

UPDATE ON CORONAVIRUS (COVID-19)

PRIME MINISTER ANNOUNCES NEW COVID-19 RESTRICTIONS FOR AT LEAST THE NEXT 6 MONTHS – AND IF THAT DOESN'T WORK THERE WILL BE A SECOND LOCKDOWN

FROM MAYOR ROKHSANA FIAZ

22nd SEPTEMBER 2020

Dear Newham Resident,

Earlier today, the Prime Minister announced much anticipated Covid-19 restrictions that would be re-introduced because the transmission rate is high across the country - rising exponentially and doubling every seven days. This follows the raising of the Covid-19 alert level yesterday by the government's Joint Biodiversity Centre from level three to level four, which is the first time it has gone up, since it was introduced in May.

It also follows the stark warnings made yesterday by the Professor Chris Witty, the Chief Medical Officer for England and Sir Patrick Vallance, the Government's Chief Scientific Advisor, who both said that the current rate of spread could lead to 50,000 new cases of COVID-19 infection a day by mid-October, with 200 deaths per day by mid-November. While they were at pains to say that this is a warning, not a prediction, of what is likely to happen if we do not act now to slow the spread of infection; in the last 24 hours 4,926 new cases of confirmed infection in the UK have been recorded – and tragically 37 more people have died, that's 26 more than yesterday. Figures from Public Health England confirm that Covid infection rates in 20 London boroughs are higher than regions of England like the North West which have already hit by further restrictions. We are monitoring the situation very carefully here in Newham

The Prime Minister's announcement today means that, for the next six months at least:

- Masks will become mandatory for retail and hospitality staff, as well as for passengers in taxis – this was a key demand of from London Leaders communicated by the Mayor of London, Sadiq Khan, when he spoke to the prime minister this morning;
- Fines will double to £200 for a first offence if you fail to wear a mask in line with the current requirements when you are out and about in shops or venues, or if you break the 'rule of six' on gatherings;
- From this Thursday pubs, restaurants and takeaways will have to close at 10pm;
- The ban on indoor team sports will continue and plans for a partial return of sports fans to stadiums from 1 October have also been suspended;
- Wedding celebrations will be limited to just 15 guests, half of the number previously permitted, though funerals will be allowed to go ahead with up to 30 mourners;
- People should work from home if they can.

Is this enough? I don't think so. My main area of concern (and there are many) is the rule of six, which allows up to 6 people from different households to mix inside homes and outside, which could be a significant cause of community transmission. Even the first minister of Scotland has introduced an outright ban on households mixing at homes, saying that her priority was to “address the key driver of infections”, because social distancing and good ventilation are hard to maintain in domestic settings and the increase is happening in the community.

I am also very concerned about the situation in London. Yesterday, I joined a series of emergency meetings with Council leaders and Chief Executives from across London. We were given an update on the London situation, and what is clear that because of the insufficient testing in London we have an incomplete picture of the spread of the virus in the Capital. In the absence of reliable testing data, London must rely on a range of indicators to assess the spread of the virus, for example we know there has been an increase in 111 calls with people reporting symptoms. Basically we have been told that London could soon be in a similar position to other parts of the country, like the North of England's current infection levels. That is why we have to do much more to stop the spread of Covid-19 in London and here in Newham.

I know many of you will all be anxious, frustrated and even angry at the prospect of facing greater lockdown rules, however we cannot return to the horror of the early stages of this virus – which has so far cost the lives of 310 of our much loved, missed and mourned Newham residents. I know the vast majority of you have been doing the right thing and following the rules, so by taking these actions now we can help prevent a deeper and longer lockdown in the future to both save lives, and protect jobs and our economic recovery.

For those that are needing to self-isolate if they are Covid-19 positive, the government has also announced a new £500 payment in England to financially support those on low incomes receiving in-work benefits. While it is welcomed, it doesn't go far enough to help those who don't meet the criteria, who'll be faced with the choice of earning money to keep a roof over their head and food on the table despite the risks of spreading the virus. There's also the ongoing issue of testing capacity which must be urgently addressed – otherwise the rates of transmission will continue to rise – and then the scandal of lifting the ban on private evictions in England and Wales, which will affect so many of our residents in Newham.

We fear some 20 per cent of private renters may already be in rent arrears as a result of job losses, furlough and general economic downturn because of Covid-19, and they all face the real threat of losing their homes. At the beginning of the pandemic the Government pledged that no-one would lose their home through no fault of their own. That pledge has been broken, and as the furlough scheme ends next month, millions of families across the country face the very real prospect of homelessness. Newham already has the highest eviction rate in London, as rents soar beyond wage levels, so we are particularly vulnerable.

As we head into extended lockdown restrictions and economic recession – I again call on the Government to urgently rethink this cruel and potentially disastrous decision, and with other London leaders will continue to demand more action and resources for councils.

But for now we must resolve to continue to follow rules, and take on board the new restrictions. All of us have a responsibility to safeguard the health and welfare of the whole community.

Please stay safe, follow the rules and protect yourself as well as each other.

Best wishes,

Rokhsana Fiaz
Mayor of Newham

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of Everything We Do