

Sharp rise in coronavirus numbers and a new variant



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Mr Speaker, with permission I'd like to make a statement on coronavirus.

We are nearing the end of such a tough year, where the British people have united and had to make so many sacrifices for the common good.

And I know the whole House, and the whole country, has been cheered by the progress we have seen in the last few weeks, which means that we can now roll out the vaccine programme that will ultimately set us free, Mr Speaker.

I can tell the House that today the NHS has begun its vaccination through GPs, in England, and in care homes in Scotland. And day by day, we are giving hope to more people, and making this country safer.

It's life-saving work. However, it will take time for its benefits to be felt far and wide. So we must persevere, because the virus remains just as dangerous as it has always been.

The average daily hospital admissions are up 13%. The latest figures show that the average daily cases have risen by 14% in the last week. And as before, this rise and this spread is not even across the country.

We are seeing a sharp rise in South Wales, in London, and parts of the East and South East of England.

This is a trend we are also seeing in other parts of Europe, in countries like Sweden, where nearly all the intensive care beds in Stockholm are currently in use, and Germany, where they have had to announce tougher new restrictions over the weekend. And the Netherlands, who today have announced further measures.

Until we can vaccinate enough vulnerable people, and ensure they get the second dose so they're protected, we must act to suppress this virus.

Our strategy throughout, as set out in the Winter Plan, has been to suppress the virus while protecting the economy, education and the NHS until the vaccine can make us safe.

And today, Mr Speaker, I'd like to update the House on the latest steps we are taking on this mission.

New variant

First, I'd like to update the House on a new development about the virus itself.

Over the last few days, thanks to our world-class genomic capability in the UK, we have identified a new variant of coronavirus which may be associated with the faster spread in the South East of England. Initial analysis suggests that this variant is growing faster than the existing variants.

We have currently identified over 1,000 cases with this variant, predominantly in the South of England although cases have been identified in nearly 60 different local authority areas and numbers are increasing rapidly.

Similar variants has been identified in other countries over the last few months. We have notified the World Health Organization about this new variant. And Public Health England is working hard to continue its expert analysis at Porton Down.

Mr Speaker, I must stress at this point that there is currently nothing to suggest that this variant is more likely to cause serious disease and the latest clinical advice is that it's highly unlikely that this mutation would fail to respond to a vaccine.

But it shows we've got to be vigilant, and follow the rules and everyone needs to take personal responsibility not to spread this virus.

Local action

Mr Speaker, the first formal review of tiering decisions is taking place this Wednesday, 2 weeks after the new rules came into force.

However, I need to tell the House that over the last week, we have seen very sharp exponential rises in the virus across London, Kent, parts of Essex and Hertfordshire.

We do not know the extent to which this is because of the new variant but no matter its cause, we have to take swift and decisive action, which unfortunately is absolutely essential to control this deadly disease while the vaccine is rolled out.

In some parts of these areas, the doubling time is around every 7 days.

This isn't just about rising rates among school-age children anymore but in all age groups, including the over-60s.

And we know from painful experience that more cases lead to more hospitalisations, and sadly the loss of more of our loved ones.

Hospitals across the capital, Essex and Kent are already under pressure and we know that this doubling of cases will be mirrored in hospital admissions, and it only takes a few doublings for the NHS to be overwhelmed.

Our NHS is straining every sinew to cope with the pressures, as they always do, but if cases continue to double, even they will be overwhelmed.

So we must act now to shift the curve because when the virus is growing exponentially, there is not a moment to spare. We are therefore acting ahead of the formal review date.

I am very grateful to colleagues at Public Health England, NHS Test and Trace, and the Joint Biosecurity Centre, whose surveillance of this virus means we can act very rapidly when a problem arises.

We have therefore decided to move Greater London, the south and west of Essex, which includes Basildon, Brentwood,

Harlow, Epping Forest, Castle Point, Rochford, Maldon, Braintree and Chelmsford.

Along with Thurrock and Southend-on-Sea Borough Councils.

And the South of Hertfordshire, which means Broxbourne, Hertsmere, Watford and the Three Rivers Local Authority, into Tier 3, which is the Very High alert level.

This means that people can only see friends and family they don't live with, or are in a support bubble with, in outdoor public places, and of course in line with the rule of 6.

Hospitality settings must close, except takeaway and delivery.

And people should avoid travelling outside their area and reduce the number of journeys they make wherever possible.

Now I know that this is difficult news and I know that it will mean plans disrupted, and that for businesses affected, it will be a significant blow.

But this action is absolutely essential, not just to keep people safe, but because we've seen early action can help prevent more damaging and longer lasting problems later.

Mr Speaker, these restrictions will come into force at midnight on Wednesday morning.

Because when the virus moves quickly, we must move quickly too and we must take the actions that are not necessarily easy, but are effective.

We will continue to stand with those who are most impacted, through our furlough scheme and support for the self-employed.

We've already begun to surge mobile testing into these parts of London, Essex and Kent, and we are extending community testing too.

In addition, I can tell the House that this weekend, as part of our expansion of community testing, we are extending it to 67 local authorities across England.

And further, today we will be publishing a guide for colleagues to promote, support and champion local community testing and contact tracing.

We will be using millions of newly invented tests to reduce the rate of infection in areas where infection is highest.

And help to move down through tiers and closer to normal life.

Conclusion

Mr Speaker, thanks to the forces of science, help is on its way but while we know now that that day will come, this isn't over yet.

And while we deploy the fruits of scientific endeavour to make the country safe, we must do what it takes to protect our loved ones and our NHS now.

I know these steps are hard but we must not waver as we enter the final stretch.

So that when we look back on this time of crisis, we can all say that we played our part.

And I commend this statement to the House.

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