

**NOTE OF CABINET CALL, 12 DECEMBER 2021**

THE PRIME MINISTER said that the Omicron variant of Covid-19 (coronavirus) was spreading across the United Kingdom. There were now 3,127 cases of Omicron in the UK, up by 1,239 on the previous day. This demonstrated a rapid increase in the transmission of the new variant. The Chief Medical Officers of the four nations had agreed that the UK's Covid alert level should be raised from Level Three to Level Four given the increasing levels of transmission. Whilst it was not yet known how severe this variant would be, it was increasingly clear that two doses of the AstraZeneca vaccine were not as effective at stopping Omicron transmission as they had been for Delta.

Continuing, THE PRIME MINISTER said that the one variable that was in the Government's control was the number of boosters that could be put into arms. The UK had already delivered the fastest booster programme in Europe. Now was the time to go further and faster. The Government had previously set a target for every adult being offered a booster by the end of January 2022. But they could do better. He intended to launch that day a new mission, an 'Omicron Emergency Boost' to get the nation boosted faster. Every adult should now be offered the vaccine by the end of December 2021. This would require matching the numbers of daily vaccinations that the NHS achieved in the first part of the vaccination programme, day after day. This effort would be supported by the military and Home Office with the NHS looking to bigger vaccination sites and public venues and changing clinical rules to enable greater throughput in vaccination centres. The current 15 minute observation period for each individual after a jab would be put aside for the moment to enable vaccines to be administered as quickly as possible. The Government would work closely with the devolved administrations to support them in offering boosters across the United Kingdom at the same accelerated rate.

Continuing, THE PRIME MINISTER said that every organ of the state needed to contribute whatever was needed to this effort. Cabinet colleagues should offer the National Director and Senior Responsible Officer for the NHS Vaccination Programme and the NHS every assistance needed. This would require difficult choices, including the NHS deprioritising some activity. But if the Government could accelerate the booster campaign in this way, they could make a huge difference to the preparedness of the nation for this new strain of the virus. This approach would not involve further restrictions and only minimal impact on the economy. Even though taking this additional step might not be enough to deal with the variant, it was plainly right to pursue it.

Concluding, THE PRIME MINISTER said that communications to the public needed to emphasise that the risk of Omicron causing significant pressure on the NHS and deaths was serious. The evidence was that the Omicron wave could be devastating; the public should ignore those who seemed to think it was a mild threat akin to the common cold. He would be delivering a press conference that evening to hammer home the point, announce the booster target and encourage take-up.

THE GOVERNMENT'S CHIEF MEDICAL OFFICER said that Omicron cases were doubling every two to three days. There was no sign of the variant slowing down and it would become the dominant strain in London shortly. The UK was already seeing

hospitalisations and hospitalisations continued to rise in South Africa, where the spread of the variant was further advanced. Whilst there was not yet conclusive evidence of the severity of infection from Omicron, it was clear that a third booster dose was better than having two vaccines and would make a real difference. The UK faced significant risks of a combination of people in the NHS with the new variant and wider illness in the economy.

THE GOVERNMENT'S CHIEF SCIENTIFIC ADVISER said the Government needed to be extremely wary. The Omicron wave was going to come quickly given the speed of doubling. This created the risk of many people being ill and absent from work at the same time. Boosters were much more effective than two doses of the AstraZeneca vaccine in protecting against transmission.

THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE said that this was a race against the virus. Boosters made all the difference. The NHS was reprioritising to deliver this mission. More vaccine centres would be opened, and the opening hours of existing centres were being extended. Some GP appointments would be reprioritised. He was grateful for the support already being provided by HM Treasury and the Ministry of Defence and discussions were underway with other departments about how they could assist the effort.

In discussion, the following points were made:

- a) the Department for Work and Pensions stood ready to help and would release staff across the country for this. To support this, the Department needed clear requests for staffing to be made area by area so that people could quickly be made available;
- b) there should be a very strong message to the 4.2 million unvaccinated people that Omicron would find them so they needed to get vaccinated;
- c) although there were implications for individual freedoms there needed to be some incentives for people to be vaccinated. Vaccine passports and other measures were already in place in other countries; and
- d) as well as the working with the Devolved Administrations on this renewed push on the booster programme, it would be important and to secure UK wide agreement on the introduction of any further restrictions.

Summing up, THE PRIME MINISTER said that he believed that the Government's approach was the right one. The UK's economy remained much more open than those of other countries. The booster programme was central to UK success and boosters should be included in the proposed certification regime. It was vital to build on that success and make sure everyone acted to get boosted now.

The Cabinet:

- took note.

OFFICIAL-SENSITIVE

Attendees:

The Rt Hon Boris Johnson MP (chair)  
The Rt Hon Dominic Raab MP  
The Rt Hon Elizabeth Truss MP  
The Rt Hon Priti Patel MP  
The Rt Hon Ben Wallace MP  
The Rt Hon Michael Gove MP  
The Rt Hon Sajid Javid MP  
The Rt Hon Stephen Barclay MP  
The Rt Hon Alok Sharma MP  
The Rt Hon Anne-Marie Trevelyan MP  
The Rt Hon Dr Thérèse Coffey MP  
The Rt Hon Nadhim Zahawi MP  
The Rt Hon George Eustice MP  
The Rt Hon Grant Shapps MP  
The Rt Hon Brandon Lewis CBE MP  
The Rt Hon Alister Jack MP  
The Rt Hon Simon Hart MP  
The Rt Hon Baroness Evans of Bowes Park  
The Rt Hon Nadine Dorries MP  
The Rt Hon Lord Frost of Allenton CMG  
The Rt Hon Oliver Dowden CBE MP  
The Rt Hon Mark Spencer MP  
The Rt Hon Simon Clarke MP  
The Rt Hon Jacob Rees-Mogg MP  
The Rt Hon Suella Braverman QC MP  
The Rt Hon Kit Malthouse MP  
The Rt Hon Michelle Donelan MP  
The Rt Hon Nigel Adams MP  
Professor Chris Whitty CB  
Sir Patrick Vallance

Secretariat

S Case  
S Ridley  
M Sweeney  
L Neal

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| <b>Name</b> |
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CABINET SECRETARIAT  
14 DECEMBER 2021