

No change here: London to retain masks on public transport

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Mayor of London Sadiq Khan wears a mask as he rides on a Circle Line tube train to visit the London Transport Museum, in London, Wednesday July 14, 2021. The London Mayor has asked Transport for London to enforce the use of mask wearing on buses and trains as a "condition of carriage", even after legal restrictions in England are lifted on July 19. Khan said he was "not prepared" to put tube, tram and other transport users in the capital "at risk" by removing the rules on face coverings. Credit: Kirsty O'Connor/PA via AP

Mask-wearing will be required on London's transport network even after the legal obligation to wear them in England is lifted on July 19, the city's mayor said Wednesday.

Sadiq Khan has asked the body that oversees transport in the capital to enforce the use of mask wearing on the subway, buses and trams as a "condition of carriage"—basically contracts between passengers and Transport for London.

Khan said he is "not prepared" to put transport users "at risk" by removing the rules on face coverings after legal restrictions are lifted next Monday despite a big resurgence of the virus across the U.K. as a whole.

Under the new approach outlined by Khan, enforcement officers would be able to deny access or eject passengers not wearing a mask while using the subway, buses and trams. London's Metropolitan Police and British Transport Police won't be able to get involved, though, as mask-wearing will no longer be required by law.

"What would have been far better is for the national rules to apply across the country, not just in London but across the country," he told the BBC. "That would have provided clarity in relation to what the rules are."

Earlier this week, British Prime Minister Boris Johnson confirmed that most of England's coronavirus restrictions, including compulsory mask wearing in many indoor public settings, will end as part of the final stage of his road map out of the coronavirus lockdown.



People wears face masks to curb the spread of coronavirus during the morning rush hour at Waterloo train station in London, Wednesday, July 14, 2021. London Mayor Sadiq Khan has asked Transport for London to enforce the use of mask wearing on buses and trains as a "condition of carriage", even after legal restrictions in England are lifted on July 19. Khan said he was "not prepared" to put tube, tram and other transport users in the capital "at risk" by removing the rules on face coverings. Credit: AP Photo/Matt Dunham

However, Johnson urged people to remain cautious and to exercise "personal responsibility," a stance that has led to accusations of mixed messaging.

Transport Secretary Grant Shapps said Khan's decision was "very much in line" with what the British government, which sets public health

policy for England, wanted to happen. The other nations of the U.K.—Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland—have not opted to ditch legal requirements on mask-wearing in enclosed spaces.

"Whilst we are going from this being a legal requirement to guidelines, we do expect individual carriers to make sure they are putting in place whatever is appropriate for their network," Shapps told Sky News.

Next Monday's lifting of legal restrictions comes at a time when coronavirus infections have been rising sharply. On Tuesday, the U.K. recorded 36,660 infections, its highest daily tally in nearly six months. Cases are expected to spike even higher, with the government warning that 100,000 daily infections may be possible this summer, a level that has not been previously seen.



People wears face masks to curb the spread of coronavirus after disembarking from trains during the morning rush hour at Waterloo train station in London, Wednesday, July 14, 2021. London Mayor Sadiq Khan has asked Transport for London to enforce the use of mask wearing on buses and trains as a "condition of carriage", even after legal restrictions in England are lifted on July 19. Khan said he was "not prepared" to put tube, tram and other transport users in the capital "at risk" by removing the rules on face coverings. Credit: AP Photo/Matt Dunham

The British government believes that the vaccine rollout has mostly severed the link between infections and those needing hospitalization as the vast majority of people getting COVID-19 are in the less vulnerable younger age group, many of whom have yet to be vaccinated. As of Tuesday, nearly 69% of the British population had received one dose of vaccine while 52% had two.

Concerns though are rising that despite the rollout, the high case load will once again pressure the National Health Service. The number of people requiring hospital attention and subsequently dying have been edging higher in recent days, though not at the same rate as infections.

The final stage of easing England's lockdown means that all restrictions on social gatherings will be removed and social distancing measures will be scrapped. Nightclubs can reopen for the first time since March last year, and there will no longer be limits on people attending concerts, theaters, weddings or sports events.

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