

# Prime Minister's address to the nation: 4 January 2021

Since the pandemic began last year, the whole United Kingdom has been engaged in a great national effort to fight Covid.

And there is no doubt that in fighting the old variant of the virus, our collective efforts were working and would have continued to work.

But we now have a new variant of the virus. It has been both frustrating and alarming to see the speed with which the new variant is spreading.

Our scientists have confirmed this new variant is between 50 and 70 per cent more transmissible – that means you are much, much more likely to catch the virus and to pass it on.

As I speak to you tonight, our hospitals are under more pressure from Covid than at any time since the start of the pandemic.

In England alone, the number of Covid patients in hospitals has increased by nearly a third in the last week, to almost 27,000.

That number is 40 per cent higher than the first peak in April.

On 29 December, more than 80,000 people tested positive for Covid across the UK – a new record.

The number of deaths is up by 20 per cent over the last week and will sadly rise further. My thoughts are with all those who have lost loved ones.

With most of the country already under extreme measures, it is clear that we need to do more, together, to bring this new variant under control while our vaccines are rolled out.

In England, we must therefore go into a national lockdown which is tough enough to contain this variant.

That means the Government is once again instructing you to stay at home.

You may only leave home for limited reasons permitted in law, such as to shop for essentials, to work if you absolutely cannot work from home, to exercise, to seek medical assistance such as getting a Covid test, or to escape domestic abuse.

The full details on what you can and can't do will be available at [gov.uk/coronavirus](https://www.gov.uk/coronavirus).

If you are clinically extremely vulnerable, we are advising you to begin shielding again and you will shortly receive a letter about what this means for you.

And because we now have to do everything we possibly can to stop the spread of the disease, primary schools, secondary schools and colleges across England must move to remote provision from tomorrow, except for vulnerable children and the children of key workers.

Everyone will still be able to access early years settings such as nurseries.

We recognise that this will mean it is not possible or fair for all exams to go ahead this summer as normal. The Education Secretary will work with Ofqual to put in place alternative arrangements.

We will provide extra support to ensure that pupils entitled to free school meals will continue to receive them while schools are closed, and we'll distribute more devices to support remote education.

I completely understand the inconvenience and distress this late change will cause millions of parents and pupils up and down the country.

Parents whose children were in school today may reasonably ask why we did not take this decision sooner.

The answer is simply that we have been doing everything in our power to keep schools open, because we know how important each day in education is to children's life chances.

And I want to stress that the problem is not that schools are unsafe for children – children are still very unlikely to be severely affected by even the new variant of Covid.

The problem is that schools may nonetheless act as vectors for transmission, causing the virus to spread between households.

Today the United Kingdom's Chief Medical Officers have advised that the country should move to alert level 5, meaning that if action is not taken NHS capacity may be overwhelmed within 21 days.

Of course, there is one huge difference compared to last year.

We are now rolling out the biggest vaccination programme in our history.

So far, we in the UK have vaccinated more people than the rest of Europe combined.

With the arrival today of the UK's own Oxford Astra Zeneca vaccine, the pace of vaccination is accelerating.

I can share with you tonight the NHS's realistic expectations for the vaccination programme in the coming weeks.

By the middle of February, if things go well and with a fair wind in our sails, we expect to have offered the first vaccine dose to everyone in the four top priority groups identified by the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation.

That means vaccinating all residents in a care home for older adults and their carers, everyone over the age of 70, all frontline health and social care workers, and everyone who is clinically extremely vulnerable.

If we succeed in vaccinating all those groups, we will have removed huge numbers of people from the path of the virus.

And of course, that will eventually enable us to lift many of the restrictions we have endured for so long.

I must stress that even if we achieve this goal, there remains a time lag of two to three weeks from getting a jab to receiving immunity.

And there will be a further time lag before the pressure on the NHS is lifted.

So we should remain cautious about the timetable ahead.

But if our understanding of the virus doesn't change dramatically once again...

If the rollout of the vaccine programme continues to be successful...

If deaths start to fall as the vaccine takes effect...

And, critically, if everyone plays their part by following the rules...

Then I hope we can steadily move out of lockdown, reopening schools after the February half term and starting, cautiously, to move regions down the tiers.

I want to say to everyone right across the United Kingdom that I know how tough this is, I know how frustrated you are, I know that you have had more than enough of government guidance about defeating this virus.

But now more than ever, we must pull together.

You should follow the new rules from now, and they will become law in the early hours of Wednesday morning. Parliament will meet – largely remotely – later that day.

I know that the devolved administrations in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland share my conviction this is a pivotal moment and they're taking similar steps.

The weeks ahead will be the hardest yet but I really do believe that we are entering the last phase of the struggle.

Because with every jab that goes into our arms, we are tilting the odds against Covid and in favour of the British people.

And, thanks to the miracle of science, not only is the end in sight and we know exactly how we will get there.

But for now, I am afraid, you must once again stay at home, protect the NHS and save lives.

Thank you all very much.

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## Improvements to Ironbridge flood defences reduce risk of flooding

[Ironbridge](#) in Shropshire has been made more resilient to flooding following a review of the issues faced in the February 2020 floods.

The review has led to improvements to the method of deploying the town's temporary flood defence scheme.

The new method was put to the test before Christmas when the [Environment Agency](#) erected the flood defence due to the high river level and the [flood warnings](#) that were in place. The barriers were taken down on 29 December, once it was safe to do so.

To further reduce the risk of flooding from the River Severn, work to the road surface by [Telford and Wrekin Council](#) will improve the ground conditions for the temporary flood barrier that is deployed in the event of flooding, and ensure it does not move.

The work by Telford and Wrekin Council is due to start on 18 January 2021 unless adverse weather dictates otherwise. [Road closures](#) will be in place until the work is due for completion on 7 February 2021.

In the floods of February 2020, Ironbridge experienced the highest river levels since the year 2000. Numerous flood warnings, including two severe flood warnings, were issued for the River Severn at the Wharfage, Ironbridge, and Environment Agency temporary barriers were deployed.

With river levels at the highest ever against the barriers, there was some slippage on the road surface which caused seepage behind the barrier due to the force of the water. Pumps were used to manage surface water and the seepage behind the flood defence.

Despite the prolonged high river levels, the barrier continued to hold back the river levels. Once the levels had peaked, Environment Agency staff completed repairs to the damaged barrier to ensure it provided protection over the following weeks.

Adam Lines, area environment manager at the Environment Agency, said:

While the temporary flood barriers at Ironbridge continued to be operational and properties were defended in the February floods, we have reviewed and improved their method of deployment, which we adopted in the erection of the barriers in December.

These measures include the way we put the barriers in place to allow for a wider waterproof membrane to the front of the barriers, which increases protection. We have also reviewed how we can make them even better secured, particularly around trees; and how the road can be adapted to reduce the chance of movement of the barrier.

Changes have also been made to the deployment plan that the Environment Agency and Telford and Wrekin Council follow in putting the barrier in place and we will increase the time needed to fully install the barrier to allow for the additional work.

Councillor David Wright, Telford and Wrekin Council's cabinet member with responsibility for flood management, said:

Since the floods last winter, we have done a lot of work with the Environment Agency to produce this bespoke and innovative road design specifically for Ironbridge. Many surveys were done by both our organisations, leading to 3D designs and investigative work on how we can minimise the risk of the flood barriers being moved again by force of a flooded River Severn. It led to identifying new ways for the Environment Agency to put the barriers in place, especially around trees.

The Wharfage will be resurfaced by Telford and Wrekin Council's highways contractor Balfour Beatty with a new material to improve friction. When laid, the new road surface will be designed flatter and slightly sloping towards the river to further reduce the risk of any slippage by the barriers.

We are now turning those designs into reality as quickly as we can and that is why this work is being done during the winter. I would like to reassure residents and businesses in Ironbridge that there are contingency plans in place to deal with any increase in the river level; plans which we already put into practice last month. It is important to note that is impossible to completely eliminate flood risk, however we are doing everything we can to minimise that risk.

[Check online](#) if your property, business, or place of work is within a flood warning area or call Floodline on 0345 988 1188.

## **Background**

- The temporary flood defence barrier in Ironbridge was in use in December 2020 due to flood warnings being in place. It was fully functional despite the road surface works having not yet been carried out.

- In February 2020, Environment Secretary George Eustice visited Ironbridge to meet with residents and businesses. He thanked Environment Agency staff and emergency responders who were working 24/7 to reduce flood risk to communities.
- 2019 was the wettest autumn on record, and February 2020 was the wettest February on record, with some places receiving four times their average rainfall.
- Over the course of last winter, Environment Agency flood defences protected almost 130,000 properties, with around 8,000 properties sadly being flooded.
- Since 2015, the Environment Agency has been investing £2.6bn to better protect the country from flooding and coastal erosion. We are on course to have better protected 300,000 homes by March 2021.
- In 2020, the government announced a record £5.2 billion investment in flood and coastal defences – double the previous investment – to protect 336,000 properties, and the Environment Agency's [Flood and Coast Erosion Risk Management Strategy](#), will prepare the country for more extreme weather and build a better prepared and more resilient nation.
- In July 2020, [the government announced an additional £170m](#) to accelerate the construction of flood defence projects in 2020 and 2021, where they would drive growth and benefit local economies.

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## [COVID-19 alert level: update from the UK Chief Medical Officers](#)

### News story

A joint statement from the UK Chief Medical Officers (CMOs) recommending that the UK COVID-19 alert level move from level 4 to level 5.



Following advice from the Joint Biosecurity Centre and in the light of the most recent data, the 4 UK Chief Medical Officers and NHS England Medical Director recommend that the UK alert level should

move from level 4 to level 5.

Many parts of the health systems in the 4 nations are already under immense pressure. There are currently very high rates of community transmission, with substantial numbers of COVID patients in hospitals and in intensive care.

Cases are rising almost everywhere, in much of the country driven by the new more transmissible variant. We are not confident that the NHS can handle a further sustained rise in cases and without further action there is a material risk of the NHS in several areas being overwhelmed over the next 21 days.

Although the NHS is under immense pressure, significant changes have been made so people can still receive lifesaving treatment. It is absolutely critical that people still come forward for emergency care. If you require non-urgent medical attention, please contact your GP or call NHS 111.

Chief Medical Officer for England, Professor Chris Whitty

Chief Medical Officer for Wales, Dr Frank Atherton

Chief Medical Officer for Scotland, Dr Gregor Smith

Chief Medical Officer for Northern Ireland, Dr Michael McBride

NHS England, National Medical Director Professor Stephen Powis

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## [Increasing the level of coordination in offshore electricity infrastructure: BEIS and Ofgem open letter](#)

This letter sets out the actions the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (BEIS) and Ofgem are taking to increase the level of coordination in offshore transmission infrastructure, and calls for views to support the [Offshore transmission network review](#) which launched in July 2020.

We would particularly welcome views from those who are already pursuing some level of coordination or have identified an opportunity to do so, at a local,

national or international level. This could include considering anticipatory investment in one project to enable a future project, or combining offshore wind and interconnector assets.

Ofgem and BEIS will use this information to:

- capitalise on early opportunities that will deliver benefits for consumers and the wider energy system
- inform future policy development relating to an enduring regime for connections post 2030

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## Replying to requests for information

### News story

Customers will have more time to reply to requests for information (requisitions) from Monday 11 January.



We will be extending the period of time customers have to respond to requests for information (requisitions) for most applications. This will come into effect on Monday (11 January) where customers will have 40 days to reply to a requisition letter (C90), after which they will receive a reminder of cancellation (C90a) allowing a further 20 days in which to reply.

We know many requisitions are a result of waiting for third parties to provide information or consent. These issues can be resolved and transactions completed if given the appropriate time.

Giving customers more time to reply to resolve requisition points will reserve the priority of the original application for longer and reduce the administrative burden on all of us from requests being made for more time and the cancellations of applications.

Customers are asked not to wait for the reminder to reply to an outstanding requisition. They can use View My Applications to find any outstanding



requisitions, or check the progress of an application.

In the spring our Digital Registration Service (DRS) will reduce the number of requisitions sent due to simple errors such as name discrepancy or fee errors. This tool can be used to reduce the overall number of requisitions customers receive.

Requests can be made using reply to requisition, Application Enquiry, our [contact form](#) or by [phone](#).

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