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THE PRIME MINISTER

22 February 2021

Dear Colleague

I have today made a Statement on the roadmap that will guide us cautiously but irreversibly towards reclaiming our freedoms and our way of life, while doing all we can to protect our people against COVID.

Today's measures will apply in England, but we are working closely with the Devolved Administrations who are setting out similar plans.

The threat remains substantial, with the numbers in hospital only now beginning to fall below the peak of the first wave last April. But we are able to take these steps because of the resolve of the British people and the extraordinary success of our NHS in vaccinating over 17.5 million people across the UK.

While the data so far suggests both vaccines are effective against the dominant strains of COVID, we are learning more all the time. Public Health England has found that one dose of the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine reduces hospitalisations and deaths by at least 75 per cent. And early data suggests that the Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine provides a good level of protection, though since we only started deploying this vaccine last month, at this stage the size of the effect is less certain. No vaccine can ever be 100 per cent effective, nor will everyone take them up, and like all viruses, COVID-19 will mutate.

As the modelling SAGE is publishing today shows, we cannot escape the fact that lifting lockdown will result in more cases, more hospitalisations and sadly more deaths. This would happen *whenever* lockdown is lifted, but if we get the timing right we can significantly limit that increase in hospitalisations and save many thousands of lives. There is no credible road to a Zero COVID Britain or indeed a Zero COVID World and we cannot persist indefinitely with restrictions that debilitate our economy, our physical and mental wellbeing, and the life-chances of our children.

That is why it is so crucial that this roadmap should be cautious but also irreversible. We are now setting out on what I hope and believe is a one-way road towards freedom. This is made possible by the pace of the vaccination programme. In England, everyone in the top four priority groups had been offered a vaccine by the middle of February. We now aim to offer a first dose to all those in groups 5 to 9 by 15 April, and I am setting another stretching target: to offer a first dose to every adult by the end of July.

As more of us are inoculated, the protection afforded by the vaccines will gradually replace the current restrictions. Today's roadmap sets out the principles of that transition.

Because the level of infection is broadly similar across England, we will ease restrictions in all areas at the same time. The sequence will be driven by the evidence, with outdoor activity prioritised as the best way to restore freedoms while minimising the risk of transmission. At every stage, our decisions will be led by data not dates, and subjected to four tests.

First, that the vaccine deployment programme continues successfully; second, that evidence shows vaccines are sufficiently effective in reducing hospitalisations and deaths; third, that infection rates do not risk a surge in hospitalisations which would put unsustainable pressure on the NHS; and fourth, that our assessment of the risks is not fundamentally changed by new variants of COVID that cause concern.

Before taking each step we will review the data against these tests. Since it takes at least four weeks for the data to reflect the impact of changes in restrictions - and we want to give businesses a week's notice before each change - there will be at least five weeks between each step.

The Chief Medical Officer is clear that moving any faster would mean acting before we know the impact of each step, which would increase the risk of us having to reverse course and re-impose restrictions. I won't take that risk.

Step one will happen from 8 March, by which time everyone in the top four priority groups will be benefiting from the increased protection they receive from the first dose of their vaccine.

All the evidence shows that classrooms are the very best places for our young people to be. That is why I have always said that schools would be the last to close and the first to reopen.

Based on our assessment of the current data against the four tests, two weeks from today pupils and students in all schools and further education settings can safely return to face-to-face education. This will be supported by the introduction of twice-weekly testing of secondary school and college pupils while families and childcare bubbles will also be encouraged to get tested regularly.

Breakfast and afterschool clubs can also reopen - and other children's activities, including sport, can restart where it is necessary to help parents to work. Students on university courses requiring practical teaching, specialist facilities or onsite assessments will also return, but all others will need to continue learning online, and we will review the options for when they can return by the end of the Easter holidays.

From 8 March, people will also be able to meet with one person from outside their household for outdoor recreation – such as coffee on a bench or a picnic in a park - in addition to exercise. But we are advising the Clinically Extremely Vulnerable to shield until at least the end of March.

From 8 March, every care home resident will be able to nominate a named visitor and will be able to see them regularly provided they are tested and wear PPE.

As part of Step one, we will also make further, limited changes on 29 March, when schools go on Easter holidays. It will become possible to meet up in limited numbers outdoors, where the risk of transmission is lower. So the Rule of Six will return outdoors, including in private gardens, and outdoor meetings of two households will also be permitted on the same basis.

Outdoor sports facilities – such as tennis and basketball courts, and open-air swimming pools – will be able to reopen and formally organised outdoor sports will resume, subject to guidance.

From this point, people will no longer be legally required to stay at home but many lockdown restrictions will stay in place.

People should continue to work from home where they can and minimise travel wherever possible. Holidays abroad will still be prohibited.

Step two will commence at least five weeks after step one and no earlier than 12 April, with an announcement at least seven days in advance. If analysis of the latest data against the four tests requires a delay, then this and subsequent steps will also be delayed to maintain the five week gap.

Non-essential retail will reopen, personal care including hairdressers and nail salons, indoor leisure facilities such as gyms and self-contained accommodation will reopen, but only for use by individuals or household groups.

We will begin to reopen our pubs and restaurants outdoors. Zoos, theme parks and drive-in cinemas will reopen as will public libraries and community centres.

Step three will begin no earlier than 17 May. Provided the data satisfies the four tests, most restrictions on meeting outdoors will be lifted, subject to a limit of thirty. And this is the point when you will be able to see your friends and family indoors - subject to the rule of six or the meeting of two households.

We will also reopen pubs and restaurants indoors along with cinemas and children's play areas, hotels, hostels, and B&Bs. Theatres and concert halls will open their doors, and the turnstiles of our sports stadia will rotate once again, subject in all cases to capacity limits depending on the size of the venue.

Step 4 will begin no earlier than 21 June. With appropriate mitigations, we will aim to remove all legal limits on social contact, and on weddings and other life events. We will reopen nightclubs, and enable large events such as theatre performances above the limits of Step 3, potentially using testing to reduce the risk of infection.

Our journey back to normality will be subject to resolving some key questions and to do this we will conduct four reviews.

One will assess how long we need to maintain social distancing and face masks. This will also inform guidance on working from home – which should continue wherever possible until this review is complete. And it will be critical in determining how Parliament can safely return in a way Honourable Members would wish.

A second will consider the resumption of international travel which is vital for many businesses which have been hardest hit including retail, hospitality, tourism and aviation.

A successor to the Global Travel Taskforce will report by 12 April so people can plan for the summer.

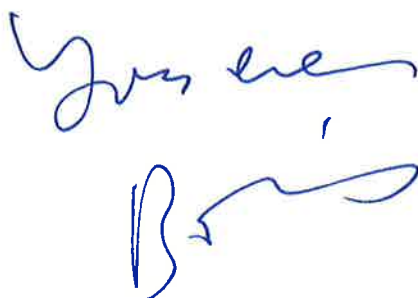
The third will consider the potential role of COVID-status certification in helping venues to open safely, but mindful of the many concerns surrounding exclusion, discrimination and privacy.

And the fourth will look at the safe return of major events.

For the duration of the pandemic, the Government will continue to do whatever it takes to protect jobs and livelihoods across the UK. My Right Honourable Friend the Chancellor will set out our financial support in the Budget next Wednesday.

We must remain alert to the constant mutations of the virus. Next month we will publish an updated plan for responding to local outbreaks, with a toolkit of measures to address variants of concern, including surge PCR testing and enhanced contact tracing. We cannot rule out re-imposing restrictions at local or regional level if evidence suggests they are necessary to contain or suppress a new variant which escapes the vaccines.

The vaccination programme has dramatically changed the odds in our favour. Today, the end really is in sight and a wretched year will give way to a spring and summer that will be very different and incomparably better than the picture we see around us today.



All Members of Parliament and Peers