

An update on the coronavirus vaccine, 2 December 2020

Mr Speaker, with permission I'd like to make a statement about the coronavirus vaccine.

Today marks a new chapter in our fight against this virus. Ever since this pandemic hit our shores, almost a year ago, we have known that a vaccine would be critical to set us free.

So all through this arduous year – and it has been an arduous year while we've been working night and day to fight the virus and keep it under control – we have been striving too, to develop the vaccines that can give us hope and let us eventually release the curbs on our freedoms that have bound us for so long.

Thanks to the incredible work of the Vaccines Taskforce, the Business Secretary and Kate Bingham, we have already amassed a huge portfolio of different vaccine candidates.

We've backed 7 vaccines, and ordered 357 million doses on behalf of the whole of the UK, one of the biggest portfolios per capita in the world.

We have said from the start that a vaccine must be safe and effective, before we would even consider deploying.

Any vaccine must go through a rigorous process of clinical trials involving thousands of people, and extensive independent scrutiny from the MHRA, one of the world's most respected medical regulators.

Today, I am delighted to inform the House that the MHRA has issued the clinical authorisation of the Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine. This is a monumental step forward. It's no longer if there's a vaccine, it's when. In our battle against the virus, help is on its way.

Today is a triumph for all those who believe in science, a triumph for ingenuity and a triumph for humanity. I want to thank everyone who has played their part in this achievement. The team at Pfizer and BioNTech, the volunteers who stepped up and took part in clinical trials and to the MHRA themselves who have made sure that this is a vaccine that we can all have faith in.

Thanks to their efforts, I can confirm that the UK is the first country in the world to have a clinically approved coronavirus vaccine for supply.

And now, our task is to make use of the fruits of this scientific endeavour, to save lives.

Deployment

Mr Speaker, we have spent months preparing for this day, so that as soon as we got the green light we would be ready to go.

We were the first country in the world to pre-order supplies of this successful vaccine and we have 40 million doses pre-ordered for delivery over the coming months, enough for 20 million people, because 2 jabs are required each.

Following authorisation, the next stage is to test each batch of the vaccine for safety.

I can confirm that batch testing has been completed this morning for the first deployment of 800,000 doses of the vaccine. These doses are for the whole UK.

This morning I chaired a meeting of health ministers from the devolved administrations to ensure the roll-out effort is co-ordinated nationwide.

This will be one of the biggest civilian logistical efforts that we have faced as a nation. It will be difficult. There will be challenges and complications. But I know the NHS is equal to the task.

Rolling out a vaccine free at the point of delivery, according to clinical need, not ability to pay, is in the finest tradition of our National Health Service.

And I am delighted to confirm that the NHS will be able to start vaccinating from early next week.

The whole purpose of the vaccine is to protect people from covid so we can get our lives back to normal. So, we will prioritise the groups who are at greatest risk.

This morning, the [Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation has published its advice](#), setting out the order of priority according to that clinical need.

This includes care home residents and their carers, the over-80s, and the frontline health and social care workers.

We will deliver according to clinical prioritisation and operational necessity because the need to hold the vaccine at minus-70 makes this vaccine particularly challenging to deploy.

While we will begin vaccination next week, the bulk of the vaccinations will be in the new year. But I would urge anyone called forward for vaccination by the NHS to respond quickly, to protect themselves, their loved ones and their community.

Mr Speaker, over the next few months we will see vaccines delivered in 3 different ways.

First, we will begin vaccination in hospital hubs.

Second, we will deploy through local community services, including GPs and in due course pharmacies too.

And, third, we will stand up vaccination centres in conference centres and sports venues, to vaccinate large numbers of people as more vaccines come on stream.

This is an important step. But we are not there yet.

And so we must all play our part, and keep following the new rules that this House approved overwhelmingly yesterday. And remember the basics, like hands, face, space and get a test, that we know from experience are so important in keeping this virus under control.

Care homes

Before I finish, Mr Speaker, can I also update the House on another bit of good news.

From today, I am absolutely thrilled to say that we can safely allow visits in care homes, subject to visitors testing negative for COVID-19.

Coronavirus has denied so many people the simple pleasure of seeing a loved one, which is so precious to so many, especially in our care homes.

This is only possible because of the success we've had in building one of the biggest testing capacities in Europe. And with local and national teams working together side by side, something we have often discussed across this house.

We have worked hard on testing, and we've worked hard on the vaccine. Our strategy of suppressing the virus until a vaccine can make us safe – that strategy is working.

And I'm delighted that we can now bring families and friends together ahead of Christmas thanks to this improvement.

Conclusion

Mr Speaker, this is a day to remember, in a year to forget. We can see the way out. But we're not there yet.

So let's keep our resolve, keep doing our bit, to keep people safe, until science can set us free.