

UK makes omicron contingency plans for hospitals, schools

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Ghadeer Mahar grimaces as she is given a vaccination at a COVID-19 booster vaccination centre at Hampden Park vaccination centre in Glasgow, Scotland, Wednesday Dec. 29, 2021. Credit: Andrew Milligan/PA via AP

The U.K. government has been making contingency plans in case hospitals, schools and other workplaces are hit by major staff shortages

amid the country's record-breaking spike in coronavirus infections.

Public sector workplaces have been preparing for staff absences ranging from 10% to 25% as COVID-19 sickens more people or forces them to isolate, the Cabinet Office said.

The highly transmissible omicron variant has caused Britain's daily new caseload to soar over Christmas and the New Year, with a new daily high of 189,000 on Dec. 31. A further 137,583 infections and 73 deaths were added for England and Wales only on Sunday, with numbers for Scotland and Northern Ireland to be announced after the holiday weekend.

About 1 in 25 people in England—or about 2 million people—had COVID-19 in the week before Christmas, the Office of National Statistics estimated. In London, the figure was 1 in 15.

Cabinet Office Minister Stephen Barclay said there had already been "significant" absences and the government was preparing for "every eventuality".

"It's important that those [contingency plans](#) are refreshed and that we take measures to mitigate those impacts," Barclay said.

Ministers have cited increased support for more virus testing, better ventilation in schools and workplaces, and drafting former teachers or even volunteers to prevent absences from having a serious impact on schools.



People queue, wearing masks against the coronavirus, outside a theatre for a performance of *Les Miserables* in London, Tuesday, Dec. 28, 2021. Many European countries have started further restrictions on their populations as the number of Omicron related COVID-19 case rise, and they aim to contain the spread of the virus. In England the government has said that there will be no new restriction before the New Year. Credit: AP Photo/Alastair Grant

Devolved authorities in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland have imposed limits on events and social gatherings in the face of the fast-spreading omicron. But Health Secretary Sajid Javid says adding new restrictions is a "last resort" for England, despite the climbing daily infection rate. Barclay backed this strategy again Sunday, arguing the reintroduction of light restrictions in December as omicron began to take hold had brought about a "significant behaviour change" with people reducing their social contacts.

The public had been advised to test themselves ahead of joining any New Year's celebrations.

National Health Service leaders say absences have already added to the heavy pressures on U.K. hospitals, even though the overall number of people being treated for COVID-19 remains much lower than last winter. NHS Providers chief executive Chris Hopson said staff have been working "flat out" and the early days of 2022 would be "crucial" in showing whether further measures are needed.



Prime Minister Boris Johnson visits a Covid vaccination centre at the Rainbow Pharmacy in the Open University Campus, Walton Hall, Milton Keynes, Buckinghamshire, Wednesday Dec. 29, 2021. Credit: Geoff Pugh/pool photo via

AP

Secondary school students in England will be required to wear face masks when they return to classes after the Christmas holidays. Education Secretary Nadhim Zahawi said the move was an attempt to "minimise disruption" and prevent teachers and pupils from being forced to stay at home.

The U.K. Health Security Agency has maintained its support for the seven-day isolation period for those who have contracted the virus and are fully vaccinated. But Paul Hunter, a professor of health protection at the University of East Anglia, told ITV that the requirement should be reduced to five days as studies had shown people were "very unlikely" to be infectious after this point.

The number of COVID-19 patients requiring hospital treatment across Britain has increased much more slowly than new infections, but in the last week reached its highest level since February 2021.



People, some wearing masks, gather on the south bank of river Thames to celebrate New Year's Eve, in London, Friday, Dec. 31, 2021. In Britain, where the highly contagious variant of the coronavirus has sent caseloads soaring to record highs, Health Secretary Sajid Javid said Monday no further restrictions will be introduced in England before the new year. Credit: AP Photo/Alberto Pezzali



A sign saying lateral flow coronavirus tests are out of stock is displayed in a pharmacy window in London, Thursday Dec. 30, 2021. Officials have warned revellers in Scotland and Wales to think twice before travelling to England to ring in the new year, highlighting how the four parts of the U.K. were again taking starkly different approaches to coronavirus restrictions amid record-high infections and soaring hospitalizations. Prime Minister Boris Johnson has resisted tightening restrictions in England despite the rapid spread of the highly transmissible omicron variant. Credit: Dominic Lipinski/PA via AP



Britain's Health Secretary Sajid Javid as he leaves 10 Downing Street in London, Wednesday, Dec. 15, 2021. British lawmakers have voted to approve new restrictions to curb the spread of the omicron coronavirus variant. The House of Commons approved measures ordering masks to be worn indoors in England and requiring proof of vaccination or a negative test to enter nightclubs and large crowded events. Credit: AP Photo/Kirsty Wigglesworth



Britain's Prime Minister Boris Johnson during a visit to a Covid vaccination centre at the Rainbow Pharmacy in the Open University Campus, Walton Hall, Milton Keynes, England, Wednesday, Dec. 29, 2021. Credit: Geoff Pugh/Pool Photo via AP

The government's push to deliver COVID-19 boosters has now seen over 50% of the population receive a third dose.

Overall, the U.K. has reported more than 13.1 million infections and more than 149,000 deaths linked to COVID-19, the second highest death toll in Europe behind Russia.

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