

Local action to tackle coronavirus

Mr Speaker, with permission, I would like to make a statement on local action to tackle coronavirus.

The impact of coronavirus has been deeply felt.

And yet thanks to the extraordinary action that this country has taken, it is now in decline at a national level.

The number of positive new cases is now below 1,000 a day and the number of recorded deaths yesterday is 25.

I am pleased to report there were no deaths in Scotland for the fourth consecutive day and that there is currently nobody in intensive care with coronavirus in Northern Ireland.

So we have been able, carefully, to ease the national restrictions.

And alongside the easing of these national restrictions, we have increasingly taken local action.

In May, we shut Weston Hospital to new admissions after a cluster of cases there.

Earlier this month, we closed 2 GP surgeries in Enfield and a meat processing factory in Kirklees.

And the Welsh Government has closed factories in Anglesey and Wrexham.

We have put in place a system to tie together local and national action, based on insight provided by the Joint Biosecurity Centre, working closely with Public Health England and the NHS.

Analysis is based on 3 levels of spread.

Individual cases are identified and managed by NHS Test and Trace.

When many cases are found in 1 setting, be it a care home for instance, a factory, or a hospital, that is classified as a cluster, and that will be dealt with largely by the local Director of Public Health, who has statutory powers to close individual organisations.

When Public Health England or the new JBC identifies clusters that are linked to one another, that is defined as an outbreak and a range of local and national actions may be needed.

Decisions are taken through our Local Action Committee Command structure. It works as follows.

If PHE or the JBC spots a problem that needs attention or the local Director of Public Health reports up a problem through the Regional Health Protection

Teams, then the outbreak is assessed at the daily Local Action Committee Bronze meeting.

Issues of concern are raised to the Local Action Committee Silver meeting, which is chaired by the Chief Medical Officer.

And problems requiring ministerial attention are then raised to the Local Action Committee Gold meeting.

Yesterday, I chaired an emergency Local Action Committee Gold meeting specifically to deal with the outbreak in Leicester.

Unfortunately, while cases in most parts of the country have fallen since the peak, in Leicester they have continued to rise.

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

Leicester accounts for around 10% of all positive cases in the country over the past week.

And admissions to hospital are between 6 and 10 per day rather than around 1 a day at other trusts.

Over the past fortnight, we have already taken action to protect people in Leicester.

We deployed 4 mobile testing units and extra capacity at the regional test site.

We provided thousands of home testing kits and extra public health capacity to boost the local team.

This afternoon, I held a further meeting with local leaders, with Public Health England, the JBC, the Local Resilience Forum and my clinical advisers, followed by a meeting of the cross-government Covid Operations Committee, chaired by the Prime Minister.

We have agreed further measures to tackle the outbreak in Leicester.

First, in addition to the mobile testing units that I mentioned earlier, we will send further testing capability, including opening a walk-in centre.

Anyone in Leicester with symptoms must come forward for a test.

Second, we will give extra funding to Leicester and Leicestershire councils to support them to enhance their communications and ensure those communications are translated into all locally relevant languages.

Third, through the councils, we will ensure support is available for those who have to self-isolate.

Fourth, we will work with the workplaces that have seen clusters of cases to implement more stringently the COVID-secure workplaces.

Given the growing outbreak in Leicester, we cannot recommend that the easing of the national lockdown, set to take place on the 4 July, happens in Leicester.

Having taken clinical advice on the actions necessary, and discussed them with the local team in Leicester and Leicestershire, we have made some difficult but important decisions.

We have decided that from tomorrow non-essential retail will have to close.

And, as children have been particularly impacted by this outbreak, schools will also need to close from Thursday, staying open for vulnerable children and children of critical workers as they did throughout

Unfortunately, the clinical advice is that the relaxation of shielding measures due on the 6 July cannot now take place in Leicester.

We recommend to people in Leicester, stay at home as much as you can and we recommend against all but essential travel to, from and within Leicester.

We will monitor closely adherence to social distancing rules and will take further steps if that is what's necessary.

The more people following the rules, the faster we will get control of this virus and get Leicester back to normal.

We will keep all of these local measures under review and we will not keep them in place any longer than is necessary.

We will review whether we can release any measures in 2 weeks' time.

These Leicester-specific measures will apply not just to the city of Leicester, but also to the surrounding conurbation, including for example, Oadby, Birstall and Glenfield.

I know that this is a worrying time for people living in Leicester and I want you to know that you have our full support.

We do not take these decisions lightly, but with the interests of the people of Leicester in our hearts.

I want everyone in Leicester to know that we have taken every one of these decisions to protect them from this terrible virus.

We must control this virus. We must keep people safe.

These actions are also profoundly in the national interest too because it's in everyone's interests that we control the virus as locally as possible.

Local action like this is an important tool in our armoury to deal with outbreaks while we get the country back on its feet.

Mr Speaker, we said that we do whatever it takes to defeat this virus.

And we said that local action would be an increasingly important part of our plan.

The virus thrives on social contact, and we know that reducing social contact controls its spread.

So precise and targeted actions like these will give the virus nowhere to hide and help us defeat this invisible killer.

I commend this statement to the House.