

Prime Minister confirms move to Plan B in England

- Move to Plan B confirmed as Omicron spreads across UK, with early analysis suggesting cases could be doubling at a rate of as little as 2.5 to 3 days
- Face masks to become compulsory in most public indoor venues, other than hospitality
- NHS Covid Pass to be mandatory in specific settings, using a negative test or full vaccination via the NHS Covid Pass
- Vaccines and testing remain our best lines of defence
- People asked to work from home if they can

The Prime Minister has today [Wednesday 8 December] confirmed that England will move to Plan B following the rapid spread of the Omicron variant in the UK.

Urgent work has been ongoing to understand the impact of the new variant with regards to vaccines, treatments and transmissibility. Early indications showed a large number of concerning spike protein mutations as well as mutations in other parts of the viral genome.

On Saturday 27 November, the government acted quickly to slow the spread of Omicron while more data was collected and assessed.

The most recent data suggests that Omicron has a very high growth rate and is spreading rapidly. S-gene drop out cases have grown from 0.15% of cases during the week of 21st November, to 3.3% of cases since 5 December in England. There are currently 568 cases confirmed across the UK and early analysis from the UK Health Security Agency suggesting the doubling time could be as little as 2.5 to 3 days.

As seen in previous waves, a swift rise in cases can lead to a rapid rise in hospitalisations, which will quickly lead to pressure on the NHS. The data in South Africa is showing a rapid increase in hospitalisations.

As a result of this concerning data the Prime Minister has acted quickly and with caution, confirming Plan B measures will come into force while more data on vaccine efficacy and disease severity is assessed. Plan B was set out in September and will help to slow the spread of the variant and reduce the chances of the NHS coming under unsustainable pressure, while buying time to deliver more boosters.

While it is likely there is some level of reduced vaccine effectiveness against Omicron, it is still too early to determine the extent of this.

The government will continue to look closely at all the emerging data but vaccines remain our best line of defence and it is now more vital than ever that those who are unvaccinated come forward, and those eligible for their

boosters book when called.

Today the NHS confirmed a huge expansion of the booster programme, with the National Booking Service now open to all those aged over 40 to book their jabs. The dose interval has also been shortened from six months to three months, with those eligible now able to book a month in advance – two months after their second dose.

The vaccine programme will be supported by the continued development of world-leading treatments. Today the Prime Minister confirmed a new national study that will see 10,000 UK patients at risk of serious illness from COVID-19 given the treatment molnupiravir to treat their symptoms at home.

Testing will also be a vital tool in controlling the spread given the likely increased transmissibility of Omicron. As there is now demonstrated community transmission of Omicron, we intend to introduce daily contact tests for contacts of confirmed positive cases instead of the ten-day self-isolation period.

Everyone should test using a lateral flow device, particularly before entering a high-risk setting involving people you wouldn't normally come into contact with, or when visiting a vulnerable person. Lateral flow devices remain free of charge and can be collected from local pharmacies.

From Friday 10 December, face coverings will become compulsory in most public indoor venues, such as cinemas, theatres and places of worship. There will be exemptions in venues where it is not practical to wear one, such as when you are eating, drinking or exercising. For that reason, face masks will not be required in hospitality settings.

From Monday 13 December, those who can will be advised to work from home.

From Wednesday 15 December, and subject to parliamentary approval, the NHS Covid Pass on the NHS App will become mandatory for entry into nightclubs and settings where large crowds gather – including unseated indoor events with 500 or more attendees, unseated outdoor events with 4,000 or more attendees and any event with 10,000 or more attendees.

People will be able to demonstrate proof of two vaccine doses via the app. Having considered the evidence since the emergence of Omicron, proof of a negative lateral flow test will also be accepted.

Introducing Covid-status certification from next Wednesday will give businesses a week's notice, as promised in the government's proposals for introducing mandatory certification published in September.

A full list of guidance on these changes will be available on gov.uk in the coming days. Face covering regulations will be laid in parliament tomorrow, with the remaining regulations laid on Monday 13 December.

Parliament will debate the measures next week, with a vote expected to take place on Tuesday 14 December.

The government will keep the data under constant review. The regulations set to expire six weeks after implementation, with a review after three weeks.

Taken together, the government is hopeful these measures will reduce transmission and slow the spread of the Omicron variant, and will continue to urge those eligible to get their boosters when called.

[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.

US and UK to partner on prize challenges to advance Privacy-Enhancing Technologies

The United States and the United Kingdom today announced plans to collaborate on bilateral innovation prize challenges focused on advancing privacy-enhancing technologies (PETs). This emerging group of technologies present an important opportunity to harness the power of data in a manner that protects privacy and intellectual property, enabling cross-border and cross-sector collaboration to solve shared challenges.

Announced during the Summit for Democracy, as part of a series of International Grand Challenges on Democracy-Affirming Technologies, the prize challenges will take place during the Summit's 'year of action', accelerating work to overcome technical gaps and adoption challenges related to PETs. By bringing together top minds from both countries on building viable solutions, the prize challenges will aim to help mature and facilitate adoption of these promising technologies.

PETs are already being used to tackle a range of societal challenges – from financial crime to Covid-19 – to enable data use in ways that preserve privacy. The prize challenge will build on the extensive innovation in these technologies that is already taking place in both countries across academia, industry, and government. The joint effort will reinforce the democratic principles enshrined in the New Atlantic Charter and illustrate both nations' commitment to working together to address critical transnational challenges.

Dr. Eric Lander, the President's Science Advisor and Director of the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy said:

Privacy-enhancing technologies are a critical component of the suite of democracy-affirming capabilities that can support our shared democratic values in the face of authoritarian exploitation of emerging technologies

It is imperative that we come together as democracies to develop approaches to unlock the economic, scientific, and societal benefits of emerging technologies while protecting shared values such as privacy, accountability, and transparency.

Nadine Dorries, UK Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, said:

Privacy-enhancing technologies can help our democracies to harness the power of data and AI to support our citizens and businesses – in a way that reinforces our shared values”.

The UK is striving to unlock the power of data across the economy. This prize challenge will build on the UK’s comprehensive National Data Strategy and help to raise the profile of these technologies on both sides of the Atlantic, laying the foundations for future collaboration.

Building on decades of investment in privacy-enhancing technologies, the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy, the U.S. National Science Foundation, and the U.S. National Institute of Standards and Technology are leading an interagency initiative to jointly develop the challenges with the UK’s expert body for trustworthy innovation in data and AI, the Centre for Data Ethics and Innovation, who will lead a team of specialists from across the UK Government.

The United States and the UK anticipate launching the prize challenges in the spring of 2022, with initial results ready to be shared at the second Summit for Democracy.

[UK’s most vulnerable people to receive life-saving COVID-19 treatments in the community](#)

- National study for antiviral to take at home launched today for over 50s and those with underlying health conditions
- Those at highest risk from COVID-19 can receive either treatment directly from next week

- Treatments set to reduce hospitalisations, easing pressure on NHS this winter

Thousands of the UK's most vulnerable people will be among the first in the world to access life-saving, cutting-edge antiviral and antibody treatments from today, the government has announced.

A national study 'PANORAMIC', run by the University of Oxford in close collaboration with GP hubs, has now launched and is recruiting around 10,000 UK patients at risk of serious illness from COVID-19 to have the opportunity to take the treatment molnupiravir at home after receiving a positive PCR test.

Those at highest risk who test positive for the virus – for example, people who are immunocompromised, cancer patients or those with Down's syndrome – will also be able to access either molnupiravir or the novel monoclonal antibody Ronapreve outside of the study from 16 December.

This will ensure the treatments can help protect those most at risk from the virus over the winter months, reducing the number of hospitalisations and therefore pressures on the NHS. This will be significant for those who have compromised immune systems and for whom the vaccines can therefore be less effective.

Molnupiravir has shown in clinical trials to reduce the risk of hospitalisation or death for at-risk, non-hospitalised adults with mild to moderate COVID-19 by 30% and Ronapreve reduced the risk by 70%.

Health and Social Care Secretary Sajid Javid said:

The UK is a world-leader in rolling out innovative treatments to the patients who need them and today is a historic milestone in our battle against the virus, deploying the first medicines vulnerable people will be able to take outside of hospital and in the comfort of their own homes to protect themselves.

This opens up a new era for the treatment of COVID-19, one where we can begin to cover every phase of contracting this deadly disease – whether it be before you catch it, just after you catch it, if you develop symptoms or if you require hospital care.

If you're eligible, please sign up to the study as soon as possible and play your part in history.

Deputy Chief Medical Officer for England Professor Jonathan Van-Tam said:

Throughout this pandemic, we have rapidly identified and deployed some of the world's best treatments for COVID-19 to UK patients – including dexamethasone, tocilizumab and sarilumab.

Antivirals will be a vital intervention for years to come, helping to protect those that can't mount the same antibody response to the vaccines.

This is really positive news for the future of our response to COVID-19 – please sign up to the study if you're eligible as soon as you can.

National study for molnupiravir

The study, which is currently for molnupiravir, has been launched today to allow medical experts to gather further data on the potential benefits this treatment brings to vaccinated patients, and will help the NHS to develop plans for rolling out the antiviral to further patients next year.

It's open to anyone in the UK, provided they:

- receive a positive PCR test;
- feel unwell with symptoms of COVID-19 that started in the last five days; and
- are aged 50 and over or 18 to 49 with an underlying health condition that puts them more at risk of severe COVID-19.

If eligible, people who receive a positive PCR test will be contacted by the study team or a local healthcare professional, for example their GP, to sign up to the trial. Alternatively, people can sign up themselves through the study's website. It is crucial that eligible participants enrol in the study urgently to ensure that they have the opportunity to access antiviral treatments within the first five days of COVID-19 symptoms.

Taking part in the study will require participants to complete a daily diary for 28 days through the PANORAMIC website or receive a phone call from the trial team on days 7, 14 and 28 to speak about their symptoms. The first set of results from the trial are anticipated in early 2022.

Targeted deployment of molnupiravir and Ronapreve

For treatment access outside of the study, those in the highest risk group will be informed by the NHS if they have a condition that will make them eligible to receive these treatments, should they test positive for COVID-19. The eligible cohorts have been determined by an independent expert group commissioned by DHSC and included in a clinical policy agreed by all four Chief Medical Officers in the UK.

These patients will be able to keep a PCR test at home from NHS Test and Trace to support rapid testing, so they can access the treatments as soon as possible after symptoms begin.

Eligible patients who receive a positive test will be assessed over the phone by an expert clinician from an NHS COVID Medicines Delivery Unit (CMDU), who will review and discuss with the patient what the most appropriate treatment

would be for them.

Those being prescribed a monoclonal antibody treatment will be invited to attend the CMDU, while those receiving molnupiravir can either get someone to collect it for them or have it delivered to their home. The NHS has been setting up CMDUs since the summer.

The government has secured 480,000 courses of molnupiravir from pharmaceutical company Merck Sharp and Dohme (MSD). It has also secured 250,000 courses of the antiviral PF-07321332, which is currently has completed phase 3 trials.

Chair of the Antivirals Taskforce Eddie Gray said:

This is an important advancement for the treatment of COVID-19 in the UK and marks a significant step in the Antivirals Taskforce's ambition to roll out two novel antivirals to patients.

Work is still underway to identify further options as soon as we can – to protect as many vulnerable people across the country as possible.

Antivirals are treatments used to either treat those who are infected with a virus or protect exposed individuals from becoming infected. They target the virus at an early stage, preventing progression to more severe, or even critical, symptoms.

The Antivirals Taskforce will continue to look at a number of further options, spanning a range of different antiviral mechanisms. Alongside the work of the Therapeutics Taskforce, this will ensure as many people as possible can be protected from COVID-19, future variants and other future diseases.

Since the beginning of the pandemic, the UK has proven itself to be a world-leader in identifying and rolling out effective treatments for COVID-19 – including the world's first treatment dexamethasone, which has since saved over a million lives worldwide.

The UK's renowned life sciences sector makes it the ideal base for the brightest of global innovators to research and progress cutting-edge treatments for COVID-19 through the clinical trials process here in Britain.

Professor Chris Butler, Professor of Primary Care at the University of Oxford's Nuffield Department of Primary Care Health Sciences and Co-Chief Investigator of PANORAMIC, said:

Studies in relatively small numbers of people with COVID-19 who have not yet been vaccinated have generated optimism that these new antiviral medicines, if used at scale, could reduce the need for people to be admitted to hospital and help them recover faster.

The PANORAMIC trial is a world-first study for generating the evidence we urgently need about large scale, early treatment with novel antiviral medicines of people who are mostly all vaccinated, still well enough to be in the community, and who are at higher risk of complications from COVID-19.

Professor Stephen Powis, NHS England's National Medical Director, said:

The rollout of monoclonal antibodies and antivirals represents another weapon in our arsenal to reduce the risk of patients at highest risk becoming seriously ill and needing hospitalisation from COVID-19.

It represents another achievement for the NHS following our world leading vaccination programme that has now delivered 100 million vaccinations in England, including over 17 million booster vaccines.

Getting vaccinated is the best way to protect you and your loved ones from COVID-19 and I would urge everyone to come forward to get vaccinated – whether that's your first, second or booster jab.

[Ukraine: Foreign Secretary Liz Truss held talks with Ukrainian counterpart in the face of Russian aggression](#)

Press release

The Foreign Secretary has held talks today with Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba in the UK-Ukraine Strategic Dialogue.



Foreign Secretary Liz Truss today (Wednesday 8 December) held talks with Ukrainian Foreign Affairs Minister Dmytro Kuleba.

Foreign Secretary Liz Truss said:

I was delighted to welcome Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba to London following our productive meeting last week at the NATO Foreign Ministers' Meeting in Latvia.

The situation facing Ukraine today is one we have seen time and again from the Kremlin playbook. Russia is trying to destabilise its democratic neighbours in a futile attempt to exert control over them.

The UK, together with our NATO and European partners, will continue to support Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity. We stand with our allies to defend and advance the frontiers of freedom. We call on Russia to de-escalate tensions and abide by its international commitments including reporting troop movements and returning to the table for serious talks. A Russian incursion would be a strategic mistake and subject to consequences.

We are providing defensive military support primarily through Operation ORBITAL, the UK's training mission to Ukraine. Since launching in 2015, we have trained over 20,000 members of the Ukrainian armed forces.

The Foreign Minister and I discussed ways to strengthen cooperation in a number of areas and build stronger trade links. That's why I am pleased to announce that UK Export Finance is increasing its support for British exporters in Ukraine to £3.5 billion which will support trade in priority sectors including healthcare, infrastructure and clean energy.

Trade is the key to unlocking the potential in our relationship and challenging malign actors together. We now need to turbo-charge trade between our countries, open up new opportunities for investment and support job creation in Ukraine and across every part of the UK.

Support for upgrading Ukraine's nuclear energy sector is a win-win area. The UK stands to gain from our world-class expertise in clean energy while giving Ukraine the opportunity to reduce its dependency on Russian fuel imports.

We will also start discussions with Ukraine on a Commercial Dialogue to expand and enhance our trade relationship, and for the first time have a dedicated environment to discuss ways to remove

market access barriers that impact trade between our countries.

We will continue to work closely with our Ukrainian friends to protect our freedom, democracy and security.

This was the first UK-Ukraine Strategic Dialogue, part of an agreement signed by the Prime Minister and Ukrainian President Zelenskyy during his visit to London last year. The aim of the talks is to deepen ties between the two countries to challenge malign actors, boost trade and invest in our shared future.

A Joint Communique was signed and is viewable [here](#)

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