

Health Secretary statement from COVID-19 press conference

Good afternoon and welcome.

Today marks the start of the next chapter in this country's fight against COVID-19.

A few hours ago, the Prime Minister announced that thanks to the progress we've all made we will be lifting the Plan B measures and returning to our original Plan A.

This is a moment that we can all be proud of.

The culmination of a brilliant national mission that's helped us to withstand the Omicron wave and restore more freedom to this country.

It's a reminder of what this country can accomplish when we all work together.

We'll shortly be hearing from the Chief Medical Advisor to the UK Health Security Agency Dr Susan Hopkins but before we do, I wanted to talk about how we got to this important milestone and what this means for our fight against this virus.

Let's start with how we got here.

Back in July, we made the decision to take Step 4 of our roadmap so we could roll back the restrictions and move closer to normal life. This wasn't an easy decision but taking this step when we did backed by the warmer weather and the school holidays. It helped us to enjoy the greatest possible freedom for a number of months.

As I said when I announced this change, this showed us how we can learn to live with COVID.

But I also warned that a more harmful new variant would have the potential to set us back.

Four months later our scientists, learning from their colleagues in South Africa, were among the first in the world to help identify a new variant of Omicron.

A variant that was capable of spreading faster than any COVID-19 variant that had come before it.

Spurred by this more transmissible variant, case numbers rose to record levels and incredibly, over a third of the UK's total number of confirmed COVID-19 cases happened over the last eight weeks.

There was a lot that we didn't know about Omicron.

But we did know that we were in a stronger position than the previous winter thanks to that decision to open up in the summer, and to the solid defences that we've built over time.

So we decided not to return to the lockdown measures, as many countries in Europe have.

Because I've always been extremely conscious of the impact that blanket restrictions can have, for instance on jobs, on education and mental health.

Instead, we pursued a different path. One that allowed us to take a balanced and proportionate approach.

We put in place the Plan B contingency measures that were set out in our Autumn and Winter Plan.

These measures left us with far fewer restrictions than most in Europe, and they bought us valuable time. Time that we could use to assess the Omicron variant and reinforce this country's pharmaceutical defences.

Since we announced Plan B, 15 million people have stepped forward to get their boosters.

We've smashed records again and again, including a record 1.06 million UK vaccinations in a single day. We've also massively expanded our capacity for testing, and we expect to have some 400 million lateral flow tests available this month alone – that's quadruple our pre-Omicron plans.

On top of this, we've secured even more antivirals and treatments, and deployed them directly to those people with the highest risk. Thanks to this huge collective effort, we're more boosted than any large country in Europe, we've created the largest testing programme of any country in Europe and we've procured more antivirals than any country in Europe. That's why we're the most open country in Europe, and today we announced how we have announced plans to go even further.

Our plan was to use the time that Plan B gave us, to give ourselves extra power in our fight against Omicron. This plan has worked, and the data shows that Omicron is in retreat.

Today's ONS data shows a fall in infections, including in older age groups.

Hospitalisations have also fallen over the past week, and the number of COVID patients in intensive care beds is now at the same level as it was back in July.

I've always said that we'd open up the country as soon as the data supports it, and earlier today that's why we announced three important changes as part of our return to Plan A.

First, starting immediately, the government is ending the guidance on working

from home, and I know that many people have already been starting to talk to their employers about arrangements to return safely to work.

Second, from the start of next Thursday, mandatory certification based on vaccines and tests will end, but of course, organisations can still choose to use the NHS COVID Pass voluntarily.

Third, also starting next Thursday, we'll no longer legally mandate the wearing of face masks.

But we suggest that they are worn in enclosed, crowded places, especially where you come into contact with people who you don't normally meet.

These changes will take effect even sooner in classrooms, where we will no longer require face coverings from tomorrow, and the Department for Education will shortly remove the guidance on their use in communal areas.

As well as these changes, we're also exploring where else we can ease restrictions.

We're looking to replace legal requirements on self-isolation with advice and guidance and, in the coming days, I'll be setting out our plans to further ease restrictions on visits to care homes.

The steps that we've announced today represent a major milestone. But it's not the end of the road, and we shouldn't see this as the finish line.

Because we cannot eradicate this virus, and its future variants. Instead, we must learn to live with COVID, in the same way that we've learnt to live with flu, and we'll be setting out our long term plan for living with COVID-19 this Spring.

We must stay vigilant, and be mindful that there could be bumps in the road ahead.

Although we've worked hard to make sure the NHS will be ready and resilient, building Nightingale surge hubs, and signing new deals with the independent sector, it is still facing significant pressure this winter. Even before the Omicron wave we had a COVID backlog of elective care, and now unfortunately that COVID backlog will be larger still. So we must proceed with caution.

A pandemic is a marathon not a sprint. Even on this day of progress, I'd urge everyone to think about what they can do to keep the virus at bay. Whether it's washing your hands, letting in fresh air, or getting tested and self-isolating if you test positive.

But the best step that we can all take is to get vaccinated. It was the jabs that have got us this far, and the jabs can keep us here too.

I'm so grateful to all the staff and volunteers and the military, everyone who made the rollout a reality, and to everyone who stepped up to get your jab.

We asked you to come forward, and you did, in your millions, and it's because of you that we've been able to take these steps today.

But for as long as there are people who haven't been protected, we know that our defences aren't as strong as they should be, and the NHS will be under more pressure than it should be.

So please: if you haven't had your first, second or third jab, it's time to come forward.

Help us to keep this success story going, and protect the incredible progress that we've all made.

Now I'd like to hand over to Susan to talk us through some of the latest data