

**From:** Name Redacted  
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**Subject:** Coronavirus press conference with First Minister, Mark Drakeford.  
**Attachments:** FM press conference script Dec 10.docx

Hi all,

Here's a summary of today's Coronavirus press conference with First Minister, Mark Drakeford. His script is also attached.

### Questions

**Q:** You've mentioned it there about hospitalisation. Typically we see hospitals feeling that impact as much as two weeks later, which takes us right up to Christmas. Should we be bracing ourselves to rearrange to cancel plans to go and visit friends and family? Likewise, might businesses be asked to make some last minute changes?

**A:** So the advice of the Welsh Government to people in Wales is this, we should approach Christmas by doing all those things which we know can help to protect us and other people from the virus. Make sure that you are vaccinated and take up those appointments. Wear a mask in crowded public places. Think about the people you are meeting especially if you are meeting people whose underlying health conditions make them particularly vulnerable to the virus. All those simple things that social distancing, the things we've learned to do, can keep us on track. And that's how we should all be approaching Christmas.

**Q:** The language you've used so far has been pretty strong. And yet there are no significant changes today. If you have the financial levers to compensate businesses or individuals. Would you have gone further today? And if so, what would you have done?

**A:** No. I don't think we would have gone further today because for the week ahead of us, delta is still going to be the dominant variant in Wales we believe and had we only been facing delta then I think our pathway through Christmas and into the New Year would have been reasonably straightforward because with only delta to deal with, but numbers of people falling ill in Wales are too high but they are stable. And the number of people needing hospital care has been declining over the last two weeks. So for the next week. We feel that we can continue with that level of restrictions we've currently got enhancing it in the way that I've described today. But we are going to move our decision making forward we're not going to wait three weeks because in three weeks, an awful lot could have changed. So these are arrangements for the next seven days. And then this time next week, we will be reviewing all the evidence, everything that is happening in Scotland in London, in particular the emerging evidence from South Africa we'll know more about the extent to which omicron has come into Wales. It's very modest at the moment, but we must expect that to rise. We'll then make another set of decisions. When we've gathered all that learning and we know the situation we will face in a week's time but for the week ahead. We think we can continue to manage things in a way that is safe and keeping Wales open. Because delta which we know about familiar with dealing with it will continue to be the dominant variant.

**Q:** First of all that despite no new restrictions we're hearing from hospitality owners that they are already experiencing Christmas cancellations and losing large sums of money. What support is there going to be from the Welsh Government for that sector again, because they've been punished due to the Omicron virus. And should people be going ahead with social events you've seen Stereophonics cancel their gigs but others are going ahead should they been?

**A:** Well, of course, you know, I recognise the enormous pressures that the hospitality industry has faced and we remain in very regular dialogue with the industry. My colleague Vaughan Gething announced 45 million pounds in new investment to help businesses in Wales only a week or so ago. And we continue to work within the Welsh government to see what funds we could bring together to help businesses further if we are facing, you know, a really challenging time with the Omicron variant. If that variant were to sweep across the whole of the United Kingdom at a speed and with an intensity, that some of the models are now suggesting then the economic impact could only be absorbed with action for the Treasury at the UK level. No devolved government by itself could manage to provide the level of support that will be necessary in those circumstances. So I've already made that point directly to the UK Government and we'll have an opportunity to do so again this afternoon. The Treasury has to be around the table as we plan ahead for what might be coming our way as to the choices that people should make. I really think it's not for the Welsh Government to micro manage people's individual decisions. I'll just repeat what I've said already. But if people are intending to go out to any sort of gathering, then they need to do so in a conscious way. They need to have thought about it before they embarked. I myself was in Swansea this morning. At an event at the Guild Hall. I took a lateral flow test before I left home this morning to give me the confidence that I wouldn't be putting other people at risk. If you are going to a gathering of any sort. Think about the things you can do vaccination, testing, mask wearing that repertoire of things that we know builds up our defences, and can help to keep us safe in the run up to Christmas.

**Q:** You said that you're moving to weekly reviews. Are you trying to wait until Senedd breaks up for Christmas before introducing tougher restrictions so you can avoid scrutiny on those?

**A:** Absolutely not. I'm afraid omicron doesn't come to match anybody's timetable. Next week is the last week of the Senedd. The Senedd can be recalled if they were to be major decisions that were necessary and our Senedd met right through the earlier waves of the of the pandemic while parliament in Westminster wasn't meeting at all. So if there are decisions we need to make and the Senedd needs to scrutinise them. I'm sure a way will be found to make sure that that can happen.

**Q:** Can you paint us a picture of what you think are the best and worst case scenarios for Wales in terms of restrictions and deaths over Christmas and then through to the end of January. And if I could just ask you about the prime minister as well, Ian Blackford has said that he has lost the moral authority to lead and should stand aside. Do you think that Boris Johnson retains the moral authority to govern?

**A:** Within the first part of the question, the sort of the variables that make it so difficult to predict exactly what we will see over the next week include these aren't they we're not completely sure how severe an illness The omicron variant will provide. So there's a lot of work going to find out that way. We're, I think it shows we need to be now that it will spread very fast. But will it be more severe? We don't know enough about that. The context in the United Kingdom is different to the South African context. The age structure of our population is different. The nature of our health service is different and we have a much more highly vaccinated population. With as I said, you know, a million people in Wales already having had the boosters and we don't know exactly how stronger protection that will provide. If we are at the fortunate end of the spectrum, it's a milder illness, that the booster programme gives you a significant defence against it, then the model show that the impact will be very real because of the speed, but that is probably absorbable by our public services. If it turns out that the variant is as severe or more severe than delta. If the vaccine escape is greater than we would have hoped for then models will show that that impact will be much more difficult to manage. We're not at a point to where the modelling is sufficiently secure for us to know which of those paths but as that's the spectrum for you, a spectrum between it being difficult but manageable to being difficult and additional actions being needed in order to manage it. And also the Prime Minister, it's not for me, I don't operate in Parliament, Mr. Blackford, does I focus on my job and trying to do my job as best I can.

**Q:** Can I just ask you a bit about when you would bring in restrictions and you've said that omicron cases are going to surge and that's, that's a given now, and if the doubling time is two or three days, we could go from a few cases to hundreds of 1000s of cases in a matter of weeks. Given this timeframe. By the time we know if these cases will result in widespread hospitalizations, that could be huge amounts of COVID already in the community. So at what point would you bring in restrictions? Will it be as soon as cases start to rise? And if so, restrictions are by your own predictions guaranteed? Or are we going to wait see if cases cause serious disease? It could be too late to prevent many deaths. So what metrics will you be using to trigger a lockdown or severe restrictions?

**A:** I think you've summarised the dilemma there very well. The advice from Sage has long been that if you know there is a problem coming towards you, you should try and act early and try to get ahead of the problem as best you can. And we have done our best to follow that advice here in Wales. So whilst I can't give a sort of precise sense of what exactly would trigger action, when exactly action would happen. I'm happy to set out that general principle that if we see a situation in Wales coming at us because of what we see happening elsewhere, that tells us that action needs to be taken, difficult as it is and upsetting as it can be. I still think the right thing to do is to follow that advice. Because that way you at least managed to make what is going or could be going to be a very difficult situation. You at least bring it back into the manageable part of the spectrum, rather than waiting and finding the things I've got so bad, but it's very difficult indeed, to make any difference.

**Q:** A report came out yesterday claiming that you'd called for a lockdown between Christmas and New Year in a meeting on Wednesday night. Now the Welsh Government are yet to deny that claim. And a source has told us that it was something that you had suggested. So could you set the record straight for us for this minister? Have you called for a lockdown yes or no? And if so, why?

**A:** You're not going to draw me into a conversation on distorted accounts of a meeting where those accounts are a gross violation of the rules under which those meetings are conducted, and where the motivation of whoever it was that carried out that gross violation was simply to cause a distraction from the many difficulties that the UK Government has experienced this week, so I'm not going to be drawn into that game. What I will say is this. Do I urge the UK Government to plan ahead? Do I urge the UK Government to take the actions that are necessary in order to meet the challenge of Coronavirus? I've done that time after time from this platform. And I'm very happy to repeat it again today.

**Q:** And another source in Welsh sports has told us that they've been told to plan for new restrictions in January. So could you be clear with the sector First Minister, and also everyone who's listening is a time to expect more restrictions next month?

**A:** It's time to plan for what might be coming our way. Planning for what might happen does not mean that it will happen. It simply means that while you have the chance to do so, you should be thinking and preparing. I just think that is such simple common sense. Given everything that we are learning about the Omicron variant. Anybody running a business or a public service? Surely should be asking themselves the question. If something did become necessary, what would we do? How would we do it? It doesn't mean to say that you will end up in that position. It simply means that you are doing that common sense thing of using the chance while you've got it to think ahead and plan ahead.

**A:** The question was, if the fact that not all laboratories have been able to detect the S gene dropout means that the number of people who we know have got the omicron variant is an underestimate of the number of people who have at Wales. I've said I'm sure that is actually the case, that whenever we declare numbers and we declare every day the number of people who've fallen ill with a Delta variant there are always more people than the testing system has been able to detect. In north Wales tests have generally gone to a laboratory Manchester that is able to detect the S gene dropout, public health Wales laboratories are able to do that. And now the major laboratory that we have in Newport in South Wales is also in that position

**A:** The question was a question about preparing for the possibility that we will have to take further actions because of the spread of the new variant. And I was simply explaining again that we should prepare we should use the time we've got to think ahead to think about what might be necessary. It's why we're moving to a weekly rather than a three weekly cycle, because it's the nature of the Omicron variant particularly, but there still are important things we don't know enough about. We will learn a lot as each day goes by, we have to speed up the cycle of our decision making and use the time we have if we do happen to be a week or so behind the impact of the variant elsewhere in the United Kingdom, to use that time to plan and to prepare.

**Q:** Do you think the reports of parties at number 10 will make people in Wales less likely to follow any new guidance?

**A:** Well, I think there's one very important difference that we have here in Wales and the same will be true of Scotland and Northern Ireland, which is that we have a government of our own here in Wales. And the messages that we have given to people in Wales have throughout the pandemic been very different to the ones that the Prime Minister has conveyed across the border. I have never come here and said to people in Wales it'll all be over in 12 weeks, it'll all be over by Easter. It'll all be over by Christmas. That Freedom Day was an irreversible set of decisions. Those are the things that I think tend to erode people's confidence in what government says if government is always saying things that is at the impossibly optimistic end of the spectrum here in Wales we have tried as a government to go on explaining to people the Coronavirus is not over. But we've got to go on doing the things we do, that if we are cautiously and carefully that is the best way of keeping each other safe. And I hope the fact of people in Wales have had that consistent messages here in Wales. mean that we will go on, as we have been very lucky to have up until now. The support of the vast bulk of people in Wales who go on every day, thinking and acting carefully and playing their part.

**Q:** Can you give any certainty to the hospitality industry that they'll be able to remain open throughout the festive period? And if they'll have to implement the COVID passes at any point?

**A:** Well absolutely recognise that that you can't just make these things happen overnight. We have decided not to introduce the COVID pass in hospitality over the next week. What I can say with certainty is this that we will carry on in close dialogue with the sector that we will share with them the information that we are getting about the impact of the new variants that we will always listen to what they say to us about the best way in which they can stay open and stay open safely. That's always been our aim, keep us safe and keep whales open. And even in the challenging weeks of may lie ahead when further action may inescapably be needed. We will only ever do that in the best dialogue we can have with the sectors that might be directly affected.

**Q:** There's been a report today that head teachers across Wales are in talks of closing early for Christmas in response to Omicron. What can you tell me about this?

**A:** Well, I am aware of course that across Wales local education authorities are continuing to have discussions with schools and head teachers. Most local education authorities plan to end school at the end of next week. But there are I think around eight local authorities who have school terms that end on about the 22nd of December, and they will be having discussions about how to make sure that they can bring the school term to an end carefully and safely. We have a shared ambition from the Welsh Government, local education authorities, teacher unions and people at the frontline to keep as many children in school as safely as we can. Right up to the end of term. But what I know our head teachers will be looking to do is if their individual circumstances mean they have to make other choices, that they do that in an orderly way, and that they give their parents notice of any changes they need to make so you know, there's a framework that we have set out, it does allow for local decisions. The intention behind the framework is to keep children in school to the end of term because of the disruption that people have experienced in their education. But local decision making within that framework is allowed. I would want to see it done in an orderly way. If local educational

authorities or schools are planning anything different, I think they would want to give their parents the longest possible notice.

**Q:** You've announced today that restrictions will be assessed every seven days rather than every three weeks. This could mean that restrictions are tightened over Christmas. And if this does happen, it's undoubtedly going to have an impact on the people of Wales as mental health. So if that's the case, will the government be willing to provide more funding to Welsh mental health services?

**A:** We have provided more funding to mental health services very regularly during the pandemic particularly those so the jargon is Tier zero it means those frontline services that are on the high street where you don't need an appointment, where you can just go and speak to somebody on the phone or in person or indeed have some help online so that people who are affected by the impact of the virus are able to get help as quickly as they can and in a way that is proportionate to the experience that they are going through. And as I said in answer to an earlier question, as part of this week's discussions and thinking ahead, the Welsh Government are looking to see what additional help we would be able to mobilise if we found ourselves in a position where a more significant level of protection was needed to help us to deal with the emergence of this new variant.

**Q:** With the Omicron variant upon us. Cardiff and Vale University Health Boards has called on unpaid carers to do more to free up paid care workers in return for uncertain financial help. I'm waiting to hear more from the board about the detail but in the meantime, can I see what your reaction on two key points is that concern our audience, particularly what the board seems to be saying is that if someone already has a whole needs assessment, and care packages arising from rights on the social services wellbeing act that they should be abandoned for the greater good to make up for too few paid care workers. interested in your thoughts?

**A:** Well, Tom, I don't think it would be fair to use the language of abandonment. What we know is happening is that at the frontline we simply do not have enough people in work to do all the things that the system is committed to doing and wants to do. And that is for a variety of reasons, but it is partly because of the number of people who themselves are ill or have been in direct contact with somebody who is ill and therefore not able to be in work because they are working with vulnerable people where extra care is necessary. So I don't think anybody is moving to a position where we just want to abandon anybody. But the only way we are able to deal with the enormous pressures that there are and to make sure that those people whose needs are the most intense and who are the greatest risk that we use the scarce resource we have to make sure they are helped is if we can mobilise help right across the spectrum. I know how much unpaid carers do already every single day, and I know that it must feel your heart must sink if you think you're going to be asked to do even more but we are going to be asking even more of an enormous number of people, including those exhausted staff that we have in social care and the health service, who are now facing the uncertainty of yet another cruel twist in this virus.

**Q:** You seem to have some sympathy for both camps. If I can put it like that. Can I now ask you in view of what you've just said, your government has spent 1000s on a very welcome carer aware campaign. There's your newly released carers strategy. Isn't this pressure and it must be pressure in some form even something that the board appear to be putting on unpaid carers. Do you think it's unacceptable in terms of your campaign? Of course, you might think it's the counterproductive thinking.

**A:** I don't think the board will be trying to put pressure on unpaid carers. What it is trying to do is to appeal to people who have given incredibly generously of their time, their commitment to see if there's anything more that they would be able to contribute at a point when the whole system is under such enormous pressure. So I hope nobody feels that they are being pressurised into doing things. You will know much more than me just how dedicated and committed unpaid carers in Wales have been. And I think the appeal from the board is that where people feel able to do a bit more that we will find a way of making that happen in order to try to relieve some of the pressure that is undoubtedly

there. For people who can only manage through the day where there is paid and specialist care available to allow them to go on living in their own homes or to be released from hospital back to where they would much rather be.

Thanks!

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**Irrelevant & Sensitive**