

Health and Social Care Secretary's statement on coronavirus (COVID-19): 26 February 2021

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

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

Before I share some news on our vaccination programme, I'd just like to update you on the latest coronavirus data.

First slide please.

Today's ONS figures show that the number of cases is now down to 1 in every 145 people and that the rate of decline is continuing but actually the pace of it is slowing.

The rate of hospital admissions show a fall of 40% over the past fortnight, but there are still 15,485 people in hospital, and that's far too high.

The number of deaths have more than halved in the last fortnight, but 380 deaths were reported each day on average over the last week. And that is far too high.

The good news is that the link from cases, to hospitalisations and deaths, which has had a grim inevitability throughout 2020, that link is now breaking, thanks to the vaccination programme.

This demonstrates as you can see that there's been a fall in the number of cases, another fall, but that the speed of that fall is slowing slightly.

And this fact and the fact that the pressure on the NHS has lifted means that the UK's Chief Medical Officers have agreed that the UK alert level can be moved down from level 5, to level 4, which of course is great news. But level 4 still means the NHS is under serious pressure.

The number of cases is now falling by only 15% a week. In some areas that has flattened entirely. And one in five local authorities have seen a rise in cases in the last week.

I'm going to ask Professor Van Tam to set out more details of this and the geography in a moment.

But I just want to say this about the figures. This stark picture shows this isn't over yet. The stay-at-home rules are still in place for a reason.

Every action that you take, every time you put your mask on, every time you stay at home – you are playing your part. This is on all of us to keep this under control.

This is still a deadly virus. We will get through this. But we have to stick at it. We must all remain vigilant.

Vaccination programme

And that brings me to the vaccination programme, because while the vaccination programme is rolling out at the pace of one of the fastest in the world, we're not there yet.

We can all take comfort that through science we have found a solution.

We have got a route out, and we can gradually replace the protection that is there in the restrictions, with protection that comes from the vaccine and that is very good news.

I'm delighted to be able to tell you that as of this morning, 19 million people have had the vaccine. That's 35% of all adults across the United Kingdom.

That also includes over half a million doses that were given yesterday.

It's easy for us to get used to these very large numbers. But that's 19 million people who now are starting to get the protection that we know comes from this jab, and we know that the jabs are saving lives right now across this country.

And of course the programme is expanding all the time.

This week, we're bringing 10 more major vaccination sites on stream, including Towngate Theatre in Basildon and Reading Football Club. And I thank everybody who is continuing this expansion of the vaccination rollout.

These join our network across the country of cinemas and cathedrals, and mosques and museums, and so many other places that have been converted from whatever they do normally into these life-saving centres, right in the heart of our communities.

And we've seen this incredible enthusiasm about coming forward too.

As my colleague, Derek Grieve, who heads up Scotland's rollout, told Her Majesty the Queen he'd like to 'bottle the community spirit' we've seen.

And I'm very pleased to tell you that today's ONS data shows 94% of adults say they've either received a jab or intend to do so. That is staggering. It's really, really good news that there is so much enthusiasm for this jab.

And it is testament to colleagues who have worked so hard to build the confidence in this jab, and make it as accessible as possible to people, which is what we're constantly striving to do.

I'd like to give a shout out to Farzana Hussain, who is a GP in East London, who's been personally calling each of her priority patients, giving information about the vaccine and urging them to come forward and get jabbed.

I also want to thank the whole team in Coventry and Warwickshire, who have delivered the highest uptake in the whole country, giving first doses to over 95% of over-65s in their area. Thank you. It's an absolutely spectacular effort.

This work is so important, and it's important because the fightback against this disease rests with every single one of us.

And the more people who are protected, the safer we'll all be.

So if you get the call, please come forward, to protect yourself and to protect those around you.

Joint Committee on Vaccines and Immunisation (JCVI)

Now, throughout our vaccination programme, we've focused on protecting those at greatest clinical need. This is the final thing I want to turn to.

We offered a vaccine, for instance, to everyone in the top 4 priority groups by 15 of February, and our current target is to offer a first dose to everyone in the top 9 groups by 15 of April.

That's everybody who's 50 or over or part of an at-risk group.

Earlier this month, I asked the clinicians at the JCVI to set out what is the best order to offer vaccinations for the under-50s.

I asked them to make this assessment based on how we can save the most lives and prevent the most hospitalisations.

Earlier today, they published their [interim recommendations](#).

Next slide please.

The JCVI's clinical advice is that to save the most lives, once we have offered the vaccine to priority groups 1 to 9, we should take an age-based approach, and invite people to come forward in 3 further stages:

First, people aged between 40 and 49 years old, then 30 to 39, and finally, 18 to 29, who will become group 12.

This is the fastest and simplest way to roll out the jab.

Our moral duty is to put saving lives first. And that's what we've done.

So I can confirm that we will follow this clinical advice.

We will get jabs into arms as quickly as we can, in the clinically recommended order.

And once we've met the target, by 15 of April, we'll move onto these priority groups 10, 11 and 12.

I'm sure we all agree that the best approach is the one that saves the most lives.

So that's what we're going to do, together.

Conclusion

While we make great progress on vaccines, with one of the fastest rollouts in the world, we all though still have to hold our nerve and do our bit.

It's on all of us, still, to stay at home, protect the NHS and save lives.

And I'd now like to hand over to Professor Van Tam.