

PM opening statement at COVID-19 press conference: 8 December 2021

As soon as we learned of the new Omicron variant,

this government acted

introducing targeted and proportionate measures as a precaution, whilst our scientists discovered more.

And we're learning more every day.

We do not yet know Omicron's severity, its exact rate of transmission, nor indeed the full effectiveness of our vaccines against it.

But since I last spoke to you, it's become increasingly clear that Omicron is growing much faster than the previous Delta variant,

and it's spreading rapidly all around the world.

568 cases have been confirmed through genomic sequencing across every region of the UK,

and the true number is certain to be much higher.

Most worryingly, there is evidence that the doubling time of Omicron in the UK could currently be between two and three days.

And while there are some limits to what we can learn from South Africa,

Because of the different rates of vaccination and different rates of previous infection –

we are seeing growth in cases here in the UK that mirrors the rapid increases previously seen in South Africa.

And South Africa is also seeing hospitalisations roughly doubling in a week, meaning that we can't yet assume Omicron is less severe than previous variants.

So while the picture may get better,

- and I sincerely hope that it will –

we know the remorseless logic of exponential growth could lead to a big rise in hospitalisations, and therefore sadly in deaths.

And that is why it is now the proportionate and responsible thing to move to Plan B in England

while continuing to work closely with our colleagues in the Devolved Administrations –

so we slow the spread of the virus,

buy ourselves the time to get yet more boosters into more arms, and especially in the older and more vulnerable people,

and understand the answers to the key outstanding questions about Omicron.

So first, we will reintroduce the guidance to work from home.

Employers should use the rest of this week to discuss working arrangements with their employees

but from Monday you should work from home if you can. Go to work if you must but work from home if you can.

And I know this will be hard for many people, but by reducing your contacts in the workplace you will help slow transmission.

Second, from this Friday we will further extend the legal requirement to wear a face mask to most public indoor venues, including theatres and cinemas.

There will be of course exemptions where it is not practical, such as when eating, drinking, exercising or singing.

Third, we'll also make the NHS Covid Pass mandatory for entry into nightclubs, and venues where large crowds gather

including unseated indoor venues with more than 500 people,

unseated outdoor venues with more than 4,000 people

and any venue with more than 10,000 people.

The NHS Covid Pass can still be obtained with two doses but we will keep this under review as the boosters roll out.

And having taken clinical advice since the emergence of Omicron, a negative lateral flow test will also be sufficient.

As we set out in Plan B, we will give businesses a week's notice, so this will come into force in a week's time,

helping to keep these events and venues open at full capacity,

while giving everyone who attends them confidence that those around them have done the responsible thing to minimise risk to others.

As Omicron spreads in the community, we will also introduce daily tests for contacts instead of isolation,

so we keep people safe while minimising the disruption to daily life.

And of course we will take every step to ensure our NHS is ready for the challenges ahead.

But the single biggest thing that every one of us can do,
is to get our jabs

and crucially to get that booster as soon as our turn arrives.

One year to the day since the UK became the first country in the world to administer a Covid vaccine into the arms of Margaret Keenan,

we have opened up the vaccine booster to all those over 40,

and we are reducing the gap between second dose and booster to a minimum of just three months.

Our heroic NHS staff and volunteers have already done almost 21 million boosters,

including reaching 84 per cent of all the eligible over 80s.

But we need to go further and faster still,

because our scientists are absolutely confident that your immune response will be stronger if you have been boosted.

And while you are at it – please get your flu jab too.

Let's do everything we can to protect ourselves and our loved ones this winter – and to reduce the pressures on our NHS.

As we learn more, so we will be guided by the hard medical data around four key criteria:

the efficacy of our vaccines and our boosters,

the severity of Omicron,

the speed of its spread,

and the rate of hospitalisations.

We will constantly monitor the data and keep it under review.

And of course we must be humble in the face of this virus

But if and indeed as soon as it becomes clear that the boosters are capable of holding this Omicron variant,

and we have boosted enough people to do that job

then we will be able to move forward as before.

So please everybody play your part – and get boosted.