

PM statement to the House of Commons on roadmap for easing lockdown restrictions in England: 22 February 2021

Mr Speaker, with permission, I will make a Statement on the roadmap that will guide us

cautiously but irreversibly –

towards reclaiming our freedoms while doing all we can to protect our people against Covid.

Today's measures will apply in England,

but we are working closely with the Devolved Administrations who are setting out similar plans.

The threat remains substantial, with the numbers in hospital only now beginning to fall below the peak of the first wave in April.

But we are able to take these steps because of the resolve of the British public

and the extraordinary success of our NHS in vaccinating more than 17.5 million people across the UK.

The data so far suggests both vaccines are effective against the dominant strains of Covid.

Public Health England has found that one dose of the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine reduces hospitalisations and deaths by at least 75 per cent.

And early data suggests that the Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine provides a good level of protection,

though since we only started deploying this vaccine last month, at this stage the size of its effect is less certain.

But no vaccine can ever be 100 per cent effective,

nor will everyone take them up,

and like all viruses, Covid-19 will mutate. So, as the modelling released by SAGE today shows, we cannot escape the fact that lifting lockdown will result in more cases, more hospitalisations and sadly more deaths.

This would happen whenever lockdown is lifted, whether now or in six or nine

months, because there will always be some vulnerable people who are not protected by the vaccine.

There is therefore no credible route to a Zero Covid Britain or indeed a Zero Covid World

and we cannot persist indefinitely with restrictions that debilitate our economy, our physical and mental well-being, and the life-chances of our children.

And that is why it is so crucial that this roadmap should be cautious but also irreversible.

We are setting out on what I hope and believe is a one way road to freedom.

And this journey is made possible by the pace of the vaccination programme.

In England, everyone in the top four priority groups was successfully offered a vaccine by the middle of February.

We now aim to offer a first dose to all those in groups 5 to 9 by 15 April,

and I am setting another stretching target: to offer a first dose to every adult by the end of July.

As more of us are inoculated, so the protection afforded by the vaccines will gradually replace the restrictions

and today's roadmap sets out the principles of that transition.

The level of infection is broadly similar across England, so we will ease restrictions in all areas at the same time.

The sequence will be driven by the evidence, so outdoor activity will be prioritised as the best way to restore freedoms while minimising the risk.

At every stage, our decisions will be led by data not dates,

and subjected to four tests.

First, that the vaccine deployment programme continues successfully;

second, that evidence shows vaccines are sufficiently effective in reducing hospitalisations and deaths;

third, that infection rates do not risk a surge in hospitalisations which would put unsustainable pressure on the NHS;

and fourth, that our assessment of the risks is not fundamentally changed by new variants of Covid that cause concern.

Before taking each step we will review the data against these tests and because it takes at least four weeks for the data to reflect the impact of relaxations in restrictions

and we want to give the country a week's notice before each change – there will be at least five weeks between each step.

The Chief Medical Officer is clear that moving any faster would mean acting before we know the impact of each step,

which would increase the risk of us having to reverse course and re-impose restrictions.

I won't take that risk.

Step one will happen from 8 March, by which time those in the top four priority groups will be benefiting from the increased protection they receive from their first dose of their vaccine.

Mr Speaker, all the evidence shows that classrooms are the best places for our young people to be.

That's why I've always said that schools would be the last to close and the first to reopen.

And based on our assessment of the current data against the four tests, I can tell the House that two weeks' from today pupils and students in all schools and further education settings can safely return to face-to-face teaching,

supported by twice-weekly testing of secondary school and college pupils.

Families and childcare bubbles will also be encouraged to get tested regularly.

Breakfast and afterschool clubs can also re-open – and other children's activities, including sport, can restart where necessary to help parents to work.

Students on university courses requiring practical teaching, specialist facilities or onsite assessments will also return

but all others will need to continue learning online, and we will review the options for when they can return by the end of the Easter Holidays.

From 8 March, people will also be able to meet one person from outside their household for outdoor recreation – such as a coffee on a bench or a picnic in a park – in addition to exercise.

But we are advising the Clinically Extremely Vulnerable to shield at least until the end of March.

Every care home resident will be able to nominate a named visitor, able to see them regularly provided they are tested and wear PPE.

And finally we will amend regulations to enable a broader range of Covid-secure campaign activities for local elections on 6 May.

As part of Step one, we will go further and make limited changes on 29 March, when schools go on Easter holidays.

It will become possible to meet in limited numbers outdoors, where the risk is lower.

So the Rule of Six will return outdoors, including in private gardens

and outdoor meetings of two households will also be permitted on the same basis, so that families in different circumstances can meet. Outdoor sports facilities – such as tennis and basketball courts, and open-air swimming pools – will be able to reopen

and formally organised outdoor sports will resume, subject to guidance.

From this point, 29 March, people will no longer be legally required to stay at home

but many lockdown restrictions will remain.

People should continue to work from home where they can and minimise all travel wherever possible.

Step two will begin at least five weeks after the beginning of step one

and no earlier than 12 April, with an announcement at least seven days in advance.

If analysis of the latest data against the four tests requires a delay, then this and subsequent steps will also be delayed to maintain the five week gap.

In step two non-essential retail will reopen, as will personal care including hairdressers I'm glad to say, and nail salons.

Indoor leisure facilities such as gyms will re-open, as will holiday-lets, but only for use by individuals or household groups.

We will begin to re-open our pubs and restaurants outdoors

and Hon Members will be relieved there will be no curfew

and the Scotch Egg debate will be over because there will be no requirement for alcohol to be accompanied by a substantial meal.

Zoos, theme parks and drive-in cinemas will re-open

as will public libraries and community centres.

Step three will begin no earlier than 17 May.

Provided the data satisfies the four tests, most restrictions on meetings outdoors will be lifted, subject to a limit of thirty.

And this is the point when you will be able to see your friends and family

indoors – subject to the Rule of Six or the meeting of two households.

We will also reopen pubs and restaurants indoors

along with cinemas and children's play areas,

hotels, hostels, and B&Bs.

Theatres and concert halls will open their doors,

and the turnstiles of our sports stadia will once again rotate

subject in all cases to capacity limits depending on the size of the venue.

And we will pilot larger events using enhanced testing, with the ambition of further easing of restrictions in the next step.

Step 4 will begin no earlier than 21 June.

With appropriate mitigations, we will aim to remove all legal limits on social contact,

and on weddings and other life events.

We will re-open everything up to and including nightclubs,

and enable large events such as theatre performances above the limits of step 3, potentially using testing to reduce the risk of infection.

Mr Speaker, our journey back towards normality will be subject to resolving a number of key questions and to do this we will conduct four reviews.

One will assess how long we need to maintain social distancing and face masks.

This will also inform guidance on working from home – which should continue wherever possible until this review is complete.

And it will be critical in determining how Parliament can safely return in a way that I know Hon Members would wish.

A second review will consider the resumption of international travel

which is vital for many businesses which have been hardest hit

including retail, hospitality, tourism and aviation.

A successor to the Global Travel Taskforce will report by 12 April so that people can plan for the summer.

The third review will consider the potential role of Covid-status certification in helping venues to open safely

but mindful of the many concerns surrounding exclusion, discrimination and

privacy.

And the fourth review will look at the safe return of major events.

Mr Speaker, as we proceed through these steps we will benefit from the combined protection of our vaccines and the continued expansion of rapid testing.

We will extend the provision of free test kits for workplaces until the end of June

and families, small businesses and the self-employed can collect those tests from local testing sites.

Mr Speaker, in view of these cautious but I hope irreversible changes, people may be concerned about what these changes mean for the various support packages, for livelihoods for people and for the economy.

So I want to assure the House, we will not pull the rug out.

For the duration of the pandemic, the government will continue to do whatever it takes to protect jobs and livelihoods across the UK.

And my Rt Hon Friend the Chancellor will set out further details in the Budget next Wednesday,

Finally, Mr Speaker, we must remain alert to the constant mutations of the virus.

Next month we will publish an updated plan for responding to local outbreaks, with a range of measures to address variants of concern, including surge PCR testing and enhanced contact tracing.

We can't, I'm afraid, rule out re-imposing restrictions at local or regional level if evidence suggests they are necessary to contain or suppress a new variant which escapes the vaccines.

Mr Speaker, I know there will be many people who will be worried that we are being too ambitious and that it is arrogant to impose any kind of plan upon a virus.

And I agree that we must always be humble in the face of nature and we must be cautious

but I really also believe that the vaccination programme has dramatically changed the odds in our favour and it is on that basis that we can now proceed.

And of course there will be others who will believe that we could go faster on the basis of that vaccination programme

and I understand their feelings and I sympathise very much with the exhaustion and the stress that people are experiencing and that businesses

are experiencing after so long in lockdown.

But to them I say that today the end really is in sight and a wretched year will give way to a spring and a summer that will be very different and incomparably better than the picture we see around us today.

And in that spirit, I commend this Statement to the House