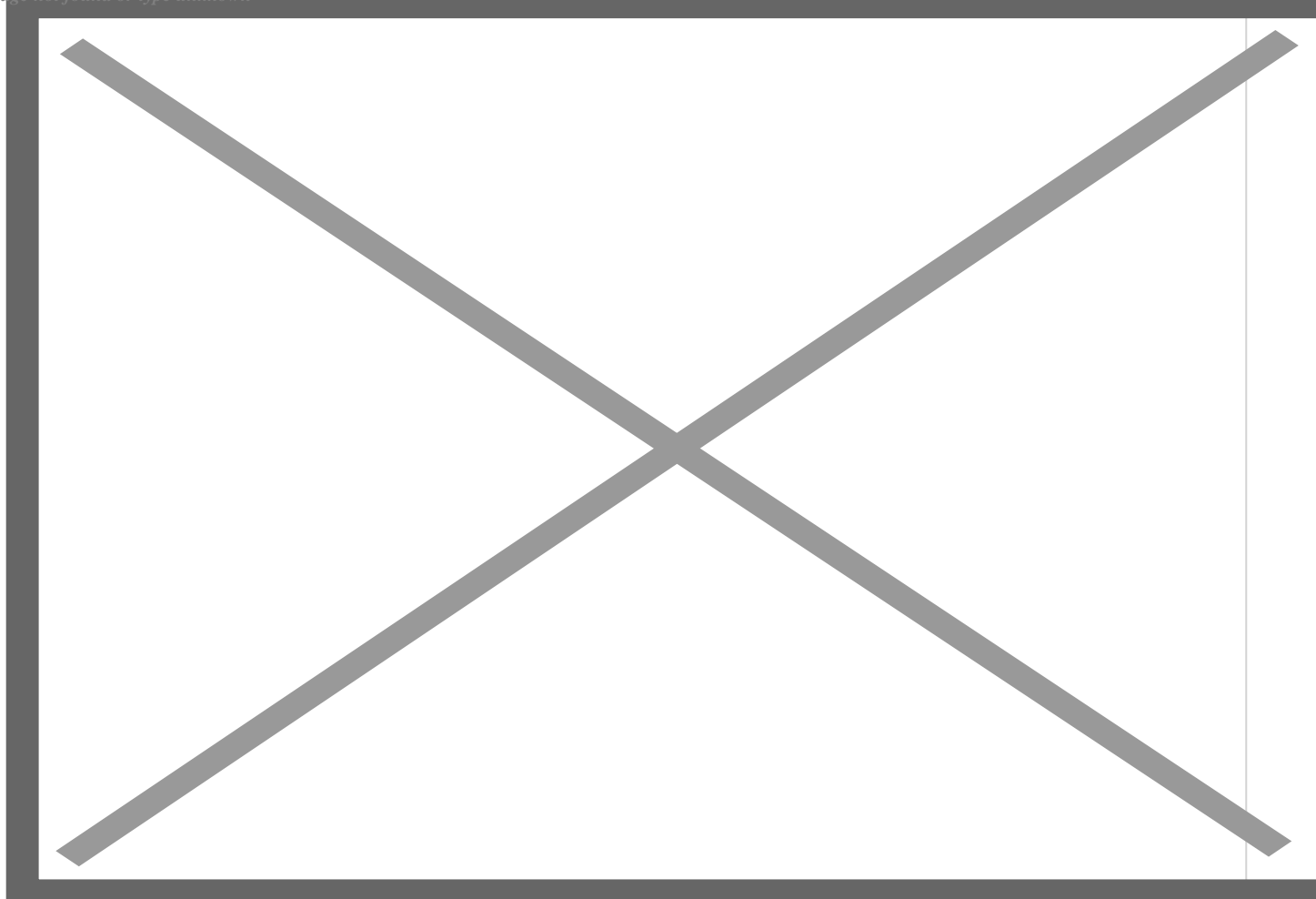


Boris Johnson lifts COVID rules in England claiming Omicron wave has peaked

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A man wearing a protective face mask walks through Piccadilly Circus, London [File: Henry Nicholls/London]

London, January 20 (RHC)-- Face masks will no longer be mandatory in public places and schools in England and COVID-19 passports will be dropped for large events as infections level off in large parts of

the country, British Prime Minister Boris Johnson has announced.

Johnson told lawmakers on Wednesday that the restrictions were being eased because government scientists believed it was likely that the surge of infections prompted by the highly contagious Omicron variant “has now peaked nationally.”

While hospitals in northern England are still under pressure because of high caseloads, Johnson said hospital admissions and patients in intensive care units elsewhere in England were stabilising or falling. “Many nations across Europe have endured further winter lockdowns ... but this government took a different path,” Johnson told lawmakers, saying the government had got the toughest decisions right and that numbers going into intensive care were falling.

“Our scientists believe it is likely that the Omicron wave has now peaked ... because of the extraordinary booster campaign, together with the way the public has responded to the Plan B measures, we can return to Plan A.”

The government will no longer advise people to work from home and beginning next Thursday, mandatory COVID-19 passes will not be required to gain entry to large-scale events. Compulsory face masks will be scrapped in classrooms starting from Thursday as well, and from next week they will not be legally required anywhere in England.

“We will trust the judgement of the British people and no longer criminalise anyone who chooses not to wear one,” Johnson said.

The restrictions were introduced in December to slow the rapid spread of the Omicron variant and buy time for the population to get their booster vaccine shot. Johnson said Wednesday that more than 90 percent of those over 60 in the UK have now had their booster shot. Official figures showed that COVID-19 infections have dropped in most parts of the UK for the first time since early December, with 94,432 new positive cases recorded on Tuesday.

Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland have followed their own anti-coronavirus measures, generally with tougher restrictions, but have also begun to ease them. Scientists warned that cases could still turn higher again if people’s behaviour returned to normal quickly. “Removing Plan B measures in the face of extremely high levels of infection is a risk,” University of Warwick virologist Lawrence Young told the Reuters news agency.

“Perhaps it would have been wiser to wait for another couple of weeks before removing the advice to work from home and the face coverings mandate. There’s no guarantee that infection levels will continue to fall.”

The requirement for those infected to self-isolate for five full days remains, but Johnson said that measure will also end in the coming weeks. He said that, while the self-isolation rule expires on March 24, he will seek to scrap it earlier if the virus data continues to improve. “As COVID becomes endemic, we will need to replace legal requirements with advice and guidance, urging people with the virus to be careful and considerate of others,” he said.

The UK has the second-worst pandemic death toll in Europe after Russia, with more than 153,000 confirmed virus-related deaths.



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