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The Independent Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE)

The Independent SAGE

Covid Protection and Support Strategy: January 2022

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Submitted to The UK Government and the People of Great Britain
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Since December 1st England has reported over 3 million Covid cases, now almost entirely due to the Omicron variant, with over a million cases reported in the last week alone. With positivity rates rising rapidly and the testing system running at capacity, it is certain that these numbers are an underestimate. ONS infection survey reported that 1 in 15 people in England had Covid in the last week of 2021.

SAGE warned repeatedly that this rapid increase in cases would lead to unsustainable pressure on the NHS in January 2022 with only “Plan B” mitigation measures, even with good booster uptake, and even if Omicron is less harmful than Delta. While restrictions on social contact in December could have been effective in averting a crisis, now it is too late. Social mixing over the festive period has already resulted in increased infections which will feed through into increased social disruption, hospitalisations and deaths over the coming weeks.

However, it still remains critical to take action now in order to ensure that the crisis is not prolonged and that, as infections fall, they stay low. The Government refuse to countenance anything beyond their ‘Plan B’ measures on the grounds that they do not want to restrict or lockdown the public. However, the key measures that are now required are less a matter of restrictions than of communicating the information, establishing the protections and providing the support that are necessary for people to be able to keep themselves and their community in good health. They centre on making environments safer (including, critically, schools) and thereby increasing the confidence with which all sections of the community, including the most vulnerable, can fully participate in society. Hence, they are not only good for physical health but also for mental health and for the economy.

The Government measures we propose are as follows:

Communications

- Provide clear and consistent information concerning the risks posed by COVID, with emphasis on the communal nature of the risk and the communal impact of our behaviours.
- Revise the list of symptoms of COVID to reflect those associated with Omicron (runny nose, headache, fatigue, sneezing and sore throat) and encourage people with these symptoms to isolate and get tested.
- Ensure that the airborne nature of COVID is clearly communicated, with an emphasis on masks and good indoor air quality as the main protections.
- Stress the need to reduce the number of unnecessary social contacts to minimise spread.

Protections

- Promote work from home where possible until at least the end of February

- Urge Universities and Colleges to move teaching online where possible until at least the end of February
- Provide CO2 monitors and ensure ventilation/filtration in all school classrooms and all indoor public venues
- Require high quality masks (FFP2 minimum) in indoor public places, with free provision to all who qualify for free prescriptions
- Ensure adequate supply of LFD tests and stress the critical importance of self-testing before contact with others outside the home.
- Increase vaccination through community engagement, easy accessibility and paid time off, as well as urgent consideration of extension to under 12s
- Enable global production and distribution of vaccines as necessary for our long-term protection

Support

- Provide full 'wrap-around' support to all people required to isolate, and adequate sick pay for those who are unwell with COVID
- Provide free digital connectivity for all and ensure availability of laptops for every student and school pupil
- Institute a comprehensive package of support for businesses experiencing effects of reduced economic activity due to surging COVID cases and work from home measures.
- Establish grants to businesses and other venues to monitor and improve air quality

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