

Schools close as UK govt announces emergency virus plans

March 18 2020

Schools in Scotland and Wales will shut on Friday, officials said, with England expected to follow suit as Britain unveiled planned emergency powers to deal with the spiralling coronavirus outbreak.

Prime Minister Boris Johnson has come under mounting pressure to close schools, as other European governments have done, particularly in light of increasing staff shortages.

But even as he told parliament a decision would be taken "imminently", the devolved governments in Cardiff and Edinburgh stole a march by announcing their own closures by Friday at the latest.

"At this stage I cannot promise that they will reopen before the summer holidays," which normally begin in July, said Scottish First Minister Nicola Sturgeon.

The announcements came as the effects of the pandemic, which has seen 2,626 confirmed cases in Britain and 71 deaths, begin to bite.

The FTSE 100 slumped again, dropping as much as 5.0 percent in morning trade, while the pound hit its lowest level since 1985 against the dollar, touching \$1.1828.

Parliamentary hotspot

Lawmakers were told to stay away from their weekly parliamentary question time with Johnson and those who did attend sat at a distance from one another to try to reduce their risk of infection.

Some 25 MPs, including a cabinet minister, are already thought to have isolated themselves. A leading disease expert advising the government warned the area around parliament was a hotspot.

"There's a lot of COVID-19 in Westminster," epidemiologist Professor Neil Ferguson tweeted, as he announced that he had also developed symptoms.

In other developments:

- the government said it was working to increase the number of people in hospital being tested for COVID-19 to 25,000 a day and ensure frontline health workers get the protective kit they need.
- Johnson said there was a "massive effort" to build enough ventilators to treat the worst-hit patients, after concern about a shortage.
- he also promised legislation to protect individuals unable to pay their rent because of job losses caused by the crisis to avoid evictions.
- Supermarkets, whose supplies have been hit by panic-buying, said they would safeguard supplies for the elderly and most vulnerable, including dedicated opening times only for older customers.
- the 50th Glastonbury music festival became the latest casualty of the outbreak, with this year's event pushed back to next year.

Emergency powers

Johnson on Tuesday said the government was on a war footing, as he escalated measures to limit the human and economic cost of the outbreak.

The government has now recommended household isolation, home-working, an end to mass gatherings including sporting events, unnecessary social contact and overseas travel.

Chief scientific adviser Patrick Vallance said 55,000 Britons could have the virus at a "reasonable" estimate.

A huge package of support for businesses to help them survive the tough new social measures has been announced, including government-backed loans of at least £330 billion (\$395 billion, 360 billion euros).

Sweeping emergency powers are now to be introduced in parliament for up to two years, including proposals allowing police to detain potentially infected people to be tested.

Health Secretary Matt Hancock said: "The Emergency Coronavirus Bill... will only be used when it is absolutely necessary and must be timed to maximise their effectiveness."

The measures "give the [government](#) the powers it needs to protect lives", he added.

The bill includes plans to boost the health workforce with volunteers, shutting airports and other transport hubs if security cannot be guaranteed, and using more video hearings in courts.

The legislation is expected to pass unopposed, given the cross-party involvement in drawing it up, and become law before parliament goes into recess on March 31.

But some opposition lawmakers voiced concern at the sweeping nature and duration of the proposals, and the effect on civil liberties. Some argued they should be regularly renewed by parliament.

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