

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT

Second Delegated Legislation Committee

HEALTH PROTECTION (CORONAVIRUS,
RESTRICTIONS) (STEPS AND OTHER PROVISIONS)
(ENGLAND) (AMENDMENT) REGULATIONS 2021

Monday 14 June 2021

No proofs can be supplied. Corrections that Members suggest for the final version of the report should be clearly marked in a copy of the report—not telephoned—and must be received in the Editor’s Room, House of Commons,

not later than

Friday 18 June 2021

© Parliamentary Copyright House of Commons 2021

This publication may be reproduced under the terms of the Open Parliament licence, which is published at www.parliament.uk/site-information/copyright/.

The Committee consisted of the following Members:

Chair: SIR EDWARD LEIGH

Antoniazzi, Tonia (<i>Gower</i>) (Lab)	Mann, Scott (<i>Lord Commissioner of Her Majesty's Treasury</i>)
Betts, Mr Clive (<i>Sheffield South East</i>) (Lab)	Morris, James (<i>Lord Commissioner of Her Majesty's Treasury</i>)
Brennan, Kevin (<i>Cardiff West</i>) (Lab)	† Owen, Sarah (<i>Luton North</i>) (Lab)
Caulfield, Maria (<i>Lewes</i>) (Con)	Pursglove, Tom (<i>Corby</i>) (Con)
† Churchill, Jo (<i>Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care</i>)	Spellar, John (<i>Warley</i>) (Lab)
Double, Steve (<i>St Austell and Newquay</i>) (Con)	† Throup, Maggie (<i>Lord Commissioner of Her Majesty's Treasury</i>)
Freer, Mike (<i>Comptroller of Her Majesty's Household</i>)	
Harris, Rebecca (<i>Lord Commissioner of Her Majesty's Treasury</i>)	
Lewis, Clive (<i>Norwich South</i>) (Lab)	Huw Yardley, <i>Committee Clerk</i>
† Madders, Justin (<i>Ellesmere Port and Neston</i>) (Lab)	
† Mak, Alan (<i>Lord Commissioner of Her Majesty's Treasury</i>)	† attended the Committee

Second Delegated Legislation Committee

Monday 14 June 2021

[SIR EDWARD LEIGH *in the Chair*]

Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (Steps and Other Provisions) (England) (Amendment) Regulations 2021

4.30 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Jo Churchill): I beg to move,

That the Committee has considered the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (Steps and Other Provisions) (England) (Amendment) Regulations 2021 (S.I., 2021, No. 585).

It is a pleasure, Sir Edward, to serve under your chairmanship. On 17 May this year, we moved to step 3 of the Government's road map, with a clear set of stages helping us cautiously to navigate a route out of lockdown. This was hugely welcomed, both in the House and across the country. It is not hard to see why. More businesses have reopened, travel is cautiously reopening, and people can meet more family and friends. Importantly, we can gather in groups of up to 30 at weddings, wedding receptions and other commemorative events, and we have removed the attendee limits at funerals, where the number of attendees now depends on how many people the venue can accommodate safely with social distancing. Those examples show steady work in the progress that we are making on the journey out of the pandemic, and learning how to live with covid-19. The regulations made other important changes on face covering and table spacing. We listened to the expertise of the Joint Committee on Statutory Instruments, and made minor technical changes to clarify drafting.

We appreciate very much the value of Parliament's scrutiny role and we regret that we are only now debating these amendments. I am sure that the hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston will remind me that some time has elapsed. Indeed, he will probably say that some considerable time has elapsed since the amendments were introduced, and I understand his concern. We have tried hard to strike a balance that accommodates the dynamic nature of the pandemic and other business. I know that he understands that is crucial that we understand the very latest data and information before we open up and move towards the next step of the road map. It is therefore with regret that we cannot always have more warning, but we are continually working closely with scientists and others to monitor the latest data and advice as we progress through the road map.

When we were considering whether we could move safely to step 3, the situation with the Delta variant was changing rapidly. As with each step on the road map, it is only right that we assess carefully the latest scientific information and the risk before making decisions of such magnitude. The road map is about more than sticking to a direction of travel. It is also about finding the balance between priorities—the need to save lives; avoid the surges in infection that put unsustainable

pressure on the NHS; the reopening of our economy; and the restoration of vital social contact between family and friends, which is important for the nation's physical, emotional and mental health.

The past 15 months have presented unprecedented challenges for all of us, and I recognise how difficult the past year has been. I reiterate my thanks to everybody—every individual, community and organisation—for the way in which they have rallied to support the fight against coronavirus. The vast majority have continued to follow restrictions, observe the guidance and play their part fully in keeping themselves and those around them safe and well protected.

Thanks to that collective resolve, there has been significant progress on the road to regaining our freedoms. With that in mind, the regulations that we are debating underpin the important move to step 3 of the road map. As ever, the decision to make that move was informed, as I said, by the latest scientific data, including the passing of all four tests set out in the road map. The first—vaccine deployment—continues successfully, and as of yesterday, over 41.7 million individuals had received their first vaccine dose, and 29.8 million people had received their second vaccine dose. That means that more than 79% of all adults in the UK have now received their first dose of the vaccine and nearly 57% have had their second. That is a quite outstanding achievement—one that we will build on as more of the cohort are invited to be vaccinated.

The deployment of vaccines is helping to reduce the effects of covid-19. To that end, those aged 25 and over are now being invited for their first jab, and we expect in fairly short order to invite those between 18 and 24. Surge vaccinations are taking place in areas where the Delta variant is spreading fastest. I am sure that I speak for everybody in the House when I say that we encourage people to take up the offer of a vaccine as soon as they can.

The second test requires a positive assessment of the vaccine's continued efficacy in reducing hospitalisations and deaths. Data available at step 3 suggested that two doses of the Pfizer vaccine reduced overall symptomatic disease by 80% to 90%, hospitalisations by 90% to 95%, and deaths by 95% to 99%. A similar effect has been reported for the AstraZeneca vaccine against symptomatic disease. The latest analysis indicates that the Pfizer vaccine is 88% effective against symptomatic disease from the Delta variant two weeks after the second dose, and two doses of the AstraZeneca vaccine are determined to be 60% effective—clear evidence that vaccines work. Public Health England estimates that the covid-19 vaccination programme has so far prevented at least 14,000 deaths among those aged 60 and above.

However, we cannot afford to be complacent. We have to continue to collect data on the vaccines' effectiveness in reducing hospitalisations and death, which brings us to the third test: the assessment that infection rates do not risk a surge in hospital admissions that would put undue pressure on the NHS. The risk is greatly mitigated by the progress of the vaccination programme across the UK, and daily hospital admissions continued to fall throughout March, April and early May, so we were content that rises in infection rates did not risk a surge in hospitalisations, putting unsustainable pressure on the service. That said, since we moved into step 3, the

number of infections has been increasing, although that was anticipated when some restrictions on social contact were lifted.

Naturally, we continue to monitor data on infection rates and hospital admissions, and are taking action to support local areas where it is needed, including through surge testing, vaccination and additional support on the ground. It remains as crucial as ever that we all maintain our caution and do our bit to help to keep everybody safe.

That brings me to the fourth test: that our assessment of the risks is not fundamentally changed by new or existing variants of concern. Informed by the most recent data at the time, we judged that the test was met and we continued to monitor those variants closely, including the B1617.2 Delta variant. Guidance has been updated on those areas of the country where that variant is spreading fastest. The evidence gathered so far suggests that it spreads more easily from person to person. We have deployed a strengthened support package across the areas most affected by the Delta variant, including test and trace measures.

As ever, the Government will not hesitate to take further firm action if necessary to protect lives and livelihoods. We know that the combination of personal social responsibility with the advice on hands, face, space and ventilation, combined with swift action in virus hotspots, has a positive effect against transmission. The continued acceleration and expansion of the vaccination programme will deliver us, in time, to a safer and happier future.

Finally, I would like to take the time to thank the public for continuing to play their part in the fight against coronavirus; the medical profession and more broadly the volunteers and individuals who are supporting not only the vaccine programme, but efforts in their community to support people; and colleagues for their contribution to today's debate, but mostly for their support in making sure that people are kept safe. I commend the regulations to the Committee.

4.39 pm

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair this afternoon, Sir Edward. I thank the Minister for her introduction to the statutory instrument, which, as she pointed out, came into force on 17 May. I will return to that point in a little while. May I first repeat my thanks and gratitude to everyone who has played their part in fighting the spread of coronavirus, in the many different forms that that has taken over the past 12 to 15 months? We would have been in a much worse situation had we not all pulled together collectively in the way in which the Minister outlined.

As the Minister set out, these regulations amend the steps regulations to implement the easing of lockdown in line with the Government road map, moving all of England from step 2 to step 3, meaning that the restrictions set out in schedule 3 to the steps regulations now apply. For example, six people or two households can gather indoors, and up to 30 people outdoors, weddings and funerals are now permitted with up to 30 people in attendance, all remaining outdoor entertainment and indoor hospitality can now reopen, and the number of people who may attend support groups has been increased to 30. Significantly, regulation 8 revokes the prohibition

on international travel and the requirement for individuals to declare their reason for travelling abroad. The Minister did not go into that point in any detail, but I will return to it a little later.

Finally, the instrument amends the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (Local Authority Enforcement Powers and Amendment) (England) Regulations 2021, the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (Obligations of Undertakings) (England) Regulations 2020, the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Wearing of Face Coverings on Public Transport) (England) Regulations 2020 and the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Wearing of Face Coverings in a Relevant Place) (England) Regulations 2020. In particular, the regulations extend the expiry date of the face coverings on public transport regulations and the LAEP regulations to 20 June, which is this Sunday.

The regulations provide an exemption for wearing a face covering in community premises where the gathering is reasonably necessary for specified education and training purposes; provide that groups are permitted to gather; and increase the limit for the offence of organising or facilitating a gathering from 30 to 50 people. They also allow students undertaking a higher education course to form a vacation household, increase limits on the numbers permitted to attend parent and child groups from 15 to 30, remove the provision that support groups should only take place in person where it is reasonably necessary, and, importantly, remove the limits on the number of people who can attend a funeral.

We are not going to oppose the regulations because, like everyone, we want to see a return to some form of normality as quickly and safely as possible, but there are various areas where I would be grateful for some additional clarity from the Minister. Of course we want to see society open up and we welcome the steps that have been taken so far, but as we take further steps down the road—or not, as the case may be—the priority must be doing all we can to keep case numbers low and prevent further transmission, ensuring that we learn the lessons from the past year. Sadly, I do not think those lessons are being learned, as the same mistakes are being made time and again.

The Prime Minister promised us an “irreversible road map” to normality, but I am afraid to say that the rate at which the number of Indian or Delta variant cases is increasing puts that in some doubt. The Minister said that these regulations anticipated a rise in cases from the opening up of society, but I do not think for a minute that the rises we have seen in recent weeks can all be attributed to that—and I am sure that it is not what the Minister was anticipating. Cases have doubled in about 10 days, and although that has not yet led to an increase in hospitalisations, there has certainly been an increase in some parts of the country; I understand that hospitalisations in the north-west have increased by a third in the past week. It has to be hoped that the age profile of those catching the virus means that there will not be as many deaths as we have seen, because it is now mainly younger people who are catching the virus. However, people who are unfortunate enough to catch the virus may have long covid, which can have devastating consequences

While cases are on the rise, we need a national response to deal with the hotspots, particularly with surge vaccinations where cases are rising most steeply. We need to put retrospective and forward contact tracing

[Justin Madders]

in place. Critically, we need pay proper sick pay and provide financial support for those who have to self-isolate. At this critical stage, where it is really in the balance as to whether we can get back to some kind of normality this summer, it is important that we ensure that the steps the Government are taking are the right ones, which is why scrutiny and debating these regulations matter.

The Minister was gracious enough to acknowledge this point in her opening remarks; she will not be surprised to hear me say yet again that I have serious concerns about the way in which we are approving legislation retrospectively. I have debated many sets of these regulations with her, and she knows as well as I do that these rules have a profound impact on individuals' liberty. Of course, there is also a huge economic impact that follows on from that. It is simply not good enough that we are once again debating these regulations well after the event. How can it be acceptable that the Government laid them through emergency procedures at 11 am on 17 May, the day they became law, when they had known for almost three months, by my count, that step 3 would be reached on that date?

Of course, we accept that in some instances emergency legislation has been needed, but it cannot be justified for each occasion, and certainly not for any legislation that I have seen come forward recently. The Prime Minister's road map has been in place since February, so why are we debating step 3 only now, particularly given that the main topic across the country since we reached step 2 has been what would happen with step 3? It should not have come as a surprise to the Government that regulations would need to be laid and approved by 17 May if the road map were going to plan, as until very recently there was every indication that it was. The decision to proceed with step 3 was made only a week before entering that step, but there is absolutely no reason why the regulations could not have been published on that day and debated before they came into force, because their substance was set out well in advance back in February when the Government first highlighted the road map.

The fact that we are considering the regulations today of all days, when the eyes of the entire nation are fixed on a press conference that the Prime Minister will give in a couple of hours, makes a mockery of the role of parliamentary scrutiny. As colleagues across the House have said for the past year, the Government's rationale for urgency just does not hold water any longer. The regulations once again contain a statement that

"by reason of urgency, it is necessary to make this instrument without a draft having been laid before, and approved by...Parliament."

I wish to put it on the record that we do not accept that. Using urgency powers when they are not necessary has become a bad habit, and it is more than time that this contempt for parliamentary scrutiny came to an end.

Those comments apply not just to the road-map elements of the regulations, but to other changes such as the extension of the face-mask regulations. Again, that is not an urgent matter that can be dealt with only under emergency powers. The Government have known about the expiry of those regulations since they were introduced a year ago, so why are we dealing with it

only now—is it arrogance, laziness, contempt or all those things? I know that the Minister is not personally responsible for the timetabling of our debates, but unfortunately she has to come here and defend this pattern of behaviour from the Government that has become all too familiar. The saying is that familiarity breeds contempt; the familiarity of this disregard for parliamentary scrutiny is beginning to feel like contempt.

Although we do not know the precise details of the Prime Minister's announcement today regarding the next steps, it has been widely trailed that we will see a delay in the next stage, so will the Minister commit to ensuring that this House is provided the opportunity to see and debate any regulations that accompany whatever comes next, before they come into force? If, as anticipated, there will be a four-week delay, surely that is enough time to schedule proper parliamentary scrutiny.

What of the references to dates in the regulations? A number of measures are due to expire on 20 June. Will the Minister confirm whether, in the light of what we will hear later today, those dates still stand—or have they effectively been superseded? It is ludicrous that we are today debating the extension of the face-mask regulations for just six days, but it is even more absurd that it is likely that another set of regulations to extend them will be coming down the line in the next three or four weeks.

While we are talking about the lack of proper accountability in how the regulations have been introduced, I put on the record my concerns about the utter shambles of the contradictory Government guidance that was issued just after they came into force. As reported by the Secondary Legislation Scrutiny Committee, that guidance, which was published on 21 May,

"said that to combat 'the Indian variant' people living in Bedford, Blackburn with Darwen, Bolton, Burnley, Kirklees, Leicester, Hounslow and North Tyneside should meet outside wherever possible and travel in and out of those areas should be avoided."

The Committee rightly points out what should have been obvious to the Government: that sneaking guidance out without publicising it

"caused considerable confusion."

It further points out:

"All eight local health directors have since issued a joint statement contradicting it"—

the guidance—

"saying that there are no restrictions on travel in or out of their areas".

Every affected local authority and its corresponding Members knew nothing about the new guidance until the evening of Monday 23 May. Although that may be the inadequate level of openness and transparency that we have come to expect from the Government, it runs completely contrary to the entire strategy that has been adopted throughout most of the pandemic in using law, not guidance, and crucially, ensuring that the public have clear messaging on what is expected of them.

As we have heard this afternoon, similar guidance will be issued in other areas including my own area of Cheshire West and Chester, alongside Cheshire East and Merseyside, which raises questions about what additional resources and messaging will be put out to public health teams in the affected areas. What is the plan to increase the vaccination rate in those areas?

What support will be made available to businesses? How do the Government plan to communicate the guidance effectively?

I have not heard in Government announcements on additional measures for those areas a plan on surge vaccination. Last month, SPI-M-O said that surge vaccination could be successful in preventing an increase in cases in areas where there was a steep rise. It said:

“The extent to which surge vaccination would curb outbreaks of”—

the Delta variant—

“is unknown until evidence for the effectiveness of existing vaccines against it has been established. That does not preclude there being a strong case for prioritising delivering doses in areas where the variant is widespread.”

My question to the Minister is therefore what plan do the Government have to increase the supply of vaccines to affected areas? So far, I have not heard anything that gives me confidence that we will see such an increase. It is all well and good giving the first jab to people in lower age groups in areas of the country that do not have a rise in cases, but the advice is that we need to focus our efforts on those areas that have had the biggest increases in cases of the Delta variant.

The Secondary Legislation Scrutiny Committee concluded that the situation for those nine areas that were subject to enhanced measures last month was in part caused by continuing confusion over the status of Government guidance and in part by failures in how the advice was communicated. That sums up perfectly the shambles that we got ourselves into last month. The blurring of lines between guidance and law is at best unhelpful and at worst totally undermines confidence in public health messaging. The Government must be much clearer and must do better on this. If measures are necessary to restrict the transmission of the virus, they should not mess about with poorly publicised guidance. If measures are necessary, there should be laws, and they should be put into regulations. That way, everyone knows where they stand and adherence will be better. Parliament can then play its role in ensuring that those measures are necessary and proportionate. Critically, the Government have to articulate why such measures are necessary and what support they intend to put in place to ensure that businesses in the areas affected do not suffer any more from a loss of business due to covid.

Guidance means none of those things happen, and it may be the case that Ministers say that on balance they do not think introducing new laws is necessary, as guidance will do the job. I suspect that that last issue is the reason why we are lapsing back into guidance, rather than law. The Government do not feel they have to provide additional business support if they do not introduce formal restrictions. That is a cop-out, and businesses and individuals who will see a drop in trade as a result of new guidance deserve better support and clarity from Government.

Moving on to another area where a shift from regulation to guidance has caused absolute chaos, and which is also covered by the statutory instrument, I turn to what one of my colleagues in the other place recently referred to as the

“confused mess that is international travel”.

As we know, the regulations have removed the prohibition on international travel and the requirement for individuals to declare their reasons for travelling abroad. Of course, we are all keen to see international travel return as soon as possible, but safety must come first, which is why a strategic approach and clarity from Government are vital. Unfortunately, once again, that is not what we are seeing. There is mass confusion and chaos, with Ministers yet again giving wildly conflicting travel advice about what constitutes the amber list.

Following the announcement on international travel that accompanied the regulations last month, in just one day the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs said that people could fly to amber-list countries if they wanted to visit family or friends; the Health and Social Care Minister in the other place said that nobody should travel outside Britain this year at all; and the Welsh Secretary said that some people might consider holidays abroad as essential. Three Ministers, three different interpretations in just one day. The following day, the Prime Minister came up with a fourth definition that people could travel in “extreme” circumstances. That in itself is open to interpretation, but it does at least set the bar a little higher, until we remember that the new rules make it easier for people to travel to amber-list countries.

I find it mind-boggling that, having spent the past year painstakingly legislating for every facet of our daily lives in order to suppress transmission of the virus, we find ourselves in a situation whereby one of the biggest threats to our future prosperity—variants—is subject to the Government inexplicably and recklessly letting people interpret the rules for themselves, having demonstrated through their Ministers that there are as many interpretations of the rules as there are people. The confusion over the amber list has led to reports of over 50,000 people travelling to the UK daily, with only a tiny percentage going into hotel quarantine, and a stream of flights entering the UK from amber-list countries. Moving Portugal on to the amber list last week was not the answer. The amber list should be scrapped, and Ministers should introduce a clear plan to manage the confusion that has led to people in Portugal not knowing whether they were coming or going. Does the Minister accept that the way this has been handled so far is gravely damaging for both consumer and business confidence? Does she accept that the system is leaving the door wide open to new strains of the virus and risks undermining the whole purpose of the regulations that we have been debating over the past 12 months?

At the moment, the situation is at risk of delivering the worst of both worlds. International travel is reduced, so the aviation sector and tourism industry are at dire risk without additional Government support, yet lax border controls and Government confusion mean that we are not successfully protecting our borders from emerging variants, as we have discussed with regards to the emergence of the Delta variant. The Government continue to make decisions that are detrimental to public health, with weak and dangerous border protections against covid that put our desire for freedom at risk. We know that the emergence of new variants of concern is the biggest single risk to the road map, so it is beyond frustrating that the Government do not seem to have learned from their previous mishandling of travel restrictions.

[Justin Madders]

We have heard various efforts from Ministers to deny it, but the fact is that it took the Government eight days after banning travel from Bangladesh and Pakistan to introduce a similar restriction on flights from India to come into effect. During that time, travellers from India continued to enter the UK without the need to quarantine in a hotel, with the result that there were dozens of outbreaks around the country. The suggestion that the Prime Minister delayed adding India to the red list until he decided to cancel a scheduled trade visit to India means that his negligence has led to the announcement that he will be making today. There is now a terrible sense of *déjà vu*, as more variants enter the UK from Thailand, Brazil, South Africa and India.

The confusion around the ambiguity of the amber list must come to an end. We urgently need a comprehensive hotel quarantine system. In the meantime, Ministers should not turn their back on the aviation and travel sectors. As we have been calling for, they should bring forward a sectoral deal that supports the whole aviation industry, including securing jobs in the supply chain.

Last but not least, I will move on to a final element of the regulations in the SI. As we know, it amends the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Wearing of Face Coverings in a Relevant Place) (England) Regulations 2020 to provide an exemption for gatherings for specified educational and training purposes in community premises, which brings the rules into line with those applied in schools. However, given that cases in many hotspot areas are now concentrated among school-age children and young adults who have not yet had the opportunity to receive either dose of their vaccine, and that a number of local public health authorities in the north-west have issued recommendations to secondary schools about using facemasks again owing to the rising covid transmission rates, mainly due to the Delta variant, is the Minister confident that the relaxation of the rules in this area is wise? Is she able to share with us the advice that informed the decision? Given the surge in infections since the SI was published, are there any plans to revisit the regulations on face coverings in educational settings? What is the most up-to-date advice on the risk of increased transmission as a result of the relaxation? I look forward to hearing the Minister's response to those points.

4.58 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Jo Churchill): I thank the hon. Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston for his contribution. I can begin by saying I agree that his focus needs to be on keeping people safe. However, we are here to discuss the regulations that were put through on the 17th, and once again we had quite a meander around the regulations that might underpin any future decisions. I will focus on the things that I believe I can inform him about, and I have noted and listened to the others, but I do not find them particularly relevant to what we are agreeing here today.

There is a need to take account of the latest data before we make the regulations. We said that the earliest date was going to be the 17th, but no earlier, and the same is true for the recommendations at each level of

the road map. There was no promise that the date would be the 17th, and therefore the data that we look at and evaluate is very close to that point in time.

That leads me on to the question of why the statutory instrument is necessary. The Opposition cannot constantly ask for the data to be the most up-to-the-minute data, then not allow us to collect up-to-the-minute data, and refer back to the fact that it is problematic to make the timings fit. That is why we have ended up in this situation. I appreciate the hon. Gentleman's concern that we are always discussing these things after the event, but we need to make sure that we are discussing what is relevant and what is there at the time, to make sure the decisions are as close to the data and as relevant to all of us as they can be.

Justin Madders: I am grateful to the Minister for giving way, but I think she has misunderstood the point I was making. I am not suggesting for a minute that these decisions should be made earlier: I absolutely agree that the most up-to-date data should be used. What I was saying was that we know what measures were envisaged on that date, because they were set out back in February, so it would have been perfectly possible to put those in regulations at the right time.

Jo Churchill: I agree with the hon. Gentleman that that was the indication of the road map, but there is always a need to look at whether we should flex all, some, or none of those things that were outlined in the road map. However, I put on record once again the fact that we appreciate and value the scrutiny role that Parliament plays, and we have tried to balance it with the dynamic nature of the pandemic. That is why we find ourselves on the Floor of the House, in Committee and so on going over these things, which are important.

I hope the hon. Gentleman appreciates that at all stages, I have tried very hard to be as open and transparent as I can. He has asked me to confirm points about the surge testing and things that are happening in parts of the country today, including his own, but I will gently say that we had a briefing on this earlier, and I do not feel it is relevant to these regulations that came into force on the 17th. As he knows, we had a full discussion with members of the medical profession, Public Health England and so on on that call. The hon. Gentleman is well aware that surge testing includes on-the-ground support from two local authorities; the use of the Army and mobile testing; surge testing and vaccination; supporting schools with their testing programme; and, as he said, PHE working with local schools and college leaders so that they can make the most appropriate decision for themselves and their environment, with reference to local data, rather than applying a blanket proposal.

On vaccination, as has always been the case, we are focusing on those in groups one to nine, making sure that we vaccinate the most vulnerable in a way that is based on age profiles. Our vaccination programme has followed the advice of the relevant committees and so on, and it has proven to be very successful: the way in which we have delivered it is now estimated to have saved some thousands of lives. We also, on any tests of positivity, have full genomic sequencing similar to that for water testing and so on, so I very much refute the idea that we are not making strong progress. Many other countries look towards us.

With respect to the hon. Gentleman's comments about travel, the Government's priority is still protecting public health. At the time that he alluded to, around the beginning of the Delta variant, positive rates were three times higher from Bangladesh than from India, but if the pandemic effort has shown us anything, it is that we are in an incredibly dynamic situation and that things can change very quickly. We cannot just ask for everything to be open; it has to be a steady progression towards opening up—hence the road map.

Step 4 is a cautious plan to ease restrictions. It sets out a “no earlier than” approach, so I ask the hon. Gentleman to be aware that there will be further statements later today; I, too, will be listening attentively when that information comes forward. However, the progress to step 3 of the road map, which we are considering today, represented a considerable achievement. It started a cautious approach to easing lockdown, guided by the data, with the specific aim of avoiding a surge in cases that would have put unsustainable pressure on the NHS and claimed more lives. Data from the Joint Biosecurity Centre, the Scientific Pandemic Influenza Group on Modelling, and Public Health England informed the assessment that all steps at that point were met. We

continued to monitor the situation closely, informed by all current data and scientific evidence, and we will continue to work alongside experts to make sure that at each stage of the pandemic we are taking decisions driven by the evidence.

I recognise the impact that the restrictions have had, and their easing is hugely welcome, but there is not one of us in the House who has not been affected, with constituents, local businesses and members of our own family who have struggled over the past 15 months. Making sure that we can progress in a methodical way that does not allow us to slip back is of huge importance. We must all continue to be cautious, follow the rules and take up offers of vaccination as soon as they are made. I thank the hon. Member and take on board his comments.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That the Committee has considered the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (Steps and Other Provisions) (England) (Amendment) Regulations 2021 (S.I. 2021, No. 585).

5.7 pm

Committee rose.

