

Health and Social Care Secretary's statement on coronavirus (COVID-19): 19 January 2022

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 – 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 8 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 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 3 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 learned 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 – the NHS 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 job, 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.

Bans for two directors who abused Bounce Back Loan scheme

Aamer Aslam, 39 from Huddersfield, and Razwan Ashraf, 31 from Keighley, were co-directors of Scholars Academy Ltd based in Brighouse, West Yorkshire. They have been disqualified for 11 and 10 years respectively.

Scholars was incorporated in December 2018 and purported to be a specialist tuition centre for children aged 5 to 17. Aamer Aslam applied for a Bounce Back Loan in May 2020 and provided an estimate of company turnover at £200,000.

Although it was permitted for a company to apply for a Bounce Back Loan (BBL) based on projected income in certain circumstances, the Insolvency Service investigation found that Scholars' bank statements showed maximum monthly income of just £640, suggesting that annual turnover was a maximum of £7,680. This meant the business would not have been eligible for a Bounce Back Loan, as it did not meet the £8,000 minimum annual turnover threshold.

Despite this, Scholars received a BBL of £50,000 in May 2020 and subsequently went into voluntary liquidation in January 2021. At the time of liquidation, the directors listed the company's liabilities to the bank as £7,000, but the bank later notified the liquidator that it was owed £50,000 by the company due to the BBL.

The Insolvency Service investigation found that as well as fraudulently inflating the company's turnover, Aslam and Ashraf used the BBL funds to make monthly payments to four individuals.

All four, one of whom was related to Ashraf, began receiving £2,000 per month following receipt of the BBL funds. Although Aslam and Ashraf claimed that these payments were genuine business expenses, there was no evidence to support this.

Separately, Razwan Ashraf was also sole director of another educational company, Progress First Ltd, which had been incorporated in January 2018.

Ashraf applied for a BBL in May 2020 and fraudulently declared in the application form that annual turnover in 2019 was £200,000, when Progress' bank statements showed that turnover was £38,973.

This resulted in Progress obtaining a BBL of £50,000 when it would only have been entitled to a BBL of £9,927.

As with Scholars, Ashraf claimed that the BBL funds were used to pay for company expenses. Regular payments were made to three individuals and no evidence has been produced to show that these payments were genuine business expenditure.

Ashraf has since repaid £35,000 to the liquidator to settle claims against him for the Progress BBL funds, and a further £25,000 in settlement of claims against both directors in relation to the BBL taken out by Scholars.

The Secretary of State accepted disqualification undertakings from both directors, with Aamer Aslam banned for 11 years, and Razwan Ashraf banned for 10 years.

The disqualification undertakings prevent both from directly, or indirectly, becoming involved in the promotion, formation, or management of a company, without the permission of the court.

Mike Smith, Chief Investigator for The Insolvency Service said:

Government loan schemes have provided a lifeline to millions of businesses across the UK – preserving their existence during the pandemic and protecting millions of jobs. As these cases show, The Insolvency Service will not hesitate to investigate and use its powers against those who appear to have abused the COVID-19 support schemes.

Notes to editors

Aamer Aslam is of Huddersfield and his date of birth is November 1982. His disqualification began on 2 November 2021 and runs to 1 November 2032.

Razwan Ashraf is of Keighley and his date of birth is April 1990. His disqualification began on 1 November 2021 and runs to November 2031.

Scholars Academy Ltd company registration number: 11707497

Progress First Ltd company registration number: 11133063

All directors have a duty to ensure their companies maintain proper accounting records. The use of a Bounce Back Loan must be for the economic benefit the business and not for personal use. Failure to account for how a

Bounce Back Loan was used, or using it for personal payments, can result in being disqualified as a director or the extension of bankruptcy restrictions.

Disqualification undertakings are the administrative equivalent of a disqualification order but do not involve court proceedings.

Persons subject to a disqualification order are bound by a [range of restrictions](#).

[Information about the work of the Insolvency Service, and how to complain about financial misconduct.](#)

Contact Press Office

You can also follow the Insolvency Service on:

[GAD publishes updated procurement guidance](#)

News story

New and refreshed guidance will help clients understand procurement rules that apply when a government or public sector body wishes to secure our services.



The Government Actuary's Department (GAD) has refreshed its information around procurement rules that apply where a government or other public body wishes to secure GAD's services.

New guidance

The guidance – [Procuring our services](#) – has been drafted in conjunction with the Government Legal Department and published online for the first time.

It reflects changes in the regulations in response to Brexit, guidance published by the Cabinet Office and the updated thresholds effective from this month.

Regulations and exemptions

In our guidance, we look at the legal requirements on public sector procurement. The Public Contracts Regulations 2015, as amended, are the key legislation for most public procurement rules.

Following Brexit, references to EU Directives have been replaced with UK based equivalents. A main change is that high value public contracts now need to be listed on the UK's Find a Tender service.

A key exemption from the regulations applies to Crown Bodies wishing to procure GAD's services (as GAD is itself a Crown Body). However, the organisation may still apply their own procurement rules.

We have also set out further information about other exemptions, thresholds, framework agreements and direct awards.

Making it easier to work with GAD

When organisations discover how actuaries can help, they want to know how to commission our services. As part of the guidance we have provided a visual summary of the decision process.

GAD's Head of Business Development, Ian Rogers, said: "We created this guidance to help current and prospective clients navigate the procurement requirements. This should make it easier for them to work with GAD."

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[£1.3million competition launched to find next Telexistence technology](#)

The Telexistence programme is a joint initiative between the Nuclear Decommissioning Authority (NDA), Defence and Security Accelerator (DASA) and Defence Science and Technology Laboratory (DSTL).

It aims to develop and demonstrate innovative technologies and novel solutions that allow a human operator to perform complex tasks and operate equipment from a safe distance.

As part of phase 2 of the competition, applicants will now be able to submit proposals that could be awarded up to £400,000 each. It will also be open to applicants from the first round of the competition.

Three focus areas have been set which must be included in entry proposals:

- Haptics
- Robotics
- Telepresence

Entrants will then be asked to focus on one case theme in which to apply their technology, including Specialist Nuclear Decommissioning Tasks, Explosive Ordnance Disposal and Defence and Security Medical applications.

Those who make it through to the next stage will have to develop and demonstrate their proposals.

Andrew Gray, Innovation Delivery Manager at the NDA, said:

“We’re excited to be working alongside DASA, on the Telexistence phase 2 competition and building on the great results from phase 1.

“Advancing these technologies and our knowledge of what is possible through the Telexistence competition, will help us deliver our decommissioning mission in different ways while ensuring humans are away from harm.

“We’re looking forward to seeing what creative solutions are put forward by the supply chain.”

Submission deadline: Midday on Wednesday 6 April 2022.

Do you have an innovative idea? [Read the Competition Document now and submit your idea](#)

[Four local authorities join Local Land Charges Register in January](#)

News story

Property buyers in Plymouth, Sutton, Babergh and Mid Suffolk can now obtain the information they need quickly, simplifying the conveyancing process for everyone.



Image credit: Rob Atherton/Shutterstock.com

HM Land Registry has accelerated the pace of local authority migrations. This month (January) Plymouth City Council, Sutton Council, Babergh District Council and Mid Suffolk District Council joined our Local Land Charges (LLC) Register.

Mark Kelso, Programme Director for HM Land Registry's Local Land Charges Programme, said:

We are working hard with local authorities across England and Wales to ensure property buyers can obtain the information they need quickly, making the conveyancing process simpler for everyone. I am really pleased that as a result of this effort people buying property in Plymouth, Sutton, Babergh and Mid Suffolk will now have access to instant LLC search results.

Anyone requiring LLC searches in the local authority areas of Plymouth City Council, Sutton Council, Babergh District Council and Mid Suffolk District Council will now need to get them from HM Land Registry rather than going directly to the council.

HM Land Registry is working in partnership with local authorities across England and Wales to migrate their local land charges data to a central, digital register. Once migrated, anyone will be able to get instant online search results via GOV.UK using the [Search for local land charges](#) service.

HM Land Registry's business customers can use their existing portal and Business Gateway channels or their usual search providers to access local land charges data for those local authorities which have migrated.

Customers will need to continue to submit CON29 enquiries to the local authority.

For more information, read about the [Local Land Charges Programme](#).

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