



Covid-19: school closures and bans on mass gatherings will need to be considered, says England's CMO

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School closures and bans on mass gatherings will need to be considered if there is evidence of onward transmission of covid-19 in the UK, England's chief medical officer has said.

Speaking at the Nuffield Trust annual summit in Windsor on 27 February, Chris Whitty said that it was "only a matter of time" before there is onward transmission of coronavirus in the UK. Measures to reduce transmission, such as school closures and banning mass gatherings for at least two months, would then need to be considered, he said.

"I expect there will be some onward transmission in the UK," he said. "We haven't had it to date, as far as I can see, but that's just a matter of time."

Measures to mitigate the impact on the health service would "come with a social cost," he said. "Everybody knows that the kinds of things you consider are reducing mass gatherings and school closures—which may or may not be appropriate for this particular virus, we don't know yet, we need to find that out. We're not saying we will adopt these measures, but we have to look at how likely are they to work, what the evidence base is, and what will be the social cost."

He added, "We're actually going to, as a society, have a serious discussion about how we're going to manage trade-offs between school closures and changing the shape of the epidemic."

Whitty said that any such measures were likely to need to be in place for two months or longer. "The implications of that aren't trivial, so we need to think carefully," he said.

He emphasised that it was important to stress the things that "really, really work" in terms of limiting the spread of disease. "By far the biggest two are washing your hands, which people underestimate, and, if you cough and sneeze, putting your hand in front of it, hopefully with a handkerchief," he said.

Whitty's comments came as the NHS announced that it is launching a service in west London offering "drive through" coronavirus testing, in which people referred through NHS 111 are invited to an appointment in their car. Community nurses then carry out a swab in the nose and mouth, which are checked and assessed within 72 hours, and people are asked to self-isolate while checks are completed.

The Royal College of General Practitioners (RCGP) has also urged patients not to contact their GP for covid-19 "holiday cancellation" letters, which some travel companies have requested. "Insurers and travel companies should be basing their decisions to offer refunds on advice from the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and Public Health England, not letters from GPs," Martin Marshall, chair of the RCGP, said. "It is not a good use of GPs' time to be writing letters for patients who are not ill but have plans to travel. GPs will always base their decisions on official advice."

There are now 16 cases of covid-19 in the UK, after a person was confirmed as having the virus on Thursday.