

Local lockdown measures to continue in Leicester with modifications

Mr Speaker, with permission, I would like to make a statement on our action against coronavirus and the decisions we've been taking throughout the day today to determine what we need in Leicester.

We continue our determined fight against this invisible killer.

The number of new cases yesterday was 642, lower than when lockdown began.

And according to the latest figures, the number of deaths in all settings is down to 66.

We are successfully turning the tide.

And part of this success lies in our ability to take action locally, whenever we see it flare up.

Often this is on a very small scale – swiftly and quietly – like in an individual farm or a factory.

But when needed, we also act on a broader basis, as we have done in Leicester.

And today I wanted to update the House on the situation in Leicester.

At the end of June we made the decision to close schools and non-essential retail in the city, and not to introduce the relaxations that applied elsewhere from 4 July, like the reopening of pubs.

This was not an easy decision, but it was one that we had to take.

At that point, the 7-day infection rate in Leicester was 135 cases per 100,000 people, which was 3 times higher than the next highest city.

And Leicester was accounting for 10% of all positive cases in the country.

This decision was taken with the agreement of all local leaders.

And I am grateful to the leader and officers of Leicestershire County Council, and to the officers of Leicester City Council, for their support and hard work.

Since then, we've doubled testing.

And through a monumental programme of communications and community engagement, we've been pushing our important messages.

I committed to reviewing the measures in Leicester every 2 weeks.

This morning I chaired a Gold meeting of the Local Action Committee to discuss the latest situation.

And this afternoon, I held a further meeting with local leaders, Public Health England, the JBC, the local resilience forum, and my clinical advisers.

The latest data show that the 7-day infection rate in Leicester is now 119 cases per 100,000 people, and that the percentage of people who have tested positive is now at 4.8%.

These are positive indicators, especially in light of the huge increase in testing in the local area.

But they still remain well above the national average, and the average for surrounding areas.

Thanks to the incredible efforts of people of Leicester, who have followed the lockdown, even while others have had their freedom relaxed, we are now in a position to relax some, but not all, of the restrictions that were in place.

So, from 24 July we'll be removing the restrictions on schools and early years childcare and taking a more targeted approach to the restrictions on non-essential retail.

Replacing the national decision to close non-essential retail with a local power to close them where necessary. This is all part of our more targeted approach.

However, other restrictions, like those for travel and only having social gatherings of up to 6 people, for example, will remain in force.

And measures introduced on 4 July, like re-opening the hospitality sector, will also not yet apply.

The initial definition of the geography covered by the lockdown was a decision I delegated to Leicestershire County Council, and they made and published.

The Leader of Leicestershire County Council, Nicholas Rushton, has advised me, based on the data and the best public health advice, that he recommends these restrictions now apply only to the Oadby and Wigston area of Leicestershire, as well as the City of Leicester itself.

And I have accepted his advice.

Some say that the local lockdown is unnecessary. I wish this were true.

But sadly it remains vital for the health of everyone in Leicester, and the rest of the country, that these restrictions stay in place.

We will review them again in a fortnight.

I hope that this careful easing of restrictions will provide some comfort to people in Leicester and Leicestershire.

And I'd say this directly to the people of Leicester and Leicestershire – I'd like to pay tribute to you all.

Your perseverance and your hard work has brought real and tangible results.

And you have shown respect for one another.

I understand this hasn't been easy.

Strong representations have been made to me by my honourable friends, the members for Charnwood, Harborough and South Leicestershire and for the members opposite who represent the city of Leicester, on behalf of constituents who have been impacted, and constituents who wanted to see the lockdown lifted too.

However, there is still a lot to do. And the public health messages remain critical.

So please get a test if you have symptoms.

Keep following the rules that are in place.

Please do not lose your resolve.

Because the sooner we get this virus under control, the sooner we can restore life in Leicester, and across the country, to normal.

Mr Speaker, this statement also gives me the opportunity to inform the House of an issue relating to testing.

We have identified some swabs that are not up to the usual high standard that we expect, and we will be carrying out further testing of this batch.

As a precautionary measure and while we investigate further, we are requesting that the use of these Randox swab test kits are paused in all settings until further notice.

This problem was brought to my attention yesterday afternoon. We contacted settings using these swabs last night, and published the pause notice immediately.

Clinical advice is that there is no evidence of any harm.

That test results are not affected.

There is no evidence of issues with any of our other tests swabs.

And there is no impact on access to testing.

Mr Speaker, our ability to take action on this local level is the keystone of our plan to defeat coronavirus.

So we can keep this virus on the run and defeat it once and for all.

I'm grateful to you for allowing me to make this statement at this time and I commend this statement to the House.

[Public service pensions update: a GAD technical bulletin](#)

News story

On 16 July 2020, the Chief Secretary to the Treasury provided an update to Parliament on public service pensions.



On 16 July 2020, the Chief Secretary to the Treasury provided an update to Parliament on public service pensions.

His statement covered options for removing the discrimination between scheme members arising from transitional protection arrangements, and future pension provision; as well as an update on the cost control mechanism.

This latest [GAD Technical Bulletin](#) provides an overview of that statement and associated publications issued by HM Treasury.

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[Commonwealth stands together on the](#)

global response to coronavirus

Press release

The Prime Minister has issued a joint statement alongside 53 Commonwealth Heads of Government, vowing to stand together against the challenges posed by the Coronavirus pandemic.



The statement says the Commonwealth is committed to protect the health of all 2.4 billion of its citizens by improving access to essential health services and safe, effective and affordable medicines and vaccines for all, particularly the most vulnerable and high-risk populations.

They will work with international partners to address the global threat from the pandemic, supporting the G20 and International Financial Institutions' action plans to tackle the crisis. This includes protecting employment opportunities, particularly for the Commonwealth's 1.2 billion young people.

Prime Minister Boris Johnson said:

It is imperative we stick together in times of uncertainty, which is why the UK is proud to stand with the Commonwealth family in the fight against Coronavirus.

Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab said

We warmly welcome the commitment of all members of the Commonwealth to contribute to the global health response, protect vulnerable countries and support the global economy.

The UK and the Commonwealth family will continue to champion inclusion, protecting and strengthening initiatives which promote gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls, such as 12 years of quality education for all.

The joint statement is available [here](#)

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Digital diplomacy: UK's Asia Minister discusses science and business links with Vietnam as part of 'renewed focus' on relations

Today's meetings – all of which took place virtually due to the ongoing disruption to international travel caused by COVID-19 – follow on from a similar day of engagement with the region last month. This reflects a drive towards building ties with Vietnam, not only as the current Chair of ASEAN and partner on the UNSC, but as an important strategic partner.

With the renewal of the UK-Vietnam Strategic Partnership Agreement, collaboration on tackling climate change ahead of the COP26 summit and the UK's application to become an ASEAN Dialogue Partner all on the agenda, these talks added new positive momentum to the UK-Vietnam relationship.

Speaking after today's virtual meetings, the Minister for Asia Nigel Adams said:

Through the conversations I have had today, it is clear that out of difficult times come opportunities, and that the UK-Vietnam relationship is set to go from strength to strength.

Whether that's in health cooperation with our scientists collaborating to help in the global fight against the disease, work on global issues like climate change, or business links with our bilateral trade tripling from less than £2bn to nearly £6bn in the last 10 years, it is clear that our partnership is growing.

In the post-COVID-19 new normal, we have an opportunity to recover together and better. While I cannot be in Vietnam this week, I am

looking forward to fostering the growing relations between our two countries and the wider region as a whole, as part of our renewed focus on partners in South East Asia.

The day began with a meeting with Vice Foreign Minister To Anh Dung, where the Minister was joined by Her Majesty's Ambassador to Vietnam Gareth Ward. Then came a roundtable with Director General Long and senior members of the Diplomatic Academy of Vietnam, to discuss Vietnam's role in the world and how best to address key global challenges and threats.

There were further roundtables on Vietnam's business environment and on shared healthcare challenges, including with members of Oxford University Clinical Research Unit, who have been supporting Vietnam's COVID response, before the day finished with a session on green recovery involving Vietnam's Ministries of Natural Resources and Environment, and Industry and Trade.

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[End of mission of Her Majesty's Ambassador to Paraguay](#)

World news story

Mr Matthew Hedges will finish his term as Her Majesty's Ambassador to Paraguay in August.



Her Majesty's Ambassador Matthew Hedges

Mr Matthew Hedges took office at the British Embassy in Asuncion in August 2017. He will finish his mission in Paraguay in August 2020. Deputy Head of Mission [John Davie](#), who joined the British Embassy in Asuncion in June, will become Chargé D'affaires in the transition period after Mr Hedges' departure. The official announcement of Mr Hedges' successor as Her Majesty's Ambassador to Paraguay is expected shortly.

During his three years as British Ambassador, Mr Hedges promoted the expansion of commercial ties between the UK and Paraguay, overseeing multiple exchanges between experts and business leaders. Cooperation in education and defence became a signature of the Paraguay-UK relationship throughout his tenure. The Royal Military Academy Sandhurst resumed its scholarship program for Paraguayan military officers, while the BECAL and the Chevening programmes signed an alliance which increased the number scholarships for Paraguayan citizens. Projects on transparency, media freedom, rights of women to live free of violence and rights of the LGBTQI+ community were some of the areas in which the British Embassy also offered its cooperation. Throughout his posting, but especially during the coronavirus pandemic, he has led the embassy's efforts to support British nationals in the country.

Reflecting on his time in Paraguay, Mr Hedges said:

These have been an extraordinary three years in which I have found a new home, a passion for Jopara and mbeju, and a deep connection with the people and land of Paraguay.

Paraguay and the UK have much to offer each other in business, education, addressing global challenges like climate change, and shared values. This work will continue after I leave, through my excellent embassy colleagues and successor, who is due to arrive in a few months.

After his time in Paraguay, Mr Hedges will join the Westminster Foundation for Democracy in London as Director for Asia.

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