

# Prime Minister's statement to the House of Commons on coronavirus: 27 January 2021

Mr Speaker, with permission, I will make a statement on the Government's measures to safeguard our United Kingdom against the new variants of Covid until we have administered enough vaccinations to free ourselves from the virus.

And I am acutely conscious that at this moment, parents are balancing the demands of working from home with supporting the education of their children, businesspeople are enduring the sight of their shops or restaurants or other enterprises standing empty and idle and, sadly, too many are coping with the anxiety of illness or tragedy of bereavement.

I am deeply sorry to say that the number of people that have taken from us has surpassed 100,000, as the house was discussing only an hour or so ago, and I know the House will join me in offering condolences to all those who have lost loved ones.

The most important thing we can do to honour their memory is to persevere against this virus with ever greater resolve, and that is why we have launched the biggest vaccination programme in British history.

Three weeks ago, I reported that the UK had immunised 1.3 million people; now that figure has multiplied more than fivefold to exceed 6.8 million people, more than any other country in Europe and over 13 per cent of the entire adult population.

In England we have now delivered first doses to over four-fifths of those aged 80 or over, and over half of those aged between 75 and 79 and three quarters of elderly care home residents

And though it remains an exacting target, we are on track to achieve our goal of offering a first dose to everyone in the top four priority groups by the middle of February.

I can also reassure the House that all current evidence shows that both the vaccines we are administering remain effective against the new variant that was first identified in London and the South East by means of our world-leading capability in genomic sequencing.

The UK has now sequenced over half of all COVID-19 viral genomes that have been submitted to the global database, 10 times more than any other country.

And yesterday, my Rt Hon Friend the Health Secretary announced our New Variant Assessment Platform, through which we will work with the World Health Organisation to offer our expertise to help other countries, because a new variant anywhere poses a potential threat everywhere.

To guard against this danger, we must also take additional steps to strengthen our borders to stop those strains from entering the UK.

We have already temporarily closed all travel corridors and we are already requiring anyone coming to this country to have proof of a negative Covid test taken in the 72 hours before leaving.

They must also complete a Passenger Locator Form which must be checked before they board – and then quarantine on arrival for ten days.

I want to make clear that under the stay at home regulations it is illegal to leave home to travel abroad for leisure purposes and we will enforce this at ports and airports by asking people why they are leaving and instructing them to return home if they do not have a valid reason to travel.

We have also banned all travel from 22 countries where there is a risk of known variants including South Africa, Portugal and South American nations, and in order to reduce the risk posed by UK nationals and residents returning home from these countries, I can announce that we will require all such arrivals who cannot be refused entry to isolate in government-provided accommodation – such as hotels – for ten days without exception. They will be met at the airport and transported directly into quarantine.

The Department for Health and Social Care is working to establish these facilities as quickly as possible and my Rt Hon Friend the Home Secretary will set out the details of our plans in her statement shortly.

My Rt Hon 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 and, as we have throughout the pandemic, we will be working closely with the DAs to implement these new measures so that, where possible, we continue to take a UK-wide approach.

Mr Speaker, it was the emergence of a new variant – up to 70 per cent more transmissible – that forced England back into lockdown, and I know everyone yearns to know how much longer we must endure these restrictions, with all their consequences for jobs, livelihoods and most tragically of all, the life chances of our children.

We will not persist for a day longer than is necessary, but nor can we relax too soon, because if we do we run the risk of our NHS coming under still greater pressure, compelling us to re-impose every restriction and sustain those restrictions for longer.

So far, our efforts do appear to have reduced the R rate, but we do not yet have enough data to know exactly how soon it will be safe to reopen our society and economy.

At this point, we do not have enough data to judge the full effect of vaccines in blocking transmission nor the extent and speed with which the vaccines will reduce hospitalisations and deaths, nor how quickly the combination of vaccinations and the lockdown can be expected to ease the pressure on the NHS.

What we do know is that we remain in a perilous situation, with more than 37,000 patients now in hospital with Covid, almost double the peak of the first wave.

But the overall picture should be clearer by mid-February: by then, we will know much more about the effect of vaccines in preventing hospitalisations and deaths, using data from the UK but also other nations like Israel. We will know how successful the current restrictions have been in driving down infections.

We will also know how many people are still in hospital with Covid, which we simply can't predict with certainty today.

So we will then be in a better position to chart a course out of lockdown, without risking a further surge that would overwhelm the NHS.

When I announced the lockdown I said we would review its measures in mid-February, once the most vulnerable had been offered the first dose of the vaccine.

So I can tell the House that when Parliament returns from Recess in the week commencing 22nd February subject to the full agreement of the House, Mr Speaker, we intend to set out the results of that review and publish our plan for taking the country out of lockdown.

That plan will, of course, depend on the continued success of our vaccination programme, the capacity of the NHS, and on deaths falling at the pace we would expect as more people are inoculated.

Our aim will be to set out a gradual and phased approach towards easing the restrictions in a sustainable way, guided by the principles we have observed throughout the pandemic, beginning with the most important principle of all: that re-opening schools must be our national priority and the first sign of normality beginning to return should be pupils going back to their classrooms.

I know how parents and teachers need as much certainty as possible, including two weeks' notice of the return of face-to-face teaching.

So I must inform the House that, for the reasons I have outlined, it will not be possible to re-open schools immediately after the February half term.

I know how frustrating that will be for pupils and teachers who want nothing more than to get back in the classroom and for parents and carers who have spent so many months juggling their day jobs not only with home schooling but with meeting the myriad other demands of their children from breakfast until bedtime. And I know too the worries we all share about the mental health of our young people during this prolonged period of being stuck at home.

So our plan for leaving the lockdown will set out our approach towards re-opening schools.

If we achieve our target of vaccinating everyone in the four most vulnerable

groups with their first dose by 15 February – and every passing day sees more progress towards that goal – then those groups will have developed immunity from the virus by about three weeks later, that is by 8 March.

We hope it will therefore be safe to commence the reopening of schools from Monday 8 March, with other economic and social restrictions being removed thereafter as and when the data permits – then or thereafter, I should say, Mr Speaker.

As we are extending the period of remote learning beyond the middle of February, I can confirm that the government will prolong arrangements for providing free school meals for those eligible children not in school – including food parcels and the national voucher scheme – until they have returned to the classroom. We can also commit now that, as we did this financial year, we will provide a programme of catch up over the next financial year.

This will involve a further £300m of new money to schools for tutoring and we will work in collaboration with the education sector to develop, as appropriate, specific initiatives for summer schools and a Covid Premium to support catch up.

But we recognise that these extended school closures have had a huge impact on children's learning which will take more than a year to make up.

So we will work with parents, teachers and schools to develop a long-term plan to make sure pupils have the chance to make up their learning over the course of this Parliament.

I know, Mr Speaker, that the measures I am setting out today will be deeply frustrating to many honourable friends and colleagues, and disappointing for all of us.

But the way forward has been clear ever since the vaccines arrived and, as we inoculate more people hour by hour, this is the time to hold our nerve in the endgame of the battle against the virus.

Our goal now must be to buy the extra weeks we need to immunise the most vulnerable and get this virus under control, so that together we can defeat this most wretched disease, reclaim our lives once and for all, and, Mr Speaker, I commend this statement to the House.