

Update on new social distancing rules

With permission, I'd like to make a further statement on coronavirus.

We've done much as a nation to get this virus under control.

And so we have been able to restore so much.

Just one example: figures today show that radiotherapy services in England have now returned to pre-pandemic levels.

And this is good news and will save lives.

But as I said to the House on Tuesday, we are seeing some concerning trends, including an increase in the number of positive cases, especially but not only among younger people.

As the Chief Medical Officer said yesterday, we must learn from the recent experience of countries like Belgium who successfully put in place measures to combat a similar rise in infections.

And so today, Mr Speaker, I'd like to update the House on a number of new measures that will help us to get this virus under control to make the rules clearer, simpler and more enforceable.

First, Mr Speaker, we are putting in place new rules on social contact.

We have listened to feedback – from the public and the police.

And we are simplifying and strengthening the rules, making them easier to understand and easier to enforce.

In England, from Monday, we are introducing the rule of 6.

Nobody should meet socially in groups of more than 6 – and if you do, you will be breaking the law.

This will apply in any setting, indoors or outdoors, at home or in the pub.

It replaces both the existing ban on gatherings of more than 30 and the current guidance on allowing 2 households to meet indoors.

There will be some exemptions.

For example, if a single household or support bubble is larger than 6, they can still gather. Places of education and work are unaffected.

COVID secure weddings, wedding receptions and funerals can go ahead, up to a limit of 30 people.

Organised sport and exercise is exempt.

Mr Speaker, these are not measures that we take lightly.

I understand that for many they will mean changing long-awaited plans or missing out on precious moments with loved ones.

But this sacrifice is vital to control the virus for the long term – and save lives.

And I vow that we will not keep these rules in place for any longer than we have to.

Stronger enforcement

Second, Mr Speaker, we are putting in place stronger enforcement.

Hospitality venues will be legally required to request the contact details of every party.

They will have to record and retain these details for 21 days, and provide them to NHS Test and Trace without delay when required.

This system is working well voluntarily, with minimal friction. And is very effective. But it isn't in place in all venues and so it is only fair that it is followed by all.

We are supporting local authorities to make greater use of their powers to close venues that are breaking the rules and pose a risk to public health, and fines will be levied against hospitality venues that fail to ensure their premises are COVID secure.

Keeping education going

Mr Speaker, our goal, as much as possible, is to protect keeping schools and businesses open, while controlling the virus.

The data show that while the cases among 17- to 30-year-olds are rising, the number of cases among the under-16s remain very low.

And we all know how important it is to keep schools open.

As the Chief Medical Officers have said, the long-term risks to children's life chances of not going to school are significant – and far greater than the health risks of going back to school. The latest data confirms this.

University students will also soon be returning.

The Department for Education has published the [updated guidance for universities](#) on how they can operate in a COVID secure way.

This includes a clear request not to send students home in the event of an outbreak in order to avoid spreading the virus across the country.

If you are a student who is about to return to university or go to university

for the first time, then please, for the sake of your education and your parents' and grandparents' health, follow the rules and don't gather in groups of more than 6 people.

Test and trace

Mr Speaker, our ability to test and trace on a large scale is also fundamental to controlling the virus, as we've discussed in the House many times.

The latest data shows that we are doing more testing per head than other European countries like Germany and Spain. And we have record capacity – we've increased capacity by over 10,000 tests a day over the last fortnight.

And while there have been challenges in access to tests, the vast majority of people get their tests rapidly and close to home.

The average distance travelled to a test site is 6.4 miles and 90% of people who book a test travel 22 miles or less.

We already have more than 400 testing sites in operation – we added 19 last week and plan 17 more this week.

However, as capacity has increased, we have seen an even faster rise in demand, including a significant increase from people who do not have symptoms and are not eligible for a test.

This takes tests away from people who need them.

So, if you have symptoms of coronavirus, or are asked by a clinician or local authority to get a test, then please apply.

But if you do not have symptoms and haven't been asked, then you are not eligible for a test.

At the same time, we are developing new types of test, which are simple, quick and scaleable.

They use swabs or saliva and they can be turned around in 90 or even 20 minutes.

The so-called Operation Moonshot, to deploy mass testing, will allow people to lead more normal lives, and reduce the need for social distancing.

For instance, it could mean theatres and sports venues could test audience members on the day and let in those with a negative result.

Workplaces could be opened up to all those who test negative that morning, and anyone isolating because they are a contact, or quarantining after travelling abroad, could be tested and released.

We are piloting this approach right now, and verifying the new technology.

Then it can be rolled out nationwide.

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I am looking forward to rolling out this programme and this work, which has been underway for some time already.

I am absolutely determined that we will get there.

And if everything comes together, and if the technology comes off, it will be possible even for challenging sectors, like theatres, to get closer to normal before Christmas.

Call to action

Finally, Mr Speaker, the most important thing that each and every one of us can do is to remember the small things that can make a big difference.

Hands, face, space and if you have symptoms, get a test.

Hands. Wash your hands, regularly and for 20 seconds.

Face. Wear a face covering over your mouth and nose if you are in an enclosed space and in close contact with people you don't normally meet.

Space. Always stay 2 metres away from people you don't live with. Or 1 metre with extra precautions, like extra ventilation, screens or face coverings.

And of course, if you have COVID symptoms, get a test and self-isolate.

Conclusion

Mr Speaker, coronavirus is a powerful adversary.

And when called upon, the British people have done so much to blunt the force of this invisible killer.

And now at this important juncture, we are being called upon once more to deliver our collective commitment, to follow the rules and to get this virus under control.

And I commend this statement to the House.