

# PM statement at Covid press conference: 21 February 2022

Good evening, when the pandemic began, we had little knowledge of this virus and none about the vaccines and treatments we have today.

So there was no option but to use government regulations to protect our NHS and save lives.

But those restrictions on our liberties have brought grave costs to our economy, our society, and the chances of our children.

So from the outset, we were clear that we must chart a course back towards normality as rapidly as possible, by developing the vaccines and treatments that could gradually replace those restrictions.

And as a result of possibly the greatest national effort in our peacetime history, that is exactly what we have done.

Thanks to our brilliant scientists.

Thanks to the extraordinary men and women of our NHS and to every one of you who has come forwards to get jabbed and get boosted – the United Kingdom has become the first country in the world to administer an approved vaccine, and the fastest major European nation to roll out both the vaccines and the booster to half our population.

We have emerged from the teeth of the pandemic before many others, retaining one of the most open economies and societies in Europe and the fastest growth in the G7 last year.

And while the pandemic is not over, we have passed the peak of the Omicron wave, with cases falling, and hospitalisations in England now fewer than 10,000 and still falling, and so now we have the chance to complete that transition back towards normality, while maintaining the contingencies to respond to a resurgence or a new variant.

As we have done throughout the past two years, we will continue to work with the Devolved Administrations as they decide how to take forwards their own plans.

In England, we will remove all remaining domestic restrictions in law.

From this Thursday, it will no longer be law to self-isolate if you test positive, and so we will also end the provision of self-isolation support payments, although Statutory Sick Pay can still be claimed for a further month.

If you're a fully vaccinated close contact or under 18 you will no longer be asked to test daily for seven days.

And if you are close contact who is not fully vaccinated you will no longer be required to self-isolate.

Until 1 April, we will still advise you to stay at home if you test positive.

But after that, we will encourage people with Covid symptoms to exercise personal responsibility, just as we encourage people who may have flu to be considerate towards others.

It is only because levels of immunity are so high and deaths are now, if anything, below where you would normally expect for this time of year that we can lift these restrictions.

And it is only because we know Omicron is less severe, that testing for Omicron on the colossal scale we have been doing is now much less valuable in preventing serious illness.

We should be proud that the UK established the biggest testing programme per person of any large country in the world.

But its budget in the last financial year was bigger than the Home Office – and it cost – the testing programme cost – £2 billion just last month alone.

So we must scale back and prioritise our resources for the most vulnerable.

From today, staff and students in most education and childcare settings will no longer be asked to undertake twice weekly asymptomatic testing.

And from 1st April, we will end free symptomatic and asymptomatic testing for the general public.

But we will continue providing free symptomatic tests to those at the highest risk from Covid.

And in line with the practice of many other countries, we are working with retailers to ensure you will always be able to buy a test.

We should be clear the pandemic is not over and there may be significant resurgences.

Our scientists are certain there will be new variants and it's very possible that those will be worse than Omicron.

So we will continue to protect the most vulnerable with targeted vaccinations and treatments and we have bought enough doses of vaccine to anticipate a wide range of possible JCVI recommendations.

Today this includes a new Spring booster, which will be offered to those aged 75 and over, older care home residents, and those over 12 who are immunosuppressed.

We will also retain disease surveillance systems and contingency measures which can ensure our resilience in the face of future waves or new variants.

And we will build on the innovations that defined the very best of our response to the pandemic, including continuing the work of the Vaccines Task Force, which has already secured contracts with manufacturers trialling new vaccines which could provide protection against new variants.

Today is not the day we can declare victory over Covid, because this virus is not going away.

But it is the day when all the efforts of the last two years finally enabled us to protect ourselves while restoring our liberties in full.

And after two of the darkest grimmest years in our peacetime history, I do believe this is a moment of pride for our nation and a source of hope for all that we can achieve in the years to come.

Thank you very much.