

When we set out on our roadmap to freedom a few months ago, we were determined to make progress that was cautious but irreversible. And step by step - thanks to the enormous efforts of the British people and the spectacular vaccine roll-out we now have one of the most open economies and societies in this part of the world.

And as we have always known and as the February roadmap explicitly predicted - this opening up has inevitably been accompanied by more infection and more hospitalisation. Because we must be clear that we cannot simply eliminate Covid - we must learn to live with it. And with every day that goes by we are better protected by the vaccines and we are better able to live with the disease.

Vaccination greatly reduces transmission and two doses provide a very high degree of protection against serious illness and death. But there are still millions of younger adults who have not been vaccinated and sadly a proportion of the elderly and vulnerable may still succumb even if they have had two jabs.

And that is why we are so concerned by the Delta variant that is now spreading faster than the third wave predicted in the February roadmap. We're seeing cases growing by about 64 per cent per week, and in the worst affected areas, it's doubling every week. And the average number of people being admitted to hospital in England has increased by 50 per cent week on week, and by 61 per cent in the North West, which may be the shape of things to come. Because we know the remorseless logic of exponential growth and even if the link between infection and hospitalisation has been weakened it has not been severed.

And even if the link between hospitalisation and death has also been weakened, I'm afraid numbers in intensive care, in ICU are also rising. And so we have faced a very difficult choice. We can simply keep going with all of step 4 on June 21st even though there is a real possibility that the virus will outrun the vaccines and that thousands more deaths would ensue that could otherwise have been avoided.

Or else we can give our NHS a few more crucial weeks to get those remaining jabs into the arms of those who need them. And since today I cannot say that we have met all four tests for proceeding with step four, I do think it is sensible to wait just a little longer.

By Monday 19th July we will aim to have double jabbed around two thirds of the adult population including everyone over 50, all the vulnerable, all the frontline health and care workers and everyone over 40 who received their first dose by mid-May. And to do this we will now accelerate the 2nd jabs for those over 40 - just as we did for the vulnerable groups - so they get maximum protection as fast as possible.

And we will bring forward our target to give every adult in this country a first dose by 19th July that is including young people over the age of 18 with 23 and 24 year olds invited to book jabs from tomorrow - so we reduce the risk of transmission among groups that mix the most. And to give the NHS that extra time we will hold off step 4 openings until July 19th except for weddings that can still go ahead with more than 30 guests provided social distancing remains in place and the same will apply to wakes. And we will continue the pilot events - such as Euro2020 and some theatrical performances. We will monitor the position every day and if after 2 weeks we have concluded that the risk

has diminished then we reserve the possibility of proceeding to Step 4 and full opening sooner.

As things stand - and on the basis of the evidence I can see right now - I am confident we will not need any more than 4 weeks and we won't need to go beyond July 19th. It is unmistakably clear the vaccines are working and the sheer scale of the vaccine roll-out has made our position incomparably better than in previous waves.

But now is the time to ease off the accelerator because by being cautious now we have the chance - in the next four weeks - to save many thousands of lives by vaccinating millions more people. And once the adults of this country have been overwhelmingly vaccinated, which is what we can achieve in a short space of time, we will be in a far stronger position to keep hospitalisations down, to live with this disease, and to complete our cautious but irreversible roadmap to freedom.

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