

PM House of Commons Statement on COVID: 12 May 2021

Mr Speaker, with permission, I will update the House on our response to Covid.

The patience and hard work of the British people has combined with the success of the vaccination programme

to reduce deaths and hospitalisations to their lowest levels since last July, and from Monday, England will ease lockdown restrictions in line with step 3 of our roadmap.

This will amount to the single biggest step of our journey back to normality.

But after everything we have endured, we must be vigilant because the threat of this virus remains real

and new variants pose a potentially lethal danger,

including the one first identified in India which is of increasing concern here in the UK.

So caution has to be our watchword.

Our country – like every country – has found itself in the teeth of the gravest pandemic for a century,

imposing heart-breaking sorrow on families across the world

with more than 127,000 lives lost in our United Kingdom alone.

And our grief would have been still greater

without the daily heroism of the men and women of our National Health Service,

the protection of our vaccines,

already in the arms of over two-thirds of adults across the UK –

and the dedication of everyone who has followed the rules and sacrificed so much that we cherish.

Amid such tragedy, the State has an obligation to examine its actions as rigorously and candidly as possible,

and to learn every lesson for the future,

which is why I have always said that when the time is right there should be a

full and independent inquiry.

So Mr Speaker, I can confirm today that the Government will establish an independent public inquiry on a statutory basis, with full powers under the Inquiries Act of 2005, including the ability to compel the production of all relevant materials, and take oral evidence in public, under oath.

In establishing the Inquiry, we will work closely with the Devolved Administrations as we have done throughout our pandemic response,

and My Right Honourable Friend the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster has this morning spoken to the First Ministers of Scotland and Wales, and the First and Deputy First Ministers of Northern Ireland to begin those conversations.

Every part of our United Kingdom has suffered the ravages of this virus, and every part of the State has pulled together to do battle against it, and if we are to recover as one Team UK – as we must – then we should also learn lessons together in the same spirit.

So we will consult the devolved administrations before finalising scope and detailed arrangements, so that this Inquiry can consider all key aspects of the UK response.

Mr Speaker, this process will place the State's actions under the microscope, and we should be mindful of the scale of that undertaking and the resources required to do it properly.

The exercise of identifying and disclosing all relevant information, the months of preparation and retrospective analysis, and the time that people will have to spend testifying in public, in some cases for days, will place a significant burden on our NHS, on the whole of government, on our scientific advisers, and on many others.

We must not inadvertently divert and distract the very people on whom we all depend in the heat of our struggle against this disease.

And the end of the lockdown is not the end of the pandemic.

The World Health Organisation has said that the pandemic has now reached its global peak and will last throughout this year.

Our own scientific advisers judge that although more positive data is coming in and the outlook is improving, there could still be another resurgence in hospitalisations and deaths.

We also face the persistent threat of new variants,

and should these prove highly transmissible and elude the protection of our vaccines,

they would have the potential to cause even greater suffering than we endured in January. And there is in any case a high likelihood of a surge this Winter when the weather assists the transmission of all respiratory diseases

and the pressure on our NHS is most acute.

So I expect the right moment for the inquiry to begin is at the end of this period, in the Spring of next year, Spring 2022

Mr Speaker, I know there will be some in this Chamber

and many bereaved families –

who will be anxious for an Inquiry to begin sooner.

So let me reassure the House, that we are fully committed to learning lessons at every stage of this crisis.

We have already subjected our response to independent scrutiny

including seventeen reports by the independent National Audit Office and fifty parliamentary inquiries –

and we will continue to do so.

We will continue to learn lessons as we have done throughout the pandemic.

But no public inquiry could take place fast enough to assist in the very difficult judgements which will remain necessary throughout the rest of this year and the remainder of the pandemic.

And we must not weigh down the efforts of those engaged in protecting us every day, thereby risk endangering further lives.

Instead this Inquiry must be able to look at the events of the last year in the cold light of day –

and identify the key issues that will make a difference for the future.

Free to scrutinise every document,

To hear from all the key players,

and analyse and learn from the breadth of our response.

That is the right way, I think, to get the answers that the people of this country deserve,

And to ensure our United Kingdom is better prepared for any future pandemic.

Mr Speaker, entirely separately from the Inquiry,

there is a solemn duty on our whole United Kingdom to come together and cherish the memories of all those who have been lost.

Like many across this Chamber, I was deeply moved when I visited the Covid Memorial Wall opposite Parliament,

and I wholeheartedly support the plan for a Memorial in St Paul's Cathedral, which will provide a fitting place of reflection in the heart of our capital.

I also know that communities across our whole country will want to find ways of commemorating what we have all been through.

So the Government will support their efforts by establishing a UK Commission on Covid Commemoration.

This national endeavour – above party politics – will remember the loved ones we have lost;

honour the heroism of those who saved lives and the courage of frontline workers who kept our country going;

celebrate the genius of those who created the vaccines;

and commemorate the small acts of kindness and the daily sacrifice of millions who stayed at home, buying time for our scientists to come to our rescue.

We will set out the Commission membership and terms of reference in due course.

And in telling the whole story of this era in our history, we will work again across our United Kingdom, together with the Devolved Administrations,

to preserve the spirit which has sustained us in the gravest crisis since the Second World War,

resolving to go forwards together, Mr Speaker, and to build back better.

And I commend this statement to the House.