Boris Johnson 'extremely cautious' on when England's schools will reopen

**PM says schools will be first to exit lockdown but refuses to give date for return of pupils**

[Boris Johnson](https://www.theguardian.com/politics/boris-johnson) has promised MPs that schools will be first to reopen when the lockdown is lifted – but stressed he would be “extremely cautious” about when that can happen.

The Commons has been recalled to discuss the regulations needed to reimpose the England-wide lockdown [announced by the prime minister on Monday](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/jan/04/england-to-enter-toughest-covid-lockdown-since-march).

Addressing MPs on Wednesday, Johnson defended his last-minute decision to close schools, after pupils in many parts of the country returned for a day, saying he had been battling to keep schools open.

“Schools were the very last thing to close, as I’d always promised that they would be,” he said, adding: “When we begin to move out of lockdown, I promise that they will be the very first things to reopen.”

“That moment may come after the February half-term, although we should remain extremely cautious about the timetable ahead.”

The prime minister also sounded a warning to businesses in sectors such as hospitality keen to know when they can reopen, saying the new regulations do not expire until the end of March, because unwinding the lockdown would be a gradual process.

“As was the case last spring, our emergence from the lockdown will not be a big bang but a gradual unravelling,” he said.

He defended the government’s handling of the pandemic in recent weeks, claiming the approach of tiered restrictions across England was working until the [new variant](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/dec/19/what-is-the-new-covid-strain-and-will-vaccines-work-against-it) of Covid became widespread.

“The tiers which the house agreed last month were working with the old variant,” he said, adding: “It is inescapable that the facts are changing and we must change our response. We have no choice.”

He added: “The data showed that our efforts to contain the spread of new variant would not be sufficient if schools continued to act as a potential vector for spreading the virus between households.”

Johnson sought to highlight the potential for rapid delivery of the Covid vaccine as the way out of the crisis, calling it a “sprint”, compared with the “marathon” of last year’s lockdown.

He reiterated that “by 15 February the NHS is committed to offering a vaccine to everyone in the top four priority groups”.

That includes all over-70s, care home workers and frontline NHS workers. “In working towards that target, there are already more than 1,000 vaccination centres across the country,” he said.

The prime minister said that from next week there would be seven large-scale new vaccination centres in venues such as sports stadiums and exhibition spaces.

He said the UK had already vaccinated 1.3 million people, saying that was more than in the rest of Europe combined, and promised a daily update on the number of people receiving the jab.

The Labour leader, Keir Starmer, said his party would support the lockdown measures but criticised the speed of Johnson’s response. “Tougher restrictions are necessary,” he said. “We will support them, and vote for them, and urge everybody to comply with the new rules – stay at home, protect the NHS, save lives.”

But Starmer said the lockdown was “not inevitable”, but “part of a pattern”, saying the government had been too slow to act throughout the crisis: including failing to heed an official report in the summer called “preparing for a challenging winter”, which warned of the risk of the virus mutating and the NHS being overwhelmed during the winter.