

Coronavirus: millions of over-70s will be told to stay at home for four months

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Older people would be asked to self-isolate for “a very long time”, Matt Hancock said

NEIL HALL/EPA

All people aged over 70 will be advised in the coming weeks to stay at home for an extended period as Britain boosts measures to [combat coronavirus](#), the health secretary confirmed yesterday.

Matt Hancock said that older people would be asked to self-isolate for “a very long time”, thought to be up to four months, to protect themselves.

Tomorrow emergency powers will be announced allowing the state to detain people infected with the disease and to lower standards to draft in more doctors and social workers for the health service. Powers to ban mass gatherings and to compensate organisations are also likely to be included. Mr Hancock confirmed yesterday that the bill would be published on Thursday, and the new power would be in place for two years.

People suspected of having coronavirus who defy public health advice could be taken into custody or fined up to £1,000 under the powers. They could also be detained in a secure hospital for up to 14 days.

Safeguards introduced after the scandal involving Harold Shipman, the serial killer GP, will be suspended to allow swifter cremations and burials. Only a single doctor's signature will be needed to register deaths and cremations. Tighter rules for clinicians registering deaths and cremations were introduced after Shipman killed more than 200 of his patients. At present a second doctor's opinion is required before forms are then sent to a referee.

Compulsory land purchases will be made possible so that the government can create large graveyards at speed.

Powers to force schools and nurseries to stay open are likely to be included in the legislation and councils will be allowed to lower standards in care homes to deal with staff shortages.

The emergency legislation could be approved without a formal vote, as MPs remain concerned that the infection could spread as they congregate in the crowded division lobbies.

Jacob Rees-Mogg, leader of the Commons, attempted to reassure parliamentarians last week that they were not at risk of catching the virus while voting. He said that he had taken a Public Health England official into a division lobby and was told they were "not a high risk". However, the expert had recommended opening windows.

The announcement that people over 70 will be asked to self-isolate would affect at least seven MPs, including Jeremy Corbyn, the outgoing Labour leader, who is 70.

Mr Hancock said that ministers had not made a decision on whether to bar gatherings of more than 500 people in the rest of the UK, after Scotland said it would bring in restrictions from today. “We are absolutely ready to do that as necessary,” he said.

Asked if ministers would order the closure of all shops other than pharmacies and supermarkets, Mr Hancock told the BBC: “We haven’t ruled that out, we will do what is necessary.” In a sign of the extreme measures pending, Mr Hancock said: “Our generation has never been tested like this.”

He added: “Our grandparents were, during the Second World War, when our cities were bombed during the Blitz. Despite the pounding every night, the rationing, the loss of life, they pulled together in one gigantic national effort. Today our generation is facing its own test, fighting a very real and new disease.”

Yesterday 14 more patients died in England, taking the death toll from coronavirus in Britain to 35. Nick Matthews, 59, a former police officer, who died in Bristol on Saturday is believed to be the youngest British coronavirus fatality.

Private hospitals and nurses could step in to help NHS

Thousands of private hospital beds and staff could join the NHS response to the coronavirus pandemic (Kat Lay writes).

Government officials and NHS England managers are talking to private healthcare providers to determine what role they can play, with an announcement expected this week.

The GMB union has called for the government to requisition the beds for public use. However, *The Times* understands that the talks are seeking a sustainable commercial arrangement.

Options under consideration include the private hospitals taking on more planned care for NHS patients, such as knee or hip surgery, to free up NHS resources to tackle the virus.

Independent hospitals may also treat some coronavirus patients, probably those with milder forms of the disease, as there are fewer intensive care beds in the private sector.

There are 8,482 beds in private hospitals in the UK, according to analysts LaingBuisson. Nearly 8 per cent are equipped for intensive care.

Rehana Azam, the GMB's national secretary, said: "It's time to take back these beds for the NHS. Rent-free. This is a public health emergency, not a business opportunity for shoddy private healthcare chums to profiteer from distress. Not a penny of taxpayer cash should line pockets of grotesquely wealthy health firms."

Doctors who work in private hospitals tend also to work for the NHS, but this is not true of other staff. The equivalent of at least 13,000 full-time nurses work for private providers, according to NHS statistics.

David Furness, of the Independent Healthcare Providers Network, said: "We recognise the need for all parts of the health system to play their part."

The Best Western Great Britain hotel chain said it would be willing to take the "unprecedented" step of turning some of its properties into hospitals.