

Oral statement on easing of coronavirus restrictions

Mr Speaker, this past six months we've all been involved in a race between the vaccine and the virus.

Our vaccination programme has been delivered at an incredible pace.

We've delivered 71 million doses into 41 million arms.

Over 93 per cent of people aged 40 and over have now received at least one dose of the vaccine.

And because of this pace, we are able to open up vaccinations to those aged 23 and 24 tomorrow.

It's this protection that's allowed us to take the first three steps of our roadmap, meaning right now we have one of the most open economies and societies in Europe.

We've been able to remove the most burdensome of the restrictions, and restore so many of the freedoms that we hold dear.

Delta variant and vaccines

At every stage, we've looked at the data, set against the four tests the Prime Minister set out to this House in February.

The fourth of those tests is that our assessment of the risks is not fundamentally changed by new variants of concern.

The Delta variant now accounts for over 90 per cent of cases across the country.

We know the Delta variant spreads more easily, and there's evidence that the risk of hospitalisation is higher than for the previously dominant Alpha variant.

Mr Speaker, case numbers are rising, up 64 per cent on last week in England, but the whole purpose of vaccination is to break the link between cases, and hospitalisations and deaths.

That link is clearly weaker than it once was.

However, over the last week we've seen hospitalisations start to rise, up 50 per cent.

Thankfully, the number of deaths has not risen and remains very low.

Sadly, before the vaccine, we saw a rise in hospitalisations inevitably lead

to a rise in deaths a couple of weeks later.

The vaccine is changing that, but it's simply too early to know how effectively the link to deaths has been broken.

We do know that after a single dose of vaccine the effectiveness is lower against this new Delta variant, at around a 33 per cent reduction in symptomatic disease.

However, the good news, confirmed with new data published today, is that two doses of the vaccine are just as effective against hospital admission with the Delta variant, compared to the Alpha variant.

In fact, once you've had two doses the vaccines may be even slightly more effective against hospitalisation if you've caught the new Delta variant.

This gives me confidence that while the protection comes more from the second dose, and so takes longer to reach, the protection we will get after the second jab is highly effective, and if anything slightly better against the Delta variant.

So, for the purpose of the restrictions, while it will take us a little longer to build the full protection we need through the vaccine, all the science is telling us that we will get there.

And of course, all this says it's so important that everyone gets both doses when the call comes.

Even today, I've had messages from people who've had their jab and I'm so grateful to each and every person for making our country safer.

At every stage of the roadmap, we have taken the time to check it's safe to take the next step.

Our task is to make sure the vaccine can get ahead in the race between the vaccine and the virus.

Step 4 and vaccine target

Mr Speaker, I know so many people have been working so hard, making sacrifices, being cautious and careful, doing their bit, to help this country down the roadmap.

I know that people have been planning and arranging important moments, and that businesses have been gearing up to reopen.

So it is with a heavy heart, and faced with this reality, that we've made the difficult decision not to move ahead with Step 4 next week. Instead, we will pause for up to four weeks, until 19th July, with a review of the data after two weeks.

During this crucial time, we'll be drawing on everything we know works when fighting this virus and we'll use the extra time to deliver the extra

protection we need.

Despite the incredible uptake we've seen in this country, there are still people we need to protect.

1.3 million people who are over 50s, and 4.5 million over 40s, have had a first jab but not yet a second.

This pause will save thousands of lives, by allowing us to get the majority of these second jabs done before restrictions are eased further.

We're today reducing the time from first to second jab for all people aged 40 and over from 12 weeks to 8 weeks, to accelerate the programme.

If, like me, you're in your 40s, and you have a jab booked 12 weeks after your first, the NHS will be in touch to bring it forward, or you can rebook on the National Booking Service.

Our aim is that around two thirds of all adults will have had both doses by the 19th of July.

And I can tell the House that we have been able to deliver the vaccine programme faster than planned.

So we can bring forward the moment when we will have offered every adult a first dose of the vaccine to the 19th of July too.

In this race between the vaccine and the virus, we're giving the vaccine all the support we can.

Further easements

Mr Speaker, we've always said that we'd ease restrictions as soon as we were able safely to do so.

And even though we can't take Step 4 on Monday, I'm pleased that we are able, carefully, to ease restrictions in some areas.

We're removing the 30 person gathering limit for weddings, receptions and commemorative events, subject of course to social distancing guidelines.

And I'm very grateful to the work of the Weddings Taskforce on this relaxation.

We'll be running another phase of our pilots for large events at higher capacities, including some at full capacity like the Wimbledon finals.

We're easing rules in care homes, including removing the requirement for residents to isolate for 14 days after visits out.

And we're allowing out-of-school settings to organise residential visits in bubbles of up to 30 children, in line with the current position for schools. And I thank my Rt Hon friend, member for Trafford, for his work in this area.

Even though we haven't been able to take the full step as we wanted, I know that these cautious changes will mean a lot to many people and move us a little bit closer to normal life.

Mr Speaker, as we do this, we'll keep giving people the support they need.

We're extending our asymptomatic testing offer until the end of July.

We have put in place one of the most extensive financial support packages in the world.

And we will continue to deliver enhanced support for the worst affected areas.

We've seen how well this approach can work, for example in Bolton.

Cases in Bolton have fallen by almost a third over the past three weeks and even as hospitalisations have risen across the North West, in Bolton they've fallen by more than half.

Last week, we introduced enhanced support in Greater Manchester and Lancashire and now I can tell the House that we're extending these extra measures – surge testing, cautious guidance, and extra resources for vaccination – to Birmingham, Blackpool, Cheshire, including Warrington, and the Liverpool City Region.

We know from experience that this approach can work, but we need everyone to play their part.

So I'd urge everyone in these areas to get tested, and to come forward for the support that's on offer, and when you get the call, get the jab and help keep us on the road to recovery.

Vaccines Taskforce chair

Finally, Mr Speaker, none of this would be possible without our vaccine programme.

Without the vaccine, faced with these rising cases and hospitalisations, the clinical recommendation would have been to go back towards lockdown.

The Vaccines Taskforce is critical to this work to deliver supplies, work on booster jabs, and ensure we're protected for the future.

Dame Kate Bingham did a formidable job in melding the best possible team and I'd like to congratulate her – and everyone else who was recognised in Her Majesty's Birthday Honours this weekend.

I am delighted to be able to tell the House that Sir Richard Sykes, one of Britain's most acknowledged biochemists and industry leaders, has agreed to take up the position of Chair of the VTF.

Sir Richard brings to bear experience from leadership positions in both the

public and private sector and I'm delighted to have him on board to lead the team in the next stage of its mission.

Conclusion

Mr Speaker, the race between the vaccine and the virus isn't over yet.

These difficult restrictions challenge our lives in so many ways.

But they play a vital role in holding the virus back, protecting people while we get those jabs done.

Let's all play our part to keep us safe from this dreadful disease.

I commend this statement to the House.