

PM statement at coronavirus press conference: 14 May 2021

Good afternoon

throughout this pandemic we've tried to keep people abreast of the last information as soon as we get it.

And since I spoke to you last Monday,

we've seen further clusters of the B.1.617.2, the variant first observed in India,

we've seen it especially in Bolton, Blackburn with Darwen and some other parts of the country.

At this stage there are some important unknowns.

We believe this variant is more transmissible than the previous one

– in other words it passes more easily from person to person –

but we don't know by how much.

I am told that if it's only marginally more transmissible, we can continue more or less as planned.

But if the virus is significantly more transmissible, we are likely to face some hard choices.

We are going to be learning a lot more in the coming days and weeks about that.

The good news is that so far we have no evidence to suggest our vaccines will be less effective in protecting people against severe illness and hospitalisation.

So that means we are in a different position from the last time we face a new variant before Christmas

because of the scale of our vaccine roll-out,

which PHE estimates has already saved almost 12,000 lives and prevented over 33,000 people from being hospitalised.

So I believe we should trust in our vaccines to protect the public whilst monitoring the situation very closely.

Because the race between our vaccination programme and the virus may be about to become a great deal tighter.

And it's more important than ever therefore that people get the additional protection of a second dose.

So following advice from the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation, we will accelerate remaining second doses to the over 50s and those clinically vulnerable right across the country so they are just eight weeks after the first dose,

and if you are in this group the NHS will be in touch with you.

We will also prioritise first doses for anyone eligible who has not yet come forwards,

including the over 40s –

and I urge anyone in those groups to come forwards as soon as you can.

At this stage, there is no evidence of increased cases translating into unmanageable pressures on the NHS

even in Bolton –

and infections, deaths and hospitalisations nationally remain at their lowest levels since last Summer.

So – and this is a balanced decision – I do not believe on present evidence that we need to delay our roadmap,

and we will proceed with our plan to move to step 3 in England from Monday.

But I have to level with you that this could be a serious disruption to our progress and could make it more difficult to move to step 4 in June,

and I must again stress we will do whatever it takes to keep the public safe.

Our surveillance and data gathering is now so advanced, that if there was a danger of the NHS coming under unsustainable pressure, we would see the signs in the data very early on and could react in good time,

and that gives us the confidence to continue moving forwards for now.

But I urge everyone to exercise the greatest caution because the choices we each make in the coming days will have a material effect on the road ahead.

To those living in Bolton and Blackburn,

I am very sorry that you are once again suffering from this virus.

I know how hard it has been for you, having been in a form of national or local lockdown for longer than almost everywhere else.

But now it is more vital than ever that you play your part in stopping the spread.

We will not be preventing businesses from reopening on Monday, but we will be asking you to do your bit.

Take the vaccine when you can.

Get your free, twice-weekly rapid tests.

If you do test positive, you must self-isolate – and we'll provide financial support, to help to those on low incomes to help them do so.

And as we move away from living our lives by government rules and as we learn to live with this virus,

then, as I said on Monday, we need to make our own decisions about how best to protect ourselves and our loved ones – informed by the risks.

And for those living in Bolton and other affected areas, there is now a greater risk from this new variant

so I urge you to be extra cautious.

Our best chance of suppressing this variant is to clamp down on it where it is

and we will be throwing everything we can at this task.

Colonel Russ Miller – Commander of the North West Region – will be deployed to support local leaders in managing the response on the ground.

There will be surge testing, with mobile testing units, and the army will be on the streets handing out tests.

And there will targeted new activity in Bolton and Blackburn to accelerate vaccine take-up among eligible cohorts – including longer opening hours at vaccination sites.

And to everyone across the whole country, wherever you live,

please get tested twice a week for free, get a jab if you are eligible,

remember hands, face, space and fresh air

observe social distancing from those you do not know,

and if you are seeing loved ones think really carefully about the risk to them

especially if they have not had that second dose – or it hasn't yet had the time to take full effect.

I want us to trust people to be responsible and to do the right thing.

That's the way to live with this virus, while protecting our NHS and restoring our freedoms.

And it's very clear now we are going to have to live with this new variant of the virus as well for some time.

So let's work together – and let's exercise caution and common sense.