

Oxford/AstraZeneca vaccine gives hope as Tier 3 and 4 measures extend to wider areas

Mr Speaker, today marks a great stride forward in our plan to get us out of this pandemic and return to normal life.

Our strategy throughout has been to suppress the virus until a vaccine can make us safe. Suppressing the virus has got a whole lot harder because of the new variant – and we must take more action today.

But the vaccine is the route out of this crisis – and the approval this morning of the Oxford/AstraZeneca vaccine is another world first for Britain and it's the single biggest stride we've been able to take since the pandemic began.

It's almost exactly a year since we first heard about what we now know of as COVID-19 circulating in Wuhan in China.

Within weeks, scientists at Porton Down had sequenced the viral genome and scientists at Oxford University's Jenner Institute received the genetic code for the new virus.

Like the great British codebreakers before them, they set to work at lightning speed. We took the decision to back them from the start with funding and access to the NHS for clinical trials and partnered with AstraZeneca, who have done a brilliant job to develop and manufacture a safe and effective vaccine at speed.

And I'm sure the whole House will join me in congratulating everyone involved in this huge British success story, which is not just a triumph of science and ingenuity – cracking a modern-day enigma code – but a victory for all.

The Oxford vaccine is affordable, can be stored at normal fridge temperature and offers hope – not just for this country – but for the whole world.

Like so much else in the pandemic response, it's been a big team effort.

While this is a great British success, it's also the British way that we are best when we collaborate with people from around the whole world. This is another example.

The vaccines programme has shown that Britain is a life-sciences super-power and the Brexit deal that this House has just passed, with a very significant majority, will help us to strengthen this yet further.

I want to thank the National Institute for Health Research, the UK Vaccines Network, the Vaccines Taskforce, AstraZeneca, Oxford University, the volunteers who stepped up for science and took part in the trial and all

those involved who have made this happen

From the beginning we have focused on a vaccine as the way out of this pandemic and now it is a reality.

We need to vaccinate as quickly as supply allows – following the necessary safety checks of course – and the NHS stands ready to accelerate deployment at scale from Monday 4 January.

We have a total of 100 million doses on order, which – combined with the Pfizer vaccine – is enough to vaccinate every adult in the UK with both doses.

We will of course vaccinate according to the [Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation \(JCVI\) priority](#), but today's news means that everyone who wants one can get a vaccine.

We already have 530,000 doses available to the UK from Monday with millions due from AstraZeneca by the beginning of February.

Mr Speaker, the clinical advice is that the Oxford vaccine is best deployed as 2 doses, up to 12 weeks apart.

And the great news is, people get protection after the first dose. This means we can accelerate the speed at which we can vaccinate people for the first 12 weeks before we return to deliver second doses for that longer-term protection.

It brings forward the day on which we can lift the restrictions that no one in this house wants to see any longer than are absolutely necessary.

But, Mr Speaker, we must act to suppress this virus now and the new variant makes the time between now and then even more difficult.

And whilst we have the good news of the vaccine today, we also have to take some difficult decisions

The NHS is under very significant pressure – there are over 21,000 people in hospital with coronavirus right now and we can see the impact that this is having. The threat to life from this virus is real – and the pressures on the NHS are real too.

I want to put on the record my thanks to all those working right now in the NHS and in particular, those – including our Chief Medical Officer – who have been working selflessly on the wards over Christmas.

They deserve our thanks, gratitude and support. We owe it to them to fulfil our responsibility to keep the virus under control.

Sharply rising cases – and the hospitalisations that follow – demonstrate the need to act where the virus is spreading. Yesterday alone, 53,135 cases were registered – the majority of which are believed to be the new variant.

Unfortunately, this new variant is now spreading across most of England and cases are doubling fast.

It is, therefore, necessary to apply Tier 4 measures to a wider area, including the remaining parts of the South East as well as large parts of the Midlands, the North West, the North East and the South West. I have laid a comprehensive list in the library of the House – and published on GOV.UK.

Even in most areas not moving into Tier 4, cases are rising too. It is therefore necessary to apply Tier 3 measures more broadly too including in Liverpool and North Yorkshire. The rest of Yorkshire remains in Tier 3.

These changes will take effect from one minute past midnight tomorrow morning.

The new variant means that three quarters of the population are now in Tier 4 and almost all of the country in Tiers 3 and 4.

I know that the Tier 3 and 4 measures place a significant burden on people – and especially on businesses affected. But I'm afraid it's absolutely necessary – because of the number of cases we've seen.

But where we are still able to give places greater freedoms, we will continue to do so.

Mr Speaker, today is a day of mixed emotions: the joy that we have in the vaccines giving us a route out of this pandemic. Of pride, that Britain is the first country in the world, once again, to approve this British vaccine. The sorrow, at the deaths and suffering this virus has caused. And of determination that we must all stick at it during the difficult winter weeks ahead.

We end 2020 still with great challenges, but also with great hope and confidence that in 2021 we have a brighter future ahead.

I commend this statement to the House.