

# Health and Social Care Secretary Oral statement on COVID-19

Mr Speaker, with permission I'd like to update the House on COVID-19.

Since the UK became the first country to approve a vaccine against COVID-19, almost exactly a year ago we've been locked in a race between virus and the vaccine.

The success of our national vaccination programme has moved us ahead in the race.

But now, with the new Omicron variant, we have to work even harder to stay ahead.

Since last week, we've learned two things about this variant.

The first is that no variant of COVID-19 has spread this fast.

There are now 4,713 confirmed cases of Omicron in the UK and the UK Health Security Agency estimates that the current number of daily infections are around 200,000.

While Omicron represents over 20 percent of cases in England – we've already seen it rise to over 44 percent in London and we expect it to become the dominant COVID-19 variant in the capital in the next 48 hours.

There are currently 10 confirmed people in England who have been hospitalised with Omicron.

It's vital we remember that hospitalisations and deaths lag infections by around two weeks.

So we can expect those numbers to dramatically increase in the days and weeks that lie ahead.

In preparation, the UK's four Chief Medical Officers raised the COVID Alert level to 4, its second-highest level, this was done over the weekend.

And NHS England has just announced it will return to its highest level of emergency preparedness: Level 4 National Incident.

This means the NHS response to Omicron will be a coordinated as a national effort, rather than led by individual trusts.

The second thing we've learned in the past week Mr Speaker, is that two jabs are not enough to prevent symptomatic infection from Omicron.

But a third dose – a booster dose – provides strong protection with analysis by the UK Health Security Agency showing a third dose is 70 percent effective

at preventing symptomatic infection and we expect the booster to take effect more quickly than the second dose.

We're already running the most successful booster campaign in Europe.

Over 4 in 10 UK adults have now received a third dose or booster and Saturday was a record, with over half a million boosters given across the UK.

But Mr Speaker, with the race between virus and vaccine so close, we must move faster.

Two weeks ago, we announced we would offer every eligible adult a booster by the end of January.

But in response to the Omicron emergency and as the Prime Minister announced yesterday evening, we're bringing that target forward by a month, and launching the Omicron Emergency Boost.

We've opened the booster programme to every adult who's had a second dose of the vaccine at least three months ago, to offer them the chance to get their booster of getting their booster before the New Year.

So from this morning, anyone over 18 can walk in to a vaccination centre and from Wednesday, they can book online via the NHS website.

The UK government will also provide whatever support is needed to accelerate vaccinations in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

We have the jabs. The challenge is to get them into the arms.

To meet our ambitious target, the NHS will need to deliver a record number of jabs.

Until now, the highest number of jabs we've delivered in a single day in the UK was over 840,000.

We'll not only need to match that, but we will need to beat it every day.

But we can – and we've got a plan to try and do it.

We're opening more vaccination sites – including pop-up and mobile sites – and they'll be working 7 days a week.

We're training thousands more volunteer vaccinators.

We're asking GPs and pharmacies to do more.

And we're drafting in 42 military planning teams across every region of our country.

Mr Speaker, this collective national mission will only succeed if we all play our part.

Those who haven't had their booster should find their local walk-in

vaccination centre or they book an appointment on the NHS website from Wednesday.

Those who have had their booster jab should encourage friends and family to do the same.

Those who have – or have recently had – COVID, should wait 28 days from their positive result to get their booster.

And to those who haven't had their vaccine at all yet, Mr Speaker, I want to say this:

Whatever has held you back in the past, please think again, and book your jab as quickly as possible.

By acting together – to Get Boosted Now – we can protect ourselves against Omicron this winter.

Mr Speaker I acknowledge that our national mission comes with some difficult trade-offs.

We are redeploying NHS staff away from non-urgent services.

This means that, for the next two weeks, all primary care services will focus on urgent clinical need and vaccines, and some urgent appointments and elective surgeries may be postponed until the New Year while we prioritise getting people the booster.

These are steps that no Health Secretary would wish to take unless absolutely necessary.

But I'm convinced that if we don't prioritise the booster now, the health consequences will be far more grave in the months that lie ahead.

Mr Speaker, our Omicron Emergency Boost is a major step but I'm not going to pretend that this alone will be enough to see us through these difficult weeks again.

Because of the threat of Omicron, we are moving to Plan B in England, subject to the will of Parliament.

Meaning that we must use face coverings in indoor public place people should work from home if they can and, from Wednesday – subject to this House's approval –you'll need to show a negative lateral flow test to get into nightclubs and large events, with an exemption for the double vaccinated.

Once all adults have had a reasonable chance to get their booster jab, we intend to change this exemption to require a booster dose.

Even with Plan B Mr Speaker, we still have far fewer restrictions than Europe.

I can also confirm, Mr Speaker, that from tomorrow fully vaccinated contacts

of a COVID-19 case will now be able to take daily lateral flow tests instead of self-isolating.

This is a vital way to minimise the disruption to people's daily lives – and avoid a so-called 'Pingdemic'.

And I can reassure this House that the UK has sufficient lateral flow tests to see us through the coming weeks.

If anyone finds they are unable to get a kit online, they should check the website the following day or pop down to their local pharmacy and pick up a kit.

And from today, I can confirm the NHS COVID pass is being rolled out to 12-15 year olds for international travel, allowing even more people to be able to prove their vaccine status for travel where it's needed, from today.

Taken together, these are proportionate and balanced steps: keeping the country moving, while slowing the spread of Omicron and buying us more time to get more boosters into more arms.

We're also taking steps to keep people safer in Adult Social Care, and we know that, sadly, people in care homes and those who receive domiciliary care are more likely to suffer serious health consequences if they get COVID-19.

So we're expanding our specialist vaccination teams to get more boosters to the vulnerable and those providing care.

But even as we do so, we must go further to protect colleagues and residents from Omicron.

So we are increasing the frequency of staff testing and, with a heavy heart, we must restrict every resident to just three nominated visitors – not including their essential care giver.

This is a difficult step, and I understand that it comes with an impact on physical and mental wellbeing.

But we know that from previous waves that it's one of the most effective things we can do to protect vulnerable residents.

We are also increasing our Workforce Recruitment and Retention Fund with £300 million of new money, this is in addition to the £162.5 million we announced in October.

The funds will help pay bonuses, bring forward pay rises for care staff, fund overtime, and increase workforce numbers over the winter.

Mr Speaker, I know that Honourable Members had hoped that the days of this kind of COVID-19 update were behind us.

After our successful reopening in the Summer, it is not an update I wanted to deliver.

But the renewed threat of Omicron means we've got more work to do to stay ahead of the virus.

We can, if we all play our part. And boosters are the key.

We've achieved so many phenomenal things over the last two years.

I know we are weary. But it's on all of us to pick up, step up and do phenomenal work once again to play our part and Get Boosted Now.

I commend this statement to the House.