

England sees no need for further restrictions—for now

January 4 2022, by Danica Kirka



Britain's Prime Minister Boris Johnson visits a vaccination hub at Stoke Mandeville Stadium in Aylesbury, England, Monday Jan. 3, 2022, as the booster vaccination programme continues. Johnson sees no need for further restrictions to curb the omicron variant of COVID-19 his spokesman said ahead of press conference later Tuesday. Credit: Steve Parsons/Pool via AP, File

U.K. Prime Minister Boris Johnson said Tuesday he hoped to "ride out" the pandemic without further restrictions, even as he warned that the country faces difficult days ahead as the highly transmissible omicron variant drives COVID-19 infections to record levels.

With omicron causing fewer serious illnesses than earlier variants and the success of a nationwide vaccine booster program, the government believes existing controls are enough to protect the National Health Service without harming lives and livelihoods, Johnson told reporters in London. The government continues to monitor the data and is prepared to respond if the situation changes, he said.

"We have a chance to ride out this Omicron wave without shutting down our country once again," Johnson said, pledging to try to keep schools and businesses open. "If we all play our part in containing the spread of this virus, the disruptions we face can be far less severe than a national lockdown, with all the devastation that would bring for livelihoods and the life chances of our children."

Opposition politicians and some public health experts have pressed the government to tighten restrictions on business and personal interactions as omicron sweeps across the country. Johnson has resisted these calls after almost 100 of his party's lawmakers opposed controls imposed last month.



A pedestrian passes a COVID testing facility that has been set up at St. George's Hospital in London, Tuesday, Jan. 4, 2022. The NHS is expected to come under increasing pressure over the next few weeks from the Omicron virus variant.
Credit: AP Photo/Kirsty Wigglesworth

Confirmed new daily infections across the U.K. jumped to 218,274 on Tuesday, 15% higher than the previous record set Dec. 31. Tuesday's figures may be inflated by inconsistent reporting during the holiday period.

Despite soaring infection rates, government policy is being driven by figures showing omicron is causing fewer serious illnesses than previous

variants.

While the number of people hospitalized with COVID-19 is rising, the number of people requiring mechanical ventilation has remained relatively stable.

There were 14,210 COVID-19 patients in hospitals across England on Jan. 3, the highest number since Feb. 20 of last year. But there were 777 people on ventilators, a figure that has remained steady for the past six weeks.

Johnson last month re-imposed mask requirements in shops and required those going to night clubs and other large public events to show proof of vaccination or a negative COVID-19 test. He also accelerated the national booster program after studies showed two doses of vaccine weren't enough to protect against omicron.



A pedestrian passes a COVID testing facility that has been set up at St. George's Hospital in London, Tuesday, Jan. 4, 2022. The NHS is expected to come under increasing pressure over the next few weeks from the Omicron virus variant. Credit: AP Photo/Kirsty Wigglesworth

Across Britain, almost 60% of people 12 and over have received a booster vaccine.

"As our NHS moves to a war footing, I will be recommending to Cabinet tomorrow that we continue with Plan B," Johnson said, referring to the current level of restrictions. "The public have responded and changed their behavior ... buying valuable time to get boosters in arms and help the NHS to cope with the omicron wave."

Even so, the National Health Service, schools and businesses across the country are under pressure as workers are forced to stay home after testing positive for COVID-19 or having close contact with someone who has. On Tuesday, Blackpool NHS Trust and Great Western Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust in Swindon were the latest to declare "critical incidents" due to demand and staff shortages.

"Following a tough few days, we have this morning declared an internal critical incident due to sustained high levels of demand, COVID and non-COVID and availability of beds," said Kevin McNamara, chief executive of the Great Western trust. "This is causing delays to patients accessing services for which I am very sorry."



Overflowing bins await collection by refuse workers after coronavirus related staff shortages, in the Walton area of Liverpool, England, Tuesday, Jan. 4 2021.

Credit: Peter Byrne/PA via AP



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The soaring number of infections also led the Blackpool Trust to declare an internal critical incident "to alleviate the pressure we are under," Trust CEO Natalie Hudson said.

Meanwhile, the government is working to identify hospitals that may need help from the military, Johnson said.

The government has already pledged to rush air ventilation units and COVID-19 test kits to schools to ensure they can remain open. Secondary school students in England are now required to wear face

masks in class.

"Anyone who thinks our battle with COVID is over is, I'm afraid, profoundly wrong," Johnson said. "This is a moment for the utmost caution."

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