

The fightback against coronavirus

Mr Speaker. I rise to make a statement on the fightback against this virus.

Across the country, our vaccine roll-out continues at pace.

With each vaccine we administer, we are one step closer to normal.

And as of today, we've vaccinated 9.2 million people.

I want to thank everyone involved in this collective national effort that saw nearly a million people get vaccinations last weekend alone – or, put another way, one in 60 of the UK's adults.

We've now protected almost 9 out of every 10 people over 80 and over half of people in their 70s.

I'm also delighted we've visited every eligible care home – 10,307 in total.

I want to thank everyone involved in that effort – including the NHS, our dedicated staff in social care and the residents themselves – for coming forward.

And I also want to pay tribute to my honourable friend, the Minister of State for Care, who has worked so hard to help us meet this ambitious target.

I know many of us in this House are playing our part in the national vaccination effort, and today we published a new resource for the House that provides more information on the vaccine roll-out and how all colleagues can play such an important part in increasing the take-up of the vaccine in their area.

Because the take-up of this vaccine will directly impact how effective the vaccines are and how fast we can safely get out of this.

Vaccine supply

Mr Speaker, we're confident we have the supplies to meet our target to offer the vaccine to the 4 most vulnerable groups by 15 February.

We now have over 400 million doses of vaccine on order, including the additional 40 million vaccine doses from Valneva we ordered yesterday.

And, Mr Speaker, that we find ourselves in this position is no accident.

Our strategy has been to invest early – and invest at risk.

We've backed many horses – no matter where they're from.

We've also built up our vaccine manufacturing capability here at home.

As a result, today we have:

- the AstraZeneca jab being manufactured in Oxford, Staffordshire and Wrexham
- the Novovax vaccine made in Teesside
- and the Valneva vaccine manufactured in Livingston in Scotland

It's a great example of what we can achieve together, working as one United Kingdom.

South African variant

Mr Speaker, despite this optimistic backdrop, we must continue to act with caution, not least, because of the renewed challenges posed by new variants of the coronavirus.

We have now found here 105 cases of the variant first identified in South Africa, including 11 cases which do not appear to have any links to international travel.

As with the variant first identified in the UK, there's currently no evidence to suggest it is any more severe.

But we have to come down on it hard.

Our mission must be to stop its spread altogether – and break those chains of transmission.

In those areas where this variant has been found – parts of Broxbourne, London, Maidstone, Southport, Walsall and Woking – we're also putting in extra testing, and sequencing every positive test.

Working with local authorities, we're going door-to-door to test everyone in those areas.

And mobile testing units will be deployed, offering PCR tests to people who have to leave their home for work or other essential reasons.

We have also seen 11 cases of mutations of concern in Bristol, 32 in Liverpool – and are taking the same approach.

In all these areas, it is imperative that you must stay at home and only leave home where it is absolutely essential.

When your local authority offers you a test, you should take up the offer because we know that around one in 3 people with coronavirus have no symptoms – but can still pass it on.

We are offering testing to everyone aged 16 and over – even if you have been vaccinated.

And if you live in one of those areas but have not been contacted, and you're unsure if you should have a test, I encourage you to visit your local authority website to find out.

Anyone who must leave your home to go to a workplace – for instance, because they cannot work from home – should get tested.

All local employers should support and encourage their workers to get tested.

The message is more important than ever: to stay at home, maintain social distancing and get tested.

Mr Speaker, across the whole country, we're expanding workplace testing, including here in Parliament itself.

This morning you and I visited the new COVID testing site here in Parliament, which offers all those who work here – MPs, peers and staff – the chance to get tested.

I took a test this morning – thankfully, negative. It's quick, easy – and you get the result back fast.

And I encourage colleagues who have to be here in person to sign up and do the same.

And for all of us, no matter where we live, we need to continue to follow those rules.

Because, while more scientific work is underway to learn more about new variants, we know – with absolute certainty – that social distancing works.

It denies the virus the social contact it needs to spread.

We must all keep at it.

We've all sacrificed too much – and come so far with the vaccine – to give up now.

And I know we that won't.

Closing

Mr Speaker, while we have been working night and day to fight coronavirus, I have often drawn inspiration from our fight against another killer pandemic: HIV.

A disease that also took too many people before their time.

This is HIV Test Week.

It's a reminder of how important it is to get your free HIV test.

But it's also a reminder of the progress we've made in tackling that terrible pandemic, that we can credibly commit to no new transmissions by the end of this decade.

And today, I'm sure the whole House will join me in wishing Lord Norman Fowler a very happy 83rd birthday.

He was an inspirational former Health Secretary and fearless advocate for tackling HIV and AIDS.

Lord Fowler is someone who knows the importance of taking action early, and the power of testing to turn the tide.

So, as we face these difficult weeks ahead, we can all draw inspiration from that great struggle: that even when you're facing a mountain of challenges, science, ingenuity and sheer power of will can see us to better days.

I commend this statement to the House.