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Britain: Covid restrictions and free mass testing to end in England

Tuesday 22 February 2022, by [ELGOT Jessica](#), [MASON Rowena](#), [SAMPLE Ian](#) (Date first published: 21 February 2022).

Announcement by Boris Johnson shows Rishi Sunak has won out over Sajid Javid in cabinet battle over funding

Covid laws and free mass testing are to be swept away across England after Rishi Sunak won a cabinet battle [1] on cutting the cost of the pandemic, prompting fears that the poor and vulnerable will pay the price.

Boris Johnson announced plans to end free testing for the general public from 1 April, saying it was time for people to “get our confidence back”.

People who test positive for Covid will no longer have to isolate by law from this Thursday – and from April will not even be advised to stay at home if infected, the prime minister said.

The chief medical officer, Chris Whitty, and the chief scientific adviser, Patrick Vallance, struck a more cautious note, however, urging people to keep taking precautions such as isolating and wearing masks while infections remain high.

Speaking alongside Johnson at a Downing Street press conference, they emphasised the need to keep monitoring for new variants, with Whitty warning that Covid could still cause “significant problems” and cautioning that it is not a “trivial” illness.

The prime minister unveiled the changes after Sunak, the chancellor, won his fight to slash the cost of Covid testing, which has topped £15bn in the past year, by up to 90%.

Sajid Javid, the health secretary, had pushed for £5bn to £6bn to fund more community testing and surveillance studies, but failed. After last-minute wrangles that delayed a cabinet meeting by more than two hours, additional funding will now have to be found from his own department’s budget. No 10 insisted that efforts to reduce the NHS waiting list backlog would not be affected.

Tory MPs opposed to Covid restrictions were delighted at Johnson’s move, but it was greeted with dismay by some medics, scientists, charities and unions. Many raised concerns that the low-paid will not be able to afford tests and may come under pressure from employers to work when ill with Covid.

Those on low pay will no longer get financial support to isolate if they test positive, and sick pay will revert to the pre-pandemic rules, with eligibility from day four of illness rather than day one.

Charities said the end of free tests was also a blow to clinically vulnerable people and older age groups, warning that they may lose confidence about going out in public, while business groups expressed frustration that they would have to take decisions on testing and isolation policies for

their own staff.

The government said “a small number of at-risk groups” and care home staff will continue to get free lateral flow tests (LFTs), possibly the over-80s, but No 10 admitted the details of who will be eligible and its funding had yet to be worked out.

Johnson emphasised “personal responsibility” for Covid in future, rather than the government setting restrictions to control it. He said “pharmaceutical interventions”, such as antivirals and vaccines, would be the primary line of defence from now on.

“We don’t need laws to compel people to be considerate to others. We can rely on that sense of responsibility towards one another,” he told the Commons. Other changes announced by the prime minister included:

- Contact tracing will end from Thursday and contacts of people testing positive will no longer have to test or isolate.
- Schools and other education settings will no longer be advised to test twice-weekly, with immediate effect.
- NHS and social care staff will no longer get asymptomatic testing but this is expected to continue for patients and care home residents.
- Covid passports will be scrapped from 1 April, with venues no longer recommended to use them. They will still be available for international travel.
- The Office for National Statistics survey of Covid in the community will be maintained but in a slimmed-down version.
- The Vivaldi study on care homes and Panoramic study on antivirals will continue, the government insisted, although it was not clear how they will be funded and whether enough testing is being done to support them.

At Johnson’s first press conference since 19 January, Whitty and Vallance emphasised that the ability to maintain surveillance and “ramp up” testing again would be crucial in future. Whitty stressed that people with Covid should still self-isolate, even though the government has not committed to renewing that advice beyond April.

Johnson insisted there was no division on the “living with Covid” strategy. “I don’t want you to think that there is some division between the gung ho politicians and the cautious, anxious scientists. We have a very clear view on this, that this has not gone away,” he said.

Vallance suggested he was concerned about the rates of infection once people returned to pre-pandemic behaviour. “In terms of the current situation, I’d like the prevalence to be lower, I’d like rates of infection to be lower ... We are not back to pre-pandemic behaviours yet. And as those returns you would expect the pressure and transmission to increase.”

The changes were met with scepticism from Labour, who accused the prime minister of weakening sick pay in a way that will “hit the lowest paid and the most insecure workers the hardest”.

Keir Starmer said: “We can’t turn off Britain’s radar before the war is won. ‘Ignorance is bliss’ is not a responsible approach to a deadly virus. It actually risks undoing all the hard won progress the British people have achieved over the last two years.”

Some scientists said it was right to begin winding down the pandemic response now the Omicron peak has passed but others expressed worries about the consequences of an abrupt end to free testing. Prof Stephen Reicher, a member of Sage's behavioural science subgroup, said he was concerned it "exacerbates inequalities for those who can't afford to test or to self-isolate".

"All the rhetoric about freedom, and about choice and about allowing people to exercise 'personal responsibility' hides the fact that those freedoms and choices are limited to those who have the means," he said.

"Johnson's removal of support for self-isolation and testing takes choice away from those who cannot afford to stay home or buy testing kits. Johnson exposed the fallacy of his argument in asserting that 'anyone who wants to can buy a test'. No they can't. if you are already having to choose between eating and heating, tests are an impossible luxury."

Following the announcement, free government LFTs appeared to have run out, with a message saying "there are no home delivery slots for these tests right now".

Rowena Mason, Jessica Elgot and Ian Sample

P.S.

- The Guardian. Mon 21 Feb 2022 17.42 GMT:
<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/feb/21/boris-johnson-says-free-covid-tests-in-england-will-end-on-1-april>
- Rowena Mason's articles in The Guardian:
<https://www.theguardian.com/profile/rowena-mason>
- Jessica Elgot's articles in The Guardian:
<https://www.theguardian.com/profile/jessica-elgot>
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Footnotes

[1] <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/feb/17/cabinet-splits-emerge-over-living-with-covid-strategy-and-free-testing>