

PM statement to the House of Commons on COVID-19: 5 January 2022

Mr Speaker, with permission I will make a Statement on the Omicron variant, and our measures to contain this virus, fortify our NHS and keep our country open.

First, I am sure the whole House will join me in paying tribute to everyone working in our NHS and social care, for their extraordinary efforts in the teeth of yet another wave of this pandemic, and for all they have done, together with thousands of volunteers, to get Britain boosted.

Since we began the Get Boosted Now campaign just over three weeks ago, we have delivered 10 million extra boosters across the UK; we have doubled the rate of vaccination from 450,000 doses a day to a peak of more than 900,000; we have matched the NHS's previous record day, and then beaten it again and again; and we have met our target of offering a booster to every eligible adult in England a whole month early.

As a result, we have a higher level of booster protection than all our European neighbours, with over 34 million boosters administered across the UK, including in England reaching more than 90 per cent of the over-70s, and 86 per cent of the over-50s.

Together with the evidence that Omicron causes less severe disease than previous variants, and the way the public have conscientiously changed their behaviour in response to Plan B, this level of protection means we are in a very different position than during previous waves.

I know some Hon Members might therefore ask whether this means we can now do away with measures altogether. But I am sorry to report that hospital admissions are rising rapidly, doubling around every 9 days, with already more than 15,000 Covid patients in hospital in England alone.

We are experiencing the fastest growth in Covid cases that we have ever known, with over 218,000 cases reported yesterday, although that included some delayed reporting.

And potentially of greatest concern, case rates are now rapidly rising among the older and more vulnerable, including doubling every week among those over 60, with the obvious risk that this will continue to increase the pressures on our NHS.

So in response to the latest data, the Cabinet agreed this morning that we should stick with Plan B for another three weeks, with a further review before the regulations expire on 26 January.

People in England should carry on working from home whenever they can, wear face coverings on public transport and in most indoor public places, and take a test before going to high risk venues or meeting the elderly or vulnerable.

All of these measures are helping to take the edge off the Omicron wave, slow the spread of infection, manage the immediate pressures on our NHS and buy time for the boosters to take effect.

And those in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland should, of course, continue to follow the rules where they live.

Mr Speaker, faced with these pressures on our NHS, I know some Members may ask the opposite question: whether we should go even further and move towards a full lockdown. But lockdowns are not cost free. They impose a devastating toll on our physical and mental wellbeing, on our businesses, jobs and livelihoods, and, worst of all, on the life chances of our children.

So this government does not believe we need to shut down our country again. Instead we are taking a balanced approach, using the protection of the boosters and the Plan B measures to reduce the spread of the virus, while acting to strengthen our NHS, protect critical national services and keep supply chains open.

We're building onsite Nightingale hospitals and creating 2,500 virtual beds to increase NHS capacity.

We've bought more antivirals per person than anywhere else in Europe. And we're working to identify those NHS Trusts which are most likely to need military support, so this can be prepared now.

From 10th January, we will provide 100,000 critical workers in England with free lateral flow tests for every working day to help keep essential services running.

This includes those who work on critical national infrastructure, national security, transport, and food distribution and processing. And these tests are separate – and in addition – to those already allocated to our public services, such as in education, where we have delivered 31 million testing kits to schools and colleges for the start of the new term.

Mr Speaker, we have the biggest testing programme in Europe, registering almost twice as many tests as France, and four times as many as Germany.

Last month alone, we distributed 300 million lateral flow devices – enabling millions of people to get tested and keep their loved ones, friends and colleagues safe in the run-up to Christmas.

But thanks to the sheer size of the Omicron wave, we still need to take steps to ensure our testing capacity reaches those who need it most.

So we will be suspending the need to do a PCR to confirm the result of a positive lateral flow test.

From next Tuesday in England, if you test positive on a lateral flow device, you should just record that result on gov.uk and begin self-isolating.

Mr Speaker, our balanced approach also means that where specific measures are

no longer serving their purpose, they will be dropped.

So when the Omicron variant was first identified, we rightly introduced travel restrictions to slow its arrival in our country.

But now Omicron is so prevalent, these measures are having limited impact on the growth in cases, while continuing to pose significant costs on our travel industry.

So I can announce that in England from 4am on Friday we will be scrapping the pre-departure test, which discourages many from travelling for fear of being trapped overseas and incurring significant extra expense.

We will also be lifting the requirement to self-isolate on arrival until receipt of a negative PCR, returning instead to the system we had in October last year, where those arriving in England will need to take a lateral flow test no later than the end of Day 2 and, if positive, a further PCR test to help us identify any new variants at the border.

Mr Speaker, all of these measures are balanced and proportionate ways of ensuring we can live with Covid without letting our guard down.

And we can only do this thanks to the biggest and fastest booster campaign in Europe.

Yet Mr Speaker, there are still almost 9 million people eligible, who haven't had their booster.

As many as 90 per cent of those in intensive care with Covid have not had their booster and over 60 per cent have not had any vaccination at all.

And there are 2 million slots available over the next week alone. So I urge Hon Members on all sides of the House to do everything possible to encourage your constituents to get boosted now.

This is the very best way to save lives, reduce the pressure on our NHS and keep our country open. And I commend this Statement to the House.