

Minister Nadhim Zahawi Oral Statement on step 4 of the road map

With permission, I would like to make a statement on the pandemic. Today marks an important milestone Mr Speaker in our fight against this virus, as we take Step 4 on our roadmap.

It is a long-awaited moment for the businesses who now can open their doors at long last, the happy couples who can have weddings without curbs on numbers and of course the people who can see more of their loved ones in care homes.

Although we have made huge advances Mr Speaker in our race between the vaccine and the virus, we are not at the finish line yet. Instead, we are entering what I believe to be the next stage. A stage where we continue with caution, while doing what it takes to manage the risk of this virus – which is still with us and still possess a threat. Cases and hospitalisations have risen over the past week, as we predicted Mr Speaker and we know that these numbers will get worse before they get better.

Although there's never a perfect time to take this step, making the move today gives us the best chance of success. We're cautiously easing restrictions when we have the natural firebreak of the school holidays and when the warmer weather gives us an advantage. So we will move forward, with caution, drawing on the defences we have built, as we set out in our five-point plan two weeks ago.

One of these five defences is the protective wall provided by our vaccination programme and I would like to start by updating the House on this life-saving work. Our vaccination programme has given us extra legs in our race against this virus. The protection it has built up in people across the United Kingdom means the ratio between cases and hospitalisations is the lowest it has been during this pandemic. This reinforces the need to protect as many people as we can, as quickly as we can and we made a four-week delay to Step 4 so we could do exactly that. 8 million more vaccinations in that period. We set the target of giving second doses to two-thirds of UK adults by today – and we hit that target last week, with five days to spare. We also pledged to offer a first dose of a vaccine to all adults – and we've met this target too.

And now almost 88 per cent of adults have taken up this offer – and although uptake amongst 18 to 30-year olds is much lower and needs to increase we are looking at this. So our work is not over yet. Just as we strive to reach the remaining adults who have not yet had first or second doses, we are already making our plans for the next stage.

Because we do not know how long immunity lasts and because coronavirus mutates, just like flu, we must stay one step ahead of the virus.

So we are drawing up plans for a potential booster programme – subject to advice, the final advice from the JCVI – so we can protect the most vulnerable ahead of winter.

And we are also looking at extending our vaccination programme so we can protect even more people. We asked the JCVI to consider whether children and young adults should be given the offer of a vaccine – and this advice has been published today.

Before I continue, allow me to apologise to you for mistakenly referencing to this on air this morning, before setting out the details in full before the House. The JCVI considered not just the health impacts, but also the non-health impacts, like how education is disrupted by outbreaks in schools. I should reassure the House that the number of children and young people who have had severe outcomes from COVID is extremely low with a hospitalisation rate during the second wave of between 100 and 400 for every million.

And when we look at the small numbers that were hospitalised, most of them had severe underlying health conditions.

Today's advice recommends that we continue to vaccinate 16 to 17-year-olds who are in an at-risk group, as we do now. But it also recommends expanding the offer of the vaccine to some younger children with underlying health conditions that put them at greater risk of COVID-19. This includes children aged 12 to 15 with severe neuro-disabilities, Down's Syndrome, immunosuppression, and profound or multiple learning disabilities.

The JCVI advice also recommends offering a vaccine to children and young people aged 12 to 17 who live with someone who is immunosuppressed. This means we can indirectly protect the immunosuppressed, who are at higher risk of serious disease from COVID-19 and may not generate a full immune response to vaccination. Finally, the JCVI advises that we should offer the vaccine to all 17-year-olds who are within three months of their 18th birthday, so we can make sure they are protected as soon as they turn 18.

Together with Health Ministers in all parts of the United Kingdom, the Secretary of State has accepted this advice and has asked the NHS to put it into action as soon as possible. As we do this, we will be using the Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine, which is the only vaccine in the UK that's been clinically authorised for people between the ages of 12 and 17. I know that people will have questions about what it means for them and their children. But I can assure them Mr Speaker that nobody needs to come forward at this stage.

The NHS will get in touch with them at the right time, and they will make sure that the jabs are delivered in a setting that meets their complex needs. We also asked the JCVI to consider rolling out vaccines out to all children and young people over the age of 12. And although we are not taking this step today, the JCVI is keeping this matter under review, and they will be looking at more data as it becomes available especially on children with a second dose of the Pfizer/BioNTech vaccine. The steps we are taking today mean we will be offering even more vulnerable people the protection that a vaccine

brings. And we will all be safer as a result.

We know that vaccines are our most important defence against this virus. This is especially the case in adult social care settings that are home to some of the people most vulnerable people in our communities who are vulnerable to a devastating impact from COVID-19. So last week, this House passed regulations to make vaccination a condition of deployment in care homes – and the Lords will consider those regulations tomorrow. These regulations are designed to help maximise vaccine uptake and protect some of our most vulnerable citizens. Yet I recognise the need for more detail on the Government's analysis of the expected impact of these regulations. So today we have published an Impact Statement – and we will be publishing a full Impact Assessment as soon as possible.

As we learn to live with COVID-19 we must be pragmatic about how we manage the risks we face. Self-isolation of positive cases and their close contacts remains one of the most effective tools we have for reducing transmission. However, we recognise there are some very specific circumstances where there would be a serious risk of harm to public welfare if people in critical roles are unable to go to their workplace – like air-traffic controllers or train signallers. So people in those kinds of roles who have received two vaccinations – plus two weeks beyond a second vaccine – will not need to self-isolate to perform those critical tasks. They will, however, have to continue to self-isolate at all other times.

The people eligible for this will receive personalised letters setting out the steps they must follow. Mr Speaker, this is a sensible and pragmatic step – and one that will be used sparingly and responsibly.

We are being similarly pragmatic at our borders. As my Right Honourable Friend, the Transport Secretary, has confirmed: UK residents arriving from amber countries who have been fully vaccinated will no longer have to quarantine – although they will still need to comply with necessary testing requirements. This will not apply to France, due to the persistent presence of cases of the Beta variant, which was first identified in South Africa. We are doing everything in our power to restore international travel – and restore it safely. But new variants pose the greatest threat to our path out of this pandemic – and we will not hesitate to act in a similar way with any other country. We will continue to keep a close eye on the data and be firm and decisive in how we protect the process we have made and the progress we have made. But the enduring message is this: getting vaccinated is the best way to ensure you can travel as freely as possible.

Vaccination also holds the key for doing the things we love doing here at home Mr Speaker. We are supporting the safe re-opening of large, crowded settings – such as nightclubs, as we saw last night, and music venues with the use of the NHS Covid Pass as a condition of entry, to reduce the risks of transmission. I encourage businesses to draw on this support and use the NHS COVID Pass in the weeks ahead.

We will be keeping a close watch on how it is used by venues, and we reserve the right Mr Speaker to mandate it if necessary. By the end of September,

everyone aged 18 and over will have the chance to receive full vaccination – and the additional two weeks for that full protection to really take hold. So at that point we plan to make full vaccination a condition of entry to nightclubs and other venues where large crowds gather. Proof of a negative test will no longer be sufficient.

Any decisions will, of course, be subject to parliamentary scrutiny – and we will ensure the appropriate exemptions for those who have genuine medical reasons for why they can't get vaccinated. And I am clear: we will always look at the evidence available and do all we can to ensure people can continue to do the things they love.

Our vaccination programme has put us on the road to recovery. We should all be proud of how this national effort is helping us take steps towards a more normal life. But we must keep reinforcing that wall of protection. Getting the jab. Getting the second jab if you've had the first. And getting the booster shot if you're asked to come forward. And with such a deadly virus – and the continued threat of new variants – our wall of protection must be more than just vaccines alone. We must continue to do all the other sensible things we know can keep the virus at bay. Getting tested. Considering the advice. And continuing to act with caution. Taken together, Mr Speaker, this will help us all enjoy these new experiences – and safely slow the spread of this deadly virus.

I commend this statement to the House.