



¹ School of Psychology and Neuroscience, University of St Andrews, UK

² Centre for Behaviour Change, University College London, UK

³ Department of Behavioural Science and Health, University College London, UK

Cite this as: *BMJ* 2022;378:o1903

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1136/bmj.o1903>

Published: 29 July 2022

The UK government's "personal responsibility" policy for covid is hypocritical and unsustainable

The focus on personal responsibility serves to justify government inaction

Stephen Reicher,¹ Susan Michie,² Robert West³

In his statement to the House of Commons on 21 February 2022, the prime minister Boris Johnson announced that, henceforth, his Westminster government would deal with covid-19 "in a very different way, moving from government restrictions to personal responsibility."¹ Since then, covid cases have remained stubbornly high in the UK, rising to as many as one in 18 of the UK population, fuelling growing numbers of people with long covid, and bringing massive disruption to hospitals, schools, and the economy.²⁻⁵ Despite growing calls from a wide range of authorities (from the World Health Organization regional director to the editors of *The BMJ* and *HSJ*) to complement the vaccination programme with further measures, the Westminster government has consistently refused to take action by repeating the mantra of "personal responsibility."^{6 7}

There is nothing wrong with stressing "personal responsibility." It is clearly up to all of us at all levels—individual, group, institutional, and societal—to do what we can to reduce infection and promote health. The problem lies in assuming that the exercise of personal responsibility rests in the hands of the individual alone. This emphasises what individuals should do to the exclusion of what government should do, and serves to justify government inaction.

This point was central to a paper published just 10 days before the prime minister's Commons statement, on 11 February 2022 by SPI-B—the government's own behavioural science advisory group.⁸ The paper, the last produced by SPI-B, addressed how to maintain protective behaviours once government measures were removed, and it repeatedly stressed that people cannot take responsibility for acting in ways that reduce the risk of infection without the government taking responsibility for providing an environment that permits this.

First, and most obviously, we simply cannot act to avoid risk without clear information about the existence of risks, what the risks are, and the contexts in which the risks are greatest. Instead of providing this basic information, the government consistently peddled a false narrative that the risk of covid was past; that however high infections went, it was of no real concern, and that the UK was in a new "post-pandemic" reality.⁹ Given that adherence to pandemic measures is linked to perceptions of risk, this misleading messaging has, inevitably, undermined behaviour that would reduce transmission of covid-19.¹⁰

Secondly, for people to take responsibility for reducing their risk they need to know what they can do to mitigate risk and how effective those actions are likely to be. In fact, just telling people about threats without explaining how they can be dealt with is disempowering; it often generates fear and can lead to fatalism or denial. By contrast, showing how threats can be overcome is empowering and important in generating appropriate action.¹¹ Once again, the government has failed in its responsibility on this; not only in what it has said and failed to say, but also in its actions. Despite advice on its own website to wear masks in crowded enclosed spaces, government ministers are failing to wear masks in high risk settings such as the chamber of the House of Commons.¹²

Thirdly, even with full information, people cannot "act responsibly" if they do not have the resources to do so. That has been clear from the start of the pandemic. A study conducted in March 2020 showed that people on lower incomes were just as motivated to self-isolate when they had covid-19 as those who were financially better off, but they did so less often and the main reason was that they simply could not afford to.¹³

Fourthly, individuals live in social and work environments that can act either as barriers or enablers of behaviours to reduce the risk from covid-19. However great their motivation, people cannot act responsibly if environmental barriers don't allow it. For instance, it is no good to suggest that people avoid stuffy spaces if there is no programme to improve the quality of ventilation. That is why SPI-B made it clear that central government had a responsibility to coordinate "multi-layered, multifaceted approach to long term behaviour change" in homes, public spaces, educational facilities, businesses, and hospitality and leisure facilities.

A case in point is the requirement to self-isolate when infected where support for doing so has been removed. In a telling comment at the press briefing following his statement on the 21 February, the prime minister said he wished that the UK was more like Germany: "where, I'm told, they are much more disciplined about not going to work if you're sick."¹⁴ This ignored the fact that sick pay in Germany covers 100% of workers' wages, whereas in the UK it only covers 19%.¹⁵ It also misses the point that, according to TUC polling, 10% of workers have been pressured to work when infected with covid-19, a further 10% have been pressured to work alongside someone who is infected, and many more fear that their job and promotion prospects would be compromised if they

chose to stay at home.¹⁶ If the government wants people to act responsibly, it needs to provide them with the resources—and remove the barriers—to doing so.

Finally, the exclusive focus on individual responsibility neglects the crucial importance of social responsibility. Societies can only function if people look out for each other as well as themselves. Indeed research has found that a sense of shared identity and community has been shown to be crucial to adherence, mutual aid, and wellbeing during the pandemic.¹⁷ In stressing the personal to the exclusion of the social, the government is promoting a fractured, selfish culture that is to the detriment of everyone.

The Westminster government is acting hypocritically by saying that individuals must take responsibility for mitigating covid risks while abdicating its own responsibility. It has ignored evidence based advice on how to enable people to avoid risk, and individual members of the Westminster government have not even followed their own edicts. By ignoring the advice of its behavioural science advisers, the Westminster government's failure to accept its own responsibilities has neither enabled the public to exercise responsibility, nor prevented continuing high levels of avoidable disease, disruption, disability, and deaths from covid-19.

Competing interests: SR is a participant in SPI(B), SAGE sub-committee and a member of Independent SAGE. SM is a member of the Scientific Pandemic Influenza Group on Behaviours (SPI-B): 2019 Novel Coronavirus (Covid-19) and of Independent SAGE. RW is a participant in SAGE SPI-B.

Provenance and peer review: not commissioned, not peer reviewed.

- 1 UK Government. PM statement on living with COVID: 21 February 2022. <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/pm-statement-on-living-with-covid-21-february-2022>
- 2 Office for National Statistics. Coronavirus (COVID-19) Infection Survey, UK: 15 July 2022. <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/healthandsocialcare/conditionsanddiseases/bulletins/coronaviruscovid19infectionsurvey/15july2022>
- 3 Gregory A, Campbell D. Covid disruption to NHS in England wreaks havoc with surgery backlog. *The Guardian* 2022. <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2022/apr/14/covid-disruption-to-nhs-in-england-wreaks-havoc-with-surgery-backlog>
- 4 UK Government. Attendance in education and early years settings during the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/attendance-in-education-and-early-years-settings-during-the-coronavirus-covid-19-outbreak>
- 5 Covid L. the invisible public health crisis fuelling labour shortages. *The Financial Times*. 2022. <https://www.ft.com/content/8b9166af-2e85-4429-ab1f-362c189e46f2>
- 6 World Health Organization. Rapidly escalating COVID-19 cases amid reduced virus surveillance forecasts a challenging autumn and winter in the WHO European Region. 2022. <https://www.who.int/europe/news/item/19-07-2022-rapidly-escalating-covid-19-cases-amid-reduced-virus-surveillance-forecasts-a-challenging-autumn-and-winter-in-the-who-european-region>
- 7 McLellan A, Abbasi K. The NHS is not living with covid, it's dying from it. *BMJ* 2022;378: doi: 10.1136/bmj.o1779 pmid: 35850953
- 8 UK Government. SPI-B: Social and behavioural impacts for lifting remaining restrictions, 10 February 2022. 2022. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/spi-b-social-and-behavioural-impacts-for-lifting-remaining-restrictions-10-february-2022/spi-b-social-and-behavioural-impacts-for-lifting-remaining-restrictions-10-february-2022--2>
- 9 Head T. After 180k deaths, Sajid Javid says UK 'should be proud' of COVID response. *The London Economic*. 2022. <https://www.thelondoneconomic.com/news/breaking-sajid-javid-proud-uk-covid-response-why-326025/>
- 10 Cipolletta S, Andregretti GR, Mioni G. Risk Perception towards COVID-19: a systematic review and qualitative synthesis. *Int J Environ Res Public Health* 2022;19:.. doi: 10.3390/ijerph19084649 pmid: 35457521
- 11 Witte K, Allen M. A meta-analysis of fear appeals: implications for effective public health campaigns. *Health Educ Behav* 2000;27:615. doi: 10.1177/109019810002700506 pmid: 11009129
- 12 UK Government. New guidance sets out how to live safely with COVID-19. 2022. <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/new-guidance-sets-out-how-to-live-safely-with-covid-19>
- 13 Atchison C, Bowman LR, Vrinten C, et al. Early perceptions and behavioural responses during the COVID-19 pandemic: a cross-sectional survey of UK adults. *BMJ Open* 2021;11:e043577. doi: 10.1136/bmjopen-2020-043577 pmid: 33397669
- 14 Plummer K. Boris Johnson said Germans are better at staying home when ill and everyone made the same point. *Indy100*. 2022. <https://www.indy100.com/politics/boris-johnson-covid-sick-pay-germany>

- 15 Partington R. Johnson's Germany comparison highlights UK's low sick pay. *The Guardian* 2022. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/feb/23/johnsons-germany-comparison-highlights-uk-sick-pay-deficit>
- 16 Wall T. Covid: one in 10 in England told to work despite signs of infection. *The Guardian* 2022. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jul/09/covid-one-in-10-in-england-told-to-work-despite-signs-of-infection>
- 17 Muldoon OT, Liu JH, McHugh C. The political psychology of Covid-19. *Polit Psychol* 2021;42:28. doi: 10.1111/pops.12775 pmid: 34548719