

Prime Minister's address to the nation: 4 January 2021

Since the pandemic began last year, the whole United Kingdom has been engaged in a great national effort to fight Covid.

And there is no doubt that in fighting the old variant of the virus, our collective efforts were working and would have continued to work.

But we now have a new variant of the virus. It has been both frustrating and alarming to see the speed with which the new variant is spreading.

Our scientists have confirmed this new variant is between 50 and 70 per cent more transmissible – that means you are much, much more likely to catch the virus and to pass it on.

As I speak to you tonight, our hospitals are under more pressure from Covid than at any time since the start of the pandemic.

In England alone, the number of Covid patients in hospitals has increased by nearly a third in the last week, to almost 27,000.

That number is 40 per cent higher than the first peak in April.

On 29 December, more than 80,000 people tested positive for Covid across the UK – a new record.

The number of deaths is up by 20 per cent over the last week and will sadly rise further. My thoughts are with all those who have lost loved ones.

With most of the country already under extreme measures, it is clear that we need to do more, together, to bring this new variant under control while our vaccines are rolled out.

In England, we must therefore go into a national lockdown which is tough enough to contain this variant.

That means the Government is once again instructing you to stay at home.

You may only leave home for limited reasons permitted in law, such as to shop for essentials, to work if you absolutely cannot work from home, to exercise, to seek medical assistance such as getting a Covid test, or to escape domestic abuse.

The full details on what you can and can't do will be available at [gov.uk/coronavirus](https://www.gov.uk/coronavirus).

If you are clinically extremely vulnerable, we are advising you to begin shielding again and you will shortly receive a letter about what this means for you.

And because we now have to do everything we possibly can to stop the spread of the disease, primary schools, secondary schools and colleges across England must move to remote provision from tomorrow, except for vulnerable children and the children of key workers.

Everyone will still be able to access early years settings such as nurseries.

We recognise that this will mean it is not possible or fair for all exams to go ahead this summer as normal. The Education Secretary will work with Ofqual to put in place alternative arrangements.

We will provide extra support to ensure that pupils entitled to free school meals will continue to receive them while schools are closed, and we'll distribute more devices to support remote education.

I completely understand the inconvenience and distress this late change will cause millions of parents and pupils up and down the country.

Parents whose children were in school today may reasonably ask why we did not take this decision sooner.

The answer is simply that we have been doing everything in our power to keep schools open, because we know how important each day in education is to children's life chances.

And I want to stress that the problem is not that schools are unsafe for children – children are still very unlikely to be severely affected by even the new variant of Covid.

The problem is that schools may nonetheless act as vectors for transmission, causing the virus to spread between households.

Today the United Kingdom's Chief Medical Officers have advised that the country should move to alert level 5, meaning that if action is not taken NHS capacity may be overwhelmed within 21 days.

Of course, there is one huge difference compared to last year.

We are now rolling out the biggest vaccination programme in our history.

So far, we in the UK have vaccinated more people than the rest of Europe combined.

With the arrival today of the UK's own Oxford Astra Zeneca vaccine, the pace of vaccination is accelerating.

I can share with you tonight the NHS's realistic expectations for the vaccination programme in the coming weeks.

By the middle of February, if things go well and with a fair wind in our sails, we expect to have offered the first vaccine dose to everyone in the four top priority groups identified by the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation.

That means vaccinating all residents in a care home for older adults and their carers, everyone over the age of 70, all frontline health and social care workers, and everyone who is clinically extremely vulnerable.

If we succeed in vaccinating all those groups, we will have removed huge numbers of people from the path of the virus.

And of course, that will eventually enable us to lift many of the restrictions we have endured for so long.

I must stress that even if we achieve this goal, there remains a time lag of two to three weeks from getting a jab to receiving immunity.

And there will be a further time lag before the pressure on the NHS is lifted.

So we should remain cautious about the timetable ahead.

But if our understanding of the virus doesn't change dramatically once again...

If the rollout of the vaccine programme continues to be successful...

If deaths start to fall as the vaccine takes effect...

And, critically, if everyone plays their part by following the rules...

Then I hope we can steadily move out of lockdown, reopening schools after the February half term and starting, cautiously, to move regions down the tiers.

I want to say to everyone right across the United Kingdom that I know how tough this is, I know how frustrated you are, I know that you have had more than enough of government guidance about defeating this virus.

But now more than ever, we must pull together.

You should follow the new rules from now, and they will become law in the early hours of Wednesday morning. Parliament will meet – largely remotely – later that day.

I know that the devolved administrations in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland share my conviction this is a pivotal moment and they're taking similar steps.

The weeks ahead will be the hardest yet but I really do believe that we are entering the last phase of the struggle.

Because with every jab that goes into our arms, we are tilting the odds against Covid and in favour of the British people.

And, thanks to the miracle of science, not only is the end in sight and we know exactly how we will get there.

But for now, I am afraid, you must once again stay at home, protect the NHS and save lives.

Thank you all very much.