

Health and Social Care Secretary's statement on coronavirus (COVID-19): 1 March 2021

Good evening and welcome back to Downing Street for today's coronavirus briefing.

I'm joined by Professor Jonathan Van-Tam, Deputy Chief Medical Officer, and Dr Susan Hopkins, from Public Health England and NHS Test and Trace.

Since we spoke on Friday, I'm absolutely delighted that we've reached the milestone of more than 20 million people in the UK getting a vaccine against COVID-19.

It's a magnificent achievement for the country.

First slide please.

As of yesterday, 20,275,451 people have received a jab.

I want to pay tribute to all the teams involved – across the whole of the UK – who are delivering the largest and fastest vaccination programme in British history.

That we've been able to do this – and move so much faster than any other similar-sized nation – has depended on a huge number of people; it is not an accident.

It's down to insight and hard work.

For the last year, we have shared a common mission: to deliver a vaccine, as fast as safely possible.

We've got used to saying thank you to the people who have made this happen.

But I just want to call out a few in particular.

First, the regulator the MHRA – who have remained tough and rigorous throughout but flexible, so it's safety, not bureaucracy they focused on, proving themselves to be, without doubt, the best medical regulator in the world. And we are all very grateful

Next, the Vaccines Taskforce. Their combination of academic excellence, with private sector entrepreneurialism, and civil service grip has forged a team of remarkable capability, which is a model for how governments can get stuff done in the future.

The scientists, the pharmaceutical companies and the armed forces, everyone involved in the delivery effort – from the leadership of the NHS to every

local volunteer.

And you, the British people.

For sticking by the rules and for your remarkable enthusiasm to get a jab – it makes me really proud.

Recent figures show 94% of those eligible have said they have either had a jab – or will get the jab when the call comes. 94%.

And this is so important because each and every jab makes us all safer.

Every time a friend sends me a message with a picture of them getting their jab – and they do a lot – I know that we're all one step safer and we're all one step closer to returning to normality.

It is fantastic the enthusiasm that people are showing and we still have a long way to go, so let's stick at it.

Today we have some new data to present on the effectiveness of the vaccine, both its real-world effect we can now see in the data and some new analytical research that we're publishing, which shows how it's saving lives, and this is being published in a paper by Public Health England and others right now.

First, let's look at the real-world data.

Next slide please.

If you look at the number of new cases as we described on Friday the number of new cases is falling but the rate of decline has slowed.

This shows how we all need to keep sticking to the rules.

Let's not blow it now.

However.

Next slide please.

The number of hospitalisations is falling faster.

Even better: among the age groups vaccinated first, the fall in hospitalisations is faster than in the younger age groups who are still yet to get a jab.

This is a sign of the vaccine working.

Next slide please.

But where you can really see it is in the data on deaths – we can see that the number of deaths each day is thankfully falling much much faster than after the first peak, and again, as you can see from this slide, is falling faster in the over-80s – who got the jab first – than in the under-80s.

Final slide please.

Taken together, this difference in the data – between older and younger groups – shows a ‘vaccine gap’, you can just see it starting to emerge here over February.

This is a gap between the rate of decline in older and younger groups, the rate of decline in terms of people dying each day, is going faster amongst the over-80s and this shows in the real world, across the UK, right now, that the vaccine is helping to protect the NHS and save lives.

These real-world effects are backed up by some exciting new data that shows that a single shot of either the Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine or Pfizer vaccine works against severe infection amongst over-70s, with a more than 80% reduction in hospitalisations. This is extremely good news.

In fact, the detailed data show that the protection that you get from catching COVID, 35 days after a first jab, is even slightly better for the Oxford jab than for Pfizer, albeit both results are clearly very strong. Professor Van-Tam is going to set more details in a moment.

These results may also help explain why the number of COVID admissions to intensive care units among people over 80 in the UK have dropped to single figures in the last couple of weeks.

Which is something that I know, we all welcome. This is seriously encouraging, it shows the power of science and what it means for you is that when the call comes – get the jab. The evidence shows it will protect you.

And I can formally announce that we’re now inviting the over-60s to be vaccinated.

All part of our national effort to offer everyone the jab by the end of July.

To do that, and to make sure our vaccine programme has the funds it needs to keep up this incredible work, at the Budget on Wednesday, the Chancellor will set out £1.65 billion of new government funding to reinforce our vaccine rollout across all parts of the UK.

As more of us are protected against the virus, we can gradually replace the safety that comes from the restrictions that we have to impose with the safety from the jab.

Part of that funding will go towards further vaccine testing and development to make sure that we are as fast and effective in developing the next generation of COVID vaccines, including vaccines against variants, as we were with the existing ones.

There’s a huge amount of work underway to ensure that we can develop vaccines against variants as fast and as safely possible.

Finally, I want to turn to the 6 cases of the variant of concern first identified in Manaus, in Brazil that we have identified here in the UK, 3 in

Scotland and 3 in England.

We know that 5 of these people quarantined at home – as they were legally required to do.

We have been in contact with them and their families, and are grateful to them for understanding the seriousness of the situation.

We are putting in place surge testing in South Gloucestershire, as a precaution and I urge everyone to remain vigilant.

One of the 6 completed a test but did not successfully complete contact details.

We are therefore asking anyone who took a test on the 12 or 13 February but hasn't received the result back, to please get in touch by calling 119.

And Susan Hopkins will give more information on this effort in a moment.

We identified these cases thanks to the UK's advanced sequencing capabilities. We know about them because of NHS Test and Trace, and scientists around the world are now working to get ahead of some of the new coronavirus variants, looking at how a third vaccine dose could tackle these evolving mutations – much as we do with flu each year.

But for now, tackling this disease rests with every single one of us.

It's important to remember that, no matter what variant it is, COVID spreads in the same way, through social contact between people.

The steps we can all take to stop its spread are the same.

To stay at home, to take vital steps like hands, face, space, and make sure we observe the basics – letting fresh air in – and keeping to the rules on social distancing.

And that's how we can keep ourselves safe – and protect the people around us.

And if we can do that, as surely as spring follows winter there will be brighter days ahead.