

Prime Minister's statement to the House of Commons on COVID-19 regulations: 6 January 2021

Thank you very much Mr Speaker and can I share your gratitude to the House of Commons staff for all their efforts, their hard work to allow us to meet today in the way that we are.

And before I begin my statement, I know the thoughts of the whole House are with the Hon Member for Cardiff Central who is currently in hospital with Covid, and we wish her a full and speedy recovery.

With permission, I shall make a statement about the measures we are taking to defeat this new variant of Covid-19,

protecting our NHS whilst it carries out the vaccinations that will finally free us from this wretched virus.

And Mr Speaker, there is a fundamental difference between the regulations before the House today,

and the position we have faced at any previous stage,

because now we have the vaccines that are the means of our escape

and we will use every available second of the lockdown to place this invisible shield around the elderly and the vulnerable.

Already – with Pfizer and Oxford/AstraZeneca combined –

we have immunised over 1.1 million people in England

and over 1.3 million in the UK.

Our NHS is following the plan drawn up by the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation

which is aimed at saving the most lives in the fastest possible time.

And given that the average age of Covid fatalities is over 80,

it is significant that we have already vaccinated more than 650,000 people in this age group,

meaning that within 2 to 3 weeks,

almost 1 in 4 of one of the most vulnerable groups will all have a significant degree of immunity.

By February 15th the NHS is committed to offering a vaccination to everyone

in the top four priority groups

including older care home residents and staff

everyone over 70

all frontline NHS and care staff

and all those who are clinically extremely vulnerable.

And in working towards that target there are already almost 1,000 vaccination centres across the country

including 595 GP-led sites with a further 180 opening later this week

and 107 hospital sites – with another 100 later this week

Next week we will also have seven vaccination centres opening in places such as sports stadia and exhibition centres.

Pharmacies are already working with GPs to deliver the vaccine in many areas of the country

and I am grateful to Brigadier Prosser who is leading the efforts of our armed forces in supporting this vaccine rollout.

We have already vaccinated more people in this country than in the rest of Europe combined

and we will give the House the maximum possible transparency about our acceleration of this effort

publishing daily updates online from Monday

so that job by job

Hon Members can scrutinise the progress being made every single day.

Yet as we take this giant leap towards finally overcoming this virus and reclaiming our lives,

we have to contend with the new variant

which is between 50 and 70 per cent more contagious.

The old variant, which the House agreed last month, the tiers agreed by this House last month was working with the old variant.

But, alas, this mutation

spreading with frightening ease and speed in spite of the sterling work of the British public –

has led to more cases than we have ever seen before,

alas numbers that cannot be explained away by the meteoric rise in testing.

When the Office for National Statistics reports that more than 2 per cent of the population is now infected,

and when the number of patients in hospitals in England is now 40 per cent higher than the first peak in April,

it is inescapable that the facts are changing

and we must change our response.

And so we now have no choice but to return to a national lockdown in England with similar measures being adopted by the Devolved Administrations –

so we can control this new variant until we can take the most likely victims out of its path with vaccines.

My Rt Hon Friend the Secretary of State for Health will open the debate on the full regulations shortly,

but the key point I am afraid is that we are once again instructing everyone to stay at home, everyone to stay at home

leaving only for limited reasons permitted by law,

such as to shop for essentials,

to work if people absolutely cannot work from home,

to exercise,

to seek medical assistance such as getting a Covid test,

or to escape injury or harm, including domestic abuse.

We are advising the clinically extremely vulnerable to begin shielding again.

And because we must do everything possible to stop the spread of the disease

we have asked schools and colleges to close their doors to all except vulnerable children and those of critical workers.

Mr Speaker, I don't think the House will be in any doubt about our determination, my determination to keep schools open,

especially primary schools –

open for as long as possible.

Because all the evidence shows that school is the best place for our children.

And indeed all the evidence shows that schools are safe, and that the risk

posed to children by Coronavirus is vanishingly small.

For most children the most dangerous part of going to school, even in the midst of this global pandemic, remains I'm afraid crossing the road in order to get there.

But the data showed, and our scientific advisers agreed, that our efforts to contain the spread of this new variant would not be sufficient if schools continued to act as a potential vector for spreading the virus between households.

Mr Speaker, I know the whole House will join me in paying tribute to all the teachers, all the pupils and parents who are now making the rapid move to remote learning,

and we will do everything possible to support that process,

building on the 560,000 laptops and tablets provided last year

with over 50,000 delivered to schools on Monday

and more than 100,000 being delivered in total during the first week of term.

We have partnered with some of the UK's leading mobile operators to provide free mobile data to disadvantaged families to support access to education resources.

And I am very grateful to EE, Three, Tesco Mobile, Smarty, Sky Mobile, Virgin Mobile and Vodafone for supporting this offer.

Oak National Academy will continue to provide video lessons

and it's very good news that the BBC is launching the biggest education programme in its history, with both primary and secondary school programmes across its platforms.

We recognise it will not be possible or fair for all exams to go ahead this Summer as normal. And the Education Secretary will be making a statement shortly.

Mr Speaker, I know many people will ask whether the decision on schools could have been reached sooner,

and the answer is that we have been doing everything in our power to keep them open

because children's education is too vital, and their futures too precious, to be disrupted

until every other avenue, every other option had been closed off

and every other course of action had been taken.

That is why schools were the very last thing to close, as I have long

promised they would be.

And when we begin to move out of lockdown I promise they will be the very first things to reopen.

That moment may come after the February half-term, although we should remain extremely cautious about the timetable ahead.

And as was the case last spring, our emergence from the lockdown cocoon will be not a big bang but a gradual unwrapping.

That is why the legislation this House will vote on later today runs until 31 March.

Not because we expect the full national lockdown to continue until then, but to allow a steady, controlled and evidence-led move down through the tiers on a regional basis

carefully brick-by-brick as it were breaking free of our confinement but without risking the hard-won gains that protections have given us.

The restrictions will be kept under continuous review,

with a statutory requirement to review every two weeks

and a legal obligation to remove them if they are no longer deemed necessary to limit the transmission of the virus.

And for as long as restrictions are in place we will continue to support everyone affected by them

from the continued provision of free school meals

to the £4.6 billion of additional assistance for our retail, hospitality and leisure sectors announced by my Rt Hon Friend the Chancellor yesterday.

Mr Speaker, we are in a tough final stretch

made only tougher by the new variant –

but this country will come together

and the miracle of scientific endeavour, much of it right here in the UK, has given us not only the sight of the finish line but a clear route to get there.

After the marathon of last year we are indeed now in a sprint, a race to vaccinate the vulnerable faster than the virus can reach them.

Every needle in every arm makes a difference,

As I say we are already vaccinating faster than any comparable country and that rate I hope will only increase.

But if we're going to win this race for our population we have to give our army of vaccinators the biggest head start we possibly can.

And that is why to do that we must once again stay at home, protect the NHS and save lives.

And I commend this statement to the House.