

PM opening statement at COVID-19 press conference: 27 November 2021

Good afternoon.

The UK's plan against Covid has been working.

We've had the fastest vaccine roll-out in Europe, and now the fastest booster campaign in Europe, with almost 16.8 million boosters in people's arms, and though case numbers have remained relatively high, we've seen falling hospitalisations and falling numbers of deaths.

But on Wednesday we received news of a new variant – the so-called Omicron Variant – I want to express my deep gratitude to scientists in South Africa who identified this new variant and shared this information widely and immediately.

This variant is spreading around the world, with 2 cases so far identified here in the UK.

As always, and I must stress this, as always with a new variant, there are many things that we just cannot know at this early stage.

But our scientists are learning more hour by hour, and it does appear that Omicron spreads very rapidly, and can be spread between people who are double vaccinated.

There is also a very extensive mutation which means it diverges quite significantly from previous configurations of the virus, and as result, it might – at least in part – reduce the protection of our vaccines over time.

So we need to take targeted and proportionate measures now as a precaution while we find out more.

First, we need to slow down the seeding of this variant in our country.

We need to buy time for our scientists to understand exactly what we are dealing with.

And for us to get more people vaccinated and – above all – to get more people boosted.

As well as to help our NHS prepare in what is an already challenging winter.

So yesterday we took steps to protect the UK against the variant coming here from southern African countries – and earlier today added four more countries to the red list.

But we now need to go further and implement a proportionate testing regime for arrivals from across the whole world.

So we are not going to stop people travelling, I want to stress that, we're not going to stop people travelling, but we will require anyone who enters the UK to take a PCR test by the end of the second day after their arrival, and to self-isolate until they have a negative result.

Second, we need to slow down the spread of this variant here in the UK.

Because measures at the border can only ever minimise and delay the arrival of a new variant, rather than stop it altogether.

So in addition to the measures we are already taking to locate those who have been in countries of concern over the last ten days, we will require all contacts of those who test positive – with a suspected case of Omicron – to self-isolate for ten days, regardless of your vaccination status.

We will also go further in asking all of you to help contain the spread of this variant, by tightening up the rules on face coverings in shops and on public transport.

And third – and most importantly – we need to bolster our protections against this new variant.

We don't yet exactly know how effective our vaccines will be against Omicron, but we have good reasons for believing they will provide at least some measure of protection.

And if you are boosted – your response is likely to be stronger.

So it's more vital than ever that people get their jabs, and we get those boosters into arms as fast as possible.

So from today we are going to boost the booster campaign.

We are already planning to do 6 million jabs in England alone over the next three weeks.

And now we are looking to go further, so the Health Secretary has asked the JCVI to consider giving boosters to as wide a group as possible, as well as reducing the gap between your second dose and your booster.

And, of course, we are speaking to our counterparts in the Devolved Administrations and will continue to coordinate with them.

The measures that we are taking today – including on our borders and face masks – are temporary and precautionary, and we will review them in three weeks.

At that point we should have much greater information about the continuing effectiveness of our vaccines.

I very much hope that we will find that we continue to be in a strong position, and we can lift these measures again.

But right now this is the responsible course of action, to slow down the seeding and the spread of this new variant, and to maximise our defences so we protect the gains we have worked so hard for and so that we can continue to save lives.

Thank you.