

Health and Social Care Secretary statement 30 November

Thank you, Prime Minister. A year ago this week, this country made headlines when we became the first nation in the Western world to authorise a vaccine for Covid-19.

This kicked off one of the greatest collective endeavours this nation has seen in peacetime – and think how far we've come since then. 115 million jobs right across the UK, and a booster programme that is expanding at a phenomenal pace.

Today we've hit that milestone of 18 million booster doses across the UK, and the daily number of jobs has gone up a third since the start of this month. Not only that, but we've delivered more booster doses than any other country with the exception of the USA and China. And that is something that we can all be very proud of.

And I'd like to thank the NHS, the armed forces, the volunteers, and everyone who's done so much to make this programme a success – as well as every single person that has come forward for their jab.

Thanks to you, we've made so much progress over the course of a year, we have now weakened the link between cases and hospitalisations and deaths. This is the real-world protection that our vaccination programme provides. Boosters in particular play a very huge part. The booster dose provides a much higher antibody response than the primary course so it's more important than ever that people step up and get protected.

We're now dealing of course with this new variant, Omicron, which the World Health Organisation said just yesterday, they said that it poses a 'very high global risk'.

There have now been 13 confirmed cases in England and also 9 confirmed cases in Scotland, and we expect to see these numbers rising over the next few days.

There's a lot we don't know of course, and our scientists are working night and day to learn more about this new variant, and what it means for our response.

Our strategy is to buy the time we need to assess this new variant. While doing everything we can to slow the spread of the virus and to strengthen our defences.

One important defence is antivirals. We've already secured hundreds of thousands of doses of two antivirals, that have the potential to speed up recovery time and stop infections progressing.

Another, of course, is that vaccination programme. It's true that we don't

yet have a full picture of how our vaccines respond to this new variant. But although it's possible for them to be less effective, it's unlikely that they have no effectiveness against serious disease.

So the best way that we can strengthen our protective wall is to get as many jabs in arms as possible. I asked the JCVI, our independent expert advisers, to look urgently at our vaccination programme in light of this new variant.

And as the Prime Minister just set out, we'll be massively expanding booster doses, in line with the JCVI advice. This includes halving the dose interval for booster jabs from six months to three months, expanding the booster doses to include all remaining adults aged 18 and above, and offering booster doses for people who are immunosuppressed.

I'd like to thank the JCVI for acting with such speed in response to this potential threat. This means we're now able to put our booster programme on steroids – and protect even more people, even more quickly.

We've got the jabs, thanks to the brilliant work of our Vaccines Taskforce, who've made sure that we've had a strong supply of vaccines all the way throughout this pandemic, and today we are setting out our plan to get those jabs in arms – and we'll shortly be hearing a bit more from Amanda.

We've set some hugely ambitious targets, and we're asking a huge amount from the NHS. But I have no doubt that that they will rise to the challenge, just as they have done throughout this pandemic.

I know that the developments of the past few days have been worrying for some people, and that we've brought back memories...what we're seeing recently has brought back memories of the strain of the last winter.

But although we can't say with certainty what lies ahead, we have one huge advantage that we didn't have back then. Our vaccination programme, which has already done so much to keep this virus at bay.

But these defences will only keep us safe if we use them. This is a national mission and we all have a role to play. If we want to give ourselves the best chance of a Christmas with our loved ones, the best thing we can all do is step up, roll up our sleeves and get protected when the time comes. I'll now hand over to Amanda.