature can improve mental health](#)

Seven sites which will test the ways in which connecting people with nature can improve mental wellbeing have been awarded a share of a £5.77 million pot, Environment Minister Rebecca Pow has announced today (Saturday 19 December).

The new test and learn sites, which are based across England, will focus on communities hardest hit by coronavirus. This could include those living in deprived areas, people with mental health conditions or BAME communities. Since the coronavirus pandemic, when many people have experienced distress, loneliness or anxiety, there has been an increased public awareness of the benefits of regular access to green spaces. [Studies have shown](#) that this has the potential to improve mental health and wellbeing.

The sites announced today will each explore and bring together opportunities for communities to get involved in their natural environment. This could include activities such as walking, cycling, community gardening and food-growing projects, and practical conservation tasks such as tree planting. For people who need help to get involved this could include supported visits to local green spaces, waterways and the coast, and other outdoor activities to reduce isolation and loneliness.

This will benefit thousands of people across the country, including people in urban, rural and coastal areas. The successful projects are:

- Humber Coast and Vale Health and Care Partnership
- South Yorkshire and Bassetlaw Integrated Care System
- Nottingham and Nottinghamshire Integrated Care System
- Joined Up Care Derbyshire Sustainability and Transformation Partnership
- Greater Manchester Health & Social Care Partnership
- Surrey Heartlands Health and Care Partnership
- Bristol, North Somerset and South Gloucestershire Sustainability and Transformation Partnership

Today's announcement builds on [the fund announced in July by Environment Secretary, George Eustice](#) supported by a cross-governmental partnership of Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, Department of Health and Social Care, Natural England, NHS England, Public Health England, and Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, and welcoming two new partners: Sport England and the National Academy for Social Prescribing (NASP). A further £1.5 million has been confirmed today, boosting the total to £5.77 million and supporting more sites across the country.

This will support the Green Social Prescribing programme, which is the practice of supporting patients to engage in nature-based activities, and play an important role in the nation's recovery as we build back better and greener. If successful, the test and learn sites could be rolled out across the country.

Environment Minister, Rebecca Pow, said:

Many of us have seen first-hand during this difficult time the benefit that connecting with nature can have on our health and mental wellbeing, and I am delighted to announce the first sites for this inspiring scheme which will improve people's access to and engagement with nature and green spaces.

As we build back better and greener from the pandemic, we are looking forward to working closely with these sites to deliver an enhanced green social prescribing offer which will deliver real benefits for individuals across the country.

[Evidence from Natural England](#) shows that almost half the population say that they are spending more time outside than before the pandemic, while the majority of adults surveyed by [Forest Research](#) agreed that their level of

happiness when in nature has increased. However, the outbreak also has exacerbated health inequalities and levels of mental ill health whilst also highlighting the inequalities of access to greenspaces.

Chief Executive of Natural England, Marian Spain, said:

Natural England's evidence has made clear that nature is good for our health. For many years we've been working closely with our health professional colleagues to make sure we can create a healthy society, which is even more important as part of a green recovery to help everybody cope with the long term impacts of the restrictions on day to day life necessitated by the coronavirus.

I'm delighted that Natural England has been able to shape this innovative partnership to consolidate green social prescribing as a core part of the government's wider ambitions for health care and health prevention within the NHS. A much needed increase the use of green social prescribing services will improve the nation's mental health, reduce demand on our health system and – crucially – reduce the stark inequalities in access to nature, which have been brought into sharp focus during the pandemic.

It's vital that the whole of our society has access to these benefits. I'm delighted that Natural England will be working with the seven areas who have been awarded funding to help support a resurgence in the provision and use of parks, nature reserves and greenspaces in towns and in the countryside.

The projects will be managed by NHS England and NHS Improvement with support from Defra, Department of Health and Social Care, Natural England, Public Health England, Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, NASP and Sport England.

Health Minister, Jo Churchill, said:

The response to our call for projects has been impressive and these pilots signal the exciting next stage of green social prescribing.

Nature-based activities can improve people's physical and mental wellbeing which is especially important for those communities and groups which have been hit hardest by the pandemic.

I look forward to seeing how these innovative schemes help tackle health inequalities, and improve outcomes for both those taking part and the environment.

James Sanderson, NHS England's director of personalised care and chief executive of the National Academy of Social Prescribing, said:

The pandemic has reminded us how much open spaces and exercise can do for our health so I'm pleased to see this further progress in the NHS' drive to offer people personalised support for their individual health and wellbeing needs, and thank the people leading these seven sites.

Social prescribing link workers are already helping NHS patients across the country and this latest initiative will support even more people in some parts of the country hit hard by Covid-19.

Professor John Newton, Director of Health Improvement at Public Health England, said:

PHE is delighted to support the seven pioneering test and learn sites and be part of the next stage of this programme.

The COVID-19 pandemic has made many more of us aware of how much we value and rely on outdoor spaces to support our health and wellbeing.

We look forward to working with the seven selected sites, seeing how they use the funding to help local communities access green spaces, maintain a healthy weight, and boost mental health, and sharing this learning across the country.

The seven successful test and learn sites will run for over two years.

Today's announcement builds on the government's commitment to transform mental health services and increase social prescribing, set out in the [NHS Long Term Plan](#) and supported through the work of the National Academy for Social Prescribing.

The [government's 25 Year Environment Plan](#) sets out an ambition to help more people, from all backgrounds, to engage with and spend time in green and blue spaces in their everyday lives, and the [landmark Environment Bill](#) will put the environment at the centre of policy making to ensure that we have a cleaner, greener and more resilient country for the next generation.

The green social prescribing pilots are being taken forward as part of HMT's £200m Shared Outcomes Fund, a fund announced by HM Treasury to pilot innovative ways of working that will improve collaboration on priority policy areas that sit across, and are delivered by, multiple public sector organisations to improve outcomes and deliver better value for citizens. HMT have approved a grant of £4.27 to this programme of work. Additional funding and support has now been given by NHSE, NASP and Sport England.