

Update on the pandemic and the roadmap to freedom

Mr Speaker, I'm extremely grateful to you for accommodating the timing of this statement today. I'd like to update the House on the pandemic, and our roadmap to freedom.

Mr Speaker, this morning I joined some of the remarkable people who have been at the heart of our pandemic response at a service to mark the NHS's 73rd Birthday at St Paul's Cathedral. Together we reflected on a 'year like no other' – for the NHS and for our country.

I know Honourable Members on all sides of this House will join me in celebrating the decision by Her Majesty the Queen to award the NHS the George Cross. I can think of no more fitting tribute to the NHS. I know that everyone in this House – indeed, everyone in this country – will celebrate this award.

Mr Speaker, there's no greater demonstration of our high regard for the NHS than the manner in which we all stepped up to protect it. Now it is thanks to the NHS and many others that we are vaccinating our way out of this pandemic – and out of our restrictions.

86% of UK adults have had at least one jab, and 64% have had two. We're reinforcing our vaccine wall of defence further still.

I can tell the House we are reducing the dose interval for under 40s from 12 weeks to 8... which will mean every adult should have the chance to be double jabbed by mid-September.

And those vaccines are working. The latest data from the ONS shows that 8 in 10 adults have the COVID-19 antibodies that are so important in helping our body fight the disease. When we look at people over 50 – the people who got the jab earlier in the programme – that figure rises to over 9 in 10.

Mr Speaker, allow me to set out why all of this is so important. Before we started putting jabs in arms, whenever we saw a rise in cases, it would inevitably be followed by a rise in hospitalisations and, tragically, a rise in deaths too. Yet today, even though cases are heading upwards in line with what we expected, hospitalisations are increasing at a much lower rate and deaths are at a low level at just 1% of the figure we saw at the peak.

Our vaccines are building a wall of protection against hospitalisation – and jab by jab, brick by brick – that wall is getting higher.

And for those people who sadly do find themselves having to go to hospital, we have better treatments than ever before. Last week, on my visit to St Thomas' Hospital, clinicians were telling me just how transformative dexamethasone has been for their live-saving efforts. Taken together, the link between cases, hospitalisations and deaths is being severely weakened –

and this means we can start to learn to live with COVID-19.

As we do that, Mr Speaker, it's important we're straight with the British people. Cases of COVID-19 are rising – and will continue to rise significantly. We can reasonably expect that, by the 19th of July, the number of daily cases to be far higher than today.

Against this backdrop, I know that many people will be understandably cautious about easing restrictions. After many months of uncertainty, this is entirely natural.

But we can now protect the NHS without having to go to the extraordinary lengths we've needed to in the past. That's not to say this is going to be easy, Mr Speaker. Of course the pandemic is not over. The virus is still with us, it hasn't gone away – and the risk of a dangerous new variant that evades vaccines remains real.

We know that with COVID-19, the situation can change – and it can change quickly. But we cannot put our lives on hold forever.

My responsibility as Secretary of State for Health and Social Care includes helping to us turn and face the other challenges that we know we must also address, from mental health to social care to the challenges of long-COVID.

I'm also determined to get to work on busting the backlog this pandemic has caused – a backlog we know is likely to get worse before it gets better.

As I set out to this House last week, Mr Speaker, I remain confident we can move to Step 4 in England on the 19th of July and the government will make its final decision on this on the 12th of July.

Today, Mr Speaker, I wish to set out further details of what Step 4 will look like.

In essence, our national response to COVID-19 will change, from one of rules and regulations, to one of guidance and good sense. We will revoke all social distancing guidance, including the 2-metre rule, except for in some specific settings, such as ports of entry and medical settings, where it makes sense for those to continue.

It will no longer be a legal requirement to wear face coverings in any setting, including on public transport – although we advise this as a voluntary measure for crowded and enclosed spaces.

It will no longer be necessary to work from home. There will be no limits on the number of people you can meet. There will be no limits on the number of people who can attend life events, like weddings and funerals – and no restrictions on communal worship and singing.

We will remove legal requirements on how businesses operate. Capacity caps will all be lifted, and there will no longer be a requirement to offer table service. All businesses forced to close their doors because of the pandemic will be able to open them once again.

And we will lift the cap on named care home visitor numbers, so that families can come together in the ways they want to once again.

Mr Speaker, ministers will provide further statements this week on self-isolation for fully vaccinated people, including for international travel, and on restrictions in education settings – including the removal of bubbles and contact isolation.

Today, I can also confirm to the House that we have completed our review of certification. While already a feature of international travel, we have concluded that we do not think using certification as a condition of entry is the way to go.

For people who haven't been offered a full course of vaccination, and for businesses, we felt the impact outweighed the public health benefits.

Of course, Mr Speaker, businesses can use COVID-status certification at their own discretion..... and from Step 4 onwards, the NHS Covid Pass will be accessible through the NHS app and other non-digital routes.

This will be the main way people can prove their COVID-19 status – a status they will achieve once they have completed a full vaccine course, a recent negative test, or by some other proof of natural immunity.

Mr Speaker, taken together, Step 4 is the biggest step of all. A restoration of so many of the freedoms that make this country great.

We know that as a consequence, cases will rise – just as they have done at every step on our roadmap. But this time, our wall of protection will help us. While Step 4 will be the moment to let go of many of restrictions, we must hold on to those sensible everyday decisions that can keep us all safe.

The responsibility to combat COVID-19 lies with each and every one of us. That means staying at home when you're asked to self-isolate. It means considering the guidance that we're setting out. And it means getting the jab – both doses – when you're offered it, something that is still the single biggest contribution anyone can make to our national effort.

And it may even mean three jabs in a single year for some of us. Last week, the JCVI provided interim advice on who to prioritise for a third dose – and our most vulnerable will be offered booster COVID-19 jabs from September, in time for the winter.

And preparing for the winter ahead is not just about COVID-19, but flu as well.

Because of the measures in place this winter, almost nobody in the UK has had flu for 18 months now. That's obviously a good thing, but it means our immunity will be down.

This winter's flu campaign will be more important than ever – and we're currently looking at whether we can give people their COVID-19 booster shot and the flu jab at the same time.

Mr Speaker, Step 4 is the next step on our country's journey out of this pandemic.

I know that after so many difficult months, it is a step that many of us will look upon with a great deal of caution. But it is one we will take together, with a growing wall of defence against this virus – a wall that each and every one of us can help to build higher.

It's vital that each of us plays our part – to protect ourselves and to protect others – into better days ahead.

I commend this statement to the House.