

Prime Minister's statement on coronavirus (COVID-19): 27 January 2021

When we look at the toll of this pandemic

it must be measured

not only in the tragic loss of life that we have endured with over 100,000 deaths

and once again I offer my condolences to the families and friends of everybody who has lost loved ones –

but I'm afraid we must also remember not just the damage to the economy, but the lost weeks and months of education

and the real risk of damage to the prospects of our young people.

And so I share very much the frustration of pupils and teachers who today want nothing more than to get back to the classroom.

And I understand the stress and the anxieties of parents coping heroically with the pressures of homeschooling.

And I know that everybody across the country wants us to get schools open as fast as possible

And I can assure you that is the ambition of this Government.

But I also know, we all know, that with 37,000 people in hospital suffering from covid

and the infection rates still forbiddingly high

you, we all, must be cautious and we all want only to open schools when we can be sure that this will not cause another huge surge in the disease.

Because the problem is not that schools are unsafe

teachers and headteachers have worked heroically to make sure that they are safe, that they are covid secure

The problem is that by definition, schools bring many households together

And that contributes to the spread of the virus within the community,

and drives up the R.

And so it follows that if we are to get schools open – and keep them open –

which is what we all want

then we need to be clear about certain things.

We need to be sure the vaccine roll-out is continuing to be successful as it is

and most important, we need to see the impact of our vaccines on those graphs of mortality, we need to see that they really are saving lives and preventing people from becoming seriously ill.

Now we are confident that will happen and vaccines will have that effect

but to be responsible we must see the proof.

And our current estimates say that the proof will only become visible in the middle of February.

And since we need to give schools two weeks' notice to re-open

it is sensible now to serve notice that we will not be able to re-open schools immediately after half-term on 22nd February.

But if we continue to make the progress that we want to see, and that we believe we can see,

Then we hope to begin opening schools on Monday 8th March.

And to help parents and teachers with this extended period of remote learning

We will extend the arrangements for providing free school meals for those eligible children not in school

including food parcels and the national voucher scheme –

until those pupils have returned to the classroom.

And as we did this financial year, we will provide a catch-up programme over the next financial year,

with a further £300 million of new money to schools for tutoring,

and we will work with the education sector to develop, wherever appropriate, specific initiatives for summer schools

as well as a Covid Premium for catch-up and to support pupils to catch up

We will work with parents, teachers and schools to develop a long-term plan

to make sure all pupils have the chance to make up their learning over the course of this Parliament, so we tackle that issue of differential learning and kids who may have fallen behind through no fault of their own

And so with every jab that goes in we are becoming more confident that we will reach our target of offering a first dose to everyone in the top four priority groups by the middle of February.

And at that moment we will be able to review our progress, judge the state of the pandemic, and the effectiveness of the vaccine, and then in the week beginning 22nd February we will set out our plan not just for re-opening our schools

but gradually to re-open our economy and our society and to get our lives back to as close to normal as possible.

Now this will be a timetable that is inevitably going to be subject to adjustment

But I believe it will provide clarity and certainty about the way ahead, a roadmap that we can take together and use as a country to defeat the virus and begin steadily to reclaim our lives.