

Gavin Williamson speech on COVID-19 response

I'd like to welcome you to today's briefing from Downing Street.

I am joined by Jenny Harries, the Deputy Chief Medical Officer, who will be sharing with you the latest detailed data on coronavirus.

On any normal Sunday afternoon, many of you would have been out with your family and friends enjoying the sunshine. And tomorrow, many children would be going to school for the first time after a two-week break.

But these are not normal times and we are asking you to stay at home, so can I start by thanking you for all the sacrifices that you've already had to make and that you continue to make.

I know this has not been easy. But it's the surest way that we have to protect the NHS and to save lives.

I can report, through the Government's ongoing monitoring and testing programme, as of today 482,063 tests for coronavirus have been carried out in Great Britain, including 21,626 test carried out yesterday.

120,067 people have tested positive – that's an increase of 5,850 cases since yesterday. 18,118 people are currently in hospital with coronavirus in the UK, compared to 18,006 on 17 April.

And sadly, of those hospitalised with the virus, 16,060 have now died. That's an increase of 596 fatalities since yesterday.

We mustn't forget that behind every single statistic there is a heart-breaking story and my sincere condolences go out to everyone has lost someone that they love.

These are challenging times for all of us and each of us has a role to play in fighting this virus. Those who are working in the NHS, those doctors, nurses, porters, cleaners and ambulance crews. They're all doing an amazing job and are truly heroic in the part they are playing in supporting every one of us in this nation.

But today I would also like to say how enormously grateful we are to those who are working in our nurseries, schools colleges, universities and children's services.

I am profoundly grateful for the vital role they are providing in our communities.

They have been keeping schools and nurseries open – including over the Easter holidays – so that our most vulnerable children and children of critical workers can continue to be supported and they can be cared for.

People are anxious to know when we are going to relax restrictions and when schools are likely to be fully back and open again. Of course, I want nothing more than to get schools back to normal, make sure that children are sat around learning and experiencing the joy of being at school.

But I can't give you a date, because before we do, we need to meet five tests.

First, we must protect the NHS's ability to cope and be sure that it can continue to provide critical care and specialist treatment right across the whole of the UK.

Second, we need to see the daily death rates from coronavirus coming down.

Third, we need to have reliable data that shows the rate of infection is decreasing to manageable levels.

Fourth, we need to be confident that testing capacity and PPE are being managed, with supply able to meet not just today's demand, but future demand.

And, fifth, and perhaps most crucially, we need to be confident any changes we do make will not risk a second peak of infections.

When we can be sure we have met these five essential points, we can think about getting children into schools again – learning, mastering new ideas and being with their friends once more.

We will work with the sector to consider how best to reopen schools, nurseries and colleges when the time is right.

Our first priority has always been protecting the wellbeing of children and young people, but particularly those vulnerable young people with special educational needs or a social worker.

Schools are open for them and we're working to make sure those who should attend do so.

Places are available for children of critical workers too. With up to 130,000 children in school every single day, schools are helping keep the country moving.

And we are asking our local authorities and schools to ensure every vulnerable child knows that their school is there to support them, that systems are in place to keep in touch with those children who are unable to attend because of health reasons.

I know that families of seriously ill and disabled children are particularly worried at this time and I'm grateful to all staff who are working so hard to support their education, health and care – particularly those in special schools and residential care homes.

Young people who have left care or are just about to, whether that's from a foster family or residential care, are really vulnerable right now. So I am

asking local authorities to ensure that no one has to leave care during this difficult time.

The £1.6 billion of additional funding announced yesterday will help local authorities give care leavers, and other vulnerable groups, the support that they need at this difficult time.

To further protect children from harm, we are continuing to support Childline and working with NSPCC to expand and promote the adult helpline by providing them with an extra £1.6 million.

This means children have someone to call and more adults will be able to raise concerns and seek advice about the safety and wellbeing of any child that they're worried about.

Like the rest of the population, all our teachers have had to adapt very quickly to new ways of working. They have had to move resources online, work remotely, change the way they support their students as well as one another.

I am immensely grateful to them and to everyone who has offered their support, including those who have made resources freely available for schools, parents and pupils to use.

We have already published an initial list of high quality online educational resources including how to support physical and mental wellbeing and materials for teaching children with special educational needs and disabilities.

In yet another example of how we are at our best when we work together, some of our leading state schools have collaborated to open The Oak National Academy, which will be launched online tomorrow (20 April).

This is a totally new initiative, led by 40 brilliant teachers who have assembled video lessons and resources for any teacher in the country to make use of if they wish to do so. 180 video lessons will be provided each week, across a broad range of subjects, for every year group from Reception through to Year 10.

I recognise all the challenges that families will be facing at the moment and we are determined to support parents who are helping their children learn from home. I think we all know how difficult that can be.

The BBC has developed resources for families as part of the most comprehensive education package in their history, available on TV and online from tomorrow morning.

And to make sure as many children as possible can access online learning, we are ordering laptops to help disadvantaged young people who sit key exams next year.

We will also provide laptops and tablets for those children with social workers and care leavers to help them stay in touch with the services they need, keeping them safe and supporting home learning.

And if disadvantaged secondary school pupils and care leavers who are preparing for exams do not already have internet connections, we'll provide free 4G routers to get them connected while schools are closed.

We are also working with major telecommunications providers to exempt certain educational resources from data charges, so that this does not add to household expenses that may already be very stretched at this moment.

Before I finish, I would like to applaud the remarkable way our education community has responded to this outbreak. I am enormously proud and inspired by the incredible spirit they are showing.

Schools are supporting their communities in every way, from preparing food parcels to sharing their facilities with local hospitals. Colleges are manufacturing and donating equipment and universities are working flat out to develop diagnostic tests and, of course, a vaccine which will help us beat this invisible enemy.

And to any young people watching, I wanted to say to you how sorry I am that you have had your education disrupted in this way.

I know how hard it must be and I would like to thank you for making the adjustments you have had to make.

I know you will be missing your friends, your teachers and your lessons. I want you to know that you are an important part of this fight too and I cannot thank you enough for all that you are doing.

This global pandemic is the biggest threat that this country has faced in modern times. If we all continue to work together, as we have been, and if we continue to stick to the advice of our experts, we will come out the other side and be able to begin the task of rebuilding our communities.

I would like now to hand over to Jenny and then we will take some questions.