

PM statement at coronavirus press conference: 22 February 2021

Good evening,

Our extraordinary NHS has now succeeded in vaccinating more than 17.7 million people across the United Kingdom and nearly a year after the pandemic began

This unparalleled national effort has decisively shifted the odds in our favour so that we no longer have to rely simply on lockdowns and restricting our behaviour and putting our lives on hold

But with every day that goes by this programme of vaccination is creating a shield around the entire population which means that we are now travelling on a one way road to freedom.

And we can begin safely to restart our lives and do it with confidence.

But I want to be frank about exactly what that means and the trade-offs involved.

The vaccines reduce the danger of Covid: they save lives and they keep people out of hospital.

But no vaccine against any disease has ever been 100 per cent effective.

So whenever we ease the lockdown, whether it is today or in six or nine months,

We've got to be realistic and accept that there will be more infections, more hospitalisations and therefore – sadly – more deaths, just as there are every year with flu.

Even if we sustained the lockdown indefinitely, which would itself cost lives and do immeasurable harm to our children, we would not be able to eradicate this disease.

And that's why it's right gradually to replace the protection afforded by the lockdown with the protection of the vaccines, and our approach is to move with the utmost care, and advancing in four steps, each with a minimum of five weeks apart so we can fully judge the impact of each relaxation before we move on, and you can see the details of all of this on gov.uk.

And we will be led at every stage by data not dates, and we will apply four tests: the pace of the vaccination programme; the effectiveness of the vaccines; the pressure on the NHS; and the risks of any new variants of Covid.

And therefore as we look at the data today, I can confirm that two weeks from today – Monday 8th March – we will begin step one and schools and colleges

across England will re-open and teaching in classrooms can start again. All the evidence shows that schools are safe and the risk posed to children by Covid is vanishingly small. But to offer even greater reassurance, we are introducing twice-weekly testing of secondary school and college pupils and asking them to wear face coverings for the rest of this term. Students on practical courses can return to university, but all others will need to continue learning online and we will review the situation before the end of the Easter holidays. We will allow breakfast and afterschool clubs to restart and among other changes on 8 March, you'll be able to have a coffee on a bench or a picnic in a park with one person outside your household.

And because we know how stressful this time has been and how people yearn to see friends and family if only fleetingly we will now go further and on 29 March, you can meet more of your friends and family outside, including in gardens – either as two households or subject to the Rule of Six.

And then we will go to step two – which is no earlier than 12 April – when shops will return and re-open, hairdressers, nail salons will reopen pubs and restaurants will all be able to serve customers outside – precisely because we know the risk of outside transmission is lower.

And then five weeks after that, no earlier than 17 May, we will go to step three and open all our hospitality sector to service indoors pubs, bars, restaurants, along with hotels and cinemas, and, subject to capacity limits, we will also open sports stadia, concert halls and theatres.

And finally – provided we continue to pass the four tests – then from 21 June we will go to step four and say goodbye to most remaining restrictions:

resuming large-scale events like business conferences and football matches, lifting the limits on weddings and reopening nightclubs.

All of these steps will apply in England, and the government will continue to do whatever it takes to protect jobs and livelihoods across our whole United Kingdom for the duration of the pandemic.

I know there are some who would like to accelerate this timetable and I know of course there are others who would like to be more cautious and stay in the slow lane.

I understand and sympathise with both of those points of view because levels of infection are still high and we must strike a very careful balance and always accept we must be humble in the face of nature.

But also, we must accept that we cannot persist indefinitely with restrictions that have separated families and loved ones for too long,

and threatened the livelihoods of millions,

and kept pupils out of school.

It is thanks to the roll-out of the vaccinations, some of them pioneered in

this country that the balance of that judgement is now changing in our favour.

And it is thanks to the vaccinations that there is light ahead leading us to a spring and summer which I think will be seasons of hope, looking and feeling incomparably better for us all and from which we will not go back.