

Health and Social Care Secretary's statement on coronavirus (COVID-19): 5 March 2021

Good afternoon and welcome to Downing Street for today's coronavirus briefing.

I'm joined by Dr Susan Hopkins, from Public Health England and NHS Test and Trace.

Today, I've got an update on progress in our battle against coronavirus, some new evidence of the effectiveness of the vaccines, an update on the cases of the Brazilian variant of concern and extra funding to support mental health in schools.

Because, of course, on Monday that marks our first step in our opening up after this lockdown.

Next week, classrooms will be buzzing with activity once more. I know parents across England will be delighted and relieved that all children are going back to school.

Also, from Monday, I'm just so pleased that we're able to reopen care homes to visitors.

We've put in place a really careful policy so each care home resident will be able to register a single regular visitor, who'll be tested and wear PPE.

I know this really matters to hundreds of thousands of people with a loved one in a care home.

And I'm really glad that we can make this step.

So, first, let's turn to the latest coronavirus data.

This data shows this progress we've made, including more evidence on the impact of the vaccine in saving lives.

First slide please.

Here, you can see the number of cases of COVID-19.

I'm pleased to say that the cases are still falling.

The average daily number of cases is now 6,685 – the lowest since late September and the weekly case rate across the UK is now 84 per 100,000.

The latest figures from the ONS, which were published earlier today, reported a further significant decline. They show that in England 1 in 220 people have

coronavirus, a fall from 1 in 145 last week.

This is all encouraging news and it should give us all confidence that we can safely take the steps we're taking on Monday.

Next slide please.

Slide 2 shows the hospital admissions with COVID and it shows that they are falling too.

There are still 12,136 people in hospital in the UK with COVID.

That's still too high, but the average number of new admissions to hospital is 900, the lowest since October.

Next slide please.

Thankfully, the number of deaths with COVID are also declining steeply.

The average number of deaths per day is 248, also the lowest since October.

And here, the decline is in fact accelerating.

The halving time of the number of deaths has come down from 19 days – so the number of deaths each day – last month, to halving every 11 days now.

Not only that, there are now fewer people dying of all causes in care homes than is normal for this time of year.

Taken together, these 3 slides show that we're heading in the right direction, although there is further to go. And what we can also see in the data, across the whole UK, is that the vaccine programme is working to protect the NHS and saving lives.

Next slide please.

The best way to see this is by looking at how fast cases, hospital admissions and deaths are falling.

The number of cases have been falling, in a fairly even way, since around the middle of January, by a quarter every week. Just a little bit more in the past few days.

It's not been completely smooth.

A week ago, I stood here and we said that we were worried that the fall in cases was slowing down.

Thankfully, as you can see in the chart, that now looks more like a temporary blip.

Which is good news for us all.

Next slide please.

Now let's turn to the number of hospital admissions.

Again, this is falling steadily, at around a quarter every week.

But there are early signs that this fall is getting a bit faster.

In fact, the 29% fall in the last week is the fastest fall in hospital admissions at any point in the entire pandemic.

Final slide please.

But where you can really see the effect of the vaccine is in the fall of the number of deaths.

The number of deaths is falling faster and faster.

And now deaths are falling by over a third every week. And in fact in the last week have fallen by 41%.

Faster than before.

The Chief Medical Officer told us weeks ago that you'd first see the effect of the vaccine in fewer people dying, and then in reduced hospitalisations.

And I believe that that is exactly what's happening.

What this all shows is that the link from cases to hospitalisations and then to deaths, that have been unbreakable before the vaccine – that link is now breaking. The vaccine is protecting the NHS and saving lives and that right across the country, this country's plan is working.

And as well as this real-world data, I want to share the results of a study by the University of Bristol which clearly shows the difference our vaccination programme is making.

The study looked at all patients over 80 who were admitted with serious respiratory disease in Bristol.

The results showed a single dose of both the Pfizer or Oxford/AstraZeneca jab offers around 80% protection against hospitalisation after at least 2 weeks even amongst the most frail, and those with underlying medical conditions.

Again, as with the data that were published last week, the effect was slightly stronger in the Oxford jab than with Pfizer. What this corroborates is that what we have seen over the past couple of weeks is that vaccines work. And they're the best way of securing our freedom.

As of midnight last night 21.3 million people have been vaccinated.

I can tell you that we have vaccinated two fifths of the entire adult population of the United Kingdom.

Yesterday, I was in Scotland, seeing the combined teamwork of NHS Scotland, Scottish local authorities and the armed forces, delivering jabs in Hamilton.

They were all working together as one, towards a common goal. Protecting us all.

As anyone who has been to a vaccination centre will know, the joy on people's faces when they get the jab is unbelievably uplifting.

And more and more people will be getting this feeling of protection over the next few weeks and months.

We're on course to hit our target of offering a first dose to everyone who's 50 or over, or part of an at-risk group, by 15 of April.

And all adults by the end of July.

The vaccine roll-out has allowed us to set out our roadmap for how we'll carefully lift some of the restrictions that we've all endured for far too long.

And as we do this, we'll be drawing on the huge testing infrastructure that is now in place.

We are now testing 2.8 million people a week.

The roadmap is built on the principle of replacing the protection that comes from lockdown with the protection that comes from vaccines and regular testing.

So, as we open up – for instance, care homes as I mentioned a moment ago, to visitors – that will come with regular testing for visitors.

And as schools and colleges return we will be giving teachers, staff, parents, secondary and college students and their households access to rapid regular testing twice a week in term time and in holidays.

And I urge all those and the households of those who are going back to school or to college next week to take up this offer

One of the most dangerous things about this virus – one of those dangerous things – is that around one third of those who get it don't get any symptoms at all and yet can still pass the disease on to others.

That's why it's so important that all of us follow the social distancing and take the precautions that we know we must.

So rapid, regular testing is a critical part of our response.

And we can do so much more because of the huge capacity we've built up in NHS Test and Trace.

I would urge you if you're eligible to participate in one of these regular testing programmes like I do, because that is how we will keep this virus under control as we continue to roll out the vaccine

For more information on how you can get a test, go to gov.uk/coronavirus.

I'd urge everyone who's eligible to get that regular testing.

Now, I know that this pandemic has been an anxious time for so many young people.

Growing up, after all, is tough enough at the best of times.

But during these difficult times, it's even tougher.

Home schooling, being unable to see your friends, sport cancelled, and being stuck at home.

I know just how much people are looking forward to going back to school, seeing friends in a classroom not just on Zoom.

Monday will be a long-awaited day for many.

But for some it'll be a moment of unease and anxiety too.

We need to help young people to get through this and get their life going again.

And give them the help and support that they need.

We've worked hard throughout the pandemic to make sure mental health services are open. And we've set up 24/7 support for those in need.

I'm delighted to announce today that we'll be allocating an extra £79 million to boost mental health support for children and young people.

Almost 3 million children and young people will benefit from more mental health support teams, and those mental health support teams in schools will be working hard to ensure people get access to the support and care that they need.

And we'll be expanding access to mental health services in the community too.

I'd like to end with some good news on our work to tackle new variants.

Thanks to the brilliant team who've been working so hard over the past week, we've now successfully identified the sixth case of the variant of concern first identified in Manaus in Brazil.

Using the latest technology, and the dogged determination of our testing and tracing scheme, we've successfully identified the person in question.

The best evidence is that this person in question stayed at home and that there's no sign that there's been any onward transmission.

But as a precaution, we're putting more testing in Croydon, where they live, to minimise the risk of spread.

This positive outcome was only possible because of the huge genome sequencing capacity that we now have in this country and our test and trace team, so we

could identify these cases, track them down and contact them.

It shows how important this capacity we've built is, and how important it is to be transparent whenever new variants are found.

Because whether it's here at home or around the world, testing, sequencing and being transparent about what you find helps stop the spread of this disease – and in particular these variants of concern which are so worrying – and protects lives.

I'm really delighted at the work the team have done this week. They've worked absolutely flat out since these 6 cases were first identified on Friday and found the 6 positive cases, even though the form wasn't filled in quite right.

So Susan is going to say a little bit more about this in a moment but my summary is:

Things are moving in the right direction.

These are challenging times.

But thanks to the vaccine, we're making progress.

But we're not there yet.

So, as we go down the road to recovery, it's vital everybody plays their part, follows the rules and when their call comes, get your jab.