

Covid-19 update

THE PRIME MINISTER said that he wanted to advise the Cabinet on the latest picture on Covid-19 (coronavirus). A new variant from South Africa had been identified. Several Southern African countries had already been added to the Government travel Red-list as a result. There were a few cases already in the UK. This variant seemed to spread extremely fast. There was a strong theoretical risk that this variant posed, of vaccine escape. The risk of vaccine escape did not mean that current vaccines were outmoded; it was more important than ever for people to get a booster vaccine dose. The more immunity people had the fewer deaths there would be from Omicron. Thus the latest variant was passing from person to person very easily and affecting older people at a time of year that was already challenging for their health. The Government must take a precautionary approach and in the meantime get more boosters in people's arms.

Continuing, THE PRIME MINISTER said that there were three approaches being adopted that day which would slow the arrival of the variant in the UK. The first was asking passengers on the second day of their arrival in the UK to take a Polymerase Chain Reaction (PCR) test and to self isolate ahead of that test. This measure was proportionate and should not be an overwhelming disaster for the travel industry; people could continue to travel and the measure was less draconian than some countries were considering. The second measure was to tighten the rules for the use of face coverings in settings like retail and transport. The full details would be set out to the public to make it as clear as possible. This rule change would send a clear signal to the public to change behaviour. The final approach was to require that all case of Omicron self isolated for fourteen days. This rule would be time limited and reviewed in three weeks time. These three steps were intended to buy more time for boosters to be delivered and for Government and scientists to know what they were dealing with. This was

not locking the country down, it was a proportionate and precautionary step in the face of a troubling new variant.

THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE said that these were three big changes. The Government would learn more in this time. Live samples of the virus were being assessed in Porton Down. There would be more time for boosters. The Joint Committee on Immunisation and Vaccination may broaden the scope of the roll out. Antivirals were already available and worked differently from vaccinations.

THE GOVERNMENT'S CHIEF MEDICAL ADVISOR said that there would be more cases across the UK and Europe. The measures proposed today would help slow the spread. These steps would help avoid the risk of cancelling Christmas. Over the next three to four weeks the Government would need to wait and see.

THE GOVERNMENT'S CHIEF SCIENTIFIC ADVISOR said that he wanted to reinforce that the current two doses of vaccinations were less effective and so the booster roll out was more important. Vaccination was our biggest defence.

In discussion the following points were made:

- a) there were enough vaccination courses available to treat the whole population. All vaccination centres should be open for seven days a week so the roll out should accelerate quickly; and
- b) while it was important to act, the situation with travel companies needed to avoid returning to square one. The proposal for a day two PCR test was sensible as it meant people only had to self isolate until getting the results. It was helpful to send the message that the Government was not shutting down the country again.

Summing up, THE PRIME MINISTER said that these measures would not include a signal to work from home or avoid public transport. That spectre should not be evoked although these steps would be considered as part of a plan B response if needed. The Delta variant was in hand with current public health measures but Omicron needed to be addressed. He was grateful to colleagues for their time that day. He hoped everyone agreed that the proposed measures in the face of the Omicron variant were responsible and proportionate; to avoid more draconian measures later.

The Cabinet

- took note