

Prime Minister's statement on coronavirus (COVID-19): 22 September 2020

Good evening, the struggle against covid is the single biggest crisis the world has faced in my lifetime.

In less than a year this disease has killed almost a million people, and caused havoc to economies everywhere.

Here in the UK we mourn every person we have lost, and we grieve with their families.

And yet I am more certain than ever that this is a struggle that humanity will win, and we in this country will win – and to achieve what we must I want to talk to you directly tonight about the choices that we face – none of them easy – and why we must take action now.

I know that we can succeed because we have succeeded before.

When the sickness took hold in this country in March, we pulled together in a spirit of national sacrifice and community. We followed the guidance to the letter. We stayed at home, protected the NHS, and saved thousands of lives.

And for months with those disciplines of social distancing we have kept that virus at bay.

But we have to acknowledge this this is a great and freedom-loving country; and while the vast majority have complied with the rules there have been too many breaches – too many opportunities for our invisible enemy to slip through undetected.

The virus has started to spread again in an exponential way. Infections are up, hospital admissions are climbing.

We can see what is happening in France and Spain, and we know, alas, that this virus is no less fatal than it was in the spring, and that the vast majority of our people are no less susceptible, and the iron laws of geometrical progression are shouting at us from the graphs that we risk many more deaths, many more families losing loved ones before their time;

and I know that faced with that risk the British people will want their government to continue to fight to protect them, you, and that is what we are doing, night and day. And yet the single greatest weapon we bring to this fight is the common sense of the people themselves – the joint resolve of this country to work together to suppress covid now.

So today I set out a package of tougher measures in England – early closing for pubs, bars; table service only; closing businesses that are not covid

secure; expanding the use of face coverings, and new fines for those that fail to comply;

and once again asking office workers to work from home if they can while enforcing the rule of six indoors and outdoors – a tougher package of national measures combined with the potential for tougher local restrictions for areas already in lockdown. I know that this approach – robust but proportionate – already carries the support of all the main parties in parliament.

After discussion with colleagues in the Devolved Administrations, I believe this broad approach is shared across the whole UK. And to those who say we don't need this stuff, and we should leave people to take their own risks, I say these risks are not our own.

The tragic reality of having covid is that your mild cough can be someone else's death knell.

And as for the suggestion that we should simply lock up the elderly and the vulnerable – with all the suffering that would entail – I must tell you that this is just not realistic, because if you let the virus rip through the rest of the population it would inevitably find its way through to the elderly as well, and in much greater numbers.

That's why we need to suppress the virus now, and as for that minority who may continue to flout the rules, we will enforce those rules with tougher penalties and fines of up to £10,000. We will put more police out on the streets and use the army to backfill if necessary.

And of course I am deeply, spiritually reluctant to make any of these impositions, or infringe anyone's freedom, but unless we take action the risk is that we will have to go for tougher measures later, when the deaths have already mounted and we have a huge caseload of infection such as we had in the spring.

If we let this virus get out of control now, it would mean that our NHS had no space – once again – to deal with cancer patients and millions of other non-covid medical needs.

And if we were forced into a new national lockdown, that would threaten not just jobs and livelihoods but the loving human contact on which we all depend.

It would mean renewed loneliness and confinement for the elderly and vulnerable, and ultimately it would threaten once again the education of our children. We must do all we can to avoid going down that road again.

But if people don't follow the rules we have set out, then we must reserve the right to go further. We must take action now because a stitch in time saves nine; and this way we can keep people in work, we can keep our shops and our schools open, and we can keep our country moving forward while we work together to suppress the virus.

That is our strategy, and if we can follow this package together, then I know we can succeed because in so many ways we are better prepared than before.

We have the PPE, we have the beds, we have the Nightingales, we have new medicines – pioneered in this country – that can help save lives.

And though our doctors and our medical advisers are rightly worried about the data now, and the risks over winter, they are unanimous that things will be far better by the spring, when we have not only the hope of a vaccine, but one day soon – and I must stress that we are not there yet – of mass testing so efficient that people will be able to be tested in minutes so they can do more of the things they love. That's the hope; that's the dream. It's hard, but it's attainable, and we are working as hard as we can to get there.

But until we do, we must rely on our willingness to look out for each other, to protect each other. Never in our history has our collective destiny and our collective health depended so completely on our individual behaviour.

If we follow these simple rules together, we will get through this winter together. There are unquestionably difficult months to come.

And the fight against covid is by no means over. I have no doubt, however, that there are great days ahead.

But now is the time for us all to summon the discipline, and the resolve, and the spirit of togetherness that will carry us through.