

PM statement on living with COVID: 21 February 2022

PM statement in the House Of Commons

Mr Speaker, with permission I will make a statement on our [strategy for living with Covid](#).

And before I begin, I know the whole House will join me in sending our best wishes to Her Majesty the Queen for a full and swift recovery.

It is a reminder that this virus has not gone away, but because of the efforts we have made as a country over the past two years we can now deal with it in a very different way, moving from government restrictions to personal responsibility.

So we protect ourselves without losing our liberties – and maintaining our contingency capabilities so we can respond rapidly to any new variant.

Mr Speaker, the UK was the first country in the world to administer an approved vaccine, and the first European nation to protect half our population with at least one dose.

And having made that decision to refocus our NHS this Winter on the campaign to Get Boosted Now, we were the first major European nation to boost half our population too.

And it is because of the extraordinary success of this vaccination programme, that we have been able to lift our restrictions earlier than other comparable countries, opening up last summer, while others remained closed, and keeping things open this winter, when others shut down again, making us one of the most open economies and societies in Europe, with the fastest growth anywhere in the G7 last year.

And while the pandemic is not over, we have now passed the peak of the Omicron wave, with cases falling, hospitalisations in England now fewer than 10,000 and still falling, and the link between infection and severe disease substantially weakened.

Over 71 per cent of all adults are now boosted in England, including 93 per cent of those 70 and over, and together with the treatments and scientific understanding of the virus we have built up, we now have sufficient levels of immunity to complete the transition from protecting people with government interventions to relying on vaccines and treatments as our first line of defence.

As we have throughout the past two years, we will continue to work closely with the Devolved Administrations as they decide how to take forward their own plans, and today's strategy shows how we will structure our approach in England around four principles.

First, we will remove all remaining domestic restrictions in law.

From this Thursday, 24 February, we will end the legal requirement to self-isolate following a positive test, and so we will also end self-isolation support payments, although Covid provisions for Statutory Sick Pay can still be claimed for a further month.

We will end routine contact tracing, and no longer ask fully vaccinated close contacts and those under 18 to test daily for seven days.

And we will remove the legal requirement for close contacts who are not fully vaccinated to self-isolate.

Until 1 April, we will still advise people who test positive to stay at home. But after that, we will encourage people with Covid-19 symptoms to exercise personal responsibility, just as we encourage people who may have flu to be considerate to others.

Mr Speaker, 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 much less important, and 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 this came at a vast cost.

The Testing, Tracing and Isolation budget in 2020-21 exceeded the entire budget of the Home Office.

It cost a further £15.7 billion in this financial year, and £2 billion in January alone at the height of the Omicron wave.

We must now scale this back.

From today, we are removing the guidance for staff and students in most education and childcare settings to undertake twice weekly asymptomatic testing.

And from 1st April, when Winter is over and the virus will spread less easily, we will end free symptomatic and asymptomatic testing for the general public.

We will continue to provide free symptomatic tests to the oldest age groups and those most vulnerable to Covid.

And in line with the practice in many other countries, we are working with retailers to ensure that everyone who wants to can buy a test.

From April 1st, we will also no longer recommend the use of voluntary Covid-status certification, although the NHS app will continue to allow people to indicate their vaccination status for international travel.

And Mr Speaker, the government will also expire all temporary provisions of the Coronavirus Act.

Of the original 40, 20 have already expired, 16 will expire on 24 March, and the last 4 relating to innovations in public service will expire six months later, after we have made those improvements permanent via other means.

Second, we will continue to protect the most vulnerable with targeted vaccines and treatments.

The UK government has procured enough doses of vaccine to anticipate a wide range of possible JCVI recommendations. And today we are taking further action to guard against a possible resurgence of the virus, accepting JCVI advice for a new Spring booster offered to those aged 75 and over, older care home residents, and those over 12 who are immunosuppressed.

The UK is also leading the way on antivirals and therapeutics, with our AntiVirals Task Force securing a supply of almost 5 million – more per head than any other country in Europe.

Third, SAGE advise there is considerable uncertainty about the future path of the pandemic, and there may of course be significant resurgences.

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

So we will maintain our resilience to manage and respond to these risks, including our world-leading ONS survey, which will allow us to continue tracking the virus in granular detail, with regional and age breakdowns helping us spot surges as and where they happen, and our laboratory networks will help us understand the evolution of the virus and identify any changes in characteristics.

We will prepare and maintain our capabilities to ramp up testing.

We will continue to support other countries in developing their own surveillance capabilities, because a new variant can emerge anywhere.

And we will meet our commitment to donate 100 million vaccine doses by June, as our part of the agreement at the UK's G7 summit to provide a billion doses to vaccinate the world over the next year.

In all circumstances, our aim will be to manage and respond to future risks through more routine public health interventions, with pharmaceutical interventions as the first line of defence.

Fourth, we will build on the innovation that has defined the best of our response to the pandemic.

The Vaccines Task Force will continue to ensure the UK has access to effective vaccines as they become available, already securing contracts with manufacturers trialling bi-valent vaccines, which would provide protection against Covid variants.

The Therapeutics Task Force will continue to support seven national priority clinical trial platforms focused on prevention, novel treatments and treatment for long-Covid.

We are refreshing our biosecurity strategy to protect the UK against natural zoonosis and accidental laboratory leaks, as well as the potential for biological threats emanating from state and non-state actors.

And building on the Five Point Plan I set out at the United Nations and the agreements reached at the UK's G7 last year, we are working with our international partners on future pandemic preparedness, including through a new pandemic treaty, an effective early warning system or Global Pandemic Radar, and a mission to make safe and effective diagnostics, therapeutics and vaccines available within the first 100 days of a future pandemic threat being identified.

And we will be hosting a global pandemic preparedness summit next month.

And Mr Speaker, Covid will not suddenly disappear.

So those who would wait for a total end to this war before lifting the remaining regulations, would be restricting the liberties of the British people for a long time to come.

This government does not believe that is right or necessary.

Restrictions pose a heavy toll on our economy, our society, our mental wellbeing, and the life chances of our children.

And we do not need to pay that cost any longer.

We have a population that is protected by the biggest vaccination programme in our history.

We have the antivirals, the treatments, and the scientific understanding of this virus, and we have the capabilities to respond rapidly to any resurgence or new variant.

And Mr Speaker it is time to get our confidence back.

We don't need laws to compel people to be considerate of others.

We can rely on that sense of responsibility towards one another, providing practical advice in the knowledge that people will follow it to avoid infecting loved ones and others.

So let us learn to live with this virus and continue protecting ourselves without restricting our freedoms.

And in that spirit, I commend this Statement to the House.