

Secretary of State for Health and Social Care provides an update on step 4

Thank you Mr Speaker.

Before I update the House on the pandemic, I'd like to take a moment to congratulate the England football team for making history and for the way they've brought us all together with their skill and spirit over the past few weeks.

Last night's result may have not been the one many of us were hoping for, but they played like heroes, and the nation is proud of each and every one of them.

I also want to condemn the shameful racism experienced by several members of the England team after the match. Racism has no place in football, or in our society, and I know the House will agree that we must show zero tolerance of this appalling behaviour.

Mr Speaker, with permission, I'd like to turn to our path out of this pandemic. All the way through our fight against this virus, we've looked forward to the day when we can roll back legal restrictions and get closer to normal life. Now, thanks to the shared sacrifice of the British people, and the protective wall of our vaccination programme, we've made huge advances.

Today, I'd like to update the House on the next decision in front of us: Whether to proceed to step 4 of our roadmap next Monday?

As I set out to the House last week, this will be a major milestone for this country, taking us another step closer to the life we all used to live. It means carefully removing more of the restrictions that have governed our daily lives. Like how many people you can meet how many people can attend weddings and how many visitors can see loved ones in care homes.

We've all been yearning to get here, and we all want this to be a one-way journey.

So we've acted in a measured way, taking each step at a time, and looking at the latest data, and our four tests, before deciding whether to proceed.

Mr Speaker, the first test is the success of our vaccination programme.

Ever since the 8th of December last year, when the world's first clinically authorised vaccine was given right here in the UK, we've been putting jabs in arms at a phenomenal pace. Giving over 80 million doses in just seven months. We've given more doses per capita than any other large nation. And as a result, around 9 in 10 adults in the UK now have COVID-19 antibodies which are so important in helping our bodies to fight the virus.

To bolster this protective wall even further, we made the tough, yet necessary decision, to take a four-week pause to step 4, so we could protect even more people before easing restrictions. And since making this decision, we've been able to give 7 million extra doses across the UK.

We pledged that by the 19th of July, we'd have offered every adult a first dose of the vaccine, and have given two doses to two thirds of all adults.

I'm pleased to inform the House that we're on track to beat both of these targets. So, as we make this crucial decision, we're in a stronger position than ever before.

Mr Speaker, we're looking not just at how many jabs we've put in arms, but what impact they're having on hospitalisations and the loss of loved ones—and this is our second test.

There is increasing evidence that the vaccine has severely weakened this link – the link that was once a grim inevitability.

Data from Public Health England estimates that two doses of a COVID-19 vaccine offers protection of around 96 per cent against hospitalisation meaning fewer COVID patients in hospital beds, and fewer people mourning the loss of a loved one.

And they also estimate that the vaccination programme in England has prevented between 7.5 million and 8.9 million infections over 46,000 hospitalisations and around 30,000 people losing their lives.

All because of the protection that the vaccines can bring.

Mr Speaker, our third test is around whether infection rates would put unsustainable pressure on the NHS. And I want to be open about what the data is telling us, and why we've reached the decision we have.

Cases are rising, propelled by the new, more transmissible Delta variant. The average number of daily new cases is over 26,000 and this has doubled over the past 11 days. And sadly, the case numbers will get a lot worse before they get better. We could reach 100,000 cases a day later in the summer.

Hospitalisations are also rising, with sustained growth over the past month – and once again, they will rise too. But we should be encouraged that hospitalisations are far lower than they were at this point during the previous wave.

Just as we should be encouraged that people over 65 who are more likely to have had both doses of a vaccine make up 31 per cent of Covid admissions in the last week, compared to 61 per cent in January.

This is further evidence that our vaccination programme is doing its job and protecting our NHS. And as more people get the jab, our protective wall will get stronger still.

We will stay vigilant and keep a close eye on the data, as well as the impact

of long-COVID, where we're investing £50 million into research.

But on the basis of the evidence in front of us, we do not believe that infection rates will put unsustainable pressure on the NHS. It's so important that everyone does their bit in helping the NHS to stand strong.

And the best thing we can all do to protect the NHS, and each other, is to get the jab, and crucially, get both doses.

Our final test is that the risks are not fundamentally changed by new variants of concern.

We've seen from the growth of the Delta variant, which now makes up 99 per cent of new cases, just how quickly a new variant can take hold.

However, although the Delta variant is more transmissible than the Alpha variant, the evidence showing two doses of the vaccine appears to be just as effective against hospitalisation.

But we know that the greatest risk to the progress we've made is the possibility of another new variant – especially one that can escape immunity, and puncture the protective wall of our vaccination programme.

So even as we look to ease restrictions, we'll maintain our tough measures at the borders and we'll expand our capacity for genomic sequencing, already one of the largest in the world, so we can come down hard on new variants.

Mr Speaker, we have looked closely at the data, against these four tests. And we firmly believe that this is the right time to get our nation closer to normal life. So we will move to the next stage on our roadmap on July 19th.

To those who say "Why take this step now?", I say "if not now, then when?".

There will never be a perfect time to take this step, because we simply cannot eradicate this virus. Whether we like it or not, coronavirus is not going away.

But moving forward next week, supported by the arrival of summer and the school holidays, gives us the best possible chance of a return to normal life.

If we wait longer, then we risk pushing the virus towards winter, when the virus will have an advantage, or worse still, we risk not opening up at all.

We delayed step 4 by four weeks so we could build our vaccine wall even higher. We believe this wall means we can withstand a summer wave. And while the wall would be higher still in winter, we know the wave would be much more dangerous.

So while we know there are risks with any decision, this is the most responsible decision we could take.

This step forward is about balancing the harms caused by COVID, with the

undeniable harms that restrictions bring.

These restrictions were vital to protect the NHS. But we must be upfront about the impact of keeping them, just as we are about removing them just as we are about removing them.

The rise in domestic violence, the impact on mental health, undiagnosed cancer to name just a few.

So, we'll ease restrictions next week, while at the same time maintaining the defences we've built against this virus.

Like our vaccination programme – where we still have more young people to protect our work to support the most vulnerable and the contingency plans that can help us stay one step ahead of the virus.

But this is not the end of the road.

It's the start of a new phase of continued caution, where we live with the virus and manage the risks.

And we're publishing a plan today, showing the safe and gradual approach we'll be taking throughout the summer. It includes details of how we'll be encouraging businesses and large events to use certification in high risk settings to limit the risk of infection guidance for those who are clinically extremely vulnerable and details of a review we'll be conducting in September, to assess our preparedness for autumn and winter.

Mr Speaker, as we make these changes, it's so important that people act with caution and personal responsibility. For example, everyone should return to work gradually if working from home meet people outside where possible and it's expected and recommended that people should wear face coverings, unless they're exempt, in crowded, indoor settings like public transport.

Mr Speaker, I also wanted to update the House on our policies for self-isolation. Last week, I announced to the House that, from the 16th of August, double jabbed adults and under 18s will no longer need to self-isolate, if they're a close contact of someone with COVID-19.

Until then, with cases rates expected to rise it's vital that we make sure our systems for self-isolation are proportionate and that they reflect the protection given by our vaccination programme.

As part of this approach, we'll be working with clinicians, and the NHS, to explore what more can be done for colleagues in patient facing roles. This would only be used in exceptional circumstances, where the self-isolation of fully vaccinated close contacts could directly impact the safety of patients. So we can keep our vital services going as we safely and gradually get closer to normal life.

Mr Speaker, the 19th of July will mark another step forward in our road to recovery. Getting here has been hard fought and long awaited. But this battle isn't over yet.

Let's move forward in a confident but measured way, so we can get closer to normal life, and protect the progress we've all made.

I commend this statement to the House.