

Health and Social Care Secretary's statement on coronavirus (COVID-19): 25 January 2021

Good afternoon and welcome back to Downing Street for today's coronavirus briefing. I'm joined by our Deputy Chief Medical Officer, Dr Jenny Harries and Dr Susan Hopkins, who is the Chief Medical Advisor to Public Health England and NHS Test and Trace.

I want to update you on the latest coronavirus data – and the vaccine rollout. In the last week in the UK, we have seen 37,258 cases of coronavirus, on average each day. The NHS is still under intense pressure across all parts of the country with 37,899 people in UK hospitals with COVID-19 – and that includes 4,076 on ventilators.

Sadly, today 592 more deaths were reported. We must never forget the real impact of this disease. The loved ones that we've lost. Grandparents. Parents. Friends. Colleagues. We grieve for each one. And the pressure on the front line, I can tell you, is just so relentless. And when I talk to my colleagues who are working in COVID wards.

They are flat out and they are stretched to the limit. They're doing everything they can. And I want to say a huge thank you to all those colleagues who are working so hard – they are pulling a huge shift and it's a duty on all of us to support them.

I want to extend that thanks also to our ambulance service workers and in particular I want to thank ambulance service staff who stepped up over the weekend when an appeal went out from the Scottish Ambulance Service for extra help and ambulance services from the other nations stepped forward.

Our health systems across the UK routinely work closely together – offering support when its needed. From vaccines to ambulance services, and the UK is stronger together in the fight against this pandemic.

I know how tough that fight is. Thankfully, there are early signs that the actions we're taking are working. The rise in the number of cases is slowing – and falling in some parts of the country like London and Scotland. At the same time, the number of vaccinations is going up.

Like many of you, I've been talking to members of my family who've just had the call to be vaccinated. It's a really emotional moment when people get vaccinated. It means so much to people because the vaccine brings safety to that individual and marks the route out for us all from this pandemic.

I'm so proud to be able to tell you that we have, as of last night, vaccinated 78.7% of all over 80s. That's almost 4 in 5 of everyone aged over 80. I'm delighted – you can see from these figures – there's so much

enthusiasm for vaccination amongst the over 80s because octogenarians know what the scientists know: which is that the vaccines save lives.

Of course, the rate limiting factor to this vaccination programme remains supply. As we know, supply is tight. We've had a very strong performance in this past week. And I'm confident that the NHS will deliver every shot that's made available to it. To help with that, today we opened a further 32 large-scale vaccination centres including at Blackpool Winter Gardens, the Black Country Living Museum – better known to many as the set of Peaky Blinders – and London's Francis Crick Institute – itself no stranger to human ingenuity.

And I'm determined to get vaccine uptake as high as possible. Today we're funding councils to enhance their vital efforts to engage those who are hardest to reach through our Community Champions scheme. As of today, 6.6 million have now received a vaccine against COVID-19. That's more than 1 in 9 of the adult population.

On Saturday alone, we gave nearly half a million jabs. In the last week, 2.5 million people have been vaccinated across the UK. That's a rate of more than 250 people a minute.

We're on track to offer everyone in the top 4 priority groups a jab by the 15 February. If you're in one of those groups, one of the top 4 priority groups, and you haven't had the call yet, don't worry: the NHS will be in touch.

It's a truly national effort. Alongside the GPs, pharmacists and other NHS staff and of course Armed Forces working so hard – alongside all of them working every weekend every evening. I particularly want to thank the 80,000 people who stepped forward to help deliver this, doing things like volunteering to stand in car parks for 8 hours a day – in the freezing cold to ensure elderly people can safely get into a vaccination centre.

It's truly heart-warming. We've seen this selfless attitude towards the vaccination programme and it makes me very proud and very grateful to all those who have stepped forward. Because we know the responsibility for our fightback against this disease rests with every one of us. That is equally true when it comes to following the rules and maintaining social distancing.

Social distancing works – by denying the virus the social contact it needs to spread. I want to reiterate an important point made by the Chief Medical Officers and the clinical advice that they have been giving: even if you've had the jab, the rules still apply.

There's 2 reasons for this. First, because the protection takes time. Your body's immune is only fully trained up around three weeks after your jab. And, even if you have protection yourself, we still don't know whether you will be able to pass coronavirus on to someone else.

We are monitoring this very carefully and will publish information on it as soon as we have it available. So this is not a moment to ease up.

The success of our vaccine rollout means we cannot – cannot – put our progress at risk.

The final thing I want to say is this. There's no question that the new variants have made this fight a whole lot tougher. And I want to set out again, precisely what we know about the new variants. As with all science – as we have throughout this unprecedented crisis – we are learning more all the time.

The new variant first discovered in Kent – which comprises now a significant number of our cases now – is spreading 30 to 70% more easily than the existing variant. Based on analysis conducted by academic colleagues in a variety of studies there is a realistic possibility that this variant may be associated with increased mortality compared to the old variant – as well as increased transmission.

Because of our extensive genomic sequencing, we have identified cases of the new variant first identified in South Africa and that one that was first identified in Brazil. Further scientific work is underway to understand more about these variants but in the meantime it reinforces the critical message that we must be cautious.

For all of us, our response must to be extra careful stay at home – maintain social distancing. We've all frankly sacrificed too much and its so important that we protect lives and we're making progress with the vaccine.

With the end in sight we cannot put that progress at risk. And there's a promise of better days that lie ahead we have to hold our nerve and persevere through this difficult winter. So it's incumbent on us all, wherever possible to stay at home, protect the NHS, and save lives.