

England returns to Plan A as regulations on face coverings and COVID Passes change today

- From today and because of the success of the booster rollout, all measures under Plan B have been lifted meaning face coverings are no longer mandatory in indoor venues
- COVID Passes are now voluntary for large events and nightclubs and people are no longer being advised to work from home
- It comes as hospital admissions stabilise, Omicron infections decline and the number of people in intensive care with COVID-19 continues to fall

From 00:01 on Thursday 27th January England returned to Plan A measures following the huge success of the vaccination programme and falling Omicron infections.

Plan B measures were initially introduced on 8 December 2021 to slow the spread of the Omicron variant and buy time for scientists to better understand it and get more jabs in arms. The Get Boosted Now appeal was launched, bringing the date for all adults to be offered a booster to the New Year.

This target was reached, and over 37 million boosters have now administered. The vaccination programme has succeeded in reducing the risk of severe infection and hospitalisations, easing pressure on the NHS. Hospital admissions have now stabilised and the number of people in intensive care units with COVID-19 continues to fall.

As of today the lifting of Plan B means:

- mandatory COVID-19 certification will end, but venues may choose to use the NHS COVID Pass voluntarily;
- face coverings will not be required by law in indoor venues;
- local directors of public health are still able to recommend face coverings in communal areas only in education settings within their area, but only where the department and public health experts judge the measures to be proportionate – this is a temporary measure;
- infection prevention control guidance continues to require face coverings be worn in health and care settings, including primary care and pharmacies;
- it is suggested that people wear face coverings in crowded and enclosed spaces where they might come into contact with people they do not normally meet; and
- it is still a legal requirement for those with COVID-19 to self-isolate for 10 days with the option to end self-isolation after 5 full days following two negative LFD tests.

As of Wednesday 19 January, the government no longer asked people to work from home. People should speak to their employers about arrangements for returning to the office, and should follow the Working Safely guidance.

Health and Social Care Secretary Sajid Javid said:

The tireless efforts of NHS and care staff, and the army of volunteers, as well as the phenomenal response of the British public means over 37 million people have been boosted. I want to thank everyone who has come forward to Get Boosted Now.

Our vaccines, testing and antivirals ensure we have some of the strongest defences in Europe and are allowing us to cautiously return to Plan A, restoring more freedoms to this country.

As we learn to live with Covid we need to be clear eyed that this virus is not going away so if you haven't already – please come forward for your first, second or booster jab.

Today's changes follows a review last week of data including infections, vaccine efficacy, COVID-19 pressures on the NHS, workforce absences, public behaviours, and views from the scientific community.

Vaccines continue to be the main defence against COVID-19 with data from the UK Health Security Agency (UKHSA) showing a booster is 92% effective in preventing hospitalisation from two weeks after it is administered and is 65% to 75% effective against symptomatic infection from Omicron. More than 83% of people aged over 12 in the UK have had their second dose and of those eligible, 81% have received their booster.

Though infections continue to fall, Omicron remains prevalent across the country – especially in the young and the elderly. Remaining cautious and taking precautionary measures is vital alongside vaccines and testing to control the spread of COVID-19. As the virus becomes endemic, the government will set out a long-term strategy for living with COVID-19 and replacing legal requirements on self-isolation with advice and guidance urging people with the virus to be careful and considerate of others.

The government and the UK Health Security Agency continues to monitor new variants to keep the country safe and are working with the World Health Organisation (WHO) and other national public health bodies to establish the International Pathogen Surveillance Network to improve surveillance around the world. The UK is also providing world-leading genomic sequencing capability through the New Variant Assessment Platform (NVAP).

Background information

The changes are not subject to vote as the regulations mandating face coverings in certain settings, and the use of COVID-19 passes have been allowed to expire, as of 23:59 on Wednesday 26 January.

To help do your bit as we learn to live with COVID-19, you should:

- Let fresh air in if you meet indoors, meeting outdoors is safer;
- Get tested, and self isolate if required;
- Continue to wear a face covering in crowded and enclosed spaces where you may come into contact with other people you do not normally meet;
- Try to stay at home if you are feeling unwell;
- Wash your hands;
- Download and use the NHS COVID-19 app;
- If you haven't already, Get Boosted Now;
- Confirmatory PCRs are no longer required after positive lateral flow results;
- Given the accessibility of LFDs, positive cases can end their self-isolation period after 5 full days if they test negative on day 5 and 6; and
- Fully vaccinated contacts can also avoid isolation by testing daily with LFDs.

[The work and leadership of the UN remain crucial in Afghanistan](#)

Thank you Madam President.

I also thank the Secretary General, SRSG Lyons, and Ms Seraj for their sobering briefings today, and I'm grateful to Ambassador Tirumurti for his update on the work of the 1988 committee.

Madam President, the situation in Afghanistan remains of deep concern. Over 20 million people, half the population, are in need of urgent assistance. The risks of a humanitarian catastrophe are real and urgent action is needed to avert economic collapse.

The work of UNAMA and UN leadership remain crucial. The United Kingdom welcomes the launch today of the Transitional Engagement Framework, a whole of UN system approach to provision of life saving assistance and support for basic human needs. Saving lives requires an adequately resourced, prioritised and coordinated UN-led international response. You have our support.

It also requires constructive engagement by the Taliban on delivery under humanitarian principles. We welcome the positive trajectory in the ability of

female humanitarians to deliver assistance to the most vulnerable.

The United Kingdom has shown our commitment to the Afghan people by doubling our aid to Afghanistan this financial year to £286 million and, importantly we have already disbursed £163 million of this money. We encourage others to support the UN's appeal and to release their generous commitments without delay.

We recognise humanitarian assistance can only go so far, there is also a need to address the liquidity crisis. We strongly support the UN and World Bank's efforts to find creative solutions.

We also welcome ongoing discussions between the World Bank and donors on repurposing a portion of the remaining \$1.2 billion Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund, in addition to the \$280 million already released in order to support essential health services and food security and nutrition.

Madam President, this week's conference in Oslo has been an important opportunity for the UK, other donors and civil society to communicate expectations directly to the Taliban. Expectations set by this Council in resolution 2593.

We are deeply concerned in particular by reports of an increase in reprisals against former security forces and government officials as well as attacks against minority groups and detentions of civil society, particularly female activists. We call on the Taliban to respect the amnesty they issued in August for all Afghans and to carry out transparent investigations into all allegations of human rights abuses.

As we've heard clearly from Ms Seraj today, and others, women's rights have also been sharply restricted, with many women unable to work and girls kept away from school. The Taliban's assurances that girls will be able to return to school on 21 of March is welcome – the international community will be watching closely. Schools were already segregated under the previous government and many parents want to see their daughters educated.

Sustainable peace and stability in Afghanistan will rely on a politics reflective of Afghanistan's rich diversity and we continue to call for inclusive governance.

On terrorism, we welcome the Taliban's commitments to tackle terrorist groups, and urge them to ensure that Al Qa'eda, Islamic State and other terrorist groups can never again organise, raise funds or plan attacks from Afghan territory. We took careful note of SRSF Lyon's remarks in this regard, and we will continue to calibrate our approach to the Taliban according to their actions against these core priorities, not just their words. Madam President, it's vital that we in this Council continue to speak with one voice in support of the UN's work in the months ahead. Thank you.

Protecting civilians from the increasing urbanisation of conflict

Thank you very much, Prime Minister Støre, and our thanks also to the Secretary-General, Mr Maurer and Ms Al-Mutawakel for their briefings. The United Kingdom is grateful to Norway for convening this important event – this importance is reflected by the presence of the Vice President of Ghana and the Foreign Minister of Gabon.

As we have heard today, civilians are paying a heavy price for the increasing urbanisation of protracted conflict. All too often civilians find themselves the victims of terrible violations of international humanitarian law, as witnessed during the appalling barrel bombing campaigns in Syria, and in conflicts seen in Yemen, Ethiopia, Mali, and elsewhere, which have caused devastating suffering and long-term effects.

Full adherence to international humanitarian law is fundamental to the protection of civilians. Compliance is not an aspiration – it is an essential legal and moral obligation. Operating in an urban environment is difficult and dangerous, but those doing so must take all feasible precautions to minimise harm to civilians and damage to infrastructure. If a military operation cannot be conducted in compliance with the law, it must not take place. The international community can and must do more to assist, and pressure, states to protect their civilians.

How do we achieve this? First, we must engage more purposefully in the sharing of best practice to help all parties to conflict enhance their compliance with international humanitarian law. The United Kingdom has long provided specialist training to the armed forces of other states, including forces deployed in MONUSCO, MINUSCA, and AMISOM, to help build understanding and compliance.

Second, non-state armed groups need to understand their obligations under International Humanitarian Law and the importance of compliance. The United Kingdom supports organisations such as the International Committee of the Red Cross working to increase awareness. And we are also supporting research to improve our understanding of why non-state armed groups do or do not comply, and to identify approaches to improve adherence.

Third, we must work to ensure that those responsible for breaches of international humanitarian law are held to account. There can be no impunity for crimes committed in conflict.

So I want to welcome the work that is being led by Ireland to seek a political declaration on the use of explosive weapons in populated areas. The United Kingdom is committed to this process. It must serve to increase the protection of civilians without hindering legitimate and proportionate

military operations in urban areas.

Mr President, I would like to underscore the United Kingdom's own unwavering commitment to the full implementation of, and compliance with, international humanitarian law. Our defence policies have practical measures to protect civilians integrated at every stage of the operational process. We will continue to encourage others to do likewise, share best practice and condemn those who fail to meet their obligations.

Thank you, Mr President.

[Home Secretary agrees historic returns agreement with Serbia](#)

Press release

The new pact will mean quicker removals to Serbia and will help protect the UK's borders and communities



A landmark agreement to return Serbian nationals who have no right to be in the UK, including foreign criminals, has been signed by Home Secretary Priti Patel today.

The new pact will mean swifter and quicker removals to Serbia and will help protect the UK's borders and communities, in line with the Government's New Plan for Immigration.

Home Secretary Priti Patel said:

This Government's priority is keeping the people of this country safe, and we will stop at nothing to remove those with no right legal right to be in the UK, including foreign criminals.

Signing this agreement will strengthen our returns arrangements

with Serbia and will crack down on those who seek to abuse our hospitality.

This landmark deal delivers on our New Plan for Immigration and our commitment to streamline the appeals and judicial process which can be used to frustrate removals.

The returns agreement was signed by the Home Secretary and Serbian Minister of Interior, Aleksandar Vulin, as part of his visit to London today (Wednesday 26 January).

It strengthens the UK's ability to remove Serbian nationals who have no right to be in the UK. This includes failed asylum seekers, foreign national offenders, and individuals who have overstayed their visas.

This latest agreement follows the successful returns deal with Albania, signed by the Home Secretary in July last year. And in May 2021, the UK government signed a landmark migration agreement with India to support people coming to the UK through legal routes, while strengthening the removal of those with no right to be in the UK.

Since 2019, the UK has successfully returned 9,286 foreign national offenders from prisons, immigration removal centres and the community, delivering on the Government's promise to tackle illegal immigration and the harm it causes.

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UK and Guatemala celebrate the first anniversary of the implementation of the Association Agreement

The Association Agreement between Central America and the UK entered into force on 1st January 2021. To mark the first year of its implementation, the Business Commission for International Negotiations and Trade (CENCIT), the Ministry of Economy and the British Embassy held a virtual event.

Guatemalan companies actively exporting to the British market and British companies exporting to Guatemala were present to share their experiences and success stories in the framework of this bilateral trade. Especially during a first year in which trade faced unprecedented challenges and consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Guatemalan exporters of fruits and vegetables and a British exporter of

alcoholic beverages participated in the event. These companies represented the users of the agreement and commented on its correct implementation, which has been received positively by the private sector as it guaranteed commercial continuity between Guatemala and the UK, when the latter completed its exit from the European Union.

The Vice Minister of Integration and International Trade, Edith Flores de Molina, participated on behalf of the Ministry of Economy. The Ministry's key objectives are; to conduct negotiations of multilateral and bilateral trade agreements, follow up on the Central American economic integration process, negotiate free trade and investment treaties, and support the promotion of Guatemalan exports.

Bilateral trade between Guatemala and the UK, from July 2020 to June 2021, was £199m (approximately USD 260m), 1.4% more than the same period of the previous year, showing a positive trend to continue increasing. The main products exported from Guatemala to the UK were: fruits and vegetables, coffee, sugar, beverages and oilseeds; while the main British products exported to the Guatemalan market were: vehicles, beverages, chemicals, plastics and pharmaceuticals. 95% percent of the goods are currently free of tariffs and 1.2% are under tariff reduction and/or quota.

The UK and Guatemala are committed to keep working together to make efficient use of the agreement and encourage companies to utilise it, with a view to further increasing bilateral trade. Additionally, to take advantage of the framework provided by the agreement to enhance the collaboration of best and innovative sustainability practices.

To mark the event, the Deputy Head of Mission of the British Embassy, Barbara Amono-Oceng, stated:

We are very pleased to hear that the implementation of the Association Agreement has gone smoothly. The British Government has worked closely with its trading partners to ensure business continuity and provide certainty for companies. We are confident that trade with Guatemala will continue to increase, bringing greater opportunities for prosperity and development.

The Agreement promotes trade, investment and economic cooperation between the UK and Central American countries. By 2027, the vast majority of British goods will enter Central America at zero tariff.