

Health Secretary article in The Times

From everything we've seen of our extraordinary vaccine rollout, one fact stands out above all others: the more people who get both doses of a COVID-19 vaccine, the easier and faster our return to normal life will be. The vaccines have given us a wall of defence against COVID-19 that, jab-by-jab, is getting stronger every day and the latest stats show that they have saved at least 100,000 lives in England alone.

When we began the vaccination programme, we asked the JCVI – the independent expert group of clinicians who advise the government on vaccines – to advise us on the order for vaccinations that would save the most lives and protect the most people from severe COVID-19. Their message was clear: start with the oldest and most vulnerable and work your way down.

Now we have protected the most vulnerable, the JCVI took the step earlier this month to advise that vaccines should be offered to 16- and 17-year-olds, bringing us in line with countries like Sweden, while recommending jabs for 12 to 15 year olds with specific underlying health conditions, or those that are household contacts of someone who is immunosuppressed. Right now they are investigating whether vaccinations could be given to all 12- to 15-year olds, as many other countries, including France, Germany and Italy have already started doing. While we await those findings, one thing is already crystal clear: the main consideration for any decision on vaccinating our young people will always be the risks and the benefits to children themselves.

For months now, the Delta variant has been sweeping its way across the world. We've seen how mutations surface and thrive among unvaccinated people. We know that more the population is protected by a vaccine, the more protection society as a whole will have from Covid-19. It is because of this simple principle, that offering all teenagers the jab would solidify our wall of protection and reduce the amount of infections, decreasing the risk of new variants emerging. If the expert clinicians recommend vaccinating 12 to 15 years olds, I and the fantastic NHS and public health teams are doing everything to make sure we're ready with the same sense of urgency we've had at every point in this programme.

We have all see the effort that has gone into the vaccination programme, including the different places we could all go and get the vaccine, bringing together all the volunteers and vaccinators, and having a simple way of booking appointments and proving that you have had the jab. All of this took time to bring together. Last year, before the critical milestone of the first vaccine being approved by our medicines regulator and recommended for deployment by the JCVI, the wheels of government and the health service had been in motion for months. Blueprints and plans were being put in place for the most ambitious peacetime mobilisation of volunteers and health workers in our history to administer jabs across the country.

Looking ahead to the next stage of the vaccine programme today is no

different. I have asked the NHS to be ready to roll out jabs to this age group – pending final advice from the JCVI.

The legwork is being put in across the government, between my Department and the Department of Education, ahead of any decision on both this age group and on the potential for booster vaccines for adults. Discussions have already begun with school vaccination teams to make sure, if the light turns green, they're ready.

As a parent myself, I know that people who wouldn't think twice about getting the jab for themselves will naturally have more questions when it comes to vaccinating their kids. There is no greater priority for a parent than the safety of their child and, you can rest assured: there is no greater priority for me and for the government. We have seen on a daily basis just how safe and just how effective our vaccines are, as we've given first doses to over 88% of 16 and overs, and the medicines regulator has approved the use of the Pfizer and Moderna vaccines for children aged 12 and above.

In any vaccination programme aimed at a young age group like this, parents and guardians will have a critical role to play – offering the kind of counsel you can only get from a parent or guardian. And if 12 to 15 year olds are offered the vaccine, parental or carer consent will be sought, just as we do with other school immunisation programmes.

Jabs at school are fortunately nothing new, and I, like so many others, remember well getting my tetanus, diphtheria and polio jabs at school – which is now a three in one jab – in a packed school hall. Our health service is steeped in experience of vaccination programmes at schools, with a proud tradition that long pre-dates the pandemic. Health leaders are already scoping out what a potential school programme of vaccinations of COVID-19 could look like, when combined with locations like local vaccination sites.

At the same time, the NHS is already agreeing partnerships with providers to recruit and train school aged immunisation teams, hosting online sessions with providers and local authorities to keep them abreast of contingency plans, and publishing a series of training materials in earnest.

It has been really fantastic to see that teenagers have been some of the most enthusiastic advocates of COVID-19 vaccines. In recent weeks, 16- and 17-years olds have been coming out in their droves to do their bit, travelling with schoolmates and family members to get the jab at sites like walk-in centres and GPs.

Anyone with teenagers at home will know just how well clued up they are. They know their stuff and get the huge benefits of being vaccinated. They know it can protect them and protect the adults around them.

So much of this enthusiasm comes from the fact they've seen the chaos COVID-19 can bring first-hand. We should not underestimate the size of the huge sacrifices they've had to make. Young people have endured months of sustained disruption to their learning, forced to adjust to learning at a kitchen table with many tired parents moonlighting as substitute teachers. It

has also been an isolating experience for a great many teens, being denied the kind of formative experiences you can only get when you pass through the school gates.

While we await the advice of our scientific experts, we are doing what responsible government's do and preparing for as many eventualities as possible. Whatever the advice says, I have no doubt we'll continue to see the same sense of public spirit and shared responsibility that young people have exemplified at every point of this pandemic.