

Covid-19

12:35:00

Jonathan Ashworth (Leicester South) (Lab/Co-op)

(Urgent Question): To ask the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care if he will make a statement on covid-19.

The Minister for Covid Vaccine Deployment (Nadhim Zahawi)

Our race between the vaccine and the virus continues. As a nation, we have taken some huge strides forward: there are now 908 people in hospital with coronavirus, a fall of 9% in the past week, and the average number of daily deaths is now six, the lowest number since the middle of March. On top of this positive news, our vaccination programme is accelerating at pace. Over 72% of all adults have now been given their first dose, and 43% of all adults have the protection of two doses.

This weekend, we reached the milestone of 60 million vaccines administered across the United Kingdom, and Public Health England also published new research showing that the effectiveness of vaccination against symptomatic disease from the variant first discovered in India is similar after two doses when compared to the B117 variant dominant in our country. As with other variants, even higher levels of effectiveness are expected against hospitalisation and death. This is encouraging data, and it reinforces once again the importance of our vaccination programme in giving us a path out of this pandemic, as well as showing just how important it is that everyone comes forward for both jabs when the call comes through. It is the progress made by the British people in following the rules, and in taking up the protection offered through our vaccination programme, that means we were able to take step 3 in our road map last week.

However, we take these steps with vigilance and caution, staying alert to new variants that can jeopardise the advances we have made. We have come down really hard on the variant first identified in India wherever we have found it, surging in testing capacity and vaccines for those who are eligible. Over the past few days, we have extended this rapid approach to even more areas: as well as Bolton and Blackburn with Darwen, which the Prime Minister spoke about at his press conference on the 14th of this month, we are taking rapid action in Bedford, Hounslow, Burnley, Leicester, Kirklees and North Tyneside. As the Prime Minister set out two weeks ago, we are urging people in these areas to take extra caution when meeting anyone outside their household or support bubble, including meeting outside rather than inside where possible; keeping 2 metres apart from people they do not live with; and trying to avoid travelling in and out of the affected areas unless it is essential, for example for work—if a person cannot work from home—or for education.

As the Prime Minister said, we want the whole country to move out of these restrictions together. We are trusting people to be responsible and to act with caution and common sense, as they have done throughout this pandemic, and to make decisions about how best to protect themselves and their loved ones that are informed by the risks. That is exactly what we should be doing. We are always looking to see how we can communicate more effectively with local authorities, and we will of course take on board the views expressed by the House over the course of this debate. By acting quickly whenever the virus flares up and protecting people through our vaccination programme, we can guard the incredible gains we have all made, and get ourselves on the road to recovery.

Jonathan Ashworth

Does the Minister appreciate that cities such as mine, Leicester, or towns and boroughs such as Burnley, Bolton, Batley and Blackburn, have borne the brunt of this crisis over these past 15 months? We have often been in lockdown for longer than elsewhere. At times, we have felt abandoned. We did not have adequate financial support: families did their best, but they struggled. Can the Minister understand how upsetting, how insulting, it is to have new restrictions imposed on us—local lockdowns by stealth, by the back door—without the Secretary of State even having the courtesy to come and tell us?

Why was the guidance plonked on a website on Friday night and not communicated to everyone? Why were local directors of public health and local authority leaders not consulted? Why were MPs not informed? What does it now mean for our constituents? What does it mean for the family in Leicester who have booked a few days next week by the coast for the school half-term? Do they have to cancel that break? What does it mean for university students in Leicester when they have finished their exams? Do they have to go home—or can they go home? Can prospective students come and look at the campuses?

What does the guidance mean for the parents in Bolton who are planning to take their children to see grandparents on the other side of Greater Manchester this bank holiday Monday? Should they rearrange their plans? What does it mean for the young couple in Burnley, Blackburn or Batley, who have postponed their wedding for over a year and invited friends and family from across the country to come and celebrate their special day with them? Is the message to them that they have to delay their wedding again?

Can the Minister answer these questions today? Can he take a message from me, as the Member of Parliament for Leicester South, back to the Secretary of State—“Withdraw this guidance now and convene a meeting this afternoon of the relevant directors of public health to produce a plan involving isolation support and enhanced contact tracing”? As the hon. Gentleman knows from his work as vaccines Minister, a single dose of the vaccine is less effective against this particular variant. Will he produce a plan with local directors of public health to roll out vaccinations to everybody and consider including bringing forward a second dose for a larger cohort of people?

A year ago, Ministers such as the hon. Gentleman were defending Dominic Cummings on Twitter. Now, Mr Cummings tweets about the lack of competent people in charge. Many of our constituents, looking at this latest lockdown fiasco, will think that Mr Cummings has a point.

Nadhim Zahawi

I thank the right hon. Gentleman for, I hope, his equally supportive comments when it comes to supporting his constituents and others around the country—in Bedford, Blackburn, Bolton, Burnley, Kirklees and Leicester, his own patch, as well as Hounslow and north Tyneside.

I spoke to the M10 metro Mayors this morning, and the one thing I would urge is that we all work together and take the politics out of this. Our constituents deserve that. Essentially, as I said in my opening statement, we are asking people in the affected areas to be cautious and careful. The right hon. Gentleman asked about visiting family: people should meet outside rather than inside, where possible. Meeting indoors is still allowed, in a group of six or as two households, but meeting outdoors is safer. People should meet 2 metres

apart from those they do not live with unless they have formed a support bubble; that obviously includes friends and family they do not live with. So yes, people can visit family in half-term if they follow social distancing guidelines. The guidelines include specific sections on meeting friends and family. Avoid travelling in and out of the affected areas, as the Prime Minister said on 14 May, unless it is essential—for work purposes, for example.

The whole principle is that we need to work together. The right hon. Gentleman has a responsibility, as do I and the metro Mayors, to communicate to our residents and constituents that this is a time to be vigilant and careful. We are putting more surge testing and turbocharging vaccinations in those areas, to make sure that we do the work with local directors of public health. I hope he will agree that we have had that plan in place and seen it operate in Bolton and Blackburn; we will see it operate in his constituency and other parts of the country as well.

Jeremy Hunt (South West Surrey) (Con)

I congratulate the Minister on the outstanding roll-out of the vaccine programme, which is a source of enormous pride to all of us, on all sides of the House. As we emerge from lockdown, we all want it to be a permanent change. For most families, the biggest priority is to make sure that schools remain open, even if we find that new variants arrive in the UK in the course of the autumn. We know that children do not tend to get bad symptoms, but they can spread the virus, so is it time to look at vaccinating the over-12s, as they are doing in the United States? Is it time to look at whether we can use some of the US Food and Drug Administration analysis to speed up that decision-making process, so that by the time children come back in the autumn, schools are protected and we can be confident that they will be able to stay open?

Nadhim Zahawi

I am grateful for my right hon. Friend's question. He is absolutely right to focus on the protection of children but also of families and their community. That clinical decision has not been taken in the United Kingdom. He will be aware that, as well as the US regulator, the Canadian regulator has approved the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine for 12 to 15-year-olds. Operationally, we will be ready, but ultimately the decision has to be a clinical one and our regulator will have to be satisfied that the vaccines are extremely safe. When you are vaccinating children, essentially, you are offering some protection to them—children can be infected with covid and there is some evidence of long covid among children—but on the whole it is to protect their families and to protect against transmission in communities. Vaccines have to be incredibly safe before we administer them to children, but we have the infrastructure in place to be able to do that, as and when the regulatory and clinical decision is made.

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP) [V]

Can the Minister explain if the new restrictions for areas such as Bolton are only advisory? Will hospitality companies affected still be eligible for financial support? Why was the Public Health England report on variants snuck out at 11 pm on Saturday, during the Eurovision final and minus the promised data on school outbreaks? The B.1.617.2 or April 02 variant appears to be 50% more infectious and is affecting even younger children, so can the Minister explain why on earth the Government have ended the wearing of face coverings in schools? It is good that two doses of the vaccines still provide good protection from the variant, but testing shows that one dose is only 33% effective. The gap between doses has been shortened from 12 to eight weeks, but with less than half of those between 50 and 65 years of age having had their second dose, are there

plans to close the gap further?

Nadhim Zahawi

I am grateful for the hon. Lady's question and just remind her that Public Health England makes those decisions for itself: it is not up to the Minister when it releases its data.

On pubs and hospitality, indoor areas of venues—cafés, restaurants, bars and so on—can reopen. In any premises serving alcohol, customers will still be required to order, to be served and to eat and drink while seated. Venues are obviously prohibited from providing smoking equipment such as shisha pipes. It is just to make sure that we do everything we can to limit the ability of the virus to infect others. Within that, reducing social contact is incredibly important. Some businesses, such as nightclubs, must remain closed and follow the restrictions. It is very much about making sure that we work together to control the B.1.617.2 variant, exercising the common sense that the Prime Minister spoke about. The guidance is there to do that. People on the whole have been following the guidance.

On transmission and the effectiveness of the two doses—the hon. Lady's question on accelerating the vaccination programme—the whole idea of us following the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation guidelines and advice on vaccination is to be able to vaccinate at scale. We have two big weeks ahead of us and we will continue to focus on the second dose. When people get that text message or the call to bring forward their second dose, they should please take that up, because it is incredibly important in controlling the variant.

Greg Smith (Buckingham) (Con)

It is tremendous news that the vaccines that are being so successfully rolled out across our United Kingdom are highly effective against the variant first identified in India, but many businesses continue to be delicately balanced on a cliff edge of either a successful summer or bankruptcy. Does my hon. Friend agree that we need a positive message of hope and certainty that all the evidence continues to back up the complete end of all restrictions and social distancing by 21 June?

Nadhim Zahawi

It is good news from Public Health England on the B.1.617 variant that two doses of either Pfizer or AstraZeneca-Oxford are as effective on infection and are very likely to be even more effective on serious illness and hospitalisation in real-world circumstances. Ultimately, we are effectively pursuing an evidence-led strategy. The four weeks plus one—the five-week interval—are for us to be able to assess the data and share it with Parliament and the nation. At the moment, I am cautiously optimistic that we are in a good place. We have to remain vigilant and we have to work together. As I said earlier, let us take the politics out of this and make sure that all our constituents are careful, and we will get there together.

John Spellar (Warley) (Lab)

I am sure that the Minister will agree that throughout the pandemic our community pharmacies have performed magnificently on the frontline of the health service, but unfortunately there still seems to be institutionalised bias against them in the Department of Health and Social Care, even now. Only a couple of pharmacies in Sandwell have been authorised for the covid vaccine. I urge the Minister to get a grip on his bureaucrats and get vaccines rolling in our Sandwell pharmacies before the bank holiday.

Nadhim Zahawi

I know that the right hon. Gentleman is a passionate advocate for community pharmacies; he and I have discussed them in the past. I do not recognise his characterisation of the NHS team, who I absolutely know work every day with community pharmacies. I think that just over 500 community pharmacies and independent pharmacies are now part of the vaccine deployment. In phase 1, they have proved themselves to be excellent at reaching out and giving confidence to their communities and at getting people vaccinated; where primary care has decided not to carry on with phase 2, they have also stepped up to fill the gaps so that we keep going. I will absolutely look at the right hon. Gentleman's constituency to see whether we can do more.

Shaun Bailey (West Bromwich West) (Con)

The record vaccine roll-out has absolutely vindicated the decision of my constituents in Wednesbury, Oldbury and Tipton to believe that this country can succeed in standing on its own two feet. Vaccination is going to form a really big part of our lives. What work is my hon. Friend doing to ensure that, as we continue our vaccination roll-out, we have the localised infrastructure to ensure that our great progress is not hindered?

Nadhim Zahawi

I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. If the virus were designed to test liberal democracies, because the only way we could combat it was to withdraw people's freedoms with the dreaded non-pharmaceutical interventions, the vaccine has played to the real strengths of the four nations that make up the peoples of these isles. We have had that Dunkirk spirit of coming together as 1,000 flotillas: the 80,000 volunteer vaccinators, the doctors, the nurses, the pharmacists and, of course, our armed forces and local government colleagues, who have stepped up not only to identify communities that we need to protect, but to find sites.

We are already making plans for the booster jab to be ready by September. I remind the House that the clinical decision has not yet been made, but when it is—whether that is in September, in October, in November or early in the new year—we will be ready to go. We are also planning how it will dovetail with our flu vaccination programme and seeing how we can increase the uptake in flu vaccination, because the worst of all worlds would be to do well against covid and then be hit by a heavy flu season in the autumn.

Mohammad Yasin (Bedford) (Lab) [V]

Last evening, I learned that the Government had sneaked Bedford borough into local lockdown without even bothering to warn the public health team. The Minister knows that for almost two weeks I have been calling for surge vaccines in Bedford for all over-16s, yet until last Friday many of my constituents were forced to travel miles to access the Pfizer vaccine. The variant first identified in India has been imported here because of the Government's lax approach to border control. Why are the people of Bedford paying for the Government's gross negligence and incompetence once again?

Nadhim Zahawi

The hon. Gentleman and I discussed the turbocharging of the vaccination programme in Bedford, which I know he appreciates. The real difficulty is that, if we now begin to vaccinate people who are 18, outside the JCVI's advice, we are taking vaccine away from others who are eligible and need that protection. So the strategy we are pursuing is to turbocharge. I need to explain that a

little. We are effectively putting in more resource, later opening and mobile vaccination centres and we are expanding vaccination centres, so that those who are already eligible and, for whatever reason, have been unable to access the vaccine or have been waiting to see, can get the protection of the first dose. Of course then we get the second dose into all those over the age of 50, because we know that the two doses in those areas, against the B.1.617.2 variant, make a huge difference.

Jacob Young (Redcar) (Con)

I congratulate the Minister on the success of the vaccine roll-out and the rate at which the age limit is dropping. At the age of 28, I am regularly checking the NHS website to see when it is my turn. However, those who are a little older than me are trying to get their first jab at the Riverside Stadium in Middlesbrough but struggling to do so, reportedly because only the AstraZeneca jab is being stocked at the vaccine centre there. Will he use his office to try to find out what the problem is and resolve it, so that people are not having to travel unnecessarily to get their first jab?

Nadhim Zahawi

I will absolutely look at what the issue is. The good news we have had recently from our regulator, the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency, is that the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine can now be stored for up to a month—it used to be only five days from once it was thawed from minus 70° C—which means it is much more versatile and less challenging than it used to be. So I will absolutely look at that and contact my hon. Friend.

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD)

One area of concern for which new restrictions have been published but no advice has been communicated is the London Borough of Hounslow, which shares a boundary with Whitton, Hampton and St Margarets in my constituency. Hundreds, if not thousands, of people go back and forth every day, for school, for work, to get food and other essential supplies and for medical appointments. So, first, could the Minister advise my constituents whether they should be getting on buses and trains that cross the borough boundary and whether they should be going to supermarkets and accessing medical services over the borough boundary? Secondly, will he consider vaccinating, as a priority, people, such as teachers, key workers and airport staff, who have to go to work in Hounslow but live outside the borough?

Nadhim Zahawi

I am grateful for the hon. Lady's question and I discussed this with the Mayor of London this morning. Of course Hounslow is on the list of affected areas and we are turbocharging the vaccination programme, as well as doing the surge testing and the sequencing and isolation. But as I have outlined in response to others, people need to exercise caution and common sense, and travel outside of the area only if it is essential. That is important. The right thing to do is for us to work together to make sure we deliver that message, as I did this morning with the Mayor of London.

Mr Mark Harper (Forest of Dean) (Con)

In The Telegraph story this morning about what the rules for self-isolation might be post 21 June, a Government source was quoted as saying, in response to the suggestion that they will not change:

“There is still a risk of getting the virus and spreading it on,”

That is of course true—there is a risk—but of course once people have been vaccinated the risk is much lower and, importantly, the vaccines are very effective at stopping serious disease, hospitalisation and death. So may I say to the Minister that post 21 June it is important not only that legal restrictions and social distancing go, but that all the remaining rules are adjusted to reflect the much lower risk that exists once we have vaccinated the population? Otherwise, we are going to have those rules in place forever.

Nadhim Zahawi

It is worth waiting for 14 June, when we will be saying more on this, but suffice it to say two things: first, even if someone has had two doses of either vaccine—I have had this experience in my own family—they can still contract covid and should therefore be isolating and quarantining; secondly, we are also looking at ways in which contacts of people who may have contracted covid can be regularly tested instead of isolating.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP)

I thank the Minister for his responses so far and for the magnificent effort. I had my second vaccine yesterday, and just to show how national that was, the person who gave me the injection was a doctor from Lincolnshire. I believe that this very much shows that the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland works better together, and that this is a supreme example of that.

We understand that things will change depending on the circumstances and that localised lockdowns may be the way to ensure that areas with low numbers are able to allow people to live safely. Can the Minister outline what parameters will establish localised lockdowns and tell us whether the same approach will be taken UK-wide by the devolved regions?

Nadhim Zahawi

I am very pleased to hear that my hon. Friend has had his second dose; when people get that text message, they should please come forward and have their second dose. We are looking to ensure that the whole country comes out of this together, hence the advice being very much about exercising caution and self-responsibility. People actually get this; we see in much of the research data that they know the things that can add to the risk and that they should therefore abstain from doing those things while we vaccinate at scale to get to the place where we can all hopefully get our lives back.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con)

Some of us will be viscerally opposed to the use of covid passports in the domestic economy. When will the Government set out their proposals in some detail?

Nadhim Zahawi

We are considering a range of evidence around covid status certification and whether it may have a role in opening up higher-risk settings, so it would be remiss of a Government Minister or a Government not to look at technologies around the world that would allow us to open up not 20% of Wembley stadium but the whole of Wembley stadium for the FA cup final. No final decisions have been made, and we are of course committed to setting out our conclusions on the review ahead of step 4.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhese (Slough) (Lab)

Some people have been making a lot of money from Government-approved quarantine hotels, but many of my Slough constituents are continuing to suffer during their

stays. Their long list of angry complaints includes a lack of water, with people being told to drink from the bathroom tap; poor food standards often not meeting dietary or religious requirements, with people having to fork out for takeaways; poor ventilation with no chance of opening a window; and I have not even started yet on the shambolic state of mixing in hours-long airport queues so that even if somebody does not have coronavirus, they soon will have. Why are the Government failing to get a grip of the situation, despite repeated requests from right hon. and hon. Members of this House?

Nadhim Zahawi

I do not recognise the hon. Gentleman's description of the way the system is working. There were some distressing videos posted online of people in airports, but we work with the airports and require them to ensure that social distancing protocols are followed. Indeed, at Heathrow, we recently looked at people from red list countries arriving at a particular terminal. I will take away his point about particular hotels, and if he lets me have the exact details I can look at what is happening, because it is wrong and distressing if people cannot have fresh drinking water.

Tom Hunt (Ipswich) (Con)

In Suffolk and north-east Essex, 97% of the over-80s have now had two jabs, which I think puts it at the top of the league table. I predict that, as a 32-year-old, I am on the cusp of being offered my jab, but I will wait for my contact to confirm that. Huge thanks should also go to BSC Multicultural Services, which has worked incredibly hard with hard-to-reach groups to get the vaccine out, and I also want to give a special mention to community pharmacies, which the right hon. Member for Warley (John Spellar) mentioned. It seems like a long time since the Aqua Pharmacy on Duke Street approached me, but it has gone on to deliver 15,000 doses. I sometimes feel that community pharmacies do not always get the attention they deserve. Can the Minister assure me that in the NHS White Paper community pharmacies will be at the heart of what we are doing to recover from this pandemic?

Nadhim Zahawi

I can certainly give my hon. Friend that reassurance. Community pharmacies are an incredibly important part of our deployment infrastructure.

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP)

Like everybody else, I pay tribute to those who are delivering the vaccine and those who have developed it. I am not quite at the age to have been offered my first dose yet, but I am hoping that it will be soon. When I get that blue envelope through the door, I will go to get my jab. The Minister will be aware that there are a number of people who have a phobia of needles. Is he in a position to update the House on the development of a nasal vaccine?

Nadhim Zahawi

I am glad the hon. Member will get his jab when the call comes. We are obviously working with a number of manufacturers, who are looking at different delivery technologies for vaccines in the future. It is still some way off, I am afraid. At the moment, the needle dominates the vaccination deployment technologies, but I know that a number of manufacturers are working on other ways of delivering vaccines, including through pills.

Andy Carter (Warrington South) (Con)

Seventy per cent of my constituents have now had one vaccine. I am sure the Minister will join me in congratulating and thanking all those people in

Warrington who have played such an important part in this incredible vaccination programme. As he will know, vaccines are one part of the solution. Can he give us an update on drugs and research into treatment for those who find themselves in hospital suffering from covid?

Nadhim Zahawi

I join my hon. Friend in thanking the local team for going above and beyond, and, as I said earlier, it is all about that spirit of Dunkirk and the coming together of the nation to deliver the vaccination programme. A couple of weeks ago, the Prime Minister announced the therapeutics taskforce, which is moving at pace to identify therapeutics and antivirals to help people who, for whatever reason, cannot be vaccinated and to give us a greater arsenal in our armoury against this pandemic.

Neale Hanvey (Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath) (Alba) [V]

I get my second vaccine tomorrow, so I would also like to thank all of the NHS staff and other staff who have made this possible in such a quick turnaround. However, all of that cannot conceal the opacity of the UK Government's position on accusations of cronyism and corruption, but, thanks to the Good Law Project, that is finally being challenged in the High Court this week. I have been attempting to get to the heart of the procurement of unlicensed lateral flow tests and been met with glib obfuscation from the Department. Can the Minister therefore tell me: when was the contract for these devices signed; was it known at the time that these tests were not licensed by the MHRA for asymptomatic testing; which Minister approved this contract; and if the Government really have nothing to hide, why do they just not come clean?

Nadhim Zahawi

I just remind the hon. Member that, at this Dispatch Box, the Prime Minister announced a full inquiry that will take place in the spring of 2022, where we can learn all the lessons of the covid pandemic and the Government's response to it. Suffice to say that all contracting is published in the appropriate way, and civil servants follow the exact rules around contracting.

Mr Richard Holden (North West Durham) (Con)

Fifty-seven thousand people in North West Durham have had their first jab and 34,000 the second, so we are doing really well and progressing excellently. I have my first jab this Saturday. I say to my hon. Friend the Member for Ipswich (Tom Hunt) that he is 32, so he can also get his jab now. Anybody else in my constituency or across the country can book now through the app. There are concerns, though, about the vaccine. Can the Minister ensure that all the possible issues and side effects are constantly monitored and published so that people can make informed positive choices to get the vaccine, especially in the younger age groups, to ensure that everyone is protected as much as possible, especially from the new variants?

Nadhim Zahawi

I can certainly give my hon. Friend that assurance. We have an independent regulator here in the MHRA and, of course, Public Health England, and we have a yellow card system where adverse incidents are recorded—they can be reported directly by a GP, a clinician or the person themselves. All that data is published and people can access it on their MHRA website, or google it and see it. An incredible part of the success story of the vaccination programme is that sharing of data, which has led to the highest level of vaccine acceptance among adults in the world. The figures suggest that about 90% of all adults say that they will take the vaccine, or are very likely to take the vaccine.

Janet Daby (Lewisham East) (Lab) [V]

What steps are the Government taking to ensure that the UK is a leader in the global response to tackling covid-19, especially given the fact that we are not safe until everyone is safe?

Nadhim Zahawi

When the Prime Minister set up the vaccines taskforce he gave it two priorities: first, to discover the vaccines that would work, in order to contract for them or to manufacture them in the UK; and secondly, to work out how to help the rest of the world, which is why we were the first country to put £548 million into COVAX and very much establish COVAX, which now has more than 450 million doses, the bulk of which are Oxford-AstraZeneca, which is our gift to the world. Some 98% of the COVAX jabs that have been delivered and have protected people have come from Oxford-AstraZeneca. Pfizer has also been doing the same thing: from day one its chief executive, Albert Bourla, spoke about vaccine equality, and Pfizer is offering vaccines at cost to low and middle-income countries.

Rachel Hopkins (Luton South) (Lab)

It is simply unacceptable that my constituents in Luton South found out about the changed advice on travel to Bedford through the back door, via the media last night. They need thorough clarity and formal information to be provided through our local authorities.

On local authorities, what steps are the Government taking for the prioritisation of turbocharged vaccinations, not just for areas with the new variant but for areas with enduring transmission?

Nadhim Zahawi

I think I have dealt with the first part of the hon. Lady's question, in the sense that the guidance and information was shared with the country on 14 May. We continue to endeavour to improve our communications, in partnership with local government and by addressing local health systems.

On vaccine turbocharging, the hon. Lady will know that we are looking at mobile vaccination sites, increasing sites' opening hours and putting in more resource so that we can vaccinate the people who are eligible to be vaccinated—it is important to make that distinction. We will continue to do all that in Bedford to make sure that the people of Bedford are protected and we get the variant under control.

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con)

Over the weekend I was contacted about two instances of people having difficulties getting the access that they wanted to their frail relatives in Barnet Hospital. It was particularly distressing because in both instances the patients had difficulties communicating with and understanding hospital staff. I appreciate that hospitals have a paramount duty to ensure proper infection control, but will the Minister encourage hospitals throughout the country to facilitate visits so that relatives can support the frail elderly while they are in hospital?

Nadhim Zahawi

I will certainly take my right hon. Friend's constituents' details and look into that. We urge all hospitals to make sure that when the frail elderly need social contact, they are able to get it.

Mick Whitley (Birkenhead) (Lab) [V]

No one is safe from covid-19 until we all are, but the UK continues to stubbornly resist calls for a waiver of covid-19 vaccine patents. Given that people in many of the world's poorest countries cannot expect to be vaccinated until 2023, and given the failure of the COVAX initiative to distribute vaccines at the volume and speed that is needed, will the Government now follow the lead of the Biden Administration and reverse their position on a patent waiver?

Nadhim Zahawi

That is a really important question. Let me share with the hon. Member a little about the operational challenges around vaccine manufacture. We will of course look at any text that our US colleagues put forward on the intellectual property issue, but in reality if the exam question is to get more jabs in the arms of those who live in low and middle-income countries, the bottleneck is not the IP but the transfer of technology to manufacturers around the world. What Oxford-AstraZeneca has done incredibly well is to transfer that technology to 20 sites that can manufacture at scale. We have already delivered 450 million doses of the Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine. The hon. Gentleman might recall that Pfizer did the same thing; it actually paused its manufacturing in Europe and expanded it, to go from 1.2 billion doses a year for 2021 to almost 3 billion doses. If the exam question is to get more jabs in arms, we need that technology transfer. It is not easy, as we saw in Halix in Europe, which had great difficulty operationalising the manufacturing, as did Catalent in the US. That is the real effort that needs to go in—as well, of course, as helping other countries with deployment. It is only one part of the jigsaw to get the vaccine into warehouses in those countries; those countries have to be able to get it out and into people's arms.

Robert Lorgan (High Peak) (Con)

The experience over the last year has shown that local lockdowns are not effective, because cases simply rocket in the areas immediately outside the local restrictions. With that in mind and to get ahead of the curve, this morning I have been in discussions with Derbyshire County Council and my local director of public health to establish a pop-up vaccination site at Gamesley, where there has been a high number of new cases, so that we can deliver surge vaccination. Will the Minister work with me, my local director of public health and the NHS to ensure that we get the doses we need to get everyone in the High Peak vaccinated as soon as possible?

Nadhim Zahawi

My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The important thing is to get those who are eligible vaccinated and for those who need their second dose to get that second dose within the eight-week period. That is the way we control this variant. I will happily work with him on any local initiative that he is working on.

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op) [V]

The evidence is clear: women who are pregnant who get covid are twice as likely to have a premature birth and twice as likely to experience stillbirth. Other countries have recognised this and have ensured that pregnant women of any age are a priority for vaccination, but in this country the conversation about the data has not even happened yet, despite months of asking. There will be thousands of pregnant women in the areas where the variant is on the rise, and across the country, terrified about what might happen if they get covid. What can we do to help them get hold of the vaccine, regardless of age, so that we are protecting the youngest members of our community?

Nadhim Zahawi

The hon. Lady will know, because she is on the weekly MPs' call that I host, that the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation is looking at this data. In the meantime, because of data provided by the United States of America, we have made the Pfizer-BioNTech and Moderna vaccines available to all pregnant women who are in the eligible cohort. That is happening as we speak. I know that Professor Anthony Harnden, who is the deputy chair of the JCVI, has promised the hon. Lady that the JCVI is looking at the data; when it delivers the advice to us, the system will follow that advice.

Andrew Jones (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (Con)

The scale and pace with which we are delivering our vaccine programme is a marvellous achievement and a testament to everybody involved. It is how we are able gradually and safely to come out of the restrictions. Will my hon. Friend confirm that we will always be following the science and the data, so that activities can resume as safely and as soon as possible? I am particularly thinking about indoor gatherings for groups such as community choirs, and other events that bring people together. Such activities are so needed to combat the isolation that has hit so many people during the lockdown.

Nadhim Zahawi

My hon. Friend will know that the reason for restrictions on activities such as choirs and singing is the added transmission through aerosols or droplets. The faster that we can move the vaccination programme, the sooner we can end those restrictions. Therefore, my absolute focus—and my commitment to him—is that we continue at pace. We have a big week this week and a big week next week.

Florence Eshalomi (Vauxhall) (Lab/Co-op)

I thank the Minister for his weekly updates, which I have found really helpful, and for his work on vaccine hesitancy across the black, Asian and minority ethnic community. I had my vaccine on 14 May at St Thomas' Hospital—the same hospital that cared really well for our Prime Minister. The Prime Minister thanked those nurses, including Luis, who gave me my vaccine. But we saw that Jenny resigned from the NHS last week, so will the Minister use his will and his power to speak to the Treasury to get our hard-working nurses the pay they deserve?

Nadhim Zahawi

I am grateful for the hon. Member's commitment in ensuring that we get the vaccine message out to harder-to-reach communities and for her work with me on the weekly meetings. We have delivered an increase to nurses. We await the outcome of the deliberations of the panel that will look at nurses' pay, and then the Treasury will make an announcement in the usual way.

Holly Mumby-Croft (Scunthorpe) (Con)

I thank my hon. Friend for his assistance in ensuring continuity of supply to the Baths Hall in Scunthorpe and our other vaccination hubs. Over 71% of our adult population in North Lincolnshire have received their first vaccine and almost 50% have had their second vaccine. Will he join me in thanking the fantastic volunteers who I see outside in all weathers at the Baths Hall, welcoming patients to receive their vaccination? We quite simply could not have done it without them.

Nadhim Zahawi

I absolutely join my hon. Friend in that, because I see it up and down the country all the time. I spoke earlier about the Dunkirk spirit, with people

coming up and saying, "I want to be counted. I want to be part of this." We demonstrated it to the world a little bit in the 2012 Olympics. This is a whole other scale of operation. Nevertheless, we have delivered on it and will continue to deliver on it, and I stand on the shoulders of the real heroes and heroines of the NHS family, our armed forces and local government.

Lee Anderson (Ashfield) (Con)

The vaccine works—it prevents serious illness and helps to prevent transmission—but I read in the papers this morning that even if someone has had two jabs, if they come into contact with someone who is positive after 21 June, they will still have to isolate for 10 days. Could my hon. Friend confirm whether or not that is correct?

Nadhim Zahawi

I answered a question on this issue earlier. Obviously if someone contracts covid, they have to isolate and quarantine, but in terms of their contacts, we are looking at regular testing to see whether there is an alternative. I am afraid that my hon. Friend will have to wait a little longer before step four, and we will say more on this on 14 June.

Vicky Foxcroft (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab)

It is a pleasure to be back in the Chamber, but for many like me who are immunocompromised, returning in person to the workplace is concerning, as we do not yet know how effective the vaccines are for us. Will the Minister consider allowing immunocompromised people to have access to antibody testing, thereby giving us some idea of the vaccines' efficacy and some knowledge of our level of protection from the virus?

Nadhim Zahawi

The hon. Lady asked a similar question last week, and Professor Harnden of the JCVI said that the problem with antibody testing is what it really tells us. I will happily ask the question again on her behalf of the JCVI. Suffice it to say that on 17 May we put out guidance to employers saying that those who are shielding and immunocompromised should be allowed to work from home if they need to.

Chris Green (Bolton West) (Con)

Will my hon. Friend confirm that the Government's position on the coronavirus pandemic is that it is still a question of life and death, that communications are vital in this effort and that compliance follows confidence, which in turn follows competence? Will he confirm when these local lockdown measures were agreed with the leadership at Bolton Council and when the Prime Minister formally agreed to this updated guidance being imposed?

Nadhim Zahawi

My hon. Friend will recall that the Prime Minister addressed this issue on 14 May.

Jonathan Ashworth
indicated dissent.

Nadhim Zahawi

Yes, he did address this issue in his press conference. I can read the right hon. Member for Leicester South (Jonathan Ashworth) the words from that press conference, because he says from a sedentary position, "He did not." The Prime Minister said, speaking about Bolton:

“given the caution that I think we have to exercise with this new variant, the risk of extra transmissibility, I would urge people just to think twice about that. That’s what we’re saying. I think that we want people in those areas to recognise that there is extra risk, an extra disruption, a threat of disruption to progress caused by this new variant and just to exercise their discretion and judgment, in a way I’m sure that they have been throughout this pandemic and will continue to do so, I hope very much.”

Those were his words, and the guidance was in place.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab)

The Minister has done a good job on the vaccines, but this statement is utterly chaotic and completely confused. What advice is he actually giving to people in the north-west or in West Yorkshire about going to the pub, about weddings and about travel—even about whether, if they are allowed to travel out of Bolton, they are allowed to travel to Portugal, on the green list, for holidays? Is not the reality that he is so uncomfortable about giving any advice because he knows the reason he is putting these people in Bolton, in West Yorkshire and in other places in this position is that the Government failed to put India on the red list earlier? Over 400 people from India came into the country with the Indian variant, and putting India on the red list would have prevented it from spreading to thousands of other people in the community. Will he apologise to people in the areas that are affected with the additional restrictions he is advising because of the Government’s failure?

Nadhim Zahawi

I do not agree with the right hon. Lady, as she will not be surprised to hear. I have already talked about how visiting families are impacted and pubs and hospitality are affected, and about the exercise of caution and being careful. She will recall that when India was put on the red list on 23 April, it was a full six days later that this particular variant was identified by the experts—the virologists—as a variant of interest, and a full two weeks later before it became a variant of concern. So her point, actually, is made unfairly.

Dr James Davies (Vale of Clwyd) (Con)

When does my hon. Friend anticipate that the NHS smartphone app will be enabled to allow those in Wales to demonstrate their covid vaccination status? Further to that, does he expect that other features of the app, such as the ability to book GP appointments, to order prescriptions and to view notes will also be enabled in Wales?

Nadhim Zahawi

We are working closely with the Welsh Government to enable the integration of Welsh citizens’ data with the NHS app, NHS.uk, for the purpose of covid status certification, including undertaking the required scoping and impact assessment that will enable us to set out a detailed timeline for the delivery of that integration.

Dr Luke Evans (Bosworth) (Con) [V]

The people of Bosworth are a pragmatic bunch, as are the people of Leicestershire. Leicestershire surrounds Leicester. What advice does the Minister give to those people who are in Leicestershire who send their kids to school in Leicester, who work in Leicester, and who are thinking of having bank holiday time with family in Leicester?

Nadhim Zahawi

I thank my hon. Friend—[Interruption.] I hear the right hon. Member for Leicester South saying “Good question.” He is absolutely right. We have to exercise caution and common sense, as I described earlier, around visiting. People absolutely can visit family and friends at half-term if they follow social distancing guidelines. I think people absolutely will exercise that personal responsibility and common sense when they go about their family time or school time.

Sarah Owen (Luton North) (Lab)

Last year the Prime Minister gave in to pressure from trade unions and cross-party opposition and announced refunds for health and care workers from overseas for the £624 charge they are paying to use the NHS. Yesterday the Minister for Health, the hon. Member for Charnwood (Edward Argar) could not tell me how many healthcare workers had been refunded, and in Committee earlier, the Care Minister did not know either. Does this Minister know how many, if any, healthcare heroes have had their NHS charges refunded, or was it just another empty promise from this Government?

Nadhim Zahawi

I am happy to write to the hon. Lady with the answer to her question. Suffice it to say that this is an important amount of money to those people and I do not think we should be playing politics with it in a sort of “gotcha” moment.

Esther McVey (Tatton) (Con)

The Minister will recall that we were told that the first lockdown was required to give time to build capacity in the NHS. Can he therefore tell us how many more hospital beds are available now than in March last year?

Nadhim Zahawi

I will write to my right hon. Friend with that detail. Suffice it to say that we now have 908 people with covid, as I said in my statement—the lowest number since lockdown.

Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck (South Shields) (Lab)

South Shields and North Tyneside are interconnected. Today, my community and businesses are incredibly anxious. We know that local lockdowns do not work and inevitably lead to national ones. We know that it is likely that there will be other variants of this virus, which may well be with us for ever. Lockdowns break our economy and society, cause mental distress, delay vital cancer treatments, lead to further unemployment and exacerbate inequalities. Can the Minister explain why the Government’s response—instead of fixing test, trace and isolate, for example—is always more restrictions and endless cycles of lockdown?

Nadhim Zahawi

I hope the hon. Lady agrees that the vaccination programme has given us a way out of non-pharmaceutical interventions, which were the only thing we had at our disposal to try to slow down the pandemic and the virus. As we transition from pandemic to endemic, we are planning for a booster shot in the autumn to protect the most vulnerable or all people in phase 1—that clinical decision has yet to be made. We are already making plans for next year to deal with covid, as we deal with seasonal flu, through annual vaccination programmes. By next year, this country will be able to manufacture 700 million doses of vaccine, not just for the UK but to help the rest of the world.

Jason McCartney (Colne Valley) (Con)

My constituency is in Kirklees. I could ask about how the new travel advice for Kirklees was communicated to my constituents, but instead I want to clarify three things with the Minister. The first is travel advice. It is half-term next week, and families will be visiting and going on short breaks. Should they now cancel those trips? Secondly, hotels, bed and breakfasts, and restaurants are getting cancellations. What support will hospitality get? Finally, my constituents can see the data on where the hotspots are. When will we start using granular data to tackle the outbreaks, rather than lumping whole council areas into these advised restrictions?

Nadhim Zahawi

Let me take those questions in reverse. On granular data, we already have the capability in the vaccination programme to see by postcode area where the uptake is at. That is how we can focus our resources to turbocharge the programme, as we have done and will continue to do, including in Kirklees.

On pubs and hospitality, indoor areas and hospitality venues can continue to serve seated clientele, diners and drinkers, as I described earlier. If people have booked visits to their families, they are absolutely able to have them as long as they follow social distancing guidelines and common sense.

We need to make sure that we are vigilant, because the B1617.2 variant is concerning, and we have to bring it under control by turbocharging vaccinations, surge testing, isolating and genome sequencing.

Antony Higginbotham (Burnley) (Con)

I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Colne Valley (Jason McCartney): what we need now more than ever before is clear communication from the Government, so that residents of Burnley, Blackburn and Bolton know exactly what is expected of them. Will the Minister confirm that this guidance is guidance and that my constituents can still exercise the freedoms that they reclaimed last Monday? Will he meet me and other colleagues to talk through what more we can do to make sure that communication is clear in the areas where we need it most?

Nadhim Zahawi

I am very happy to meet my hon. Friend. On the guidance, as I have made clear on a number of occasions at the Dispatch Box, people have to be careful and vigilant, as they have been already.

A number of colleagues have asked about the Batley and Spen by-election. We have just demonstrated in the local elections that we can conduct elections safely; we will be able to conduct that by-election safely, too. People just need to be sensible. Let us work together, bring this together and take the politics out of it.

Mr Speaker

I now suspend the House for three minutes to enable the necessary arrangements to be made for the next business.

13:34:00

Sitting suspended.