

Prime Minister's Speech: 10 May

DISCLAIMER: This document contains a scientific fact check of the statements made during the Prime Minister's Speech on 10 May. This summary was compiled in near real-time was publicly available so may contain mistakes or other inaccuracies resulting from misunderstanding. Our usual detail of fact-checking has not been performed due to the short turnaround time. Volunteers from Scientists for Labour have undertaken to ensure that the commentary provided in this report is accurate, but it should be taken 'as-is'. Readers are encouraged to check both the original statement made and the actual text of the source below before using this information.

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Links are **orange** for news articles

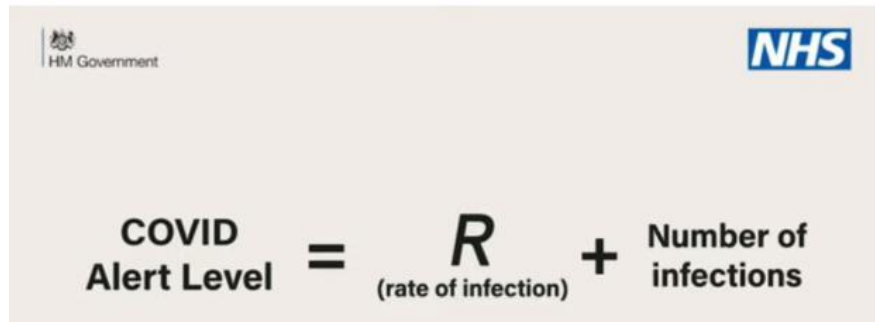
Links are **green** for papers in academic journals.

Links are in **purple** for governmental statistics or advice

1. Summary

Our primary conclusion from this fact checking exercise was that little to no specificity was provided in the Prime Minister's speech, and that there were very few facts provided. Our main concern resulting from the PM's briefing is the lack of specificity itself – very few dates and numbers were provided and there was very little that either we or the public have to go on in terms of new information. There was a distinct lack of clarity regarding current and future steps – a new five point sliding scale was presented and the extremes of the scale were explained, but there was no detail as to what each of the individual points between the extremes meant. There was also no clarity in how the Government intends to move between points on the scale, or any instructions provided regarding actions the public should or should not take at any one threat level.

The Prime minister has provided an equation for the calculation of the threat level:



The image shows a slide with the HM Government logo on the left and the NHS logo on the right. In the center, the equation is written as: COVID Alert Level = R (rate of infection) + Number of infections. The text is in a bold, sans-serif font.

where *COVID Alert Level* is an integer between one and five, *R* is a number around 1 (currently apparently below 1, according to the PM) and the *Number of infections* is a number likely to be currently around 10,000. The Government, therefore, implies that:

$$[1-5] = 1 + 10,000$$

This equation is fundamentally flawed. Whilst we suspect that the government was trying to get across an *indicative* measure of how the alert level would be determined, broadcasting meaningless ‘mathematics’ on national television is not, in our opinion, helpful and only further undermines efforts to increase the scientific and healthcare literacy of the population.

Aside from this glaring issue, because of the relatively low amount of content, there is very little we can provide in terms of fact checking. However, we have summarised the facts stated in the following list:

1. **R:** the PM stated that *R* (the reproduction value) was below 1, the most recent research shows that the *R* might currently be below 1 but estimates vary. More clarity on the exact metric in use and its role in setting policy is needed.
 2. **THE ALERT SYSTEM:** A new alert system is being rolled out. The meaning of these levels, the metrics needed to transition between them, and the ‘endgame’ (what happens at level 1) remain unclear.
 3. **TESTING:** the importance of testing will hopefully become clearer tomorrow. See our reports on contact tracing and testing for further details.
 4. **TRANSPORTATION AND THE RETURN TO WORK:** The recommendation is that those who can’t work at home should return to work. At 20% of pre-lockdown levels of mobility a second more damaging resurgence could occur.
 5. **SCHOOLS:** dates have been given for targeted reopening, but without details on how these were devised should be provided.
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2. Preparing for the return to work on Monday - synopsis

The PM changed the recommendations around home working so that people should be 'actively encouraged' to go to work if they cannot work from home. "We now need to stress that anyone who can't work from home, for instance those in construction or manufacturing, *should be actively encouraged to go to work.*"

Both BuzzFeedNews and the BBC previously reported on draft documents outlining the government's plans to ensure safe work spaces, however it is unclear whether these recommendations have been translated to employers in full, or whether employers have been encouraged to undertake risk assessments. The implications for furlough are unclear.

It is unclear how many people who were previously not working this would affect. However the communication of this message may prove extremely stressful for those expected to return to work with less than 12 hours notice, especially those from vulnerable groups who would be risking their health. The recommendation not to take public transport, and instead to drive, walk or cycle, will disproportionately affect low income groups who have no other choice than to use public transport.

3. Scientists for Labour's three key messages to look for in tomorrow's brief

1) **PROGRESSION PLAN:** each stage of the easing of restrictions should have a clear aim, metric by which this should be evaluated, and target group which it benefits. If the stage beginning June 1 aims to return pupils back to school, it should be clear what data will be used to inform a decision to advance, revert, or defer making any further change.

2) **TESTING** is going to play a key part of this exit strategy, and there are three things to consider. One is how widely we test, and what that will be used to inform; the second is whether we can test for past infection (using antibody tests), and the third is what degree of immunity is conferred by past infection. We want to see this addressed by a justified testing prioritisation plan (which doesn't just consist of posting lots of tests out), a consideration of where we are in trials/licensing of antibody tests, and discussion of how we would react if it turns out that widespread re-infection is possible (as this could change everything). There should be a discussion of the inherent uncertainties in these results too.

3) **FINAL OUTCOME:** is the PM assuming a vaccine will be available, or that the disease will become endemic and we will all catch it? We would be very surprised if the likely final outcomes are, at this point, clear - but some planning is needed. For example, if the disease is to become endemic, then that would mean something very different for how hospitals return to normality than if we assume a vaccine is going to be ready in mid-2021. *The PM's statement on the alert levels (1 being "COVID-19 no longer present in the UK") suggests that he does not believe this will happen - a basis for this opinion should be made clear immediately.*

Point 1 - A need to keep R below 1

Statements:

- There is a need to keep the reproduction rate (R) below 1.0. An R of 1 would indicate that each infected person infects one more person. R less than one would mean that each infected person will, on average, not infect someone else. R greater than 1 risks a return to exponential growth
- R is currently thought to be between 0.5 and 0.9. [unclear whether the PM was talking about R0 or Rt in these statements]

Relevant links:

What is the 'R' value and why is it so important for the easing of the coronavirus lockdown?	R0 estimate, as published 10 May
Substantial undocumented infection facilitates the rapid dissemination of novel coronavirus (SARS-CoV-2)	Undocumented infections were the source of 79% of documented cases
Modeling COVID-19 on a network: super-spreaders, testing and containment	Easing social distancing without effective testing and tracing could lead to a worse second peak

Commentary:

- The PM is unclear as to whether he is talking about the basic reproduction value (R0) or a the effective reproduction value (Rt). These are different measures and we hope the specifics will be clarified tomorrow.
- It should also be noted that estimates of R0 and Rt are very difficult to make, and R0 estimates will lag the actual value by several days. How this will be accounted for should be clarified.
- The difference between an R0 value of 0.5 and 0.9 is enormous. 0.5 would mean that every ten people infected will infect five more, whilst for 0.9 they would infect nine more. With a 20% uncertainty around a mean of 0.7 (assuming symmetric confidence limits), we would expect substantial differences in policy for R0 of 0.5 versus 0.9.
- Studies suggest that many (or the majority) of carriers may be asymptomatic, and hence not accounted for properly in estimates of R.

Point 2 - The COVID alert system

Statements:

- A new COVID alert system is being introduced, akin to the UK Terror Threat Levels or BIKINI systems.
- There will be five alert levels. 1 is “COVID-19 no longer present in the UK” and 5 is “critical”.
- We are currently in level 4.
- Now in a position to move in steps to level 3.
- To keep infection down, we must rapidly reverse epidemics in care homes and NHS - numbers are coming down sharply but much more to be done.

Commentary:

- Our concerns about the government’s ‘formula’ have been detailed above.
- It is unclear what the intermediate levels between 1 and 5 are. Moreover, this indicator can only ever be an assessment of the current situation, and care should be taken to make clear whether it is intended to serve as any predictor of future risk.
- The levels do not at present have clear ‘advice’ attached to them. How should behaviour be modified before tomorrow morning to account for the change in advice?
- As detailed in our ‘three key points’ above, there is a significant amount of debate as to whether COVID-19 will ever be completely eliminated in the UK. The PM’s choice of the wording for level 1 (the “endgame”, as it were) suggests that they think it will be - this should be clarified urgently.
- The descriptor for level 1 includes the phrase ‘in the UK’. A threat will remain in the UK in so long as there are cases anywhere in the world. Why is this not considered?

Point 3 - Testing

Statements:

- We have world beating system for testing potential victims and tracing contacts for ~100,000 people every day

Relevant links:

Total COVID-19 tests	Number of tests performed to date by country
Daily COVID-19 tests	Number of test performed per day by country

Commentary:

- The UK currently has a relatively high test rate compared to other countries around the world, but has been operating at a lower rate than, for example, India, for the past week.
- Please see our reports on testing and contact tracing here for more details and pertinent policy questions: <https://www.scientistsforlabour.org.uk/covid-19-1>

Point 4 - Transport and the return to work

Statements:

- People should now be "actively encouraged" to go to work if they cannot work from home: "we now need to stress that anyone who can't work from home, for instance those in construction or manufacturing, *should be actively encouraged to go to work.*"
- Working with employers to make workplaces as safe as possible.
- But they should avoid public transport if at all possible. Should go by car, or ideally by walking or cycling.
- Capacity of public transport should be limited to maintain social distancing.

Relevant links:

Report 20: Using mobility to estimate the transmission intensity of COVID-19 in Italy: A subnational analysis with future scenarios	Even at 20% pre-lockdown levels of mobility, a second more damaging resurgence could occur
TUC - No one should have to return to work without "tough new measures" on safety	Includes the recommendation that employers should produce risk assessments and communicate to workers before return to work.
Coronavirus: What's the risk of taking buses or trains?	Short explanation of the potential risks of public transport - although this is still uncertain
Analysing the link between public transport use and airborne transmission: mobility and contagion in the London underground	Study on the transmission of Influenza like illnesses on the London Underground - suggests a link between use and transmission.
Transport system will be reduced to just 10% capacity when full services resume due to social distancing, Grant Shapps warns	Report that the transport system's capacity will be reduced to 10% once full service is resumed due to social distancing measures.
Coronavirus: Possible post-lockdown workplace rules revealed	Potential rules for workplaces post-lockdown.

This Is The Government's Draft Plan To Ease Coronavirus Lockdown Measures In The Workplace	Report from BuzzFeed News: having seen all seven draft documents from the government on workplace rules. Includes the recommendation that 'Shielded "extremely vulnerable" people will be banned from any work that isn't carried out at home.' which was not mentioned by the Prime Minister. It is unclear how many of these recommendations have been communicated to workplaces due to open tomorrow.
ECDC Report on Transport	Report from European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control on reducing transmission on public transport.

Summative Commentary:

- The recommendation for certain sectors to return to work comes, for some, 12 hours before they are expected to be at their workplaces.
- There is currently no assurance that employers have taken out risk assessments, or introduced hygiene measures or social distancing measures to protect their staff.
- Avoiding public transport is not possible for some workers, and there was no mention from the PM of measures to make this option safer, aside from the suggestion of reduction in capacity.
- This may further exacerbate social inequalities around who is exposed to coronavirus.
- Furthermore, the encouragement to rely on private modes of transport, both in returning to work and leisure activities as suggested, sets a dangerous and potentially irreversible message that public transport is not safe. This may have long term impacts on air pollution, congestion and climate change. [See our APPG submission here.](#)

Point 5 - Schools returning

Statements:

- Step 2: School reopening, beginning with Reception and Years 1 and 6 may begin after the June half term. Those with exams next year should hopefully get time with teachers before the break.
- Step 3: Earliest by July 1. Hope to begin wider reopening of shops, and High Streets.

Relevant links:

Coronavirus: How lockdown is being lifted across Europe	A quick overview of lockdown relaxation measures taken by other countries.
As coronavirus lockdowns ease, this is how other countries are gradually reopening schools	Further discussion of measures which could be taken to enable schools to reopen.
Expected impact of reopening schools after lockdown on COVID-19 epidemic in Île-de-France	Reopening schools after lifting lockdown will likely lead to an increase in the number of COVID-19 cases in the following two months.

Summative Commentary:

- There has been some guidance provided for the return of pupils to schools, without the full details being elucidated (or even worked out yet?)
- There was no time-bound statement for those secondary school pupils who will have examinations next year. The government should make clear whether they are considering moving some school teaching into the holidays.
- **France** has taken a zonal approach. The country has been split into 4 zones, with Paris being in a red zone, with its schools therefore shut.
 - Primary schools and nurseries in other zones will re-open on 11 May. Schools in the green zones for 11-15 year olds will open on 18 May.
 - 15 pupils per classroom is the limit and masks are compulsory for older schoolchildren.
 - Schools for 15-18 year olds will not be opening before June.
- **Ireland**: all schools shut until September.
- **Belgium**: all schools are open but maximum 10 people per classroom.
- **Netherlands**: primary schools to re-open in May with secondary schools to re-open in June.
- **China**: masks are compulsory, customised school transport is in use, designated routes to classrooms have been established and some students are having temperature checks.