

Statement: Position on the lifting of Covid-19 restrictions across the United Kingdom

March 2022

The Blood Cancer Alliance (BCA) is a group of 15 charities representing people with blood cancer across the UK. We have a number of concerns following the Government lifting all remaining Covid restrictions for England and Northern Ireland, and with Scotland and Wales set to follow suit by the end of March.

The move to end all Covid-19 restrictions - including the legal requirement for those testing positive to self-isolate - does not appear to have considered the needs of those who are immunocompromised, including people with blood cancer. People who are immunocompromised are still at a significantly higher risk from Covid-19 than the general population, as they are less likely to receive good protection from COVID-19 vaccines and must rely on other measures.¹

The BCA is advocating for a comprehensive strategy specifically for immunocompromised groups, including people with blood cancer. According to an analysis by the Office for National Statistics collected between October and December 2021, people with blood cancer now account for a higher proportion of Covid deaths now than at any point during the pandemic.² The removal of protections in the general population will only exacerbate the risk to severely immunocompromised people, as transmission rates are likely to remain at significant levels. It is therefore imperative that the Government ensure adequate plans are in place to protect blood cancer patients throughout the continuing pandemic.

Ahead of restrictions being lifted across all devolved nations by the end of March, the BCA is urgently calling for the Government and those of the devolved nations to:

1. Guarantee a timely roll out of the next Covid-19 booster to all people with blood cancer, supported by clear and accessible communications.
2. Grant continued free access to Covid-19 lateral flow tests and PCR tests for all immunocompromised people and their regular contacts, including for asymptomatic testing.
3. Guarantee that all severely immunocompromised people have smooth, timely access to antiviral and antibody treatments, and commit to making preventive treatments available as soon as possible.
4. Set up specific financial and legal support for immunocompromised people who may be rendered unable to safely work in light of the restrictions being lifted.
5. Ensure all measures put in place to protect immunocompromised people as we move to the next phase of the pandemic have considered the unique requirements of those from an ethnic minority background through tailored and targeted access and outreach programmes.
6. Demonstrate a committed effort to raise public awareness of the continued risk of Covid-19 to all immunocompromised people, which should include clear guidance advising on steps the public can take to continue to protect those groups.
7. Instate a senior governmental figure responsible for coordinating provision for CEV and immunocompromised people during this critical period, tasked with ensuring that the complex needs of these groups are met.

A failure to enact the above requirements will render immunocompromised groups, including people with blood cancer, second class citizens. Not only does the removal of restrictions and the added

¹ <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/coronavirus-covid-19/people-at-higher-risk/who-is-at-high-risk-from-coronavirus/>

² <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/feb/12/scientists-plead-caution-covid-restrictions-lifted-england>

financial barrier to lateral flow tests pose increased risk to their physical health, but the stress and worry of not being able to manage the risk to their health – unless continuing to shield indefinitely – increases the burden on patients' psychological and emotional health.

Looking ahead, the Government must ensure appropriate plans are in place to guarantee that immunocompromised groups are adequately protected from any future variants of Covid-19 which may emerge. Furthermore, the Alliance wants blood cancer patients to be prioritised for access to treatment for Covid-19 – including preventive treatment - quickly and easily. This will require clear access and eligibility criteria, which has been a particular challenge for the blood cancer community throughout the pandemic and must urgently be addressed ahead of any future variants emerging.

The Blood Cancer Alliance concedes that restrictions cannot remain in place in perpetuity. This reality makes it all the more important that the Government acts urgently to mitigate the significant and very real risks now posed to the physical health and emotional wellbeing of clinically extremely vulnerable blood cancer patients.