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Opposition to working from home is untenable

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So much for living with the virus, or vaccines being our way out of this Covid purgatory. Ditto “sticking with Plan A” as Sajid Javid promised recently. And what happened to waiting until Dec 18 to make a decision on tighter Covid rules?

Our embattled Prime Minister insists Plan B “is not a lockdown”, and indeed it is not. But who would bet against one this winter now, even though the country was promised it was all-but unthinkable? Will schools close again too? How long before mandatory vaccinations are on the table? Again, nothing would surprise from a shambolic administration that has done more about-turns than a caffeinated drill sergeant.

Just two weeks after the world first learned of the omicron variant emerging in South Africa, here we are again, the mother of all distraction tactics from an illicit cheese-and-wine gathering that makes the Barnard Castle affair look like a storm in a teacup.

Masks are now mandatory for most indoor venues; vaccine passports for major events; and already, a return to working from home, although Christmas parties are still on. In short, the usual cocktail of contradictions that sounds like it was brewed together at a lockdown drinking session round at Boris and Carrie’s.

Everyone has had enough of corona restrictions and accompanying mixed messaging

but the one that this government may live to regret the most is a knee-jerk working from home edict. Each time the order is given to stay away from the office, working patterns that were intended to be temporary become even more entrenched with profound implications for the economy and society.

For now, ministers continue to behave as though there will be a day in the future when the country, encouraged by pleas from Westminster and employers, dutifully scrambles back to their desks en masse, leaving only the immunodeficient, vaccine refuseniks and those simply too scared to leave their homes, still hunched over laptops at the kitchen table.

Our leaders are kidding themselves. One only has to look at the response from major employers to quickly understand that working from home is already here to stay. The Government just doesn’t want to admit it.

Such reticence is understandable. A recent study from consulting giant McKinsey concluded that a fifth of the population could work remotely three days a week, though potentially as many as five. At that level, there would be up to four times as many



people working from home than pre-pandemic, which would have a serious impact on city centres, transport and consumer spending.

The slowdown is already being felt from the reintroduction of masks alone. With dining out at its lowest level since indoor hospitality reopened in May and pub operators reporting a wave of cancelled Christmas bookings, the hospitality industry has renewed calls for tailored support to avoid a flurry of bankruptcies. Even the indomitable Mike Ashley is worried about the “shadow of uncertainty” from omicron.

Long-term, a study from the University of Sheffield estimates a cost to the economy of £3bn in lost consumer spending from city centres, assuming the average person works from home just one day a week. It also warns of a “doughnut effect”, where major cities empty out as posh suburbs thrive.

Yet, McKinsey found that more than half the workforce has little or no opportunity for remote work, with many of these low wage jobs. The risk therefore is the creation of a two-tier society that exacerbates social inequality even further.

Instead of burying their head in the sand and pretending that these long-term structural trends don't exist, the government should start to plan accordingly. Instead the constant flip-flopping is destroying its authority to dictate working patterns. Having only just started to return to the office in meaningful numbers, people are now being ordered back home again.

PwC has already said it will allow staff to continue to come into the office but it works both ways. The next time the Prime Minister evokes the plight of Pret a Manger in a desperate bid to encourage workers back to the office, will employers, or indeed employees, pay the slightest attention?

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