

Prime Minister's statement on coronavirus (COVID-19): 16 October 2020

Good afternoon, I am joined this afternoon by Dr Susan Hopkins of NHS Test and Trace and Public Health England and Sir Patrick Vallance Chief Scientific Advisor.

On Monday, I explained that we would seek to consult with mayors and local authorities in areas moving into the Very High alert level.

I am grateful to all those in local government in hotspot areas who have been working with us over the last week on how to control the virus in their areas.

In particular, I would like to thank Steve Rotheram in Merseyside, Sadiq Khan in London and local leaders in Lancashire who have worked constructively with us.

In Merseyside, where the situation is most acute, we were able to conclude talks quickly. In London, we have worked with the Mayor to respond to rising infections across the capital as well as particular spikes in some boroughs. And in Lancashire today, we have worked with both Labour and Conservative leaders to agree a package.

These were tough discussions, difficult decisions. No one wants to have to implement these measures which damage local businesses, curtail individual freedom and impose significant strains on people's mental health.

But these decisions were necessary because of the rate of increase not just of infections but also in hospitalisations and admissions to intensive care. Without action, there is no doubt that our NHS would soon be struggling to treat the sheer number of people seriously ill with Covid. Non-Covid treatments and surgeries would need to be cancelled in order to cope. And many more people would die.

So taking action is the right and responsible thing to do. And it is backed up by significant support for areas on Very High alert:

- The Job Support Scheme, combined with Universal Credit, means that those on low incomes who are affected by business closures will receive at least 80% of their wages.
- We are providing up to £465 million to help Very High alert level areas to implement and enforce the restrictions, in addition to the £1 billion of extra funding for local authorities across the country.

- We will work with local authorities to allocate testing and introduce local contact tracing.

Now, we have not yet reached an agreement with Greater Manchester. I completely understand the reluctance of the Mayor and his colleagues to take Manchester into the Very High alert level. It is far from a pain-free course of action and it will mean a difficult time for the people of that great part of the country – on top of the restrictions they have already had to endure since the summer.

But I must stress, the situation in Greater Manchester is grave, and it worsens with each passing day.

Cases doubled in the last 9 days. High infection rates are creeping up the age range: while cases are 690 per 100,000 for 16-29 year olds, they have now risen to 224 per 100,000 for the over-60s.

The number of COVID in-patients in Manchester's ICU beds is already over 40% of the number at the height of the first wave. That number will inevitably rise further, given that hospitalisation occurs 2-3 weeks after infection. On present trends, in just over 2 weeks there will be more Covid patients in intensive care than at the peak of the first wave.

So I urge the Mayor to reconsider and engage constructively. I cannot stress enough – time is of the essence. Each day that passes before action is taken means more people will go to hospital, more people will end up in intensive care, and tragically more people will die.

Of course if agreement cannot be reached, I will need to intervene in order to protect Manchester's hospitals and to save the lives of Manchester's residents.

But our efforts will be so much more effective if we work together.

Some have argued that we should introduce a national lockdown instead of targeted local action and I disagree. Closing businesses in Cornwall, where transmission is low, will not cut transmission in Manchester.

So while I cannot rule anything out, if at all possible I want to avoid another national lockdown, with the damaging health, economic and social effects it would have.

Alongside our local strategy we have been working throughout to find other ways to suppress this virus.

We are backing our brilliant scientists leading the global effort to find a safe and effective vaccine. We have also secured early access to over 350 million vaccine doses through a portfolio of promising new vaccines to ensure we are in the best place, and we are taking every possible step to ensure we can move as quickly as possible to deploy a vaccine if and when one is found to work.

And we've created a huge diagnostics industry from scratch, scaling up the ability to test from 2,000 in February to more than 300,000 today.

I also want to update on our future approach to testing.

We are now testing more people than any other country in Europe but we always want to go further.

One of the most dangerous aspects of this disease is that people without any symptoms can infect many others without realising it. If we can catch more asymptomatic people before they unknowingly pass on the disease to the vulnerable, we can help to stop the virus' vicious spread.

So far it has been difficult to do this. But that is changing.

Scientists and companies in Britain and around the world have been developing new tests which are faster, simpler and cheaper. They have been working hard to discover and evaluate new testing technologies. Though there is work to do, It's becoming clear over the past few weeks that some of these new tests are highly effective and can help us save lives and jobs over winter.

We have already bought millions of these tests, some of which are very simple – meaning you simply need to wipe the swab inside your mouth – and can give a result as quickly as in 15 minutes. Some of these fast tests work with saliva and we are already using these in hospitals.

We have started building the infrastructure for domestic manufacture of these tests, ensuring that Britain has the ability to produce millions of fast tests here.

Over the next few weeks we will start distributing and trialling these tests across the country. This will enable us to do quick turnaround tests on NHS and care home staff much more frequently. By testing more frequently and quickly than ever before, we can hope we can help prevent the virus entering and spreading through care homes.

And we will be able to test students in universities with outbreaks, as well as children in schools, helping us to keep education open safely through the winter.

And we will make tests available to local directors of public health to help control localised outbreaks – handing more control from London to all parts of our country so that those on the ground can use the tools we give them as they think best. And I have instructed my team to ensure that Liverpool City Region, Lancashire, and any other areas which enter into the Very High alert level are immediately prioritised for those tests.

This will make a big difference in how we protect people from this disease. But it's vital that we all take a cautious approach to this new technology.

First, it will take time to develop this plan. No country in the world is regularly testing millions of people, so we need to take the time to establish how to do this effectively and safely, and to build the logistics

and distribution operation necessary for a large-scale operation across the country.

Second, we won't be able to use testing to get business back to normal quickly. In time, we want to use tests to open, and keep open, more parts of the economy that have sadly been closed. But it is crucial that we make sure such systems work safely and I must level with you that it will take time to get this right before many organisations can buy and operate these tests themselves.

Third, this will need a huge effort across the country, and we will need hospitals, care homes schools, universities and other organisations to work with us as we develop this plan.

But the most important thing is that people isolate if they test positive. If you test positive with one of these fast new tests, then you must stay at home.

If everyone follows the rule and self-isolates if you have symptoms, get a positive test, or have come into contact with someone who has the virus, we will suppress the disease.

And we must all remember that this virus thrives on human contact. So we must do everything in our power to limit its spread. Always think: Hands Face Space, ventilate your buildings, wear a face covering in enclosed spaces, keep your distance from others. And make sure – as I say – you improve ventilation when spending time indoors. If we all do these simple things we'll protect each other from the virus and we will defeat it together.

I'll hand over to Patrick Valance who will run through the latest data and we'll then go to your questions. Sir Patrick.