



National Voices

Cite this as: *BMJ* 2022;376:o683<http://dx.doi.org/10.1136/bmj.o683>

Published: 15 March 2022

## A government concerned with health disparities would not lift almost all covid-19 protections

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Recently, Boris Johnson, the UK prime minister announced the government's "Living with covid" plan. It seems to throw all caution to the wind by removing almost all protections we have against the virus. The plan—which is to remove the safety net offered by universal free testing and £500 self-isolation support payments for people on low incomes—will undoubtedly worsen health inequalities for huge numbers of people.

Yet less than a fortnight before, the government launched its Levelling Up Plan which pledged a raft of measures to tackle inequalities that unfairly hold back communities. Among these, the government shared that their aim is to raise Healthy Life Expectancy by five years by 2035 and to narrow the gap between local areas where it is highest and lowest by 2030. It is hard to believe that the same health secretary who is driving forward work on a White Paper on Health Disparities could be behind and in support of such contradictory approaches.

Over the last two years, our members and the people and communities they work with have repeatedly shared testimony of the devastating ways in which covid-19 has affected those already living with ill health, poverty, discrimination, or inequality. We are all in the same storm, but we are not in the same boat.

One silver lining of the pandemic has been that there is now wider understanding within the health and care system about the levels of inequality in the UK and how that affects people's health outcomes. This knowledge is important, but fundamentally if we don't work out how we do things differently, we'll find ourselves staring at the same sets of data in years to come.

There were always going to be differences in opinion about when we are ready to remove protections against covid-19, however, it should be a cause of great concern for all of us that at a time when many are struggling to meet the rising cost of living, people will be forced to make impossibly difficult decisions between providing for their families and protecting the health of their friends, families, and colleagues.

If you were in a position where you noticed you had a cough, but you had to choose between paying for a test and staying at home, often without pay, even though you really needed the money, or going to work and going about your life, potentially spreading covid-19 to your colleagues, friends and loved ones—what would you do? These are decisions nobody should have to make.

Additionally, the Government's "Living with covid" plan completely disregards people who are immunocompromised and more vulnerable to the virus, effectively excluding a very large group of

people from living full lives in society. There are around 500 000 people who are severely immunocompromised who may be less well protected by the vaccine and at highest risk of severe illness from covid-19, and many, many more who have an increased vulnerability to serious illness or even death.

The government's approach to living with covid-19 makes our society a fundamentally more dangerous place for anyone who has increased vulnerability to the virus. In the absence of free testing, people's friends and family members will have to pay for tests every time they want to see their loved one. Worryingly, the dangerous approach that the government is taking will mean that many people will let their guard down and abandon basic protections that would make society a safer place for everyone.

The pandemic is not over and with some sensible protections, we can make sure nobody is left behind. We may have to learn to live with covid-19, but there are far more humane and fair ways to do this, that will much better protect our NHS and the people that work for it. Let's prioritise reducing health inequalities by taking time to understand the ways in which health policies affect the diverse groups of people who make up our society and by building in protections to keep us all safe. We shouldn't be in a position where we must tolerate living with the degree of inequality that has been exposed by the pandemic.

Competing interests: National Voices is a coalition of health and social care charities in England. None declared.

Provenance and peer review: not commissioned, not peer reviewed