

Prime Minister's statement on coronavirus (COVID-19): 31 July 2020

Good afternoon,

Two weeks ago, I updated you from this podium on the progress we had made as a country against coronavirus. And in many ways that progress continues.

The number of patients admitted to hospitals is still falling, and now stands at just over 100 each day. In April there were more than 3,000 coronavirus patients in mechanical ventilation beds, but now the latest figure is 87.

The number of deaths continues to fall. That is obviously encouraging

But I have also consistently warned that this virus could come back and that we would not hesitate to take swift and decisive action as required.

I am afraid that in parts of Asia and Latin America the virus is now gathering pace. And our European friends are also struggling to keep the virus under control.

As we see these rises around the world, we cannot fool ourselves that we are exempt. We must be willing to react to the first signs of trouble.

Today, the weekly survey by the Office for National Statistics reports that the prevalence of the virus in the community in England is likely to be rising for the first time since May.

Around 1 in 1,500 now have the virus, compared to 1 in 1,800 on 15 July and 1 in 2,000 on 2 July. The ONS also estimate there are now 4,900 new infections every day, up from around 3,000 per day on 14 July and 2,000 per day at the end of June

We can't afford to ignore this evidence.

It's vital to stress that we are in a far better position to keep the virus under control now than we were at the start of the pandemic – because we know so much more about the virus and have so many more tools at our disposal to deal with it.

Our testing capacity has increased 100-fold.

We have a contact tracing system up and running which has led to over 184,000 people isolating who may otherwise have spread the virus and is capable of tracing thousands of contacts every day.

We have secured supplies of billions of items of PPE to withstand new demands on hospitals and care homes.

And of course we have new treatments, like dexamethasone and remdesivir, to

shorten recovery times and reduce mortality rates.

But as I say, we cannot be complacent. I cannot – I won't stand by and allow the virus to cause more pain and heartache in this country.

Last night the Health Secretary announced new restrictions on household contact in the North West – specifically Greater Manchester, and parts of East Lancashire and West Yorkshire.

These are targeted measures on social contact between households, which the data tells us is driving the current increase in cases. Businesses and workplaces should continue as before in those areas. I know how it is hard to have restrictions like this imposed on seeing your family and your friends. But we have to act rapidly in order to protect those we love.

And we know this sort of intervention works – measures taken in Leicester and Luton have suppressed the virus, allowing us to relax measures.

Even as we act locally, it is also my responsibility to look again at the measures we have in place nationally in light of the data we are seeing about incidence.

At every point I have said our plan to reopen society and the economy is conditional – that it relies on continued progress against the virus, and that we would not hesitate to put on the brakes if required.

With those numbers creeping up, our assessment is that we should now squeeze that brake pedal in order to keep the virus under control.

On Saturday 1 August, you'll remember, we had hoped to reopen in England a number of higher risk settings that had remained closed. Today, I am afraid we are postponing these changes for at least a fortnight.

That means that, until 15 August at the earliest:

Casinos, bowling alleys, skating rinks and remaining close contact services must remain closed. Indoor performances will not resume.

Pilots of larger crowds in sports venues and conference centres will not take place.

Wedding receptions of up to 30 people will not be permitted, but ceremonies can continue to take place, in line with COVID-Secure guidelines.

I know that the steps we are taking will be a heavy blow to many people – to everyone whose wedding plans have been disrupted, or who now cannot celebrate Eid in the way they would wish, I am really, really sorry about that. But we simply cannot take the risk.

We will of course study the data carefully and move forward with our intention to open up as soon as we possibly can.

Two weeks ago, I also said that from tomorrow the government would give

employers more discretion over how employees can work safely – whether by continuing to work from home or attending a Covid Secure workplace. We know that employers have gone to huge lengths to make workplaces safe, so that guidance remains unchanged. We also said we would pause shielding nationally from 1 August – based on clinical advice, that national pause will proceed as planned, and our medical experts will be explaining more about that decision later and about shielding later today.

Most people in this country are following the rules and doing their bit to control the virus. But we must keep our discipline, we must be focused and we cannot be complacent.

I have asked the Home Secretary to work with the police and others to ensure the rules which are already in place are properly enforced.

That means local authorities acting to close down premises and cancel events which are not following Covid Secure guidance.

And it means a greater police presence to ensure face coverings are being worn where this is required by law. We will also extend the requirement to wear a face covering to other indoor settings where you are likely to come into contact with people you do not normally meet, such as museums, galleries, cinemas and places of worship. We now recommend face coverings are worn in these settings, and this will become enforceable in law from 8 August.

At this stage, we are not changing the rules on social contact nationally. I don't want to tell people to spend less time with their friends. But unless people follow the rules and behave safely, we may need to go further. Two weeks ago, I said we would hope for the best but plan for the worst.

And of course we continue to hope for the best. The way to get there and to achieve that optimum outcome is if we all follow the rules, wash our hands, cover our faces, keep our distance – and get a test if we have symptoms, so that NHS Test and Trace can keep the virus under control.

This is how we will avoid a return to full national lockdown.

We've made huge progress together.

I know we are going to succeed and I know we are going to beat this – if each and every one of us plays our part.