The BMJ

Cite this as: *BMJ* 2022;376:o355<http://dx.doi.org/10.1136/bmj.o355>

Published: 09 February 2022

Covid-19: Government plans to remove all remaining restrictions in England a month early

Gareth Iacobucci

The government plans to end all remaining covid restrictions in England—including the legal obligation to self-isolate—ahead of schedule later this month, the prime minister, Boris Johnson, has said.

The current restrictions, including the requirement that anyone who tests positive for covid-19 must self-isolate for at least five days, are due to expire on 24 March. But Johnson, addressing MPs during prime minister's questions on 9 February, said that the remaining rules could end early if recent trends in the data continued.

"It is my intention to return on the first day after the half term recess to present our strategy for living with covid," he said. "Provided the current encouraging trends in the data continue, it is my expectation that we will be able to end the last domestic restrictions—including the legal requirement to self-isolate if you test positive—a full month early."

If the government proceeds with its full removal of restrictions the law will be replaced by guidance that people should stay at home if they have covid, said Downing Street after Johnson's announcement, adding that fresh guidance on living with covid would include a decision on whether travel restrictions will remain until the end of March.

In response to the prime minister's statement healthcare leaders said that they understood the importance of wanting to return to normal but called for a cautious approach.

Chris Hopson, chief executive of NHS Providers, said, "It is important to remember that covid-19 has not gone away. Though cases have fallen significantly in recent weeks and the NHS's very successful booster campaign has made a massive difference to the numbers of seriously ill patients, the number of people testing positive for covid-19 remains high by previous standards.

"Any steps to de-escalate our precautionary approach—including ending requirements for self-isolation for positive tests—must be proportionate to the risks."

Matthew Taylor, chief executive of the NHS Confederation, said, "Around 40% of NHS staff absences are due to covid currently, and so removing the self-isolation requirements could bolster capacity significantly at a time when the service is committed to tackling its waiting lists—but we have to be mindful that it could also lead to higher rates of transmission, which could then lead to more admissions into hospital alongside more ill health in the community.

"The government must take a cautious approach as we move onto the endemic stage of covid, be guided by the evidence, engage the NHS appropriately, and be prepared to review its decision if new threats emerge."