

The Guardian

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Names in the newsComedy

Wipe your tears, Maureen Lipman, there is plenty of life left in comedy

[Rebecca Nicholson](#)



Far from being on its deathbed, it's actually in rude health



Maureen Lipman: oh do cheer up. Photograph: David M Bennett/Dave Bennett/Getty Images

Sat 25 Dec 2021 10.00 EST

According to Dame Maureen Lipman, [comedy is in a terrible state](#). “It’s in the balance whether we’re ever going to be funny again,” she told the *Today* programme on Radio 4, in a segment tied to a YouGov poll that found that many people censor their beliefs when meeting strangers. (Shocking that more people don’t introduce themselves with their full voting history and a row about immigration.) Lipman gravely asserted that “we’re on the cusp of wiping out comedy”. Poor old comedy, now consigned to reclining permanently on a chaise longue, having swooned at the thought of causing offence one too many times. Poor old comedy, hooked up to the life-support machine, fighting off the virus of cancel culture. It’s 50/50: will we ever laugh again?

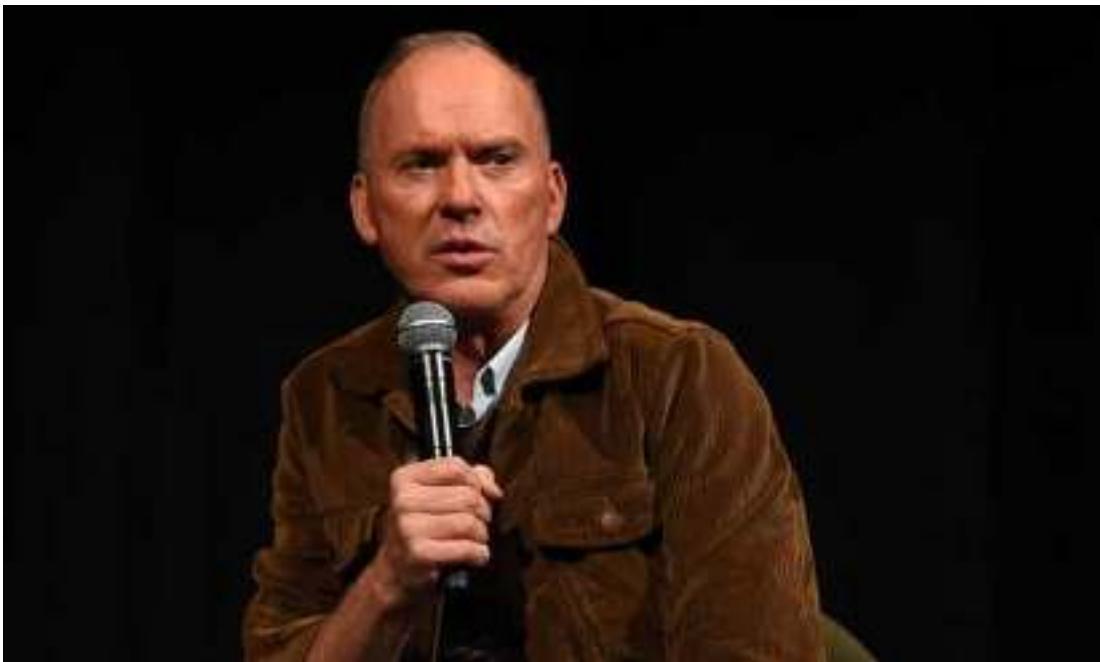
There are plenty of arguments that continue to be made about cancel culture and whether it is real or imagined, by plenty of people who are smarter than I am, though it’s worth noting that many of the most successful comedians seem to grumble about it from their thrones of solid gold.

The right to cause offence is, in some ways, a separate issue, one that balances finely on questions of power and taste. But the idea that comedy could disappear as a result of comedians being afraid to say whatever they want to say is a strange one for anyone who watches much comedy, particularly in a live setting.

The live comedy spirit, more outrageous, more provocative, may not be making its way on to our screens in swaths, but that has always been the case. Television is often less risky than the live arena, because audiences are bigger and broader and that must be factored in. Perhaps it's falling into the trap, nevertheless, to list TV comedies that are clever and witty and leave you with the sense of a boundary pushed or a line crossed, but when I watch *Alma's Not Normal* or *Ladhood* or *PEN15* or *We Are Lady Parts*, I never get the impression that they are holding much back.

The bedfellow to poor comedy is the “it wouldn’t get made now” line, the equivalent of “it was better in my day”, usually used to complain about one trend in modern comedy, to punch up rather than punch down. I suspect many older shows I love would not be made now, but many shows that I love now would not have been made 20 years ago. *Comedy* evolves, changes, adapts, follows trends until it bucks them. Someone discharge comedy and free up the bed: the prognosis is that it’s absolutely fine.

Michael Keaton: the human face of a drug disgrace



Michael Keaton: a fine late career.

Photograph: Frank Micelotta/PictureGroup for Hulu/REX/Shutterstock

While I do love an end-of-year list, deadlines mean that most of them are compiled in late November and so anything with a December-ish release date is probably going to miss out on the accolades. One such show is [Dopesick](#), which came to an end on Disney+ last week and went straight into my own belated personal top 10. This harrowing drama series, starring Michael Keaton as a doctor in an Appalachian community that is all but wiped out by oxycontin abuse, has been outstanding, a furious and infuriating indictment of Purdue Pharma, the Sackler family and the repulsive profiteering of huge corporations, at the cost of hundreds of thousands of lives. Keaton, who is having a fine late career, is wonderful, and though it is not an easy watch, I would recommend it for those with a strong constitution and a few hours to spare.

I tend to use end-of-year lists as a catch-up guide for what I should watch during the Christmas holidays, so in case you do the same and any of the following may have dropped off your radar, I can also recommend this lot. [In My Skin](#), on iPlayer, is a brilliant, funny, heartbreaking drama about a teenage girl, her tough family life and mental illness, which might not sound like a festive joy, but is utterly beautiful. [Landscapers](#), starring Olivia Colman (you may have heard of her), is an inventive drama quite unlike

anything else around, and also on Sky is [*Yellowjackets*](#), a dream for fans of 90s film stars and horror and survival series. Too late for the lists, but well worth a look.

Thom Sonny Green: drummer who lives to play live



Thom Sonny Green: stage-struck. Photograph: Didier Messens/Redferns

I did not know that I was an [Alt-J](#) fan until recently, but their single U&ME has been one of my favourites of the year. A news story about the band's drummer, [Thom Sonny Green](#), then caught my eye, as he has spent a lot of the pandemic shielding, but has said that he has decided he will be rejoining the band on tour from February. "Who knows what will happen if I catch Covid again? But anything I have to do to get back out on stage, I'll do it," he told the BBC.

One of my unexpected highlights of 2021 was going to see [Fontaines DC](#) on a whim, in Manchester, finding myself in a room filled with 3,000 people for the first time since early 2020.

As the band powered through their opening song, shouting "life ain't always empty" on repeat, you could feel the crackle of energy rippling through the

room.

Music has been treated appallingly by this government during the pandemic and [live music is once again on a precipice](#), but when it's back, music reminds you of its sheer vitality and power. I had not known just how much I'd missed it. Green's urgent need to be with the band on tour is completely human.

Rebecca Nicholson is an Observer columnist

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The Observer view on a year in which the British public put their leaders to shame

[Observer editorial](#)

While most people are at pains to do the right thing in tough times, the same cannot be said for Boris Johnson's government



Boris Johnson at prime minister's questions on 15 December 15.
Photograph: Jessica Taylor/UK PARLIAMENT/AFP/Getty Images

Sun 26 Dec 2021 01.30 EST

If there is one image from the past year that is certain to make the history books, it is that [indelible picture from April of the Queen](#), Covid-masked and isolated, in a wooden pew of St George's chapel, Windsor, for the funeral of her husband, Prince Philip. As yesterday's heartfelt Christmas

message confirmed, the monarch, frail though resolute, still consumed by duty, has, as she enters the 70th year of her long reign, never felt so alone.

You might argue that, at the end of a torrid year, her nation also finds itself as isolated as at any time during those seven decades. Twelve months on from the Brexit agreement that saw the not-very United Kingdom bid adieu to its nearest neighbours, many more of the fears of Remainers than the hopes of Leavers have begun to be realised. Though the economic evidence has been blurred by the pandemic, it's already clear enough that departure from the single market has created dramatic and predictable [labour shortages and severely disrupted supply chains](#). Far from the promised ease of "sovereignty", Britain has in the past year become a country ever more hemmed in and obsessed by its borders, locked into intractable negotiation over the Irish Sea, mired in bureaucracy at the Channel ports, fixated on hostile responses to desperate refugees in rubber dinghies and currently shut out from any free movement to the continent because, as if we didn't know before, borders have two sides.

The roots of that isolation lie in the disease of British – or English – exceptionalism, which brought this government to power. It is that ideology, in which rules are for other people, which also set the stage for the reckless and chaotic initial response to the pandemic and which has defined the judgment of the prime minister right up to the present moment. To say the government he leads has "trust issues" is like suggesting that a kleptomaniac enjoys a shopping trip. That peerless chronicler of her times, [Joan Didion](#), who died on Thursday at the age of 87, once observed (of the moribund and corrupt Reagan administration of 1988) that "most strikingly of all, it was clear that those inside the process had congealed into a permanent political class, the defining characteristic of which was its readiness to abandon those not inside the process". Looking back over the events of the past year or longer, it is equally hard to understand the actions of Johnson's government in any other way.

One heartening consequence of that transparent venality and laziness, however, has been the determination of the majority of the population to act with greater fellow feeling than their rulers in Westminster. The spirit of localism that had its vivid expressions in [Marcus Rashford's campaign to feed hungry children](#) at the start of the pandemic, and which saw

communities pull together to make provision for the vulnerable, has persisted in different ways as the crisis has dragged on. You could see it in the widespread acceptance that, in the absence of clear guidance, this would have to be once again, a restrained festive period. Despite the vocal minority of anti-vaxxers on the streets, and the highly selective “libertarians” dictating government dithering from the back benches, most people have been at pains to do the right thing.

We are approaching the new year with understaffed emergency wards filling up and a depressingly familiar sense of uncertainty about the exact scale and nature of the challenges ahead. As Didion also observed: “It is easy to see the beginnings of things and harder to see the ends.” If the past year has revealed anything, however, it is, once and for all, that complex crises cannot be solved by populist slogans; they require rigour and competence and sacrifice, qualities, as we move into 2022, still far more in evidence in Britain’s people than its leaders.

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OpinionUkraine

The Observer view on the year ahead for Europe

[Observer editorial](#)

From France to Ukraine, the continent faces many challenges during 2022



French president Emmanuel Macron (R) greets Germany's chancellor Olaf Scholz in Paris on 10 December, a few days after Scholz officially took over from his predecessor Angela Merkel. Photograph: David Silpa/UPI/Rex/Shutterstock

Sun 26 Dec 2021 01.30 EST

The recent [barrage of threats](#) from Vladimir Putin is no longer solely to do with Ukraine. Russia's president has steadily broadened the scope of his demands to encompass defence and security arrangements in Europe as a whole. Even if current tensions on Ukraine's borders do not ultimately result in open conflict, this deliberate escalation bodes ill for 2022.

What Putin wants, in effect, is to turn the clock back to the 1990s, before former Warsaw Pact countries such as Poland and ex-Soviet republics such as Estonia joined Nato. If he had his way, he would probably reconstitute the Soviet Union, whose demise he mourns. This bitter old KGB spy never accepted cold war defeat.

The western alliance must make clear that such dangerous revisionism is unacceptable. Russia cannot have a veto on Ukraine's (or Georgia's) future Nato membership. Nor may Putin revive the old Soviet "near abroad", resurrect spheres of influence or dictate where western forces are stationed. Talks on confidence-building measures to ease Russia's concerns would be a more sensible way forward.

Yet by deploying an estimated 100,000 troops to Ukraine's frontiers and maintaining a verbal bombardment, Putin has made clear he will not quickly relax the pressure on Europe's leaders. For Washington, this is a geopolitical puzzle. For Europeans, a hostile, angry Russia is an immediate, menacing danger lurking on their doorstep.

Sensing US weakness, eastern European countries in particular are alarmed by President Joe Biden's statement that the US is ready to address "Russia's concerns relative to Nato" – and by Putin's aggressive demand last week for "immediate" concessions. The broader worry for 2022 is that, following the chaotic Afghanistan withdrawal, US security guarantees cannot be trusted.

Despite assurances at last summer's G7 summit in Cornwall that "America is back", Biden is focused primarily on his domestic agenda and on containing China. Neither policy is going well. Covid is surging again, while the president's signature spending bills, aimed at sparking a post-pandemic recovery, have been watered down or blocked by wayward Democrats in Congress. Biden will be preoccupied by a difficult campaign for November's midterm elections.

Thus for Europe, and the EU in particular, the new year looks set to begin on a disconcertingly uncertain, lonely note. It's squeezed between a malignant Moscow and an ambivalent America. And to make matters worse, postwar Europe's foundational relationship – that between France and Germany – may be about to come under fresh strain. Olaf Scholz, Germany's new

chancellor, wasted no time in opening a dialogue with the French president, Emmanuel Macron, travelling to Paris two days after taking office. On paper, the centre-left, three-party coalition led by Scholz backs deeper EU integration and enhanced European sovereignty, ideas promoted by Macron and diluted by Angela Merkel, Scholz's predecessor.

But in practice, French-German convergence may be hard to achieve. There are sharp differences on EU energy policy, the "green transition" and French efforts to classify nuclear energy as a "sustainable" fuel at a time of fast-rising gas prices. Macron wants Germany to support more [pan-European spending](#), funded by shared debt along the precedent-setting lines of the EU's €800bn (£679bn) Covid recovery fund. This is unpopular in Berlin.

Macron argues passionately that, in a world of fierce predators and unreliable friends, Europe must strive for greater autonomy in defence, security and foreign policy. Yet he has opposed calls for a tougher line towards Russia and China from, for example, [Annalena Baerbock](#), co-leader of the German Greens, who is Scholz's new foreign minister and a keen human rights advocate. It will be hard to square this circle.

Europe's ability to deal with a host of other pressing problems – the row between Brussels, Poland and Hungary over constitutional issues, separatist tensions in the [Balkans](#), friction with Turkey, Islamist terrorism in the Sahel, Iran's nuclear ambitions and unresolved Brexit arguments – will not be helped by France's assumption of the six-month EU presidency in January.

Although he denies it, [Macron](#) is certain to be distracted by his bid for a second term in April's elections. This epic battle unites three central issues that will dominate Europe's agenda in 2022: rightwing populism, migration and the pandemic. Some surveys indicate that since the German election, [the populist tide has been receding](#). But in France, strong support for the xenophobic racists, Marine Le Pen and Éric Zemmour, suggests such conclusions are premature.

Having followed Biden in abandoning Afghanistan, European Nato members can hardly complain if, as aid agencies predict, they face a big new wave of [Afghan refugees](#) this winter. This would again highlight the EU's

collective failure to agree a comprehensive, humane migration policy – and will be exploited by the French far right.

Another failure, the extraordinary absence of a coordinated European response to the Omicron variant as countries impose different, contradictory and often deeply unpopular, draconian restrictions, could help tip how [France](#) votes. As with Boris Johnson, the Covid bug, not the machinations of Russia, China and the US, may yet be Macron's and Europe's undoing.

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NotebookChristmas

It wouldn't be Christmas without Dickens

[Rachel Cooke](#)



His seasonal message still moves me to tears



Oli Higginson (Fred) in *A Christmas Carol* at the Old Vic. Photograph: Old Vic / Manuel Harlan

Sat 25 Dec 2021 12.00 EST

On Tuesday, a Christmas miracle. Not only did my niece, nephew and I all test negative for Covid, so did the cast of the [Old Vic's production of *A Christmas Carol*](#). After days of uncertainty, our longed-for outing was on.

I warned Edith and William in advance that I would probably cry and so it came to pass. I wept copiously, while they rolled their eyes. In the interval, I tried to explain that because Dickens's story has to do with regret – with choices wrongly made and paths never taken – its wondrous power only grows as you get older. What I didn't tell them, wanting (probably naively) to preserve their innocence, is that its central message could at this point hardly be more necessary or less likely to be heeded.

How loudly the “be kind” brigade trumpet their compassion on social media! And yet how rarely, on the part of their noisiest and seemingly most virtuous members, does this involve any kind of challenge. Their mercy extending only to those of whose behaviour they wholly approve, they could hardly be more different from dear Bob Cratchit and sweet-hearted Fred, both of whom love Ebenezer Scrooge – or try to love him – in spite of his

great miserliness, and who, when he wakes on [Christmas](#) morning a changed man, accept in good faith his newfound generosity, the former resisting the urge to call “for help and a strait-waistcoat”, the latter practically shaking his uncle’s hand clean off as he welcomes him into his home.

Outlaw country



Robin Hood: tug-of-love outlaw. Photograph: Tracey Whitefoot/Alamy

In the Sheffield suburb of Loxley, a local teacher, Dan Eaton, has found a carved cross that he believes marks the site of the [birthplace of Robin Hood](#): a discovery made, somewhat conveniently, behind the playground of his school. Naturally, the council is thrilled. Here is more grist for its “Bring Robin Home” campaign (Hood has been associated with Loxley since the 16th century).

But the people of Nottingham remain unconvinced. “Robin Hood is as much from Sheffield as Jarvis Cocker is from Nottingham,” says Merlita Bryan, a Labour councillor and the current sheriff of Nottingham. For her, Hood is properly Robin of Locksley, named for a long-lost village in Nottinghamshire.

When I was a child, my father, who lived in Loxley, was quite determined to claim Hood as a Yorkshireman, a conviction born mostly of the fact that such a proto-socialist could not possibly have come from somewhere as far south as Nottingham. But out and about, his stories weren't hard to believe. It was on ghostly Loxley Common, where the bodies of criminals were once gibbeted, that outlaws were supposed to have lain in wait for travellers from York. Walking our lurcher in the gloaming, I always felt afraid; as the sun sank, you practically ran towards the shop that marked the border with civilisation and not just because it was the only place for miles about that had a reliable supply of the semi-illicit and noisy sweet known as Space Dust.

Glimpse of light



Marking the winter solstice at Stonehenge.

Photograph: Finnbarr Webster/Getty Images

From Loxley, you can look across the valley to Lodge Moor, Dungworth and Stannington, places where, at this time of year, people traditionally gather in the pub to sing village carols. My favourite Stannington carol is Hail Smiling Morn, a version of a glee (or part song) composed in 1810 by the comically named Reginald Spofforth. Its words (I know them by heart) describe a sunrise that "tips the hills with gold... at whose bright presence

darkness flies away”: lines that speak so marvellously well to this time of year, when the winter solstice has passed and we begin to inch ever closer to the light.

Rachel Cooke is an Observer columnist

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Observer comment cartoon

Omicron variant

Keeping Omicron at bay – cartoon

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OpinionChristmas

Families have had their fun. Now, for us singletons, let the magic of Betwixtmas begin

[Emma John](#)



The week between Boxing Day and New Year's Eve is a special gift to the unpartnered



Renée Zellweger captures single life in *Bridget Jones's Diary*. Photograph: PF1/Working Title/Allstar

Sun 26 Dec 2021 02.00 EST

And so that was Christmas. I hope you had fun. Near and dear ones, old and young, all the good stuff. Presents, tree, giant fowl... a dusting of carols, a soupcon of the Queen... a joyous surrender to couch-based inertia and sprout-based flatulence. If this isn't the time to indulge a few cliches, I don't know what is.

My family has always indulged pretty much every one of its yuletide whims, turning the 72 hours from Christmas Eve to Boxing Day into a rare bacchanal of M&S excess that I embrace, endorse and would defend to the death on the barricades. There is only ever one wrinkle in the wrapping paper, which is that I'm still single at 43 and nothing brings that home like the most family-oriented festival of the year.

For one thing, the TV schedulers do seem to have a unified if blinkered view of what constitutes an appropriate Christmas message for never-married women like me. I've watched enough Hallmark movies now to have learned that the reason for my ongoing lack of a partner is the fact that I'm simply too uptight and wedded to my job and that if I would only move back home

to the small town where my parents' grocery store is under threat, I'd soon run into a passionate beet farmer who could teach me the true meaning of the season.

So while I rarely regret my singleness, a rich diet of [festive romcoms](#) does tend to bring on an annual purging of forlorn hope, the same way the water companies like to discharge their sewage overflows into the sea when they think no one is looking. After all, these are not the most dignified of times for the [unpartnered person](#). You try feeling great about yourself after you've spent a sleepless night sharing a room with your excitable five-year-old niece or gradually deflating on the airbed wedged in the alcove next to your brother-in-law's treadmill.

Thank the blessed baby Jesus, then, for [Betwixtmas](#), which begins, according to my calendar at least, on 27 December. This special four-day period is nestled between the messy aftermath and clean-up duties of family Christmas and the exhausting-sounding New Year's Eve party I will almost certainly flake out of at the last minute.

It is truly the single person's holiday. For while married friends and knackered parents are on field manoeuvres in a car crowded with over-entitled children and over-ripe cheese, zigzagging between grandparents, in-laws and friends they're too busy to see the rest of the year, the single person is in their pyjamas eating leftover trifle for lunch and making a last-minute plan with their other single friends to see the new *Matrix* film.

As with any epiphany, the magic of Betwixtmas did not immediately appear to me and my pals. In our 20s, it was a wilderness zone, when everyone had taken time off work and headed home to see their folks, with whom they would grow increasingly impatient and irritated, building up a head of frustration and emotion that had to be released in an epic all-night blow-out on New Year's Eve. But we were young and the fear of being home alone without concrete plans was still upon us.

It was only in our 30s that we began to discover the secret weapon of which we were possessed. If there is one superpower that the single person wields, one gift the gods have reserved uniquely for us, it is that of spontaneity. While our contemporaries require a good week's notice to find enough

childcare cover for a quick coffee, we who have so much time to ourselves usually have plenty left over to share with others.

My most cherished festive memories have been laid down in under-celebrated days with mundane names like Monday

For that very reason, some of my most cherished festive memories have been laid down in the unhallowed, under-celebrated days of Betwixtmas, days with mundane names such as Monday or Tuesday or that-day-I've-got-off-in-the-middle-of-the-week. A holy time of quiet reflection, punctuated with long walks with whoever's around or sneaky sales shopping in self-extended lunch hours. Of easygoing leisure interrupted with a sudden dash to a discount-ticket matinee or an outing to an ice rink where you spend five minutes in skates and two hours drinking rum-laced hot chocolate under an outdoor heater.

Yes, many of these are days when some of us are technically supposed to be working. But first, we all know no one's keeping tabs. Second, if Heather says she's going to be in the pub that lies exactly halfway between our houses then surely it would be impolite not to join her?

And third, the randomness of people's availability is half the joy. There's an element of open-house fluidity to Betwixtmas; it extends its joyful invitation to anyone with a few hours to spare during this unstructured interregnum. Which is how I've ended up spending some gloriously meandering days with a truly random assortment of friends and friends' friends who would never otherwise have been in each other's company.

This, to me, is when the festive season offers its most exclusive gift. These are the moments when I feel like I'm living my true Christmas movie-self: making lightning costume changes, from a onesie to a party dress and back again. You need confidence in yourself to enjoy it. You have to be prepared to embrace uncertainty.

Of course, in-person social activities will be curtailed this year; it is incumbent on those of us who love this sacred time to honour it responsibly. Some of the meet-ups will move to Zoom, some of the movie nights will be

Netflix watch-alongs, but its spirit will live on among single people everywhere. So from my “family” to yours, we wish you all a very merry Betwixtmas.

Emma John's book, Self Contained: Scenes From a Single Life, is out now

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/dec/26/families-have-had-their-festive-fun-now-for-joy-of-betwixtmas>

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Observer lettersRefugees

Letters: let refugees work and we all win

Farmers need labour and asylum seekers want to work: surely it's time to lift the ban



Asylum seekers at a barracks in Folkestone, Kent. 'Work would allow them to use their skills and live in dignity.' Photograph: Dan Kitwood/Getty Images

Sun 26 Dec 2021 01.00 EST

I read with interest "[Host of golden daffodils will rot in the fields for want of foreign pickers](#)" (News). While farmers are struggling to recruit UK workers, the National Farmers' Union lists the UK's new points-based immigration system, which coincides with the free movement of EU citizens ending because of Brexit, as one of the reasons for this problem. Giving asylum seekers the right to work would allow them to use their skills and live in dignity. How can the government justify to farmers who need labour the policy of not allowing people who are already in the UK the right to fill

these vacancies? How can you explain to a farmer who has no labour to harvest his fruit, vegetables or flowers that, yes, we have people who are eager to work but we will not allow it and if you employ them you will be breaking the law?

Refugee Action has been running a campaign to “[lift the ban](#)”. The Lift the Ban coalition report shows that a change in policy would result in an economic gain of £97.8m a year for the government as a result of additional tax revenues and savings. This is based on the amount that would be saved by not having to provide cash support plus the extra money received by the exchequer through payroll contributions from income tax and national insurance. Other sectors would also benefit from a change in this Kafkaesque scenario.

Virginia Brown

Talgarth, Powys

What about the victims?

Who would argue with Catherine Bennett about the need for tougher penalties for dangerous, careless, uninsured, irresponsible or even intoxicated drivers (“[Pity the poor, oppressed driver forced to share their roads with the rest of us](#)”, Comment)? But what she misses is the impact on the victims. Society pays little attention to those seriously but not fatally injured, whose livelihoods are lost as a result of someone else’s wrong decisions. They are left to the machinations of insurance companies whose motivation seems to be minimising and delaying compensation pay-outs. The companies’ prolonged negotiations leave victims with no financial cover when they need it most and mental and physical suffering.

By all means pile up the righteous indignation if it will prevent future carnage but spare a few thoughts for the many permanently injured people whose lives are never the same after a chance encounter on the road.

Yvonne Williams

Ryde, Isle of Wight

My fears for future of the NHS

I, too, am very worried about the future of the NHS (“[A dangerous lie is stalking the NHS: that it is no longer fit for purpose](#)”, Comment). Since 1948, many on the right have been keen to kill it off. However, until recently, the popularity of the NHS has prevented this.

The way the Tories traditionally move a public service into the private sector is to underfund it to the point that the public will agree to any change in the hope of seeing it improve. This was classically demonstrated by the way the railways were run down in the 1980s in order to privatise them in the 1990s. NHS funding stagnated between 2010 and 2016, with the corresponding rise in waiting lists to 4.5 million pre pandemic. The political strategy could not be any more transparent.

John Kinder

Romsey, Hampshire

No ‘papers, please’

Re “[Strange beasts, these ‘libertarians’ who love to curb the freedom of others](#)” (Comment): for another example of libertarian inconsistency, Kenan Malik needed to look no further than Nick Cohen’s description of the damagingly partisan elections bill (“[The Tories call it electoral reform. Looks more like a bid to rig the system](#)”, Comment).

Last week, Unlock Democracy, Open Britain and Fair Vote UK wrote to all the Conservative Covid rebels about the elections bill. We pointed out that, if it is passed, to be allowed to vote people will need to present photographic identity documents. This unnecessary requirement will cost up to £180m over 10 years and actively discriminates against young, older and disabled voters. For Conservative rebels committed to fighting a “papers, please” society, there will be a chance at the report stage of this bill to stand up and be counted and defeat photo voter ID. I fear many will be missing in action.

Tom Brake, director, Unlock Democracy

London N1

Scrum down, Michael

Your rugby union correspondent, Michael Aylwin, writes that primary-school teacher is a euphemism for “part-timer” in his report on Cardiff’s heroic performance against Harlequins in the Champions Cup (“[Dombrandt’s double helps break resistance of Cardiff’s kids](#)”, Sport). Is he up for changing jobs in January with Cardiff’s stand-in hooker, Evan Yardley?

Rob Walker

Linthwaite, Huddersfield

Papal firefighter

One factor Simon Tisdall might have mentioned in his thoughtful article (“[The world is ablaze. Xi, Putin and Biden must join the firefighters](#)”, Foreign affairs commentary): while each world leader’s interest is in protecting his/her back, the one voice that reaches every corner of the world and consistently advocates the common good is Pope Francis. He urges world leaders not simply to look after their own interests but to work together to abolish nuclear weapons and capital punishment, to oppose interests that selfishly squander natural resources and damage the world’s ecosystems, to make refugees welcome in more prosperous countries, to put an end to the enslavement and trafficking of vulnerable women and to make the sharing of technology to defeat Covid a priority.

Guido Waldman

London N1

Follow this school’s rules

Angela Neustatter’s article was a beautiful account of her grandmother’s role as AS Neill’s partner in founding the extraordinary Summerhill school as it celebrates a century of existence against all the odds (“[My grandmother’s forgotten role in the school with no rules](#)”, Focus). She rightly also referred to the debt the school owes to the “charismatic” Zoe Redhead, Neill’s daughter and successor. At a time when the pressures on childhood and adolescence have made being a “good enough parent” so much more difficult, Redhead has just written *Barefoot in November: Parenting the Summerhill Way*. It is published by the Summerhill Trust and is, a guide to hard-pressed parents – and grandparents and other guardians,

for that matter – on how to cope with the everyday, and increasingly vexed, issues of family life.

Summerhill is not, as your headline suggests, “the school with no rules”; it has plenty, but the children are involved in agreeing and enforcing them. A failure to involve pupils in the running of our schools has been a drag on school improvement, especially in England, and has led to a decade-long fad for “zero tolerance” and “assertive discipline”, which has resulted in 1,500 pupils being permanently excluded from English schools for every one excluded in Scotland. More of us should find out what Scotland is doing so well and of course buy Zoe Redhead’s book.

Tim Brighouse
Oxford

Maggie in Madrid

A footnote to your article about Spain’s rightwingers and their gatherings in Madrid’s Plaza de Colón (“[‘A Francoist daydream’: how Spain’s right clings to its imperial past](#)”, World, last week). Just off Colón you will find Plaza Margaret Thatcher.

Janet Ruane
Leamington Spa

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For the recordUK news

For the record

This week's corrections

Sun 26 Dec 2021 01.00 EST

We referred to Amelia Luck, 21, as “the youngest ever female lifeboat helm”. She is currently the youngest woman in that role, but the [RNLI website](#) notes that Elizabeth Hostvedt, an 18-year-old Norwegian student, became the first woman qualified to command an RNLI inshore lifeboat in 1969 ([‘If there’s peril I’ll be there...’](#) 12 December, p31).

We misnamed Alan Shepard, the first American in space, as “John Shepard” ([The science stories of 2021](#), 19 December, the New Review, p28).

In a report about the BBC Sports Personality of the Year awards (“Biles receives lifetime achievement award”, 19 December, Sport, p17, later editions), we incorrectly said the US gymnast Simone Biles had been “unable to add to her tally [of medals] at the Tokyo Olympics” after withdrawing for mental health reasons. We meant to say she did not add to her haul of gold medals; she won a team silver and an individual bronze at the 2020 Games. Also, Biles has four Olympic golds, not five as the article said.

All ye faithful: A [Notebook item](#) (19 December, p50) said the “latest census figures, released last week” show the percentage of the “UK population” who identify their religion as Christian is just over 51%. In fact the figure is from a 2019 ONS survey, which is the most recent data available, and is for England and Wales.

Other recently amended articles include:

[‘We are family’: the Israelis sharing life and hope with Palestinians](#)

[Bands and DJs count the costs as UK fans fail to show up for gigs](#)

Peter Macnab: Superdrug boss leading the high street fightback

Newcastle v Manchester City underlines the problem inherent in football

*Write to the Readers' Editor, the Observer, York Way, London N1 9GU,
email observer.readers@observer.co.uk, tel 020 3353 4736*

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OpinionConservatives

All revolutions devour their own children. Just look at the Brexiteers

[Nick Cohen](#)



Driven by ideological obsession, the Tories move still further from ordinary voters



Andrew Bridgen, left, supported Steve Baker when he removed Nadine Dorries from their WhatsApp group over her loyalty to the prime minister.
Composite: Ian Lawrence; Dave M Benett, Jessica Taylor/Getty Images

Sat 25 Dec 2021 14.00 EST

As the *Observer* goes to press on Christmas Day, the UK's ruling [Conservatives](#) are contemplating breaking the back of the National Health Service. Maybe they are right to avoid taking all but the most cursory precautions against Omicron. Perhaps the relative mildness of the new variant will outweigh its wild infectiousness. The fact remains that, although they want the crisis to be over, they have no idea if it is over. And on this speculative hope, Conservative MPs are prepared to run the potentially fatal political risk of collapsing the NHS.

So much attention focuses on Boris Johnson's unfitness to be prime minister that the dissolution of the parliamentary Conservative party into warring bands of ideologues and fantasists is in danger of being lost. Its contempt for rules, its willingness to gamble away its chances of holding power show a movement in the grip of radical rightwing delusion. Contrary to much political commentary, the Conservatives have not reinvented themselves to advance the interests of their new working-class voters. The aristocratic disdain of a Downing Street that partied while forcing the country to lock

down shows how widely the values of the Tory elite and the average voter have diverged.

A supposed truth about politics, which has been dignified with the technocratic title of “[May’s law of curvilinear disparity](#)”, holds that the professional politicians at the top of a party cannot afford to be as extreme as activists below them. Members are free to indulge their whims. Serious politicians must hug the electorate close if they hope to attain power. All attempts to create laws as certain as the laws of physics to predict human behaviour fail. The state of the Conservative party shows that May’s law is no exception. A [study](#) for the UK in a Changing Europe thinktank found Conservative MPs were more lost in rightwing ideology than Conservative members, Conservative voters and, naturally, the electorate as a whole. Almost a quarter of Conservative members and 73% of the public agreed that there was “one law for the rich and another for the poor” (as Johnson’s career has shown). Just 5% of the Conservative MPs the authors surveyed believed it. Large majorities thought that big business takes advantage of the public and that ordinary people do not get a fair share of the nation’s wealth. Conservative politicians did not.

Like angry children, Conservatives demand that the world be as they want it to be and not as it is

The rightwing doctrine they cling to is not a coherent system of thought. I find the best way to understand it is as truculent over-confidence. Like angry children, Conservatives demand that the world be as they want it to be and not as it is. They do not realise that they have caught themselves in a feedback loop. The nationalism and Thatcherism that once brought them electoral successes are threatening to destroy the values they think they uphold.

Read the Tory press and you cannot miss the laments at the failure to turn the UK into a capitalist powerhouse. [Lord Frost walks out of the cabinet](#) saying Brexit should have brought a “lightly regulated, low-tax” country. Liz Truss positions herself to benefit from Johnson’s downfall by posing as a free-trade fundamentalist who will unchain Britannia from the shackles of the state.

They still cannot admit that Brexit was an attack on wealth-creation. The Office for Budget Responsibility forecasts it will cause twice the long-term economic damage of Covid, leave trade 15% lower, bring a [£100bn annual hit to national income and cost £40bn in lost tax revenue](#). When you shrink the tax base, you have to raise taxes to cover the shortfall just to stand still. When you shrink the private sector, the size of the state grows in comparison by definition. When you pull your country out of the largest free-trade area in the world, you have no right to protest about economic decline.

“Move fast and break things” may work as a slogan in Silicon Valley but it isn’t a programme for government. The creative destruction Conservatives thought they were unleashing with [Brexit](#) has created nothing of value and left only rubble behind.

Their behaviour shows that at some level they grasp the magnitude of their failure. All revolutions devour their own children as the euphoria of the initial uprising degenerates into panic. The speed with which the Brexit revolutionaries are devouring theirs is the best indication of the depth of their insecurity.

They don’t even have the table manners to wait until the kids are out of nappies before sharpening the carving knives. Johnson won the Brexit referendum and the 2019 election. Now the right cannot wait to be rid of him. With a roar of “enough is enough”, [Steve Baker bans Nadine Dorries](#) from a Conservative WhatsApp group for the crime of praising the prime minister. Her work in undermining the BBC counts for nothing. In Conservative culture, as in all cancel cultures, you must show a demeaning adherence to the ideological line or you are finished. When Johnson made Sajid Javid health secretary in June, the Tory press hailed him as a Covid “[hawk](#)”, who would resist any attempt to lock down the economy. This month, fears about the Omicron variant compelled him to introduce modest restrictions. Conservative MPs did not say that, if even Javid believed there was danger ahead, they should take notice. They heckled him in the Commons as he made the case for caution with cries of “resign” and “[what a load of old tripe](#)”.

“Instead of taking him at face value, they are painting him as the enemy,” Labour’s health spokesman, Wes Streeting, told me in a voice filled with

disbelief, and I thought, with a hint of anticipation as well.

Every senior opposition figure I talk to believes the Conservatives are no longer capable of governing themselves or the country. They have dissolved into an extremist rabble that is contorted by magical thinking, heresy hunts, fits of temper and doctrinal spasms.

If the opposition parties cooperate, and if Labour can break with the calamity of the Corbyn years, there is a chance that they can eject this government from power. A faint chance, I grant you, given the scale of the Tories' electoral advantage but a chance nevertheless. And with that uncharacteristically cheery thought, I wish you all a merry Christmas.

Nick Cohen is an Observer columnist

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Headlines thursday 23 december 2021

- [Omicron Risk of hospital stay 40% lower than for Delta, UK data suggests](#)
- [Live UK Covid: Omicron studies hailed as ‘good news’ but UK still in ‘danger zone’, expert warns](#)
- [Covid Vulnerable children aged 5-11 to be offered jabs](#)
- [‘Help us to help you’ Doctors issue plea to unvaccinated](#)

Coronavirus

Risk of hospital stay 40% lower with Omicron than Delta, UK data suggests

Researchers find those who test positive with new Covid variant up to 25% less likely to attend hospital at all

- [Coronavirus – latest updates](#)
- [See all our coronavirus coverage](#)



The Imperial College outbreak modelling team analysed hospitalisations and vaccine records among all PCR-confirmed Covid cases in England between 1 and 14 December. Photograph: Tejas Sandhu/Sopa/Rex/Shutterstock

[Ian Sample](#), science editor, and [Heather Stewart](#), political editor

Wed 22 Dec 2021 17.27 EST

The [Omicron variant](#) of coronavirus appears to be milder, with a 20%-25% reduced chance of a hospital visit and at least a 40% lower risk of being admitted overnight, the first UK data of its kind has showed.

But as daily Covid cases topped 100,000 for the first time on Wednesday, experts warned that high transmissibility means the NHS is still at risk of being overwhelmed.

In what was described by scientists as a “qualified good news story”, two studies on Wednesday pointed to a lower risk of hospitalisation with Omicron.

An Imperial College outbreak modelling team led by Prof Neil Ferguson analysed hospitalisations and vaccine records among all PCR-confirmed Covid cases in England between 1 and 14 December. The dataset included 56,000 cases of Omicron and 269,000 cases of Delta.

[Their report](#) found that the risk of any attendance at hospital was 20% to 25% lower with Omicron versus Delta, and 40%-45% lower when the visit resulted in admission for at least one night. For the small percentage of people who had neither been previously infected with Covid nor vaccinated, the risk of hospitalisation was about 11% lower for Omicron versus Delta.

Ferguson said that while it was “good news”, the assessment did not substantially change Sage modelling pointing to 3,000 daily hospitalisations in England at the peak of the wave next month without restrictions beyond the plan B measures currently in place.

While the analysis shows evidence of “a moderate reduction” in the risk of hospitalisation associated with Omicron compared with Delta, Ferguson said, “this appears to be offset by the reduced efficacy of vaccines against infection with the Omicron variant”.

“Given the high transmissibility of the Omicron virus, there remains the potential for health services to face increasing demand if Omicron cases continue to grow at the rate that has been seen in recent weeks,” he added.

The Imperial study found that having had a previous Covid infection reduced the risk of hospitalisation from Omicron by about half compared with a first infection, the report adds.

Those hospitalised with Omicron had on average shorter stays – 0.22 days compared with 0.32 days for Delta – but more data is needed, particularly in older age groups among whom Omicron is currently less prevalent. It is too early to assess the risk of admission to intensive care and death, but the researchers say greater reductions in risk are possible.

A separate, preliminary analysis of Omicron cases in Scotland pointed to an even greater reduction in the risk of hospitalisation compared with Delta. Scientists on the Eave II study, using hospital data from 23 November to 19 December, concluded that the risk of hospitalisation may be 70% lower with Omicron than Delta.

Dr Jim McMenamin, the national Covid-19 incident director for [Public Health](#) Scotland, welcomed a “qualified good news story”, but said that it was “important we don’t get ahead of ourselves”.

The Scottish study, which has yet to be peer reviewed, is based on small numbers and most Omicron cases were in people aged 20 to 39, meaning researchers were unable to assess the severity of the disease in elderly people who are more vulnerable. The researchers logged 15 hospitalisations with Omicron, about a third of the 47 admissions that modelling suggested they should expect given the characteristics of those infected.

“The potentially serious impact of Omicron on a population cannot be underestimated. And a smaller proportion of a much greater number of cases that might ultimately require treatment can still mean a substantial number of people who may experience severe Covid infections that could lead to potential hospitalisation,” McMenamin said.

It came as the number of UK daily infections hit a record high of 106,122 despite previous signs that the wave was starting to plateau.

NHS England also said 301 Covid admissions were recorded by hospitals in London on 20 December, up 78% week on week and the highest number for

a single day since 7 February.

At Westminster no decisions have yet been taken by ministers about what restrictions, if any, should be introduced after Christmas, with many Tory backbenchers and some cabinet ministers sceptical about the need for further action.

Contingency plans have been drawn up, but Downing Street sources insist these have not yet been put to ministers, and no further announcements are now expected before Christmas.

The shadow health secretary, Wes Streeting, urged the government to provide certainty. “The risk to the NHS remains. Boris Johnson needs to explain why people and businesses in England aren’t being told what the coming weeks look like, when those in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland have clarity,” he said.

The Liberal Democrats’ health spokesperson, Daisy Cooper, accused the prime minister of subjecting the public in England to “a Christmas of confusion and consternation”. “Once again Boris Johnson has crossed his fingers, closed his eyes and hoped for the best,” she said.

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Politics live with Andrew Sparrow
Coronavirus

UK Covid live: 119,789 coronavirus cases reported in highest daily figure of pandemic – as it happened

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Vaccines and immunisation

Vulnerable children aged 5-11 to be offered Covid jabs

Two weaker doses of Pfizer jab to be given, with some scientists calling for all in age group to be vaccinated

[Covid vaccination for UK children: what has been approved?](#)

[Coronavirus – latest updates](#)



JCVI advice is for all UK children who are vulnerable to be jabbed, but each national government can decide for itself. Photograph: Robin van Lonkhuijsen/EPA

[Peter Walker, Ian Sample , Heather Stewart and Richard Adams](#)

Wed 22 Dec 2021 12.31 EST

Hundreds of thousands of clinically vulnerable five- to 11-year-olds are to be offered Covid vaccines for the first time, with some scientists calling for the programme to be extended to the whole age group before the new UK school term.

The Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation (JCVI) has recommended vaccinations for about 330,000 younger children at clinical risk, and also those living with someone who is immunosuppressed.

They will be offered two doses of the Pfizer vaccine – in 10-microgram amounts, a third of the quantity used for adults – with a gap of eight weeks.

A parallel announcement will expand the booster programme to more teenagers, including 16 and 17-year-olds.

The JCVI's decision on five- to 11-year-olds came after the UK's medicine watchdog, the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency (MHRA), approved the use of the Pfizer vaccine for them.

“Parents and carers can be reassured that no new vaccine for children would have been approved unless the expected standards of safety, quality and effectiveness have been met,” said Dr June Raine, the MHRA’s chief executive.

While the MHRA’s green light covers the entire age group, the JCVI is unlikely to approve a mass vaccine rollout among primary age children for another month or longer, a move that could frustrate ministers, aware that the US and a number of EU countries are already doing this.

Christina Pagel, a professor of operational research at University College London, and a member of Independent Sage, said the delay was “setting children up for another term of educational disruption and potential illness”, and would also place parents and school staff at greater risk.

She said: “The US has successfully and safely given over 7 million doses to children. Many EU countries are now vaccinating primary school children before the next term. To say that there are logistical difficulties in administering a smaller dose is simply not credible and not good enough.”

While teaching unions argue it is up to scientists and parents to decide on such matters, Julie McCulloch, head of policy at the Association of School and College Leaders, said the option of extending the rollout remained open, “and we hope that decision will be made in a timely manner”.

However, some medical experts have raised concerns about the legitimacy of vaccinating children – who tend to experience Covid as a very mild illness – in order to protect the wider population.

The JCVI’s role is to balance any impact of vaccination against these notably lower risks faced from Covid by healthy younger children. In September, the watchdog [referred the decision](#) on mass vaccination for 12- to 15-year-olds to the UK’s chief medical officers, saying the net health benefit even for this age group was too small.

With the rapid spread of the [Omicron variant](#), the JCVI also has to consider how much protection two vaccine doses will give, and whether the natural immunity seen in the estimated 40% of younger children already exposed to Covid helps repel the variant or not.

The JCVI could only act on vaccines for younger children when the MHRA approved the Pfizer vaccine for this use. Some [officials have said](#) the delay in this was caused by Pfizer only applying to the MHRA after the EU’s European Medicines Agency (EMA) completed its process for the age group.

In a parallel announcement, the JCVI recommended the rollout of booster vaccinations to those aged 16 and 17; children aged 12-15 who are in a clinical risk group or in a household with someone immunosuppressed; and 12- to 15-year-olds who are severely immunocompromised and who have already had a third primary dose, the same as happens now for immunocompromised adults.

This should happen, again as with adults, no less than three months after the main doses.

All the JCVI's recommendations are UK-wide, though it is then up to the governments of each UK nation to decide whether to accept them. The chief medical officer for Wales, Dr Frank Atherton, immediately said he would.

The definition of clinically vulnerable children will be the same as used for adults, as set out in the [section of the government's so-called Covid green book](#) detailing vaccines policy.

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2021/dec/22/jcvi-set-to-recommend-vaccinating-vulnerable-five--to-11-year-olds>

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Hospitals

‘Help us to help you’: doctors in England make pleas to unvaccinated

Frontline staff report that all or nearly all admissions at their hospitals have not been jabbed

- [Coronavirus – latest updates](#)



Ambulances outside St Thomas' hospital in London. Photograph: Tejas Sandhu/SOPA Images/Rex/Shutterstock

[Matthew Weaver](#)

Wed 22 Dec 2021 11.49 EST

Frontline doctors have issued desperate pleas for more people to get vaccinated after reporting that in some hospitals all new intensive care Covid patients have not had jabs.

An estimated 5 million people, or 10% of the eligible population, have not had been inoculated, and it is this group who are seemingly draining the most resources from overstretched hospitals, experts say.

The problem is worst in parts of London, but Cambridge's Royal Papworth hospital said more than 80% of its Covid patients requiring the most care were unjabbed.

Will Ricketts, a consultant chest physician at the Royal London hospital, [tweeted](#) on Wednesday: "Every new respiratory admission with Covid since Friday has been unvaccinated."

On Sunday he had said nearly every patient on the Covid wards and every patient he had referred to intensive care was unvaccinated. He pleaded: "We're not here to judge (my day job is lung cancer), but please help us to help you please #GetVaccinatedNow."

A source for Barts health trust said: "The number of unvaccinated people admitted to ICU has fluctuated between 80% and 90% across the north-east London patch over the past few weeks. For our trust that includes Royal London, Barts, Whipps Cross and Newham."

On Tuesday a respiratory registrar at a west London hospital tweeted: "Every single patient in our respiratory support unit is unvaccinated ... #vaccines work". He later deleted the tweet after some accused him of breaching patient confidentiality.

Prof Rupert Pearse, an intensive care doctor at the Royal London and Barts, confirmed to the BBC that up to 90% of his patients were unvaccinated. He said: "It's very sad that people are vaccine-hesitant, but we understand the reasons, and we are happy to talk about people's fears about getting vaccinated. There is absolutely no doubt that it's protecting the population."

Jo-anne Fowles, a nurse consultant in extracorporeal membrane oxygenation (ECMO) – a procedure for providing prolonged cardiac and respiratory support – at the Royal Papworth [told ITV Anglia](#): "82% of the patients we have treated for Covid-19 since February have been unvaccinated."

On Sunday the health secretary, Sajid Javid, said [about nine out of 10 Covid patients](#) needing the most care in hospital had not been jabbed. This figure is believed to refer to those requiring ECMO, according to Anthony Masters, an ambassador for the Royal Statistical Society. He said information provided by NHS England showed that of the 154 Covid patients receiving ECMO between July to November, 141 , or 92%, were unvaccinated.

The UK [Health](#) Security Agency's latest vaccine surveillance showed that of the 3,087 people who died of Covid in England in the three weeks before 6 December, 718 were unvaccinated, or about 23%.

Prof Jim McManus, the president of the Association of Directors of Public Health, cautioned against more regular publication of data on the health outcomes for unvaccinated people – as seen in the US – unless it could be put in context.

He said: “I’m not sure those figures would prod a lot of people to get vaccinated, because it could get accidentally or deliberately misinterpreted. Some will seize on the fact that vaccinated people are in hospital to suggest the vaccines don’t work.”

He added: “There will be vaccinated people in hospital as a matter of basic arithmetic. Before Omicron, the vaccines were around 96% effective at protecting against hospitalisation. But 4% of 1 million people represents 40,000 people. So if you look at the sheer numbers without looking at the proportions involved, it can look like the vaccine isn’t having an effect. But there is a much higher proportion of those who are unvaccinated ending up in hospital. If the statistics were put in context, it could really help.”

The chief executive of NHS Providers, Chris Hopson, said: “We would strongly encourage everyone who is eligible to get jabbed or boosted, and to think about how they can reduce the risk of infection.

“Trust leaders consistently tell us that most of the Covid-19 patients they are seeing are unvaccinated. We don’t hold data on that, but it’s a recurring theme and a source of frustration, not least because of the potential impact on other patients whose treatment may be delayed as a result.”

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2021/dec/22/help-us-to-help-you-doctors-in-england-make-pleas-to-unvaccinated>

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2021.12.23 - Spotlight

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- [Climate change is happening now Meet the people on the front lines](#)
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Interview

Kate Winslet: ‘I feel way cooler as a fortysomething actress than I ever imagined’

[Ryan Gilbey](#)



‘Mare is how most of us felt through lockdown’ ... Kate Winslet.
Photograph: Jason Bell/Camera Press

The star of one of 2021’s biggest TV hits, Mare of Easttown, talks about weepy reunions with Leonardo DiCaprio, bingeing Ted Lasso and middle-aged women taking over our screens

Thu 23 Dec 2021 03.00 EST

Kate Winslet will be ready in a sec. “I’m just going to put some more eyedrops on my styte,” she says. Blame her intense crime drama [Mare of Easttown](#), one of the TV hits of the pandemic. “It was quite a stressful job, and about nine weeks in I got three styes in my left eye, the third of which turned into a solid little marble and had to be cut out. But I pushed on. On with the show!” In it, she plays DS Mare Sheehan, who is raising her grandson, coping with her son’s suicide, and trying to solve the murder of a young mother in a working-class Philadelphia suburb. All without makeup: Mare is more likely to reach for a Cheeto topped with a squirt of spray cheese than anything in the Max Factor range.

“The discussion about how Mare looked blew my mind,” says Winslet. The 46-year-old actor is speaking by phone from the West Sussex home she shares with her husband, Ned Abel Smith, and their seven-year-old son Bear, as well as her two children from previous marriages: 21-year-old Mia by her first husband, Jim Threapleton, and 17-year-old Joe by her second, the director Sam Mendes. “People were asking, ‘Did she gain weight? Didn’t she look frumpy? Wasn’t that brave of her?’ But why should that be brave? I suppose because it’s not how leading actresses are represented. Maybe Mare will be the tipping point, and we’re going to stop scrutinising women on screen quite so much.”

Realism extended to every corner of the show. “We were always saying on set: ‘That’s too TV. Keep it real.’ I’d constantly be rubbing Marmite into the knees of my jeans, or scuffing up my sneakers with a Brillo pad. You can’t just make one thing feel real: it has to be everything.” Take Mare’s car. “She would have been driving her grandson to and from kindergarten, feeding

him breakfast on the fly. I know what the floor in the back of my own car looks like – there's crushed cereal, with bowls and spoons clinking around, because we've had breakfast on the school run. You're sitting on crumbs which are so embedded in the seat it would take a fucking blowtorch to get them out!"



'The discussion about how Mare looked blew my mind' ... Winslet in *Mare of Easttown*. Photograph: 2021 Home Box Office

This is Winslet's shtick: she may be a seven-time Oscar nominee (she won in 2008 for the Holocaust drama *The Reader*) and a double Emmy-winner (for two HBO shows, *Mildred Pierce* and now *Mare of Easttown*) but she remains the star who's a slob like us. It's a persona that chimes perfectly with Mare – Winslet intervened to ensure that publicity pictures weren't airbrushed to make her look more presentable – as well as with our times. "Mare is how most of us felt through lockdown," she says. "She validated the permanent pyjama look."

Inadvertently or otherwise, Winslet became almost the face of the pandemic. As reports of coronavirus spread at the start of last year, her 2011 disaster movie [Contagion](#), in which she plays an epidemiologist, shot to the top of the streaming charts. Three months later, she and several *Contagion* co-stars, including Matt Damon and Marion Cotillard, presented public information

videos. Winslet became a kind of Covid Vera Lynn, jollying people along by teaching us how to wash our hands, cough into the crooks of our arms, and deploy the word “fomite” correctly.

That brooding stillness is hard for me because I’m a joyful, busy, active, huggy person

During the interminable third lockdown, she gave two outstanding performances: first as the 19th-century palaeontologist Mary Anning in [Ammonite](#), and then in Mare of Easttown. Both characters force Winslet to play against her natural warmth: it’s more than an hour into Ammonite before Mary smiles, while Mare doesn’t laugh until episode five. “I took some of what I learned on Ammonite into Mare,” she says. “That brooding stillness. It’s hard for me because I’m a joyful, busy, active, huggy person. That’s who I am.”

The scripts for Mare of Easttown arrived one by one while she and Saoirse Ronan were shooting [Ammonite](#) on the Dorset coast. “I’d say: ‘Oh my God, episode five just came in’, then Saoirse would go” – and here Winslet slips into her co-star’s breathless Irish lilt – ““Jesus fooking Christ, this is so exciting, you’ve gotta tell me what happens!”” Audiences turned out to be every bit as enthusiastic. “It came along just as people badly needed something to discuss other than who they knew who had died from Covid. It put families on couches, and there was a nostalgic quality to the one-episode-a-week format. It gets conversation going while you’re waiting for the next one.”



Winslet as Mary Anning in *Ammonite*, with Saoirse Ronan as Charlotte Murchison. Photograph: See-saw Films/BBC Films/Allstar

Winslet's own fondest TV memories from growing up in Reading, Berkshire, revolve around exactly those kinds of cliffhangers. "You'd desperately want to know what would happen to Zammo next on *Grange Hill*, or to the Fowlers in *EastEnders*." Is she a binger now? "Covid has taught me how to binge. In more ways than one. But yes, Ned and I watched *Ted Lasso* pretty much back-to-back. Covid made you not feel so bad about hanging out on the couch."

It would be wrong to suggest that *Mare of Easttown* has catered simply to a nostalgia for delayed gratification when there is so much else to praise it for, not least its female characters. "Middle-aged women have long been underestimated, disrespected and disregarded in the film and television community, and now that's changing," she says. "Look at the actresses who won at the Emmys. None of us were in our 20s by any means, and that's cool! I feel way cooler as a fortysomething actress than I ever imagined I would."

She also felt a deeper connection between herself and the character than she has done on previous jobs. "I knew *Mare* and this world vividly. I grew up in a tiny terraced house in a working-class, small-town community where your

life overlaps with your neighbours' lives just because the walls are so thin. If Lorraine down the road had her varicose veins done, the entire world knew. And if, for the first time ever, the couple two streets across voted Conservative instead of Labour then – bloody hell! – all shit went off in our house, and my parents would be debating whether they ought to talk to those people about their choices. This wasn't a teeny-tiny cul-de-sac. It was the Oxford Road. If I was standing in my parents' bedroom, I could be eye-to-eye with the people on the top deck of the No 17 bus."

Winslet is proud of *Mare of Easttown*'s focus on community; the whodunnit element may be the motor, but it's the milieu that makes the show feel so salty and rich. There is also far less emphasis on damaged female bodies than audiences have come to expect from crime drama. "You're right, we did show less," she says. "In the morgue scene, we had a dummy that was an exact replica of the actress's body and we were even respectful of that. Between takes we would cover the dummy with a sheet."

For all the show's sensitivity, its vision of the police as uniformly caring, conscientious and true feels antiquated in light of the murders of George Floyd and Sarah Everard, to choose only the most shocking recent examples of police criminality. Shouldn't television reflect the fact that the police badge is not necessarily a reassuring or honourable symbol?

"I don't know if I'm going to be playing Mare again," Winslet says. "But if we were to do a second season, then for sure these atrocities which have existed in the police force here and in America will find their way into the stories we tell. One hundred per cent. You can't pretend these things haven't happened." She sighs. "It's horrible, isn't it? This moment in time. It's horrific. You can hear me, I can't quite find the words because we all feel so betrayed and powerless. We have to turn this moment into something meaningful. We have to use our voices on behalf of people who don't have one. That matters to me now in ways that hadn't even crossed my mind in my 20s."



The second series of *Mare of Easttown* would have to address ‘atrocities in the police force’. Photograph: HBO/2021

Possibly, she had other things to think about. Her 20s began, after all, with *Titanic*. “Do you know Leo just turned 47?” she asks, suddenly shocked. Then her voice grows wistful as she thinks back to herself and DiCaprio as pups. “I turned 21 on that shoot, and Leo turned 22,” she says. I tell her that when I met DiCaprio back then, he complained to me about *Titanic*’s arduous production and how miserable he felt. She lets out a raucous laugh. “I remember! I remember that he was! It wasn’t pleasant for any of us, but we were all in it together. Though he had way more days off than I ever bloody did. I guess I was raised to be grateful and just get on with it. I didn’t feel it was my right to be miserable, and if I *was* miserable I certainly would not have let a journalist know.” She is laughing again. “There is no way I would have let that slip!”

She and DiCaprio later played a troubled married couple in *Revolutionary Road* and met again in Los Angeles recently for the first time in three years. “I couldn’t stop crying,” says Winslet. “I’ve known him for half my life! It’s not as if I’ve found myself in New York or he’s been in London and there’s been a chance to have dinner or grab a coffee and a catchup. We haven’t been able to leave our countries. Like so many friendships globally, we’ve

missed each other because of Covid. He's my friend, my really close friend. We're bonded for life."

Were she sitting in front of me now, I get the impression she might appear to have something in her eye. Or perhaps it would just be the drops.

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[Now you've seen itSpider-Man: No Way Home](#)

Spider-Man: No Way Home: Strange blunders, Spider-splicing and sizzling supervillains – discuss with spoilers

What was the sorcerer thinking? Has Sony marked its turf? And where does Green Goblin rank among the great villains?



Fan service ... Tom Holland as Spider-Man. Photograph: Sony Pictures/AP

[Ben Child](#)

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Thu 23 Dec 2021 04.26 EST

When is a movie that's only good, rather than great, the best thing you've seen all year? When it's a fan event on the scale of Spider-Man: No Way Home, which unites everyone who ever loved the big-screen franchise

(going back to 2002's [Spider-Man](#)) for a gorgeously nostalgic feelgood romp.

This is the climax to Jon Watts' "Home" trilogy, following the excellent [Spider-Man: Homecoming](#) and its 2019 sequel [Far From Home](#). But while it nicely rounds off the character arc of Tom Holland's Peter Parker, it also restores a sense of wellbeing to the [Sony-owned](#) Spider-flicks that came before it, and may just turn out to be the future. So what did we learn from our latest trip into Spider-Man's rapidly expanding world?

Doctor Strange: shonky characterisation or ingenious arc?

We already know there's [something pretty weird going on](#) with Benedict Cumberbatch's wacky wizard, and our spider-senses are only tingling more intensely by the time the credits roll on No Way Home. No longer Sorcerer Supreme after disappearing for five years, Strange seems bored and reckless, happily going for Parker's rash suggestion that he cast a dangerous spell to restore Spider-Man's secret identity. It ends up going horribly wrong and inviting supervillains and heroes from alternate realities (AKA the five Sony-owned films from 2002-14, prior to the studio striking a deal with Marvel) into the MCU.

Perhaps Strange is just going through a narcissistic phase a la Tony Stark in [Age of Ultron](#). But for such a trusted, supposedly wise member of the Avengers to make such a bad decision almost beggars belief. Maybe Marvel simply used the plot device to set up the forthcoming Doctor Strange in the Multiverse of Madness, with the former Sorcerer Supreme now a rogue agent being run down by former comrades. At the very least, Strange's character arc looks set to make Tony Stark's look like an episode of Countryfile.



Spelling trouble ... Benedict Cumberbatch (right) as Doctor Strange.
Photograph: Matt Kennedy/AP

Three Spider-Men are better than one

No Way Home reminded me of those Doctor Who specials in which multiple versions of the Time Lord played by various actors would team up to face down a greater threat. While these were not always the most incisive modes of storytelling, the opportunity to see past iterations of the Doctor always upped the goosebumps factor. This is certainly the case during the scenes in which the Tobey Maguire and Andrew Garfield incarnations of Spider-Man unite with Tom Holland's to restore normality to the MCU and save the interlopers from instant death.

We could go on about the ways in which No Way Home gives the webslingers from previous series a fitting finale, but the simple fact is that it is just nice to see Garfield, and in particular Maguire, swinging back into action once again.

Aunt May's death and the threat of constant sorrow

It's the oldest trick in the book: kill off a major character and ensure your audience spends the rest of the movie panicking that other fan-favourites are set to go next. Still, it felt like a dirty move to take out Marisa Tomei's Aunt May, especially when we've always assumed Holland's Spider-Man lost his Uncle Ben before first appearing on our screens. And yet it's May's kindness in the face of adversity that ends up fuelling Spidey Prime's determination to cure the supervillains rather than taking them out. That ultimately makes for a surprisingly original narrative that allows all three Spideys to play their part in the action, even if it also does remind us that pretty much all Sony's bad guys followed a rather samey path towards villainy.

The de-ageing, the villains and the brilliance of Willem Dafoe

It's been over a decade since we saw Alfred Molina's Doc Ock and Willem Dafoe's Green Goblin on the big screen, but *No Way Home* lets us know early on that we're seeing them as they were just before their respective deaths in *Spider-Man* and *Spider-Man 2*. It's not surprising that some special effects were clearly used to restore Molina to his younger self. Whether the same went for Dafoe is harder to tell – the 66-year-old is still so spritely that he insisted on doing all his own stunts this time around, to spectacular effect. His Green Goblin stakes his claim for the all-time list of movie supervillains with a bravura return of cackling insanity. The movie's nod to the Goblin's traditional hooded costume is another lovely touch.



Cranking back the years ... Alfred Molina as Doc Ock. Photograph: Courtesy of Sony Pictures/AP

How about those other villains? They never quite made it to a Sinister Six, as in the comic books, unless you count the fleeting post-credits appearance of Tom Hardy's Venom. And truth be told, Rhys Ifans' Lizard and Thomas Haden Church's Sandman take relative back seats. As for Jamie Foxx's Electro, this was a very different character to the one we saw in [The Amazing Spider-Man 2](#).

Has Sony finally won the battle of the studios?

The first two movies in the Home trilogy always felt like [Marvel](#) films, even if Sony continued to hold co-ownership on paper. With characters from the MCU popping up incessantly, as well as the bright and breezy writing, Watt's films felt like a new beginning for Spidey.

By contrast, No Way Home feels like the movie Sony demanded when it struck the deal that allowed Spider-Man to appear in the Avengers movies. Both the Sam Raimi trilogy and the films overseen by Marc Webb ended poorly, with [Spider-Man 3](#) and The Amazing Spider-Man 2 receiving short shrift from critics. Story arcs were left unfinished, redemption for our hero was never quite achieved, and without Marvel's intervention it is unlikely

we would ever have seen Maguire or Garfield suiting up on the big screen again. But after the events of No Way Home, all bets are off: Spider-Man on the big screen has now potentially been spliced in three, and Sony has a completely different sandpit to play in.

Where does Peter Parker's future now lie?

It seems unlikely the studio would ever make new Spider-Man movies starring Garfield or Maguire, but the reality is that No Way Home paves the way for either option. The Raimi and Webb universes have been brought thrillingly back into the picture, and there is no reason further adventures might not take place for either. There's even the option of teaming all three Spider-Men up with a new [Miles Morales](#) big-screen webslinger, though that would take some seriously snazzy writing. There is no reason Sony couldn't introduce one of its Spideys into a Venom film.

Meanwhile back in the MCU, Holland's Parker faces an uncertain future. His world has been shrunk from an infinite sandpit of universes to a much smaller one based around the mean streets of New York. After the casting of Strange's spell, he has no friends, no job, no apparent access to Stark technology and little to do but take down minor criminals in the back alleys of Queens. Will the already green-lit fourth instalment see Parker slowly rebuilding all his connections to the wider world, or will this slimmed-down version of reality become the new normal, with Spidey returning to his comic-book roots?



Where next? ... Spider-Man: No Way Home. Photograph: Courtesy of Sony Pictures/AP

The post-credit scenes ... and a significant shakeup

One clue may stem from the mid-credits scene in which Venom is briefly revealed as having been zapped into (and then out of) the MCU during the sequence of events that ushered in the other supervillains. This might seem like a cheeky plug for Sony's Venom flicks were it not for the scene's final frame, in which we note that a small amount of the character's unique alien symbiote has been left behind. Is our new, friendless Peter Parker about to fall victim to that infamous, dangerously cool black suit?

What about that final end-credits scene? It looked more like a full-on trailer for *In the Multiverse of Madness* than anything we have seen before, showing Doctor Strange teaming up with Scarlet Witch, coming into conflict with Chiwetel Ejiofor's Mordo and even seeming to meet an alternate version of himself. Is this the future for Marvel's post-credit teases? If so, it seems we're even more likely to be forced to sit tight until the absolute final frame than we have been until now. There's just too much to risk by making an early exit.

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**Escape your comfort zone! How to face
your fears - and improve your health,
wealth and happiness**



Illustration: Steven Gregor/The Guardian

Is there something great you have always wanted to do, but fear has held you back? Make 2022 the year you go for it



[Emine Saner](#)

[@eminesaner](#)

Thu 23 Dec 2021 04.00 EST

The “comfort zone” is a reliable place of retreat, especially in times of stress – living through a global pandemic, for instance. But psychologists have long extolled the benefits of stepping outside it, too. The clinical psychologist Roberta Babb advises regularly reviewing how well it is serving you. The comfort zone can, she says, become a prison or a trap, particularly if you are there because of fear and avoidance.

Babb says people can be “mentally, emotionally, physically, socially, occupationally” stimulated by facing their fears or trying something uncomfortable. “Adaptation and stimulation are important parts of our wellbeing, and a huge part of our capacity to be resilient. We can get stagnant, and it is about growing and finding different ways to be, which then allows us to have a different life experience.”

Facing fears can increase confidence and self-esteem, she adds, and achieving a goal is associated with a release of dopamine, the feel-good hormone. “Then you start to feel better about yourself – you’re aware of

what you can do, more willing to take positive risks. You have more energy. It's a kind of domino effect."

In her bestselling 1987 book, [Feel the Fear and Do It Anyway](#), Susan Jeffers advised people to try something "small or bold" outside their comfort zone each day, building confidence "so that stretching your comfort zone becomes easier and easier". But it isn't about becoming generally "fearless", as if we could override all of human evolution. "People often ask: 'How can I prevent myself from ever having those kinds of fearful responses?' My initial reaction is: 'You wouldn't want to live life without the ability to experience fear,'" says Ethan Kross, professor of psychology and management, director of the Emotion and Self Control Lab at the University of Michigan, and author of [Chatter: The Voice in Our Head and How to Harness It](#). Fear, when appropriate, is a safety mechanism, but "it can sometimes become miscalibrated, so that the fear doesn't match the reality of the circumstance".

Kross doesn't see the benefit of taking on fears for the sake of it – you don't have to jump out of a plane or do a bungee jump unless you think it will drastically improve your life. Instead, he says, it's about facing the fears, or overcoming the discomfort, that prevents us from doing the things "that are really important for our wellbeing, our relationships and our performance. Those are the instances in which you want to try to regulate the fear."

Different things are daunting to different people, of course, and there is a spectrum to their severity. It could be going on a date, or giving a presentation at work, or having a difficult conversation with a relative. It could be making a big decision, such as leaving a relationship, or a job. It may be relatively minor – getting up an hour earlier to exercise might not trigger a debilitating phobia, but might feel uncomfortable – and it could still bring benefits to your life.

It's hard to generalise, says Kross, about the psychological effect of facing one's fears, or stepping outside the comfort zone, but doing it can change the way you think. "When you're afraid of something, you have a mental representation that tells you it's dangerous. If you then go through that situation, and learn 'This wasn't as bad as I thought it was', that, typically, will update that mental portrayal of the situation." There are clearly more

tangible potential rewards for stepping outside your comfort zone, too – a better social life, a pay rise, more intimacy in a relationship, a new skill.

In her book [Fear Less](#), the performance psychologist Pippa Grange sets out the ways that living in a “fear culture” affects our lives. “It may have shrunk you, so you have stayed small in some ways, limiting your potential and what you can achieve. Fear can also stiffen you into rigid over-control of yourself and the people around you. And it can also push you into painful, burning shame. All of these things send you down a rabbit hole away from your real potential as a human being.” Many of the fears that keep us safely within our comfort zone are what Grange calls “not-good-enough” fear – fear of being exposed, rejected, or not being loved. One way of tackling it, writes Grange, is her “see, face, replace” strategy: explore the fear, face the impact it has on your life, then replace it with something, such as a different story, or a sense of purpose or humour.

Get comfortable with the idea, when trying something new, that failure is possible, says Babb – or rather, don’t view it as failure. “We go in with a perfectionistic idea about achievement, and that we should be able to do it. The reality is, outside our comfort zone, why would we know how to do it? That’s the whole process.”

If you are ready to expand your comfort zone, consider breaking down the uncomfortable action into steps, advises Babb. “People think about going from zero to 100, as opposed to all the different steps in between. This is linked to a cognitive behavioural therapy technique called exposure and habituation – you are building up to what you want to do. You have an opportunity to celebrate the little wins that give you a boost of confidence and energy, which makes it exciting.”

Kross says “different tools work for different people in different situations, and there’s a bit of self-experimentation that’s required”. He also recommends building exposure to demonstrate the way our “fear responses are often out of sync with the actual danger. When we confront those situations, we quickly learn it’s not actually so bad.”

Another technique he recommends is to “coach” yourself through a situation. The idea, he says, is that we’re much better at giving advice to

other people than to ourselves. “So what would you say to someone else? Use your own name: ‘All right Ethan, here’s how you’re going to manage the situation.’ We call this ‘distanced self-talk’. One of the reasons we think it’s useful is because the link between using a name, and thinking about someone else, is very strong in the mind. It switches your perspective, it gives you some distance, which helps you think more rationally about the situation.”

Turning a fear into a “challenge” can also help to overcome it. “In a situation,” says Kross, “we ask ourselves two questions, often subconsciously: what is required of me, and do I have the resources to deal with it? If you determine ‘No, I can’t do it,’ that’s a ‘threat response’ and it is associated with [negative] behavioural and physiological reactions – you perform less well under stress.” Switching the answer to “Yes, I can do this”, makes it “a ‘challenge response’, ” says Kross. Distanced self-talk can help: “It activates that challenge response. You can consciously choose to change the way you think about a situation.”

It means that, if you are ready to step outside your comfort zone – or rather broaden it – you can start right now.

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2021.12.23 - Coronavirus

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Coronavirus

Number of new Covid cases in UK passes 100,000 for first time

Total of 106,122 new cases recorded on single day as Omicron variant continues to advance

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A Covid-19 PCR test centre in London. Photograph: Andy Rain/EPA

[Heather Stewart](#) Political editor

Wed 22 Dec 2021 11.12 EST

Daily cases of Covid-19 have passed 100,000 as the Omicron variant sweeps across the UK, according to government figures – the highest number recorded since the pandemic began.

More than 106,122 new infections were reported in the 24 hours to 9am on Wednesday, up from 90,629 on Tuesday, dashing hopes that cases could be beginning to plateau. The unprecedented figure will only intensify concerns about the likely impact of the Omicron variant on hospitalisations in the new year.

The government has also provided a second metric showing the number of positive cases for the day the specimen was taken, which peaked at 103,281 on 15 December.

Confirmed cases of Omicron in England have risen by 13,106 to 69,147, the UK Health Security Agency said. Scotland's cases rose by 174 to 1,652, while in Wales they increased by 301 to 941. There were no updated numbers available for Northern Ireland because of data flow complications.

The prime minister has announced that no new restrictions will be put in place for England before Christmas – but made clear fresh measures might be required afterwards.

Wales and Scotland have already set out new curbs to come into force after Christmas, with [Cardiff reimposing the rule of six](#) and 2-metre social distancing in hospitality venues from Boxing Day.

Stormont ministers have agreed that nightclubs in Northern Ireland will close from Boxing Day. The move was agreed at a virtual meeting of the power-sharing executive on Wednesday and came as the region recorded its highest daily increase in case numbers of the virus.

As well as case numbers, ministers are monitoring hospital admissions, particularly in London, where the Omicron wave is most advanced. NHS England has said that a total of 301 Covid-19 admissions were recorded by hospitals in London on 20 December, up 78% week on week and the highest number for a single day since 7 February.

The health secretary, Sajid Javid, rejected reports on Wednesday that ministers had already been shown data suggesting Omicron produces less severe health outcomes than the previous Delta variant. He said the analysis by the UK Health Security Agency (UKHSA) was not yet complete.

With fears growing about mass staff absences across key sectors in January, Javid has also announced that mandatory self-isolation for those suffering from Covid-19 will be reduced from 10 days to seven, as long as patients take two negative lateral flow tests on days six and seven of their spell at home.

Those leaving self-isolation early are still strongly advised to minimise contact with others in crowded or poorly ventilated spaces.

Boris Johnson's cabinet held a lengthy meeting earlier on Tuesday at which it was briefed by scientific experts, but opted not to impose any new restrictions immediately.

The cabinet is divided, with some ministers, including Liz Truss and Jacob Rees-Mogg, more sceptical about the need for controls, while Javid has been warning against waiting too long for more data to become available.

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Global development

Mandatory Covid jabs in Malawi ‘violate human rights’, say civil society groups

Measure aimed at frontline workers to reduce spread of Omicron variant may increase unrest in country with low vaccine take-up, critics warn

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Malawi’s president, Lazarus Chakwera, receives an AstraZeneca vaccine in March. On Tuesday he said intensifying vaccination efforts was part of the country’s socioeconomic recovery plans. Photograph: Thoko Chikondi/AP

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Madalitso Wills Kateta

Thu 23 Dec 2021 02.01 EST

Civil rights groups in [Malawi](#) have cautioned the government on its decision to make the Covid-19 vaccination mandatory for frontline workers.

From January, it will be compulsory for public sector workers, including healthcare staff, police and teachers, as well as journalists, to be vaccinated, after an announcement by [Malawi's health minister, Khumbize Kandodo Chiponda, last week](#).

The government believes the measure will help reduce the spread of the Omicron variant in the country.

“Accumulating data continues to indicate that the majority of those being admitted to our emergency treatment units or losing their lives to Covid-19 have not been vaccinated,” Chiponda said.

As of Wednesday, Malawi had registered [66,166 Covid-19](#) cases and more than 2,300 deaths since the beginning of the pandemic. More than 1.6m vaccine doses have been administered.

However, the move has been met with concern by civil rights groups.

In a press statement, the Malawi Human Rights Commission said the directive violated the principle that medical interventions are a person's free choice.

"The commission is not in support of the mandatory Covid-19 vaccination as it violates fundamental human rights as guaranteed by the constitution of the republic of Malawi and other international instruments, even if the issue of collective or public rights is brought into the equation," read the statement.

Sylvester Namiwa, the executive director at the [Centre for Democracy and Economic Development Initiatives](#), said mandatory jabs were not justified in Malawi.

"Our decisions should be based on scientific knowledge. We understand there is Covid-19, but let's learn to live with the disease as we have done with other diseases such as HIV/Aids, tuberculosis, malaria and diabetes," said Namiwa.

Some have said the timing of the announcement was ill-advised. "The timing of these measures is not right. Many Malawians are already hesitant to get vaccinated, and the measures have been announced at a time the administration has lost popularity due to the [rising cost of living](#) and hence forcing people to get vaccinated would make the situation volatile," said Moses Chabuka, executive director at Neno Active Youth in Development.

In a national address on Tuesday, Malawi's president, Lazarus Chakwera, said intensifying vaccination efforts were part of the country's socioeconomic recovery plan.

"To recover the ground the economy has lost to the pandemic, we have to stop the pandemic in its tracks," said Chakwera.

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Covid-19: what will Omicron mean for 2022?

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2021.12.23 - Opinion

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OpinionYoung people

The teenager's poem that reveals the cruel reality of life in modern Britain

[Aditya Chakrabortty](#)



To policymakers, poet Giovanni Rose would be just a statistic. But like everyone ignored by politicians, he is so much more



Giovanni Rose in London. Photograph: Graeme Robertson/The Guardian
Thu 23 Dec 2021 01.00 EST

What if a statistic could speak its own truth? What if a stereotype could confound your expectations?

A few weeks back, I was riffling through the local papers when a story jumped out. A schoolboy in [Tottenham](#), north London, had just won an award as a Foyle Young Poet of the Year. At the bottom was printed his poem. Called Welcome to Tottenham, it brought the news from a society that is only a few miles from Westminster but might as well be a whole world away.

When historians such as [EP Thompson](#) and [Eric Hobsbawm](#) took ordinary people's lives and perspectives as their subjects, rather than stories of kings and generals, their work was labelled history from below. So let's call this poem news from below, the headlines as if Liz Truss didn't matter (imagine) and blue-on-blue combat was a soap playing on a far-off screen. The news, in other words, for the country in which most of us actually live.

Welcome to Tottenham.

Where we wake up to the smell of ‘Chick king’,

Mixed with the odour of the corpse from the night before.

Where we cover our blood stained streets with dried up gum,

Where kids have holes in their last pairs of shoes,

Where daddy left mummy and mummy’s left poor.

Giovanni Rose: Welcome to Tottenham.

Giovanni Rose wrote his poem in a few hours on a Covid-era Chromebook handed out by his school. The teenager didn’t need to make stuff up; he jotted down the world he’d been born into. In person, he’s neither swot nor class clown, just a kid who keeps his head down and never swears in front of grownups and talks softly in the same rubbery twang as most working-class youngsters in [London](#) today. And with the same unblinking clarity that marks his verse, he knows how strangers see him.

A 17-year-old black boy, he has been stopped and searched by the police on his local high road and off Oxford Street, even once by armed officers when he was, irony of ironies, making a short film against knife crime. To policymakers, he’s a statistic; to ministers he’s a stereotype; and to the media, people like Giovanni are ... what, exactly? Case studies, perhaps, to be allotted their 10-second clip on the evening news and then chucked away.

But a democracy that can’t or won’t listen to outsiders such as him is not only missing out: it’s falling down on the job. A political class that hand-waves about “the youth” would be best advised to shut up and listen to them. And the thing about Giovanni, and all the others who get talked over in our politics, is that they don’t fit their cutouts. They are so much bigger.

Giovanni knows wearing joggers and a hoodie gets him marked down as a thug – except they’re comfy, so he puts them on anyway. He grew up in one of the most deprived parts of England but he won’t let that define him either. His GCSEs were a string of 8s and 9s, and if his A-levels come in as predicted he should be off next September to study maths at a top university.

Let me admit also to a personal interest. To go from Giovanni's childhood, in the shadow of the Northumberland Park estate, and mine, right by Edmonton Green, takes a mere 10 minutes by bus but nearly three decades of history. I grew up under Thatcher; he's got Johnson. He is black; I am brown. Our paths cross and abut each other. His landscape is mine, almost, but as foreign as time renders everything. And so, after meeting and speaking a few times, he agreed to show me how my old world looks to a teenage boy today.

Where we ride around on stolen scooters,

Where we can't afford tuition so the streets are our tutors.

His childhood home is in a street with a church-cum-foodbank but backs on to a drug house: a small terrace cottage out of which industrial quantities of drugs were sold. Every time police raided, the dealers would jump the fence into his backyard. Too young to know what was going on, Giovanni would panic that burglars were breaking in.

“The last straw for my mum was when a dealer got Tasered by the police in my garden,” he recalls. “It’s kind of funny now. But at the same time, it’s not normal.”

His secondary school has to help hundreds of kids growing up in abnormal circumstances prepare for a world that expects them to behave perfectly normally. “They come in with trauma, having faced violence or sexual abuse,” says Jan Balon, head of the London Academy of Excellence Tottenham. He has recruited what is essentially a mental health unit, which counsels just under 10% of the student body throughout the week. It costs, Balon admits, “a stupid amount of money” but the NHS services are too underfunded and overwhelmed to rely on.

I love but I hate my home,

I still listen to the voicemails of my dead peers in my phone

One night when he was 14, Giovanni was woken by the sound of gunshots. Out of his bedroom window, he could see the aftermath of a drive-by.

Seventeen-year-old [Tanesha Melbourne-Blake](#) had been killed in a hail of bullets. For years afterwards, the road was decorated with memorials to her.

He was only 15 when a close friend went with a younger mate to try to retrieve a stolen £90 pair of trainers. The friend never came home. A 21-year-old man stabbed him 10 times. Not long before, he'd left Giovanni a voice note on Snapchat. "Just random, like 'How are you, bro?'" Giovanni used to listen to it afterwards. "Because I missed him."

Giovanni came into a world where adults of all kinds could not be automatically trusted: not the local gangsters, nor the police. Nor others who purported to be in authority. He was born as the [war in Iraq](#) went from false triumph into naked disaster. He started at primary as the [financial crisis](#) turned into a global depression. The year after, austerity began. He was seven when Tottenham erupted over the police killing of [Mark Duggan](#) and his family home was a mile away from ground zero of the [riots](#) that would consume London and then England. And over the past couple of years, he's been out of school for nearly six months, his wifi breaking amid remote lessons and pleading with his eight-year-old twin siblings not to disturb him during class. But with his own bedroom, he counts among his peers as lucky.

We fight over streets we don't own

Knife crime's on the rise because the beef can't be left alone.

Giovanni's mum drilled him well, both in studies and on the streets: stick to the main roads, keep looking over your shoulder. He never just goes for a walk without a destination, always knows who'll be there and when he should be back (roughly: he's a teenager, after all). He lives in what Yvonne Kelly, a professor of lifecourse epidemiology at UCL, calls "a state of hyper-vigilance".

"Just constantly worrying who's about to come up behind him means a high level of cortisol will be swilling around his system," she says. "If that's repeated day after day after day, it could make him physically ill." And so psychological threat can turn into bodily damage.

In a couple of weeks, Giovanni will sit his mock exams, having already faced tests that most of us will never know. And then ... well, then he wants to get out of Tottenham, leave all this behind. His hero is the rapper Stormzy, “a rich black man who got out of the hood”. That’s his dream, and now it’s within reach.

“A bit of me feels: ‘I made it out!’ I’m relieved I survived, but I miss this space. Most of my friends are here, most of my memories are here. Even the smell of the chicken shop.”

While he’s revising for his A-levels, ask yourself two questions: how Great can Britain be, if a boy counts himself lucky just to survive here? And what is the value of a childhood home if you’re constantly taught you must leave it behind?

- Aditya Chakrabortty is a Guardian columnist and senior economics commentator
 - Excerpts from [Welcome to Tottenham](#) quoted by kind permission of Giovanni Rose
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OpinionConservatives

Humiliated and unable to govern, Boris Johnson is close to the point of no return

[Martin Kettle](#)



Look to history and it's clear that all failing governments reach a tipping point. Once the public says enough is enough, the end is inevitable



Boris Johnson at 10 Downing Street, London, 16 December 2021.
Photograph: Tayfun Salci/Zuma Press Wire/Rex/Shutterstock

Thu 23 Dec 2021 03.00 EST

The history books will show that Boris Johnson's government was hit by two shattering humiliations in December 2021, two years after it was elected. The first was the record-setting revolt of [101 Conservative backbenchers](#) against Covid passport regulations. The second, two days later, was the loss of the [North Shropshire by-election](#) to the Liberal Democrats.

But, as we approach the start of 2022, the combined consequences of those reverses now matter more than the actual events themselves. That is because, between them, the two defeats have rewritten the script for the remainder of this government's term.

We saw this in the lasting significance of [what Johnson did on Monday](#). The prime minister emerged from an emergency cabinet meeting on the Omicron surge to announce – nothing. While other governments across Europe scrambled to save their health systems from being overwhelmed, Johnson's decided it was undecided whether to do anything about it at all. If things changed, however, [Johnson insisted](#): "We won't hesitate to take that action."

Monday's outcome negated that claim. The truth was the exact opposite. This was hesitation incarnate, a decision not to take action of the sort that the emergency cabinet meeting had presumably been called to approve in the first place. It was not the result of a considered consensus. The cabinet, it turns out, was split right down the middle, and still is. The result was that Britain now has a government unable to govern.

This is the umbilical result of the fact that Johnson is now the hostage of his backbenchers and their cabinet allies, who are in turn emboldened by the voters' damning verdict in Shropshire. So it is also important to see what happened this week as a harbinger of the Johnson government's new – and potentially terminal – phase, in which it is no longer able to take necessary decisions and is abandoned by the electorate as a result.

All failing governments eventually reach a similar point, after which it turns out to be downhill all the way. The question for British politics today is whether Johnson's government has now reached that point. The evidence suggests it has done so, in its own distinctive way, and that consequently British voters are now open to something new.

More than 40 years ago, during the 1979 election that brought Margaret Thatcher to power, the [Labour](#) prime minister, Jim Callaghan, made a famous observation about this kind of moment. "There are times," Callaghan told his advisers, "perhaps once every 30 years, when there is a sea change in politics. It then does not matter what you say or what you do. There is a shift in what the public wants and what it approves of. I suspect there is now such a sea change – and it is for Mrs Thatcher."

Callaghan's view can actually be disputed in some important respects. There was certainly a big sea change in political economy after 1979 that contrasted with the post-1945 world in which Callaghan rose to power. But the public never embraced Thatcherism to the wholehearted degree that Thatcher's run of electoral success through the 1980s may have implied.

Where he was right, however, is that the Labour governments of the 1970s had lost the public's confidence in important ways, and that Thatcher was always likely to win in 1979. And he was right that, once a government

reaches such a point, it has relatively little chance of clawing the old advantage back.

There is no iron law about precisely how this works. Circumstances differ widely. Theresa May's government began to fail near its start, when she threw away her majority in the 2017 election. David Cameron's government, by contrast, became doomed only at the very end, when Cameron lost the Brexit vote. Had he won, Cameron might still be prime minister.

With other governments, the crossing of the watershed is more gradual. Even John Major's, which seems doomed in retrospect after [Black Wednesday in 1992](#), might have survived if Labour had not focused so ruthlessly on ending its own run of four election defeats. And it wasn't quite as obvious at the time as it seems now that Tony Blair's authority was destroyed by Iraq; he went on to win another election, after all.

Gordon Brown's trajectory felt more predictable when, shortly after arriving in Downing Street, he flirted humiliatingly with calling an early election. In 2009, I was sitting next to the great lawyer Tom Bingham at a dinner when he turned and said: "I think the country decided two years ago that it will need a new government when the time comes." On that, as on so much else, he was right.

December 2021 feels like such a moment for Johnson. It is hard to recover from the reputation-shredding stories – with more to come – that produced North Shropshire. A prime minister being [mocked by football](#) and [darts fans](#) is not a good sign. Bad election results next year will undoubtedly trigger the leadership speculation that is never far below the surface in the party.

Perhaps Bingham's law applies today too, just as it did after 2007. The country feels as though it is in the process of deciding that it will need a new government when the time comes. If that is right, then it may not matter too much who leads the Tory party next time. The crucial question will be whether the country has enough confidence in the Labour alternative.

- Martin Kettle is a Guardian columnist
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OpinionLong Covid

More than a million of us are suffering with long Covid – yet still it's not taken seriously

[Joanna Herman](#)

Nearly two years into the pandemic, people like me are still out of action. We need better support and more funding



Ambulances outside St Thomas' Hospital in London last week. How will an already stretched NHS cope if there are new cases of long Covid after the Omicron surge? Photograph: Tejas Sandhu/SOPA Images/REX/Shutterstock

Wed 22 Dec 2021 11.25 EST

As we hurtle towards the end of the year, it's always a time for reflection. Getting through the festive period will be a challenge: after a couple of hours of chatting with friends at dinner, I had to go and lie down to rest, to

switch my body and brain off and allow them to recharge. It's an improvement from last year, when I wouldn't have got there to begin with, let alone managed a glass of fizz and engaged in conversation.

I caught Covid in March 2020, and was by definition a "mild" case: not admitted to hospital and no risk factors for severe disease, but how it has affected me and my family is anything but mild. Having been fit and active, I now find that on bad days I still struggle with everyday chores, and my usually quick-firing brain remains in slo-mo ("brain fog"), a far cry from the way it used to function when I was still working as a consultant in infectious diseases. Days become a hierarchy of lists: on bad days I have to prioritise only that which is essential, and on good days I have to be careful not to overdo it. Pacing has become vital, and the joy of spontaneity has been vanquished. Everything has to be planned, to allow for time and rest between each activity, be it physical or mental. As I write this, I am aware I am not following that mantra, and there will probably be payback tomorrow.

For many months, it has felt as though [long Covid](#) has not been on the political agenda, but many people are still struggling with their everyday lives, and struggling to get the help they need. Why is long Covid not included in the daily statistics, or as one of the main incentives to avoid Omicron, and to get a vaccine and booster jab? It's never mentioned, and it often feels as if sufferers don't exist.

Long Covid did return to the [news](#) last week, with the publication of data from a multi-centre study suggesting that fewer than 30% of patients hospitalised with acute Covid had fully recovered a year later. It's a stark statistic – yet this study did not account for the significant number of us who were never admitted to hospital, and have still not fully recovered. The most recent [ONS data](#) from October reports that 1.2 million people are living with long Covid (in hospitalised and non-hospitalised patients); 36% of those have had it for more than a year, with greatest prevalence in health and social care workers, and people living in more deprived areas.

Even if the new variant results in milder disease than previous ones, could more people still end up like me? And how will an already stretched NHS cope if there are new cases of long Covid after this current viral surge?

There's a lot we still don't know about Omicron; a fuller picture will become evident over the coming weeks and months. Experience from previous variants suggests that [vaccination](#) gives some protection against symptoms, even if it doesn't prevent infection altogether.

Long Covid is a complicated, multi-system disease, whose pathological processes have yet to be fully understood, making treatment difficult. This is further compounded by the diverse range of symptoms, so there is no "one size fits all" treatment. Health professionals have been extrapolating treatment strategies from other diseases, but management is not consistent between clinics. A current [study](#) aims to address this lack of standardisation by producing a "gold standard" for care, and [Nice](#) recently updated its guidance to include individualised treatment plans for those with long Covid.

Research into the disease received significant funding in the UK after it was officially recognised in October 2020, with [£18.5m](#) in February, at the same time the World Health Organization was [emphasising](#) the need for recognition, research and rehabilitation. A further [£19.5m](#) was awarded in July this year. It will be a while before we get conclusive data to guide management of the disease, but trials are under way.

We've come a long way since June 2020, when people with prolonged and unusual symptoms after Covid infection were being dismissed as [neurotic](#). Increasingly vocal individuals and groups posted on social media and found that they weren't alone in the symptoms that they were experiencing. Primary and secondary care physicians had to take notice, and, once long Covid was officially [recognised](#) as a disease, £10m was announced to fund dedicated clinics. This finally opened up care to those who had not been hospitalised.

There are now 60 clinics in England to be referred to, and [90 assessment services](#) for triaging patients but availability of care remains a postcode lottery. Northern Ireland has only recently launched its [first clinics](#), but Wales and Scotland still have none. However, even where there are clinics, [waiting lists](#) are long, and funding remains insufficient in many places. Additionally, a lack of dedicated physicians and physiotherapists presents a major problem. To improve access, in June this year NHS England

announced a [further £100m](#) for the expansion of care for long Covid services, including 15 hubs for children and young people, but the lack of a consistent workforce is an ongoing problem.

With nowhere to turn to last May, and as a yoga teacher, I set up a group for others I knew who were similarly affected, focusing on exercises to help us improve our breathing. Finally, after a year of illness, I got the support of a physiotherapist, which has been essential for my improvement. I also joined [a programme](#) run by the English National Opera that focuses on breathing retraining via singing, where the camaraderie was as helpful as the singing itself. We've been on the same physical and emotional rollercoaster of long Covid, sharing health concerns, coping strategies, employment issues and rejoicing in our baby steps of improvements. We laugh, we cry and every fortnight we sing together. Our dream is to meet in person and sing on the stage of the Colosseum.

Long Covid isn't going away soon. Post-viral syndromes are not new, but we have never seen anything on such a scale. I dread the thought of getting the [Omicron variant](#). Who knows how my body would react this time? I first wrote about long Covid a year ago, and I could never have imagined that I would still be unable to work at this point. It seems so strange that, as a consultant in infectious diseases, I've had to sit out the entire pandemic from the sidelines, when I should have been playing a vital role.

- When fit to work, Joanna Herman is a consultant in infectious diseases in London, and teaches at the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine

Guardian Opinion cartoon

Boris Johnson

Martin Rowson: the seven days of Covid Christmas – cartoon

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2021.12.23 - Around the world

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- [Poland Brussels launches legal action over rulings violating EU law](#)
- [Global development Asia's factory workers at sharp end of supply chain crisis](#)
- ['That was wrong' James Franco admits sleeping with students and says he had sex addiction](#)
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Xinjiang

Intel faces backlash in China after banning products and labour from Xinjiang

Chinese social media users call for boycott of US chip maker after it issues directive to suppliers over human rights concerns



Intel has faced a backlash in China after telling its suppliers not to source products or labour from the Xinjiang region over human rights concerns.
Photograph: Aly Song/Reuters

Reuters

Wed 22 Dec 2021 20.49 EST

Intel, the US computer chip maker, is facing a backlash from China after telling its suppliers not to source products or labour from the region of [Xinjiang](#).

Intel said it had been “required to ensure that its supply chain does not use any labour or source goods or services” from Xinjiang in accordance with restrictions imposed by “multiple governments”.

The United States has accused China of [widespread human rights abuses in the predominantly Muslim region of Xinjiang](#), including forced labour. Beijing has denied the claims.

The Global Times, a tabloid run by the Communist party, called Intel’s statement “absurd”, adding that the company – which earned 26% of its total revenues from [China](#) in 2020 – was “biting the hand that feeds it”.

“What we need to do is to make it increasingly expensive for companies to offend China so their losses outweigh their gains,” the newspaper said in an editorial.

On China’s Weibo microblog service, the singer Karry Wang said he would no longer serve as brand ambassador for Intel, adding in a statement that “national interests exceed everything”.

Other Weibo users called on Chinese citizens to boycott Intel, with one posting under the name “Old Catalan” and saying: “Must resist, do not buy!”

Multinational companies have come under pressure as they aim to comply with [Xinjiang-related trade sanctions](#) while continuing to operate in China, one of their biggest markets.

The Global Times said in its editorial that multinationals “should be able to endure, properly handle and balance pressure from all parties”.

Intel could not immediately be reached for comment.

[European Commission](#)

Brussels launches legal action over Polish rulings against EU law

European Commission says it has ‘serious concerns’ about challenges by Warsaw’s constitutional tribunal



The European commissioner for justice, Didier Reynders, said: ‘Fundamentals of the EU legal order ... must be respected.’ Photograph: Wojtek Radwański/AFP/Getty Images

[Jennifer Rankin](#) in Brussels

Wed 22 Dec 2021 10.02 EST

The [European Commission](#) has begun legal action against Poland over rulings by the country’s constitutional court that challenged the supremacy of EU law, in an escalation of the long-running battle between Brussels and Warsaw.

The EU executive said it had “serious concerns” about the Polish constitutional tribunal and its recent case law, citing rulings where the court had challenged the primacy of EU law.

Striking at the heart of the EU legal order, Poland’s constitutional tribunal [ruled in July](#) that measures imposed by the European court of justice were unconstitutional, with warnings of a legal “Polexit”.

Poland agreed on the supremacy of EU law when it became a member of the bloc in 2004, but the rightwing nationalist Law and Justice (PiS) government that came to power in 2015 has sought to challenge that principle, while bringing domestic courts under political control.

The EU’s legal action is in response to the July ruling and a similar one from October. It follows years of legal wrangling over the independence of Polish courts. In a sign that patience is wearing thin in Brussels, the EU commissioner for justice, Didier Reynders, said: “We’ve tried to engage in a dialogue, but the situation is not improving. Fundamentals of the EU legal order, notably the primacy of EU law, must be respected.”

The commission also said it had “serious doubts” about the independence and impartiality of the Polish constitutional tribunal, a body that now includes former PiS MPs on its bench. Retired judges of the tribunal have said the court has [“ceased to perform its constitutional tasks and duties”](#) since its membership was overhauled.

Poland’s government claimed the legal action was an attack on its sovereignty. “The EC is initiating proceedings and wants to subordinate the constitutional tribunal in Poland to EU law,” [tweeted](#) the deputy justice minister, Sebastian Kaleta. “This is an attack on the Polish constitution and our sovereignty.”

Beata Szydło, who was Poland’s prime minister from 2015 to 2017 and is now an MEP, [tweeted](#): “This is not a legal dispute, but an attack on the Polish constitution [and] the foundations of Polish statehood. The EC aims to deprive Poland of its rights as a sovereign state.”

Legal scholars said the action was important but overdue. “It’s great that this is happening and there’s no way the commission could retain any credibility in the rule of law field by letting the adventures of [the] Polish constitutional tribunal slide,” wrote Jakub Jaraczewski, a researcher at Democracy Reporting International.

Poland’s government now has two months to respond to the commission’s “letter of formal notice”. The case could go to the European court of justice, leading to daily fines against Warsaw.

It is only the latest in a blizzard of legal cases against Poland launched by the commission, which has also frozen Warsaw’s access to €35.6bn (£30.2bn) in coronavirus recovery funds because of concerns about the absence of independent courts.

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[Rights and freedom](#)[Global development](#)

Asia's factory workers at the sharp end of the west's supply chain crisis

Migrant workers ate and slept in factories swarming with Covid, sealed off from outside world



Factory workers endured gruelling conditions, living and sleeping in the same factories in which they worked long hours, to comply with strict government rules aiming to minimise the spread of Covid. Photograph: Nhac Nguyen/AFP/Getty Images

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HUMANITY UNITED

[About this content](#)

Rebecca Ratcliffe and Nhung Nguyen in Ho Chi Minh City

Thu 23 Dec 2021 00.00 EST

For weeks, Hoang Thi Quynh* worked and slept inside a garment factory in Tien Giang province, in southern [Vietnam](#). She would start her shift at 7.15am and then, after a day spent sewing sportswear garments, enter an empty hall of the factory complex and settle down for the night.

Each worker had a tent, set one or two metres apart, containing a foil mat, pillow, blanket and a box to store their belongings. No workers were permitted to meet anyone from outside the factory; even speaking to a visitor over the gates was forbidden.

A Covid wave that spread across the industrial areas of Vietnam earlier this year placed intense pressure on the country's manufacturing sector – just as factories were churning out products destined for shops ahead of Christmas.

Vietnam is one of Asia's key manufacturing hubs and produces goods for some of the biggest Western brands in tech, garments and sportswear. News reports about the outbreak warned of [delays in the delivery of iPhone 13s](#), and disruption in the supply of everything from [Toyota cars](#) to [Ikea curtains](#).

“Vietnam probably does a third of all apparel production [for the US],” said Jana Gold, a Senior Director with Alvarez & Marsal Consumer and Retail Group in Washington. “Of all countries to get hit with Covid, it really impacted the industry,” she said.

Many factories asked workers to stay on site to comply with government rules designed to minimise infections – a policy that has since been dropped, including by Quynh’s workplace, which allowed her to commute from home again by November.

But production still has not returned to normal; analysts predict it won’t do so until the end of the first quarter of 2022. In the run up to Christmas, retailers scrambled to prioritise which products were most needed by shops. Some continued shipping as late as mid-November, and even chartered planes to get garments to high streets on time.

The real crisis, though, has been felt by the workers – many of them internal migrants – who power the country’s factories.

In July, when Covid cases escalated, a [severe lockdown](#) was imposed across industrial areas, banning people from leaving their homes, even to buy food. Hundreds of thousands of workers moved into factories through an arrangement known as “three-on-site”, where workers sleep, work and eat in their factory. By October, [roughly 300,000 workers](#) were doing so in Binh Duong province alone.

For workers whose factories closed down during lockdown, there was no alternative but to stay in their rental rooms, in limbo. They were unable to earn a living, yet prevented from returning home to their families. Workers had little available cash to cope with the ordeal, said Nguyen Phuong Tu, visiting research fellow at Adelaide University who specialises in factory workers’ labour rights. “Most will try to remit savings back to their family members in their hometown, so the savings they have for themselves are not really much,” she said. Though some government support was available, it was nowhere near enough.

When movement restrictions were lifted at the beginning of October, many workers decided they had enough, and left industrial areas en masse.

Motorbikes, strapped with plastic bags bursting with belongings, flooded the streets. As many as 90,000 fled Ho Chi Minh City for their home provinces on the [first weekend alone](#), according to state media.

Tran Thi Lan* was one of a [reported 300,000 people who left Binh Duong](#), part of the garment manufacturing hub in the south. Her area was at the centre of a Covid outbreak, and she spent four months in lockdown. Eventually, she caught Covid herself. “I knew that it would be my turn to get infected. Every two weeks people got tested and the infected rooms got closer,” she said, shortly after she returned home.

Normally she earns a basic monthly salary of about VND4.8m (154.56 GBP), making trainers. She would get an additional VND20,000 (64p) per hour of overtime and VND300,000 (9.66 GBP) more as a food stipend. It wasn’t much, she said, considering how exhausting the work was. Her company, which suspended operations during the lockdown, gave her no support, she said.

Instead, she relied on charity food packages. She received VND800,000 (25.76 GBP) from a relief fund, and her landlord helped by halving her rent.

The crisis has underlined the vulnerability of migrant workers’ lives, and the need for better government protection, Tu said. Their jobs are both low-pay and precarious. In the past, foreign-owned companies have been known to simply close down without paying workers’ wages or social insurance benefits.

Access to public services is also tied to a person’s registered address in their home province, which means they’re unable to access key services such as healthcare, childcare or children’s education while working away in the industrial areas. “I think the economic importance of these workers has been undervalued,” she said. “Even though we know Vietnam continues to attract foreign investment based on the attractiveness of low cost and abundant labour supply.”

Factories now [face significant labour shortages](#) because so many workers have left. Many are expected to stay home with their families at least until the Lunar New Year holiday.

Gold estimates that, of the vendors she works with, 60-70% of workers are back working. “In normal times [they] might be able to manage, but with the increase in demand right now it’s just compounding the issue,” she said. There are also continued, sporadic Covid outbreaks, which lead to temporary shutdowns. On top of this, manufacturers and brands face continued disruption to the supply of raw materials and to shipping.

Mohamed Faiz Nagutha, ASEAN Economist at Bank of America Securities in Singapore, said it is unlikely that production will return to normal levels until the end of the first quarter of 2022. “If you’re talking about actually catching up back to where, in a hypothetical world, production would have been - that will take much longer,” Nagutha added.

The crisis has prompted some retailers to rethink how they balance having an efficient supply chain, and one that is less precarious, said Gold. Others are adopting a more selective approach to buying goods, and doing fewer promotions that require products to be sold in far greater numbers to make the same amount of revenue.

Tu is skeptical of whether the current crisis will bring greater rights for workers, however. Some bosses have offered higher pay to entice workers back to factories, but these perks are likely temporary, she said, adding concrete policy change by local government that’s needed. “I would be cautious about saying the bargaining power of the workers has increased in this particular period of time,” she added.

Instead, she fears the pressures on those workers who remain in the industrial areas could be amplified, as they face the mammoth task of overcoming months of delayed production. The government has [proposed lifting the annual overtime cap](#) from 200 hours to 300 hours to boost the sector’s recovery from Covid.

For the moment, many workers have voted with their feet. “When I was stuck inside the rental room, I was really scared of being infected, and that it might affect my health in the long run,” said Lan. “Along with it, my cash running out. I was frightened of the idea that I may not be able to meet my family again.”

** Some names have been changed*

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James Franco

James Franco admits sleeping with students and says he had sex addiction

Actor gives first extended comments about accusations that came nearly four years ago

01:45

James Franco admits sleeping with students and says he had sex addiction – video

Reuters

Wed 22 Dec 2021 19.22 EST

James Franco has acknowledged sleeping with students of an acting school he previously ran, saying he struggled with a sex addiction and has been working to improve his behavior in recent years.

In excerpts from The Jess Cagle Podcast made public on Wednesday, Franco, 43, said that while teaching, he “did sleep with students, and that was wrong”. He said he had not started the school to lure women for sexual purposes.

“I suppose at the time, my thinking was if it’s consensual, OK,” he added in the SiriusXM podcast. “At the time I was not clearheaded.”

The remarks were Franco’s first extended comments about accusations leveled against him nearly four years ago when the Los Angeles Times reported that five women had [accused Franco](#) of conduct they considered inappropriate.

Later, in October 2019, two women [filed a civil suit](#) against the actor, accusing him of exploiting aspiring actors at his now defunct school and duping young women into shooting explicit sex scenes.

Franco said he had developed a sex addiction after he became sober from an alcohol addiction he developed at a young age.

“It’s such a powerful drug,” he said. “I got hooked on it for 20 more years. The insidious part of that is that I stayed sober from alcohol all that time.”

Franco co-hosted the Oscars ceremony in 2011 and was a nominee at the 2012 awards for his performance in *127 Hours*.

The actor agreed this year to pay \$2.2m to settle the 2019 civil lawsuit, according to documents filed in Los Angeles superior court.

In the podcast interview, Franco also said he had been in recovery from sex addiction since 2016 and had “been doing a lot of work” after the allegations against him “and changing who I was”.

“I didn’t want to hurt people,” he said.

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2021/dec/22/james-franco-interview-sexual-misconduct-allegations>



The shoes of homeless Lisbon people who were given temporary shelter in a sports hall during the first Covid-19 lockdown. Photograph: Patrícia de Melo Moreira/AFP/Getty Images

[This is Europe](#)

Luxury homes, short lets and shacks: inside Lisbon's housing crisis

The shoes of homeless Lisbon people who were given temporary shelter in a sports hall during the first Covid-19 lockdown. Photograph: Patrícia de Melo Moreira/AFP/Getty Images

Wealthy overseas buyers lured by ‘golden visas’ helped create a city where workers struggle to find homes

by Beatriz Ramalho da Silva

Wed 22 Dec 2021 09.00 EST

Manuela Lopes dates her misfortune from the moment her Lisbon neighbourhood began attracting comparisons with Brooklyn. It was the mid 2010s: former warehouses in the old working-class parish of Marvila were giving way to co-working spaces, art galleries, artisan breweries, creative hubs and tech startups. In 2018, average property prices in the neighbourhood were up [79.8% on the previous year](#).

A short walk from Lopes' home, a 12-building luxury residential project designed by the world-famous architect Renzo Piano is now rising from Marvila's old industrial waterfront. [Prices](#) for apartments, some with balconies overlooking the Tagus, range from €500,000 to €925,000 (£425,000 to £786,000) and many have been sold off-plan. Promotional material for [Prata Riverside Village](#) promises a "new way of living Lisbon" for "young families, students, digital nomads and retired people" in a district "distinguished by its true neighbourhood atmosphere; quiet but full of life".

Lopes, 77, was born in the more modest architectural setting of the Santos Lima, a two-storey 19th-century apartment building, where her mother and grandmother before her raised their families. The "true neighbourhood atmosphere" was indeed here in the early 1970s, according to former tenants, when dissidents of the Salazar dictatorship would gather for their clandestine meetings at the Santos Lima.

For years, Lopes assumed her tenancy was protected by a Portuguese law that prevents anyone over 65 years old from eviction if their lease dated from before 1990. What she didn't know was that an offer to move flats within the building, which she had accepted, had voided the terms of her previous lease and in 2017, she was given notice to quit.

Across Lisbon, property prices were soaring, tourism was booming and many tenants were finding themselves in a similar predicament. Lopes and her neighbours discovered after receiving eviction notices that the Santos Lima had been sold for €2.7m, even though 17 families were sitting tenants. Just a few months later the building was on the market for €7.2m, advertised as having potential for conversion to private condominiums or a hotel: perfect for a rapidly gentrifying area of the capital on the riverfront. And empty.

Lopes has lost count of the strange encounters she has had in the building since then. Unnamed people started showing up in the corridors, telling tenants to leave. Doors to vacant flats were pulled out, before being re-attached months later, and construction work began without notice.

With most elderly residents protected from eviction, some landlords resorted to bullying to be able to cash in on the boom, says Rita Silva, who heads housing rights organisation [Habita](#). Lopes and her neighbours say what they have experienced is closer to intimidation. People again speak in hushed, fearful voices; suspicious not of the Salazar regime, but of the faceless owners and property agents.



- Manuela Lopes (above and below right) was born in the Santos Lima building (right) in the Marvila neighbourhood of Lisbon. She has lived with the threat of eviction since 2017. Photographs: Goncalo Fonseca/The Guardian



The building itself is becoming more dilapidated by the day. Inside Lopes' flat, the walls have dark patches from damp and mould. On the door of one of the many empty flats, decorations are still up from a previous Christmas.

"There is no use in painting my place now, I don't know when I'll have to leave. I barely have any energy left," she says.

Some of the remaining families are holding out, but Lopes, who lives on a pension of less than €400 a month, €147 of which goes on rent, has begun to pack up her things. “I’m scared of the day someone shows up and I’ll just have to go.”

“My doctor says I’m halfway into a depression,” she adds. “All of this just makes me feel small.”

Portugal’s property market is now what analysts call one of Europe’s most “dynamic”. Foreign investment is credited with powering Portugal’s economic recovery, but the “collateral damage” inflicted on the social fabric of Lisbon, Porto and other cities has been profound, says geographer and housing activist Luís Mendes.

Unaffordable rents and evictions are hitting not just those on subsistence wages or pensions, but ordinary workers and their families. Their plight can be traced to the 2008 European debt crisis. To entice foreign investment, Portugal was required to deregulate as a condition of its international bailout. A “golden visa” programme was ushered in offering residency permits in exchange for real-estate acquisitions worth €500,000 or more. Those investing were not required to move to Portugal – just to spend two weeks a year in the country. A separate “non-habitual residency scheme” was also brought in, which gave foreign citizens who spent half the year in Portugal a 10-year tax break on income earned elsewhere.



- The Renzo Piano-designed Prata Riverside Village development on the former industrial waterfront by the Tagus. Photographs: Goncalo Fonseca/The Guardian



To say these schemes proved popular is an understatement: 10,000 golden visas have been issued to non-EU buyers since 2012 in exchange for more

than €5bn of investment, most of it flooding into property. The new property owners come predominantly from China, Brazil, Turkey, South Africa and Russia.

Luís Lima, president of the Portuguese association for professionals and companies in real-estate mediation (Apemip), has no doubt that the perks gave Portugal an important “escape” from the worst effects of the financial crisis.

“Everything that is good for tourism is good for us,” Lima says. He was among the first to begin scouting foreign investment abroad after the crisis in 2008, and recalls: “Some of the maps didn’t even have Portugal on them, they just had ‘Iberia’ – now everybody knows our name.”



- The Sunday market at the LX Factory complex, a former industrial site now home to bars, cafes, restaurants and shops. Photograph: Brannon Gerling/Alamy

While the Algarve had formerly drawn international real-estate buyers, Lisbon, Porto and some of the coastal regions in between now became a honeypot for developers and speculators. “We changed the paradigm,” says

Lima, adding that the scheme has been good for employment, indirectly creating “thousands of jobs”.

But Mendes, who is on the board of the Lisbon tenants’ association, says that by turning so much of the capital’s housing into wealth-generating assets the scheme has been “disastrous” for many Lisbon-dwellers.

Countless people saw their need for homes sidelined as prices soared and the safety net for renters was swept away. A 2012 austerity measure designed to address “rigidities” in the urban rental market became known as the “law of evictions”. Suddenly a tenant could face a dramatic rent hike at the end of a lease or be evicted if a landlord wanted to renovate a flat, which was previously unheard of. By 2017, eviction rates had doubled on 2013 rates, to the equivalent of approximately [five families losing their homes a day](#).

Historically a residential centre, Lisbon rents had been cheap by the standards of other capital cities in Europe but they were in line with Portugal’s lower average incomes. As interest from abroad began to grow, demand outstripped supply, pushing prices up and pushing people out.

That supply shortage narrative is only the “tip of the iceberg”, as Mendes puts it. Lisbon also had an unusually high number of vacant houses until around 2010. At least a third of buildings in the historical centre were vacant, many in a state of degradation, Mendes says. It was a golden opportunity for investors.

In the frenzy that followed, buildings were changing hands for €1m one night and selling the next morning for €1.7m. “Sometimes with only mild renovations, properties bought for €60,000 or €70,000 six years ago are now worth €400,000 or €500,000,” Mendes says.



- The Bairro Alto district has become a popular nightlife destination with many bars and restaurants. Photograph: Martin Thomas/Alamy



- Central Lisbon. Photograph: Edson De Souza/Zuma Wire/Rex/Shutterstock

Tourism, meanwhile, introduced Lisbon to Airbnb-style short-term rentals. “Anyone could have a room or a sofa they would rent,” explains Mendes. Short lets, he says, began to “eat” into the affordable housing market.

Once full of decrepit buildings, faded masonry and crumbling facades, the old town was made over at breakneck speed. Tuk-tuks filled with tourists climbed up and down the narrow cobblestoned streets and restaurants flourished. It was not long before Lisbon began topping international league tables as a tourism destination and one of the most “liveable” cities in Europe.



- Trams in the hilly Bairro Alto district. Photograph: Danita Delimont/Getty Images/Gallo Images

By 2019, Lisbon was averaging 4.5 million tourists annually, in a city of 500,000 residents, more than eight tourists for every resident. By 2020 [a third of houses](#) in Lisbon’s historical centre were listed on short letting websites such as Airbnb, despite curbs introduced in 2019.

The [warning](#) issued by Leilani Farha, the UN special rapporteur on housing, in 2016 was coming to pass. Farha had said that “unbridled touristification”

in Portugal could exacerbate evictions and bring about the emergence of “a new poor”.

Anyone on Portugal’s minimum wage of €665 a month was certainly priced out. Today the average rent in Lisbon, for a family, averages €700-€900 a month depending on the district, but average earnings in the city are about €950. “A lot of people are excluded,” Mendes says.

In 2020, house prices across Portugal increased by [8.4%, according to the national statistics institute \(INE\)](#). “It is not just vulnerable groups that can’t access housing, for the past three years the middle class has had a noose around its neck – they can’t find housing in Lisbon,” says Silva. “When you look at incomes in Portugal house prices are absurd.”

‘I just want to live with dignity’

Dulce Dengue and her children were woken early one morning in March 2021 by men yelling at them and rummaging through the furniture of their rented flat in Loures, a town in the Greater Lisbon area, 13km north-east of the city centre. “I didn’t even have time to wake my children properly, within minutes two men were changing the locks and told me I had to leave,” she says. She was served with a court order to vacate the premises.

Dengue had lost her jobs as a cleaner and a seamstress at the start of the pandemic. She admits she had not been able to keep up with her rent.

The circumstances of the case are still the subject of legal proceedings. But the single mother, her own three children – the youngest just 18 months old at the time – and two nieces found themselves without a roof over their heads. Four other families who had been living in the same block also ended up homeless.

“We had to stay outside in the cold, it was awful, I had to feed my children on the street,” she says.

Property inflation has now rippled out from Lisbon to outlying municipalities such as Loures, say campaigners. “It is almost like

aftershocks of an earthquake," says Silva. Mendes agrees: "It has moved from the epicentre ... out through the city peripheries and suburbs."



- Dulce Dengue, her three children and two nieces were removed from a block in Loures, a town in the Greater Lisbon area. Photographs: Goncalo Fonseca/The Guardian



The difficulty for people like Dengue is that Portugal also has one of the lowest rates of social housing provision in Europe, with only 2% of all housing publicly owned, compared with [17% in the UK, 16% in France and 24% in Austria](#).

She was initially placed in a hostel paid for by the local authority. Her children were exhausted, as it took an hour to get to school, she says. “They kept asking me when we could go home.” The courts eventually revoked Dengue’s notice to quit, a decision that is being appealed. In the meantime, the family have been shuffled between hostels and temporary shelters.

“I ask for assistance,” Dengue wrote in an open letter to the housing minister earlier this year. “I don’t know how to deal with the tears of my children who don’t know when they will return home. I don’t know how to deal with the uncertainty of life, with the coming and going, sometimes I feel myself losing strength to keep fighting. I just want to give a dignified life to my children. I just want to live with dignity.”

“Dulce’s case is an example of many things that are boiling in this country – people losing their income in the pandemic, particularly people who were already in a precarious situation,” says Silva.

The “build to rent” market, meanwhile, has taken off on the capital’s margins. Loures is attracting a steady stream of buyers of what the Portuguese branch of JLL, an international real estate company, calls [“multifamily assets”](#) – residential buildings entirely for rental purposes.

Gonçalo Santos, the head of capital markets at JLL, is adamant that the golden visa programme has played a positive role in consolidating Lisbon as an investment destination in the global marketplace. That, he says, is entirely compatible with the creation of affordable housing. Taking Lisbon out of the golden visa scheme, as the government plans to do next year, will not just be “terrible for business”, it will reduce the supply of homes, he says.

11,000 families in shacks



- Homeless people living in tents on a Lisbon street. Photograph: Edson De Souza/Zuma Press Wire/Rex/Shutterstock



- Tourists at a hillside cafe in the Alfama district. Photograph: Dov Makabaw/Alamy

Faced with mounting public pressure the Portuguese government established a housing secretariat in 2017, and in answer to a growing protest movement a law giving effect to the constitutional right to adequate housing dating from 1976, was [finally approved in September 2019](#).

The first comprehensive government inquiry into housing, published in response to the findings of the UN special rapporteur on housing revealed that [25,762 families](#) were living in “grave housing poverty”, nearly 50% of them in Lisbon.

These are people in what Silva calls “situations of degradation often without access to running water”. More than 11,000 families live in shacks and self-built dwellings clustered in shantytowns or other “informal settlements”. Astonishingly these figures do not include overcrowded homes or households at risk of eviction.

The housing secretary, Marina Gonçalves, says the government’s priority is to increase social housing’s share from 2% to 5%. But she acknowledges “this will take time”.

For decades, she says, housing in Portugal was left to market forces. Public housing was not prioritised. “We have to find the answers, we can create market incentives, but we can’t think the responsibility lies with the market, the responsibility lies with the state to promote public housing policies.”

When the pandemic struck, the government suspended evictions and introduced a temporary moratorium for people in mortgage arrears. But in the absence of a massive programme of public investment in housing, Mendes believes, the pandemic is storing up a wave of future evictions and a potentially explosive crisis.

“It was already grave and will become aggravated as people’s economic and social situation becomes more precarious,” Silva agrees. “The price of housing did not decrease with the pandemic – housing remains inaccessible in Lisbon.”

The cleaners and carers who live in squats

Dam works as a security guard in a supermarket, where she is on the minimum wage doing nightshifts. Despite being in paid employment, the single mother lives in a squat in a vacant, vandalised council flat on Lisbon's outskirts.

She moved here when conditions in the flat she had been renting became so unsanitary that staying was not an option. In the squat, the windows are broken so she keeps the blinds down to keep out the cold. "When I got here, the rubbish was higher than me, the walls were filthy."



- Dam lives in a squatted local authority block of flats with her children; her disabled mother, whom she was also caring for (right), died in November from pneumonia. Photographs: Goncalo Fonseca/The Guardian



Dam, 40, supports two of her children and until recently was also the main carer of her disabled mother, who has since died from pneumonia. The family has been on a waiting list for public housing for almost a decade, living in the squat for the last three years. Although the fear of eviction hangs over them daily, Dam feels she has little choice. She has tried hard to turn the place into a home, fixing up the bathroom and painting the walls.

"I've done what I can with my means. Everybody knows I'm here; everybody knows my situation. I took photos of when I arrived, of the work I've done to the house, I have sent letters out everywhere," she explains.

Dam is far from unique. Increasing numbers, many of them single mothers, who struggle to pay rent in the city despite having jobs, are resorting to unlawful occupation. Many of those living in informal settlements or occupying empty buildings work as cleaners and carers, and during the pandemic have been on the frontlines of the capital's public health emergency.

Dam got her hopes up recently after being offered an appointment to discuss her social housing application – but was told there were still no vacancies. She is beginning to lose faith, saying: "There are thousands of people waiting like me.

“I don’t know what else to do, I can’t live in anguish for the rest of my life, this is not how I want my children to grow up.”

Portugal’s luxury housing market isn’t just defying the pandemic, it is thriving. According to Portuguese databank [Confidencial Imobiliário](#), foreign investment made up 40% of housing investment in Lisbon in 2020, while Knight Frank’s [2021 wealth report](#) places Lisbon among the few cities in the world where the luxury segment has scarcely been touched by Covid uncertainty, with prices up by 4%.

Lima says this has no bearing on the lack of housing for people at the bottom of the income scale. “People were surprised to see prices rising in a pandemic, it’s the market functioning.”

Looking back at the impact of deregulating the housing market and the golden visa programme, he admits the pace of Lisbon’s transformation has been startling. “It surprised many specialists, myself included – how fast we recovered from that crisis – and the cherry on top of the cake was foreign investment.”

The lack of affordable houses is, he says, a political failure. “There is a view that foreign investment takes homes away from the Portuguese, but this has nothing to do with it – these are completely different sectors.”



- A homeless person sleeps in Figueira Square, Lisbon. Photograph: Patrícia de Melo Moreira/AFP/Getty Images

The days of the golden visa as it currently operates appear to be numbered. António Costa's socialist government promised to remove residential properties in Lisbon, Porto and the Algarve from its scope but put off the reform until January 2022 to cushion the impact of the pandemic. Applications were up 13% in 2021.

From next year, overseas buyers will still be able to put their money into Portuguese property for a tax advantage, but in regions of lower population density.

Even Lima concedes that for low-paid workers the options remain scarce. “It’s not enough to have the right to housing in the constitution,” he says. “I don’t know how any young person with a reasonable job can pay for a house in Lisbon today. Even if you earn €1,000 a month, you shouldn’t have to pay more than €300 [rent] – and this isn’t the reality in the city.

“Some people say our prices are only a fraction of those in Madrid, London or Paris – of course, but our standard of living is not that of the Spanish,

British or French.”

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/dec/22/luxury-homes-short-lets-and-shacks-inside-lisbons-housing-crisis>

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- Air transport Christmas travel chaos as airlines cancel more than 4,500 flights
- Live Covid live news: thousands of flights cancelled as Omicron disrupts Christmas travel
- Don't close churches over Covid, urges Archbishop of Westminster
- Justin Welby sermon Covid makes all of us face unpredictability, Archbishop to say

Airline industry

Christmas travel chaos as airlines cancel more than 4,500 flights

Passengers returning home for festive season face worldwide disruption as Omicron leaves airlines short-staffed



People checking in for their flights at Orlando International airport in the US on Thursday. Photograph: Paul Hennessy/Sopa Images/Rex/Shutterstock

[Clea Skopeliti](#) and agencies

Fri 24 Dec 2021 22.25 EST

Passengers travelling over the Christmas holiday have been hit with disruption worldwide after airline companies cancelled more than 4,500 flights, according to a flight tracking website.

A surge of cancellations on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day came as the rapidly spreading Omicron coronavirus variant meant carriers were unable

to staff their flights.

The website of the flight tracking firm FlightAware showed that 2,175 flights around the world had been scrapped on Christmas Eve, a typically heavy day for travel. Around a quarter of those were in the US. Another 1,779 flights were scrapped worldwide on Christmas Day, along with 402 more that had been scheduled for Sunday.

The bulk of the cancellations came from five firms, with China Eastern cancelling 474 journeys, while Air [China](#) scrapped 188. United cancelled 177 flights, Air India 160 and Delta called off 150.

United said: “The nationwide spike in Omicron cases this week has had a direct impact on our flight crews and the people who run our operation. As a result, we’ve unfortunately had to cancel some flights and are notifying impacted customers in advance of them coming to the airport.”

Meanwhile, Delta said it had “exhausted all options and resources – including rerouting and substitutions of aircraft and crews to cover scheduled flying – before cancelling around 90 flights for Friday”. The airline blamed the impact of the Omicron variant and weather conditions for the cancellations.

In response to the pre-holiday chaos, airlines have called for the relaxation of quarantine rules for vaccinated staff.

Delta’s chief executive, Ed Bastian, has asked the head of the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) to reduce the self-isolation period for vaccinated people experiencing breakthrough infections from 10 to five days. Airlines for America and JetBlue seconded the request.

Airlines’ social media feeds have been filled with frustrated passengers asking for assistance after a spate of cancellations on Christmas Eve owing to the rapidly spreading Omicron variant.

“[@Delta](#) really?! You cancel my Christmas Eve flight at 12:30am?? I got up at 2am to get to the airport with my baby and husband and don’t see the cancellation till I’m at the airport to get my bags checked,” one passenger

tweeted at the airline on Friday – one of several similar messages directed at carriers that have had to call off flights.

Despite the uncertainties and grim news around the world, millions of Americans carried on with travel plans through a second pandemic-clouded holiday season.

Moses Jimenez, an accountant from Long Beach, Mississippi, flew to New York with his wife and three children, even though the latest torrent of coronavirus cases dashed their hopes of catching a Broadway performance of Hamilton or visit some museums.

Hamilton was one of a dozen productions to cancel shows this week as cast and crew members tested positive for Covid-19. Museums were scratched from the family's itinerary because many now require proof of vaccination and the two younger children are ineligible for the shot.

Jimenez, 33, said his family would make the best of roaming the city's streets and parks, while also seeing relatives and friends.

"We just wanted to get out of the house, really, get the kids out to the city for Christmas," Jimenez told Reuters on Thursday at New York's LaGuardia Airport.

New York planned to sharply limit the number of people it allows in Times Square for its annual outdoor New Year's Eve celebration, in response to the surge of new coronavirus cases, capping the number of attendees 15,000.

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[Coronavirus live](#)

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France, Italy and Ireland see record daily highs; Israel orders 100,000 anti-viral pills – as it happened

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Coronavirus

Don't close churches over Covid, urges Archbishop of Westminster

Catholic leader of England and Wales calls on government not to tighten rules for places of worship

- [Coronavirus – latest updates](#)
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The archbishop of Westminster, Cardinal Vincent Nichols. Photograph: Vickie Flores/EPA

PA Media

Sat 25 Dec 2021 04.44 EST

The leading Catholic in [England](#) and Wales, the archbishop of Westminster, has urged the government not to reintroduce restrictions on churches amid

record Covid-19 infection rates.

Data published on Thursday, suggesting the Omicron strain might cause less severe illness than the previously dominant Delta variant, has fuelled speculation in Westminster that Boris Johnson will resist imposing further restrictions in England after Christmas.

Cardinal Vincent Nichols said it was clear that large spaces such as churches were “not places where we spread the virus”.

“I would sincerely appeal that they do not again consider closing churches and places of worship,” the archbishop told the BBC prior to midnight mass at Westminster Cathedral.

“I think this country has shown that people can make good judgments themselves,” he added.

“We’re at that point of saying we understand the risk. We know what we should do. Most people are sensible and cautious. We don’t need stronger impositions to teach us what to do.”

It comes after a further 122,186 lab-confirmed Covid-19 cases were recorded in the UK as of 9am on Christmas Eve, another record daily figure, while 137 people died within 28 days of testing positive.

In Scotland, nightclubs will close for at least three weeks from 27 December as part of measures to control the spread of the virus, while clubs in Wales and [Northern Ireland](#) will close from Boxing Day.

But in England, the government may choose to issue new voluntary guidance on limiting contacts rather than risk another damaging Tory rebellion by recalling parliament to impose new rules.

The prime minister has indicated he will not hesitate to act after Christmas if required – with Monday expected to be the first opportunity for ministers to consider whether changes are needed beyond the existing plan B measures.

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Justin Welby

Justin Welby sermon: Covid makes all of us face unpredictability

Archbishop of Canterbury says pandemic has shown our capacity for compassion and generosity

- [Coronavirus – latest updates](#)
- [See all our coronavirus coverage](#)



The Archbishop of Canterbury praised those who have rescued refugees crossing the Channel. Photograph: Ken McKay/ITV/Rex/Shutterstock

*[Harriet Sherwood](#)
[@harrietsherwood](#)*

Sat 25 Dec 2021 02.00 EST

Everyone in society, from Cabinet ministers to rough sleepers, has faced “uncertainty, uncontrollability and unpredictability” during the Covid pandemic, the archbishop of Canterbury has said in his [Christmas](#) sermon.

Justin Welby, who led the Christmas Day service at Canterbury Cathedral, added that the past 22 months has also shown people’s capacity for compassion and generosity.

In particular, he praised those who have rescued refugees crossing the Channel to reach the UK, and volunteers who have welcomed and cared for people seeking a new life.

He told the congregation: “As a nation we have been … faced collectively as never before with our limits – our fragility, the contingency of life and our mortality. Millions have faced suffering and loss.

[UK](#)

“We all face uncertainty, uncontrollability and unpredictability, from Sage and Cabinet to each one of us, from huge companies to those sleeping rough.

But, added: “There is no doubting our human capacity to solve problems and show great kindness. I’m sure the deputy lord lieutenant going around Kent has been inspired over the last year with what volunteers do.

“There have been the volunteers who have been on my mind, welcoming and caring for refugees arriving on the beaches so close to this cathedral. Those volunteers are extraordinary people, especially the crews of the RNLI. I saw them the other day, just getting on with it – five times as many callouts as they’ve ever had in the history of the Dover lifeboat, and they do one thing – save life at sea.

“It’s not politics, it’s simply humanity.

“And volunteers today in food banks and other places of comfort and help show this country as it should be, at its best, as we dream of it to be: a beautiful sign of compassion, of generosity, of living out that saying ‘it’s not about me’.”

The Christmas story, he said, “shows us how we must treat those who are unlike us, who have far less than us, who have lived with the devastating limits of war and national tragedy – those who risk everything to arrive on the beaches, who suffer want and poor housing, little food, endless worry, health injustice, all over this, our country”.

People had been wondering for months whether Christmas would be “saved” amid the continuing pandemic and the Omicron variant of Covid, he said. “But let’s get this straight – it’s not we who save Christmas, it’s Christmas that saves us. We cannot save ourselves. But God can – the gift of salvation is not just offered to some people, but to all,” the archbishop said.

Some churches cancelled Christmas Eve and carol services this year amid worries about Covid infections, despite there being no government restrictions on indoor gatherings.

The Church of England launched its first virtual reality carol service aimed at people unable or unwilling to attend a service in person.

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2021.12.25 - Spotlight

- Escape your comfort zone : My voyage through the foods I've avidly avoided – from baked beans to Marmite
- The food quiz of the year From Salt Bae to Colin the Caterpillar
- Sean Bean on Time, makeup and his trans role ‘If I did it today, there’d be an uproar’
- Richard Jenkins ‘If a serial killer is your son, do you stop loving him?’

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[Escape your comfort zone!Food](#)

Escape your comfort zone: My voyage through the foods I've avidly avoided – from baked beans to Marmite



‘I’m not ready for Marmite’ ... Tim Dowling. Photograph: Suki Dhanda/The Guardian

Despite living in the UK for more than 30 years, there are a handful of popular staples I have doggedly refused to eat. So I take the plunge with prawn cocktail crisps



[Tim Dowling](#)

[@IAmTimDowling](#)

Sat 25 Dec 2021 04.00 EST

I like to think I have an adventurous palate. I eat many things that commonly upset people – shellfish, snails, coriander – without complaint. I don't have any allergies and I am highly lactose tolerant.

As an American who has lived in the UK for 30 years, I can only think of a few British foodstuffs I won't touch, among them baked beans, Marmite and prawn cocktail crisps. But can I really consider myself adventurous if I'm not willing to give these three a go?

Most of the online advice on overcoming food aversions is aimed at toddlers, and what's left is for people who dislike certain tastes. That doesn't apply here, because I've never actually tried any of these things. I'm averse to what I imagine they must taste like. When it comes to Marmite, my

imagination runs wild; I don't even like being in the same room as an open jar of it.

Anyway, I'm not ready for Marmite; I'm starting with the crisps, as a warmup. I have tasted many horrible crisp flavours in my time, but when I first came to London in 1990, prawn cocktail was a line I chose not to cross.

This time round, after sourcing a bag, I spend a few minutes staring into an open packet and wrinkling my nose. Reluctantly, I put one in my mouth.

A little shudder goes through my frame. The taste is nothing like what I had imagined all these years. There's nothing fishy about it; the flavour is just a synthetic approximation of prawn cocktail sauce, and if that still doesn't taste right to me it's because cocktail sauce is generally different in the US – a combination of ketchup and horseradish, rather than ketchup, mayo and tabasco.

Even so, the crisps are off-putting in a mildly addictive way – I pull a face every time I eat one, but still I finish the packet. To be honest, I think I would choose them over salt and vinegar, but it would be a dark day if those were the only two options.

My aversion to baked beans may seem odd – they're originally American, after all. The canned variety were first imported to Britain in 1886, when they were sold exclusively by Fortnum & Mason. It may be this perverse association with luxury that drives British people to persist with them. When I was growing up, we always had a can of baked beans in the cupboard, where it remained unopened.

I don't even really know how to cook them. I have seen my wife prepare beans on toast hundreds of times, without ever observing the process closely.

"Does this look legit?" I say, showing her a white plate with two artfully arranged slices of white toast despoiled by a puddle of cold baked beans.

"Stop making a fuss and just try them," she says.

"I'm not eating these," I say. "These are just for the photograph."

An hour's proximity to the beans while my picture is taken does nothing to whet my appetite, but it does take the edge off my phobia. That afternoon, I heat up a new batch and serve them to myself on much nicer bread. Then I try to convince myself I'm really, really hungry.

Although I have never had them before, there is something wholly familiar about baked beans: that sickly sweetness, that sour note of regret. They taste of old oilcloth and indelible stains. They taste like the clocks going back. I eat about half of them before I am overcome by melancholy. Later my wife finishes the rest of the tin, with joy.

A week goes by, then another. Every morning I wake up thinking: today is the day you eat Marmite. And every day I find some excuse for putting it off.

Time runs out. On the appointed day I rise early and go down to the kitchen at dawn so I can be alone with this challenge. I am not hoping for the best; [Marmite's own marketing campaign](#) is based on the idea that it divides opinion. How surprisingly good could it be?

Eventually, I sit down, open a brand new jar and spread the stuff in a thin layer – as thinly as possible, my wife has instructed – on buttered toast. There is something alarming about the brown gunk's refusal to part from the knife. I look away, like you do when you're having an injection. Then I pick up a piece of toast and bite down on it.

The shock of it causes me to stand up. It's unbelievably salty – saltier than salt. Underneath that is what I can only describe as a taste of concern: brown and faintly automotive. I walk around the table in circles while trying to swallow the stuff away. How it clings!

On my third circuit of the table it occurs to me that I need to eat more than one bite; maybe it gets easier with repeated exposure, like cigarettes. But the second time is exactly the same; the skin around my temples tightens. My brain can't believe I have repeated this experience voluntarily.

After 30 years of unquestioning avoidance, I have experienced three new tastes I can now never untaste. I can't claim it has enhanced my appreciation

of the British palate, although regular consumers of Marmite have acquired my profound respect: you people really fear nothing.

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2021/dec/25/escape-your-comfort-zone-my-voyage-through-the-foods-i've-avidly-avoided-from-baked-beans-to-marmite>

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The food quiz of the year: from Salt Bae to Colin the Caterpillar



Composite: Guardian/AFP/Getty Images/Alamy/PA

How much gourmand gossip did you absorb?

[Tim Jonze](#)

[@timjonze](#)

Sat 25 Dec 2021 03.00 EST

1.In January, 12 bottles of fine French wine completed 400 days of bottle ageing in what unique way?

They were buried 500 metres underground

They were flown to the International Space Station and back

They were placed inside the Large Hadron Collider at Cern

They were rested on the Atlantic seabed

2.The New York Times managed to enrage the entire nation of Italy in February by putting what in its recipe for carbonara?



Tomatoes

Cream

Sugar

Vegan eggs

3.2021 was the year of performance artist Salt Bae's most spectacular work yet. But which stunt listed here is entirely made up?



Charging people £360 for some bits of meat and white baguette covered in hot oil

Selling a gold-coated rack of lamb for £500

Adding £100 to your bill for a personal performance of salt sprinkling at your table

Expecting people to pay £11 for a solitary can of Red Bull energy drink.

4.“It’s my signature dish … the nicest food in the world, surprisingly lovely, gorgeous.” But what was Russell T Davies talking about on Grace Dent’s Comfort Eating podcast?

Pasta with cheese and Marmite

Rice with butter and pepper

Chocolate spread toasties

Ready salted crisps with Worcestershire sauce shaken inside.

5.Colin the Caterpillar became the first anthropomorphic chocolate log to sue a supermarket in April when his makers, M&S, lodged an intellectual property claim against Aldi. But what was the budget store’s caterpillar called?



Clyde
Christopher
Colyn
Cuthbert

6. The World Marmalade awards is never anything but special, of course. But what was especially special about this year's event?

There were no seville oranges available due to supply chain issues

A nine-year-old girl was declared the winner

The winning effort was found to be not technically marmalade

Salt Bae was on the judging panel

7. Jane Austen's "household book", written between 1798 and 1830, was discovered this year. Which of the following tasty morsels did it contain?

A recipe for her favourite cheese toastie

The diets of several key characters from her novels

An early version of what we now call the Atkins diet

A list of sweet treats banned from the home

8. Rightwing pundits in the US remained reliably sane this year by claiming Joe Biden wanted to ban what?



Beer

Bulgar wheat

Beautiful waiting staff

Burgers

9. McDonald's started serving what in the UK this year?



A burger covered in gold leaf for £12

Its first ever vegan burger

Burgers with cheese injected directly into the meat

Milkshakes made without dairy produce

10.What did Conservative MP Chris Loder describe this year as being in Britain’s “mid- and long-term interests”?



A lack of food on supermarket shelves

A shortage of waiting staff from EU countries

The effects of the climate crisis on wine-producing regions

The prime minister revealing his new diet regime

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Interview

Sean Bean on Time, makeup and his trans role: ‘If I did it today, there’d be an uproar’

[Mark Lawson](#)



‘I had to look like someone who’s exhausted and in shock. It wasn’t too hard!’ ... Sean Bean in Time. Photograph: James Stack/BBC

In Time, the actor known as Game of Thrones’ Ned Stark had to show the terrors of prison ... mostly by sitting in silence. He talks religion, looking rough – and the role he played that would not be made now



Sat 25 Dec 2021 03.00 EST

Across three Sunday nights last summer, Sean Bean was remarkable. BBC One’s Time saw him play a teacher jailed for killing someone while drunk-driving. With Jimmy McGovern’s script often leaving him silent and alone in his cell, he [painted an astonishingly affecting portrait](#) of the regret and terror of a previously respected professional banged up with veteran criminals – and he frequently did so using expressions alone.

How is it to try to grab the audience entirely through looks? “As you get older, it’s sometimes a bit easier!” says Bean, 62, with a laugh. “When I started out, I used to count up how many lines I had and want some more. Now, it’s: ‘Oh, fuck, do I have to remember all that?’ So I don’t mind silence.”

Is it not technically harder to convey everything facially, though? “Yeah, it is,” says Bean. “But if the character is alone, it’s about trying to think what they are thinking. You can draw on situations in which you have felt alone, or sad, or nervous. That can be uncomfortable, but it gets you to the truth.”

As well as fewer lines to learn, Time also allowed Bean to reach the makeup trailer later. As a leading man, his time before shooting is usually spent trying to look as good as possible. Here, he needed to look rough.

“It’s not as if I didn’t have to do anything. I shaved each day but aimed to get the effect of someone using a cheap razor in a little cracked mirror in their cell,” he says. “You do have to wear some makeup or you look a different texture from everyone else. But I put on the bare minimum, nothing too flattering. You want to look like someone who’s exhausted and in shock. That wasn’t too difficult some mornings!”

Bean deliberately chose not to speak to any prisoners as part of his preparation for playing Mark Cobden – who is often the only person on his wing experiencing incarceration for the first time. “I wanted the locations – the cells, corridors, exercise yard – to be new and shocking to me, as they are to him. I wanted just to react to what was around me,” he says.



‘I used to count up my lines and want more. Now, it’s: “Oh, fuck, I have to remember all that?”’... Bean with Stephen Graham in Time. Photograph: James Stack/BBC

The drama intercuts the experiences of Cobden and Eric McNally, his supervising prison officer, played by Stephen Graham. Their scenes together are acting as grand slam final tennis, each participant judging whether to match the pace of the other player or change it. Watching Time called to mind theatrical experiments in which actors have swapped the main parts in a play on alternate nights – the king and Bolingbroke in Shakespeare’s Richard II, the brothers in Sam Shepard’s True West – and I fantasised about seeing the drama with Bean as the prison officer and Graham as the inmate. Was the casting ever up for discussion? “It was always me for Mark and him for Eric. But it would be really interesting. You should ask Jimmy about remaking it that way.”

Four years ago, in another McGovern drama, [Broken](#), Bean played Father Michael Kerrigan, a Merseyside Catholic priest forced to double as a sort of social worker because of state and council cuts. Time and Broken are linked by Mark and Michael having been baptised into the same faith: Michael is a Catholic believer who struggles with doubts, while Mark has lost his faith but is tempted by a prison chaplain to lapse from atheism.

Bean, who grew up in a practising Catholic family in Sheffield but was deemed “too out there” as a child to be encouraged towards the priesthood (as McGovern was), says: “The church offers Mark a lifeline. Jimmy McGovern claims not to believe in religion, but Catholicism is a thread in his work. In Time and Broken, there’s a tension between what the characters say they believe or don’t believe and what they actually think.”

Where Father Michael is seen by society as a good guy and Mark Cobden as a bad man, the truth is far more complex. “They’re both very self-critical, and a mix of fallibilities and good qualities,” says Bean. “That ambiguity is what makes Jimmy’s characters so rich. And we’re all like that, aren’t we? We all like to think we have mostly good bits with a few bad bits – but others may think we have more downs than ups.”

Time was his third primetime BBC collaboration with McGovern. Before Broken, there was 2012's Tracie's Story, which gave Bean his boldest screen role. Known as an action actor – the titular 19th-century soldier in ITV's Sharpe, Ned Stark in Game of Thrones – he played, in blond wig and false breasts, Tracie, the trans alter ego of an English teacher.



'It seems such a shame if actors can't play a range of parts' ... Bean in Accused: Tracie's Story. Photograph: BBC

There are increasing calls for authentic casting, in which the identities of actor and character match. But for McGovern alone, Bean has played a priest, a prisoner and a transexual, none of which he has been. Would he defend pretence?

"I think so. I come from a generation that started in repertory theatre, playing a different role each week. The aim was to play as many parts as possible. Whereas there's a tendency now to argue that characters can only be played by someone like them," says Bean. "I think that is restrictive and counterproductive. We risk getting into a situation where drama is dictated more by which boxes are ticked than the story being told. I often think that, if I did Tracie's Story today, there'd be an uproar. I have a feeling it would be questioned and wouldn't even be made, but it's one of the roles I'm proudest of. It seems such a shame if actors can't play a range of parts."

While in Time, Broken and Tracie's Story, Bean was unable to draw on personal experience, the four-part BBC drama he is shooting with Nicola Walker – written and directed by Stefan Golaszewski, who made the BBC Two hit Mum – is called Marriage. Is it painful or useful that Bean is currently on his fifth?

“Well,” he laughs, “the show is about a longterm, 27-year marriage, which isn’t something I know about.” His lengthiest stretch of matrimony so far is seven years. “It’s about the small things that happen in a marriage, how you stay together. There are *really* few words in this. It’s all in the silences and pauses. So it’s another very different shift for me, which is what I like.”

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from <https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2021/dec/25/sean-bean-on-time-makeup-and-his-trans-role-if-i-did-it-today-there'd-be-an-uproar>

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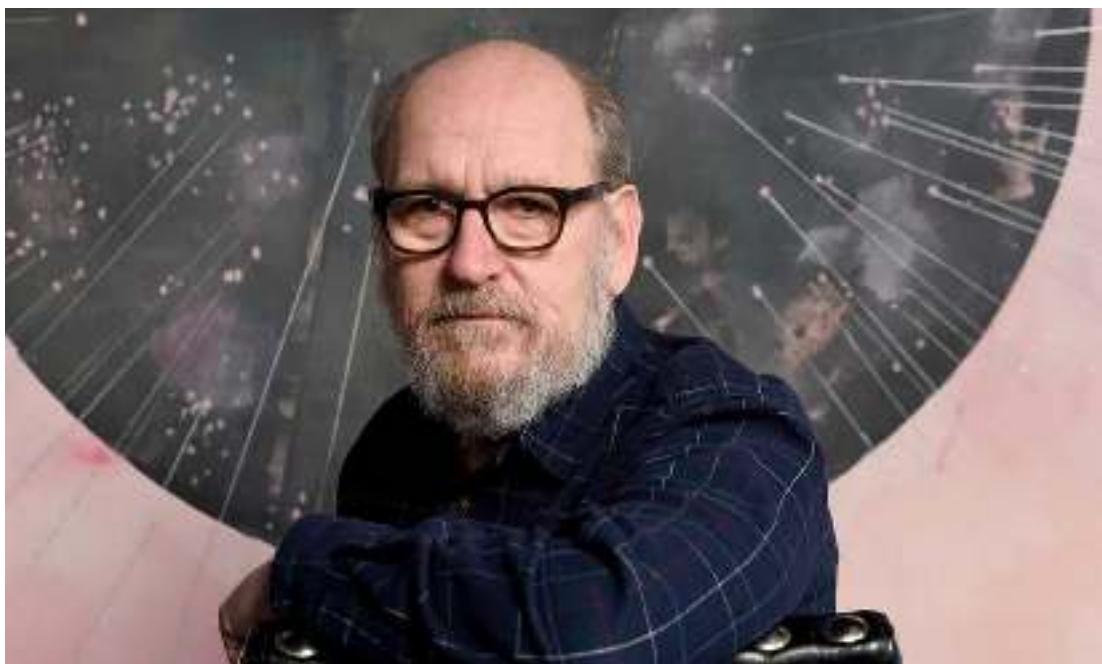
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Interview

Richard Jenkins: ‘If a serial killer is your son, do you stop loving him?’

[Jonathan Romney](#)



Richard Jenkins. Photograph: Fred Hayes/Getty Images

The Six Feet Under actor on challenging roles, working with Guillermo del Toro and being recognised at funerals

Sat 25 Dec 2021 04.30 EST

American actor Richard Jenkins, 74, has been a screen regular since the 70s, but his big breakthrough came in 2001 playing deceased funeral director Nathaniel Fisher in the TV series *Six Feet Under*. He went on to receive an Oscar nomination for best actor in *The Visitor* (2007) and won an Emmy in 2015 for his role in the drama series *Olive Kitteridge*. Jenkins has worked with directors including Woody Allen, Kathryn Bigelow, the Coens and Mike Nichols, and next month can be seen in Guillermo del Toro's *Nightmare Alley*. His latest project is playwright Stephen Karam's film of his own one-act play *The Humans* – set in a newly rented, unfurnished apartment in New York's Chinatown – in which Jenkins plays a man contemplating the state of his life at a family Thanksgiving.

You live in Providence, Rhode Island, where you've worked a lot in theatre, right?

I'm from Illinois, but I've been out here for 50-some years. I was a member of the acting company here for 14 seasons, and later I ran it for four seasons. My wife [Sharon R Friedrick] is a choreographer, and we still direct and choreograph some stuff there. We rethink musicals, like *Oliver!* and *Oklahoma!*. We love working together. When I directed alone, it was in your own head, but when you're doing it with someone else, you talk about it for months before you even start rehearsals. It's really wonderful.

And did your wife get you into dancing?

That's where we met, dancing in college. We were doing the Garden of Eden Ballet in *Can-Can* – I was the snake and she was Eve.

I was at a real funeral once, and somebody tapped me on the shoulder and said: 'Are they filming this?'

***The Humans* is deeply unsettling, with an incredibly claustrophobic labyrinth of a set.**

I think the world is closing in on my character, Erik. There's a fear of losing his family – the one thing that he could count on his whole life, the one thing that sustained him. Because of what he did [in his past], he could lose all that. It's more terrifying than any supernatural being or ghost or horror film.

You're part of an extraordinary ensemble cast: Amy Schumer, Beanie Feldstein, Steven Yeun and, a less familiar name to cinemagoers, Jayne Houdyshell.

She's incredible, isn't she? She did the play of *Humans* 600 times but she accepted us as her family immediately. Being in that apartment for a month, you either became friends or enemies; we became a group of six friends, really close.

What is it about Thanksgiving that makes it come across in films as the most traumatic experience possible?

Well, it forces you to be there with one another. Some people refuse to go. I've been fortunate, I always look forward to them. There are no gifts, you just go and sometimes you see someone you haven't seen in a while. It is brutal if the relationships are strange and there are differences. You all go your separate ways and say: "Oh my God – but next year we're going to go back and try to do it again." In that sense, it's hopeful to me.

[Watch a trailer for The Humans.](#)

In *Nightmare Alley* you play a man named Ezra Grindle. He's extremely wealthy, dangerous, haunted by the past – and has a fearsome beard.

Yeah, *that* was a beard. That was me – the hair wasn't, but the beard was. It was longer because of Covid, because we stopped shooting. I had one more scene to do and they pulled the plug in March. Nine months later I went back, so I had to trim the beard, it was loooooong.

This is your second film with Guillermo del Toro, following 2017's *The Shape of Water*.

He's eternally fascinating. I remember when I walked into *The Shape of Water*, into my character's apartment, for the first time. Sally [Hawkins]'s was next to mine, hers was in blues and greens, mine was in browns and reds, everything was natural in it, paints and books and televisions, but

nothing was real – it was a piece of art. I thought: “Is this what it was like to work with the great masters in the 40s?”

I hear Michael Caine was one of your influences when you started out...

Sometimes movies come along when you need them. I wasn't sure of acting, if I had any talent, I just didn't know. I was in college at the time and I saw *Alfie*. I was mesmerised. I thought: “Yes, I want to be an actor, that's who I am.” Michael Caine came along when I needed and said: “Go ahead.” I've never met him but I think he's amazing.

People must have really started to recognise you as the dead undertaker in *Six Feet Under*.

I was at a real funeral once, and somebody tapped me on the shoulder and said: “Are they filming this?” I met a woman at an airport and she was crying. She said: “Why did you stop that series? Why is this over?” People were passionate about it.



Clockwise from top left: Richard Jenkins, Lauren Ambrose, Peter Krause, Michael C Hall and Frances Conroy in *Six Feet Under*. Photograph: Art Streiber/AP

After that show, you must have been offered a lot of roles as careworn fathers.

Even though I've played a father a few times, it's not the same father. My father was a real worrier, and my mother didn't worry about anything. I'm a bit of a doom-and-gloomer myself. When I read *The Humans*, I thought, I just want to play Erik, I understand this man.

And next we'll see you in a TV series as the serial killer Jeffrey Dahmer's father.

It's a Ryan Murphy project for Netflix. Ryan used to be a journalist and it's really thorough: an investigation not just of Dahmer, but the damage that he caused, to the victims and their families – and to his parents. It was emotionally hard. The question for me was: if Jeffrey Dahmer is your son, do you stop loving him? And the answer's no, you just don't.

How was 2021 for you?

It's been... interesting. Like everybody, I feel like I'm still wrapped in a big ball that I can't get out of – but it's been good, I've been spending time with my family and that's always great.

And your hopes for 2022?

That I make it to 2023! One of the things I love about what I do is that you just don't know what's around the corner. It could be nothing, it could be pain and agony – or it could be something really cool. I hope we can get out of this pandemic. I worry about the arts. How about this: I hope it's better.

The Humans is released on 31 December

Nightmare Alley is in cinemas on 21 January

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2021/dec/25/richard-jenkins-interview-nightmare-alley-the-humans-six-feet-under>

2021.12.25 - Coronavirus

- Coronavirus Decision on stricter rules for England may come on Monday
- NHS Leaders alarmed by rise in admissions as cases hit record
- Omicron Cold-like symptoms mean UK guidance ‘needs update’
- Vaccines Government plans UK-wide booster alert to phones

Coronavirus

Decision on stricter Covid rules for England may come on Monday

Ministers expected to assess latest data given to Sage and decide on possible return to step 2 restrictions

- [Coronavirus – latest updates](#)
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Travellers wait at Euston station in London on Christmas Eve as data showed one in 35 people in England had Covid last week. Photograph: Andy Rain/EPA

Jessica Elgot Chief political correspondent
[@jessicaelgot](https://twitter.com/jessicaelgot)

Fri 24 Dec 2021 12.01 EST

Ministers could meet as soon as Monday to determine whether new restrictions are needed in [England](#) over the new year amid growing concerns that soaring Covid cases could hit public services.

They will be expected to assess new modelling from the University of Warwick, given to the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (Sage) in documents published on Thursday.

Scientists have looked at the [effects of a potential return to step 2 restrictions](#) from 28 December or 1 January, lasting either two weeks, four weeks or three months until 28 March. No 10 said the data had not yet been considered by ministers.

Step 2 – part of last year's roadmap – includes a ban on indoor social mixing, a return of the rule of six, and bars and restaurants only able to serve outdoors.

It comes as new ONS figures showed one in 35 people in England had Covid last week, with 1.7 million people testing positive across the UK. No 10 said officials would continue reviewing the latest hospital data over Christmas but that ministers would not meet again until Monday at the earliest.

“We are worried about workplace resilience,” one government source said. “That’s a key reason to [reduce the isolation days](#) [from 10 to seven] but a decision will have to be taken in the round, taking in hospitalisations and severe illness, which should be clearer over the weekend.”

A Whitehall source said any restrictions based on workplace concerns would probably be targeted at sectors rather than being broadbrush but ministers had not ruled out legal guidance coming in next week.

The government’s Covid-O committee, which has been focused on the functioning of services and workplace absences, is expected to review the situation again after the Christmas weekend.

Pat Cullen, head of the Royal College of Nursing, told the BBC there was a “very, very depleted workforce” due to the number of staff forced into

isolation.

Dr Jenny Harries, the head of UK [Health](#) Security Agency, said there were a number of factors as well as the variant's severity, that would be taken into account when ministers convene after the Christmas weekend to discuss further restrictions for England.

Despite the soaring cases, hopes have been raised that new restrictions could be avoided after analysis showing the risk of hospitalisation is up to 70% less for people with Omicron compared with those infected with Delta, [according to the first UK government study](#) of its kind.

Harries said ministers would need to take a holistic approach about how widespread the impact of case rates was on essential services – as well as numbers being hospitalised.

“Ministers will look at all of the data that we have available – and that isn’t simply what the epidemiology is saying, it’s how it’s impacting society,” she told the BBC.

“So, for example, we have very high rates of individuals off sick – we know that particularly in London, around one in 35 have currently got Omicron. Now that’s having an impact on the workforce. So these are not simply about hospitalisation rates.”

She added that ministers are being kept updated daily and that will continue throughout the Christmas period. “I don’t think we do know yet that this is going to be a significantly less serious disease for the population – the older population – that we are normally most concerned about in relation to serious disease and death.”

The Sage documents found “an apparent slowing of growth rates” which could be linked to self-policing of behaviour. But the papers said there were still “doubling times in most of the country … in the region of two to three days and, importantly, test positivity rates are still rising.”

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Coronavirus

NHS leaders alarmed by rise in hospital admissions as Covid cases hit record

Daily hospitalisations in England up by more than 40% in a week at same time as more staff on sick leave



Many people in the UK are being forced to spend Christmas self-isolating at home, with the worst Covid figures in London and the lowest in the north-east. Photograph: mirzavis/Alamy

[Jane Clinton](#) and [Denis Campbell](#)

Fri 24 Dec 2021 14.56 EST

NHS leaders have voiced alarm at a major rise in the number of hospitalisations due to Covid-19 after 1,171 people with the disease across the UK were admitted in a 24-hour period that set another record number of daily cases.

The latest government figures showed 122,186 cases of coronavirus had been recorded as of 9am on Friday. Another 137 people died within 28 days of testing positive.

Matthew Taylor, the chief executive of the NHS Confederation, said: “Daily hospital admissions with Covid have gone up by over 40% in the last week in [England](#) [from 815 to 1,098] and this is really worrying for health leaders whose teams are working flat out in the context of rising staff absences and wider pressures.”

He urged the public to behave cautiously and accept invitations to get vaccinated as, despite studies showing that the new [Omicron variant](#) is less likely to leave people infected seriously unwell, “this virus presents a very real risk to daily life and to the NHS.”

NHS Providers, another hospital body, warned that the number of people hospitalised in London had doubled in the space of a week.

“The number of Covid-19 patients in hospital is increasing – by 4% overnight in England and 8% in London,” said Chris Hopson, its chief executive. “The overall number of Covid patients in hospital in London, the current epicentre of Omicron, is now nearly 30% of the levels we saw in the January 2021 peak, up from 15% a week ago.”

The NHS is already facing a number of other pressures, including high demand for A&E care, staff delivering Covid booster vaccines, major shortages of frontline personnel and growing numbers of workers off sick due to the virus, he added.

Family gatherings over the festive period are likely to result in more older people becoming ill with Omicron, he cautioned.

“The need to see what happens as larger numbers of older people start to be infected with the new variant. It is likely the number of older people catching Omicron will increase given the amount of inter-generational contact over the next 72 hours of Christmas.”

Meanwhile, data has emerged showing Covid infection levels have reached a new record high. An estimated 1.7 million people in the UK had Covid-19 in the week ending 19 December, the highest number since comparable figures began in autumn 2020, the Office for National Statistics (ONS) said.

The interim data, published on Friday, also showed that about one in 35 people in private homes in England had Covid in the week to 19 December, up from one in 45 in the seven days to 16 December.

This is the highest estimate for England since the ONS began estimating community infection levels for England in May 2020, and is equivalent to about 1.5 million people.

In London that rose to about one in 20 people likely to test positive for Covid-19, the highest proportion for any region in England, the ONS said. North-east England had the lowest proportion, at about one in 55.

The ONS also said that Covid infections compatible with [the Omicron variant](#) had increased in all regions in England with “substantial regional variation”, again with the highest rates in London and the lowest in the north-east.

Sir Ian Diamond, the UK’s national statistician, told the BBC the “sobering” figures showed “really big increases” in Covid cases, with London “clearly the epicentre of the Omicron epidemic”, with numbers going up “really steeply”. He added: “There are increases right across England, with the slight exception of the south-west, increases in Wales and Northern Ireland, and Scotland has gone up just a little bit.”

There were some indications of people engaging in “safer behaviour” in response to the Omicron wave, he said, but he remained cautious. “At the moment I think it’s far too early to suggest that we will see anything other than a continued rise.”

In Wales, around one in 45 people were estimated to have had Covid-19 in the week to 19 December, slightly below the record of one in 40 in October.

In Northern Ireland, the latest estimate was one in 40, equalling the record from mid-August, while in Scotland the latest estimate was one in 65, below September's peak of one in 45.

The latest figures come after UK [Health](#) Security Agency chief executive, Dr Jenny Harries, said data suggesting Omicron may be less likely to lead to serious illness than the Delta variant of coronavirus offers a “glimmer of Christmas hope”. The UKHSA estimates that someone with Omicron is 31%-45% less likely to attend A&E and 50%-70% less likely to be admitted to hospital than an individual with the Delta variant.

But Harries said it was too early to downgrade the threat from the new strain and more information was needed, in particular about the impact it had on elderly and more vulnerable patients.

There will be no statistics on coronavirus cases or vaccinations on 25 and 26 December. Daily reporting will resume on Monday 27 December.

On Thursday, as of 9am, 119,789 lab-confirmed Covid-19 cases were recorded in the UK, the government said.

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/dec/24/uk-hits-new-covid-record-again-more-than-120000-cases-recorded>

Omicron variant

Omicron's cold-like symptoms mean UK guidance 'needs urgent update'

Lead scientist on Zoe Covid study says 'misinformation' in official messaging must be addressed to save lives

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Only about half of Covid-positive users of the Zoe app are now reporting the classic three symptoms of fever, cough, or loss of sense of smell or taste.
Photograph: Yelizaveta Tomashevskaya/Alamy

[Richard Adams](#)

Fri 24 Dec 2021 09.18 EST

The most widespread symptoms of the [Omicron variant](#) now match those of common colds, with calls for the government to update its public health messaging to include a wider number of likely Covid symptoms.

The most common symptoms reported among users of the [Zoe Covid app](#) have been a running nose, headaches, fatigue, sneezing and sore throats, according to the study's most recent analysis of confirmed cases in London.

Half of those reporting cold-like symptoms also tested positive for Covid, with no clear difference in the symptoms reported for Delta or Omicron infections. But only about half of infected users also reported the “classic three symptoms of fever, cough, or loss of sense of smell or taste”, according to the Zoe analysis.

The Zoe analysis was supported by the Sage committee of scientific advisers at a [meeting held on Thursday](#). The committee said there was “preliminary evidence” of changes in symptoms accompanying Omicron infections, as loss of taste or smell “seem to be reported less frequently”.

Prof Tim Spector, lead scientist on the Zoe Covid study, said public messaging needed to acknowledge that Covid symptoms would appear more like a common cold to many of those infected.

Spector said he was shocked by what he called “misinformation” in the government’s latest stay-at-home guidance about the symptoms of Covid.

“Zoe data clearly shows that the most important symptoms are no longer a new continuous cough, a high temperature or loss of taste or smell.

“For most people, an Omicron positive case will feel much more like the common cold, starting with a sore throat, runny nose and a headache. You only need to ask a friend who has recently tested positive to find this out,” Spector, a professor of genetic epidemiology at King’s College London, told the PA news agency.

“We need to change public messaging urgently to save lives as half of people with cold-like symptoms now have Covid.”

The [NHS website](#) currently lists the “main symptoms of coronavirus” as a high temperature; a new, continuous cough including coughing a lot for more than an hour; a loss or change to your sense of smell or taste. It advises people with any of the three symptoms to get a PCR test as soon as possible and self-isolate.

Peter Openshaw, professor of experimental medicine at Imperial College London speaking in a personal capacity, said there was evidence that the virus was changing the way it behaved, in terms of cells that it infected, leading to changing symptoms.

Recent data, including a [study from Hong Kong](#), found that Omicron was less able to infect deep lung tissue but more able to infect higher bronchial tissue.

“It appears to be shifting towards a virus that infects higher up in the respiratory tract and is therefore adapting to be more transmissible partly because it is changing the cell types it infects,” Openshaw said.

“That would go along with it producing more common-cold-like symptoms. Those laboratory studies support what the Zoe app is telling us.”

Openshaw said it would be “sensible” to update the list of Covid symptoms: “The semi-lockdown has been terrible for colds, they are struggling to survive. So if you have a cold at the moment, there’s about a 50% chance that it is actually Covid.”

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/dec/24/omicron-covid-symptoms-uk-guidance-zoe-study>.

[Coronavirus](#)

Government to send UK-wide Covid booster alert to mobile phones

Exclusive: major network operators asked to send Boxing Day message despite fears of anti-vaxxer backlash

- [Coronavirus – latest updates](#)
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A man is vaccinated at a pop-up clinic at a Bradford restaurant. The message on booster jabs is likely to be sent on behalf of the NHS. Photograph: Lindsey Parnaby/AFP/Getty Images

[Mark Sweeney](#)

[@marksweeney](#)

Fri 24 Dec 2021 07.44 EST

The government will send out a UK-wide mobile alert urging the public to get a Covid booster, a move mobile operators fear could spark a backlash from customers opposed to vaccinations.

The UK's biggest mobile operators – EE, O2, Vodafone and Three UK – have been asked by the government to send a message on Boxing Day.

The campaign will involve mobile operators sending a message on behalf of the government to their tens of millions of customers. The message is likely to be on behalf of the [NHS](#), with the text encouraging all adults to get an additional vaccination.

The proposed copy of the text message will say: “Get boosted now. Every adult needs a Covid-19 booster vaccine to protect against Omicron. Get your Covid-19 vaccine or booster. See NHS website for details.”

It is understood that the mobile operators will all enable the message to be sent, but some are agreeing with reluctance given the highly politicised nature of the vaccination programme.

“Operators feel a little nervous about angering some customers because it is such a heated issue,” a telecoms industry source said. “We will make it happen, but don’t want those who don’t agree with the message to blame us.”

Earlier this month, Tesco’s festive TV campaign featuring Santa Claus bearing a Covid vaccine passport was cleared by the UK ad watchdog, despite anti-vaccination campaigners making it the [second-most complained about advert of all time](#).

The government confirmed that the national text alert will be going ahead on Boxing Day.

“We are texting this Boxing Day for all eligible adults to get boosted now,” said Sajid Javid, the health and social care secretary. “It has never been as important to get protected with the booster – so whether it is in between

turkey sandwiches or before the Boxing Day fixtures, whatever your traditions make the booster a part of them this year.

“Millions of vaccine slots are available through the festive calendar so if you’re not boosted and you get this text, take up the offer and get vaccinated.”

Last March, at the beginning of the pandemic, the government used mobile operators to send a message regarding support of the NHS and offering general coronavirus health advice.

It is understood that the government plan will not use the nationwide mobile emergency alert system, set up to send targeted information in cases of events such as floods. If it goes ahead, the message will instead be sent by operators separately.

In October, the government launched a nationwide advertising campaign encouraging people to take up Covid-19 booster jabs.

The push comes as [Boris Johnson](#) used his Christmas message on Friday to tell the public to give the “wonderful” gift of a booster jab to their families this year.

Johnson admitted that after nearly two years it was not possible to say the pandemic was receding, as the UK reported a record 120,000 new coronavirus cases on Thursday.

In the speech, Johnson said: “Though the time for buying presents is theoretically running out, there is still a wonderful thing you can give your family and the whole country, and that is to get that jab, whether it is your first or second, or your booster, so that next year’s festivities are even better than this year’s.”

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The government decided against implementing further Covid restrictions before Christmas, but could meet as early as Monday to decide on whether restrictions would be needed in England over the new year period.

On Thursday, the latest analysis by the UK [Health](#) Security Agency suggested that Omicron is milder than past Covid variants such as Delta, with 50%-70% of people less likely to be admitted to hospital. However, data also showed that protection from a booster starts to wane after 10 weeks.

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/dec/24/government-plans-uk-wide-covid-booster-alert-to-mobile-phones>

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OpinionCoronavirus

In spite of Omicron, Britain's schools must remain open

[Devi Sridhar](#)

Home schooling harms children. And we now have the knowhow and tools to mitigate the risks from Covid



‘Instead of closing schools, we need to focus on improving the protections we now have: better vaccination coverage, ventilation and filtration of the air, and identifying infectious individuals with rapid testing.’ Photograph: John Birdsall/Alamy

Fri 24 Dec 2021 10.00 EST

We still don’t know how severe the Omicron wave will be, and debates are raging about closing nightclubs, alcohol curfews and work-from-home guidance. It can sometimes feel like last Christmas all over again. But one

decision should be clear. Given the tools and knowledge we have now, school closures should be off the table.

Why were schools closed at all in previous lockdowns? [The best approach was to minimise risk](#), given the limited knowledge about Covid-19 transmission and with no vaccination available to protect against severe health outcomes and death. Concerns about many different groups factored into policy decisions on schools.

The first concern was the risk to teachers and school workers such as cleaners and security guards being in an environment where they could contract Covid-19 during their working day. Then there was risk to family members, particularly grandparents and vulnerable parents, of children first contracting Covid-19 at school and then bringing it home to their households. There was also the risk to children themselves of contracting Covid-19 at school; the concern for children was less about severe outcomes and death, and more about long Covid and potential long-term health impacts.

The final concern was modelling data that suggested that schools being open led to wider overall societal mixing, and a greater number of contacts per person, which could increase the R number and drive exponential growth in transmission levels. But vaccines, testing and knowledge on how to manage Covid-19 transmission have radically altered all of the previous considerations.

We now have safe vaccines that are effective at reducing the severe health outcomes of Covid-19, especially with boosters for over-18s. It is positive news that the [JCVI has supported vaccinating at-risk children](#) aged between five and 11 and those living with immunocompromised people. However, the UK is again out of line with other countries, many of which opened up vaccination to all children in that age group some months ago.

We know that we can reduce transmission in indoor settings such as schools through good ventilation and air-filtration systems: this can range from [opening windows to allow a breeze](#) through classrooms and hallways to [HEPA filters that completely clean the air](#) several times in an hour.

And rapid at-home lateral-flow testing is a simple, quick way of identifying infectious individuals and ensuring they stay out of the school environment until they're past the infectious period. Probably the biggest impact on slowing Covid-19 spread and breaking chains of transmission is to have infectious individuals isolate and not pass on Covid-19 to anyone else. The UK has led in offering [free at-home testing to teachers, school staff and pupils](#), and that is seen as one of the factors in slowing spread within schools.

We also now have concrete evidence on the harms of children being out of school, which we must balance against the risk of harms from Covid. While some cling to the idealised version of online learning with middle-class children with devoted parents sitting next to them teaching with fast broadband and a laptop per child at home, this isn't the reality for most children, especially those in low-income households.

Access to devices such as computers and tablets, and the internet – and having parents with enough free time to support students – are not guaranteed. [Children](#) may also have to do work within the household, for example taking care of younger siblings. And they may have to figure out how to set up the technology themselves if they are in households where parents are working outside or absent. In short, virtual learning works for rich families, but not for poor people.

This is not just about educational attainment. In-person schooling is also about providing children with a safe, heated space during the day, food, books, outdoor play areas and access to adults trained in teaching and interacting with children. School closures also lead to a loss of play and social interaction, they're associated with [increased domestic abuse](#), a decrease in physical activity, delayed access to paediatric care, and more [mental health issues](#).

Whatever Covid-19 control measures are discussed, school closures should be off the table. Home or remote schooling just doesn't work and shouldn't be seen as an acceptable outcome for children. The risks from Covid are better known, and we have more tools to fight it.

So instead of closing schools, we need to focus on improving the protections we now have: better vaccination coverage, ventilation and filtration of the air, and identifying infectious individuals with rapid testing. Now is the time to start making plans for schools as essential societal infrastructure, just as hospitals, supermarkets and other essential institutions stayed open even during the strictest lockdown measures.

- Prof Devi Sridhar is chair of global public health at the University of Edinburgh
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What I changed my mind about in 2021 Religion

I now believe in the power of prayer – not because it works, but because it helps

[Lamorna Ash](#)

If someone asks me why, I reach for the word *velleity* – desiring things you cannot hope to get



‘This year I’ve spent more time in Anglican churches than I have the rest of my life combined.’ St Martin-in-the-Fields, London. Photograph: Bailey-Cooper Photography/Alamy

Sat 25 Dec 2021 03.00 EST

I keep a list of words that are strange to me. Any time I find one I half-know or do not recognise, it goes in the list. I find its existence reassuring, as if

having more words at my disposal will make it easier to decode whatever confusing things happen to me each day.

The best word on my list is *velleity*. I found it in [Don DeLillo's Underworld](#) (1997), in a section where a Jesuit priest is explaining to the main character, Nick Shay, the value of knowing the names for those things in danger of being lost to eternity. The priest teaches the word “*velleity*” to Nick. “Volition at its lowest ebb,” he calls it. “A small thing, a wish, a tendency.” He uses it in relation to his own life, to express regret at how it has passed. He has prayed a lot, sure, but what tangible things has he done in this world?

This year I've spent more time in Anglican churches than I have in the rest of my life combined. I haven't converted, I don't think. But I have been researching people in their 20s who have done, and it quickly became clear that without going to church I would miss crucial aspects of what it meant to become a Christian. And so, despite my initial wariness about structured religion, I started accompanying those I was interviewing not just to Sunday services, but the daily offices: morning prayers, evening prayers and compline (the night prayer).

The first few services I was bored. I believed prayer to be a waste of thought. I spent the duration worrying, or feeling hungry, or both. I stared at the faded scars and burns across my hands and tried to remember how I got them. Gradually, though, I found myself taking an interest. I started to look forward to the prayers of penitence, recited in chorus by the congregation. I liked to say, “We confess we have sinned.” To say, “We have not loved our neighbours as ourselves”, admitting (half out-loud, half in private) to all the minor acts of unkindness we had inevitably carried out that week.

I enjoyed the intercessions, too – the structured sequence of prayers, written by members of the congregation each week, which follow the pattern of prayers for the Church, then for society at large, for the local community, for any who suffer, and finally, for the communion of saints. The intercessions kept up with the news – prayers for the [England](#) team during the Euros, for NHS staff, for the families of refugees lost crossing seas.

It was a grand picture that moved me: in the 16,000 Church of England buildings across the UK, which were [reopened](#) in July 2020 after the first period in 800 years without public worship in England, all these groups of people were closing their eyes and pressing their hands together in contemplation of those they did not know. Prayer did not stop during the pandemic, however. Between March 2020 and March this year, the Church of England's various prayer apps were accessed 8m times, a [50% increase](#) on the previous year.

My Christian friend likes to phrase it in counterfactuals: what if prayer doesn't do nothing? I posed this to someone else, whose apostasy came in his early 20s. "Yeah, what if," he said, his voice empty of anything. "What if?" Having prayed each night of his childhood, he now finds the complacency necessary to trust you are "doing really valuable things by praying for the rest of the world" – at best deluded, and at worst dangerous. But most of the Christians I spoke with do not see prayer as efficacious. Instead, it is a response to the paralysis they feel when confronted with sickness, death or violence. "I'll pray for you," they say, and find it has more weight than "I'm sorry".

One of my close friends practises the metta bhavana, the Buddhist "loving-kindness" meditation. Like the intercessions, there are five stages. First, you meditate on yourself. Then on someone you love platonically, someone you feel neutral towards, someone you dislike, and then finally, the whole world. At each stage, you chant the following in your head: "May you be well, may you be happy, may you progress upon your path." My friend knows their meditating cannot ensure the happiness of others, or of themselves. But it is a way of releasing hard emotions, and feeling momentarily connected to the disparate lives external to their immediate circumstances.

I don't think the Jesuit priest in Underworld was right. I don't believe dealing in small things such as wishes makes you "low-willed", as he expressed it. Velleity means desiring things you cannot hope to get. There is something in that impracticability I find serious, strengthening. Velleity is the closest word I have for the approximation of prayer I find myself moving towards: not a replacement for action, but a distinct act in itself. Sending out thoughts to people I miss or have hurt or will never meet. Knowing it has no power, but doing it anyway.

- Lamorna Ash is the author of Dark, Salt, Clear: Life in a Cornish Fishing Town
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Opinion**Climate crisis**

The pandemic is a warning: we must take care of the earth, our only home

[Bruno Latour](#)

The climate crisis resembles a huge planetary lockdown, trapping humanity within an ever-deteriorating environment



‘The shallow layer of earth in which we live ... has been transformed into a habitable milieu by the aeons-long labour of evolution.’ Photograph: Jon Helgason/Alamy

Fri 24 Dec 2021 09.00 EST

There is a moment when a never-ending crisis turns into a way of life. This seems to be the case with [the pandemic](#). If so, it’s wise to explore the permanent condition in which it has left us. One obvious lesson is that societies have to learn once again to live with pathogens, just as they learned

to when microbes were first made visible by the discoveries of Louis Pasteur and Robert Koch.

These discoveries were concerned with only one aspect of microbial life. When you also consider the various sciences of the earth system, another aspect of viruses and bacteria comes to the fore. During the long geochemical history of the earth, microbes, together with fungi and plants, have been essential, and are still essential, to the very composition of the environment in which we humans live. The pandemic has shown us that we will never escape the invasive presence of these living beings, entangled as we are with them. They react to our actions; if they mutate, we have to mutate as well.

This is why the many national lockdowns, imposed on citizens to help them survive the virus, are a powerful analogy for the situation in which humanity finds itself detained for good. Lockdown was painful enough, and yet many ways have been found, thanks in part to vaccination, to allow people to resume a semblance of normal life. But there is no possibility of such a resumption if you consider that all living forms are locked down for good inside the limits of the earth. And by “earth” I don’t mean the planet as it can be seen from space, but its very superficial pellicle, the shallow layer of earth in which we live, and which has been transformed into a habitable milieu by the aeons-long labour of evolution.

This thin matrix is what geochemists call the “critical zone”, the only layer of earth where terrestrial life can flourish. It’s in this finite space where everything we care for and everything we have ever encountered exists. There is no way of escaping our earth-bound existence; as young climate activists shout: “There is no planet B.” Here is the connection between the Covid lockdowns we have experienced in the past two years, and the much larger but definitive state of lockdown that we find ourselves in: we are trapped in an environment that we have already altered irreversibly.

If we have been made aware of the agency of viruses in shaping our social relations, we must now reckon with the fact that they will also be moulded for ever by the climate crisis and the quick reactions of ecosystems to our actions. The feeling that we live in a new space appears again at the local as well as the global level. Why would all nations convene in Glasgow to keep

global temperature rises below some agreed upon limit, if they did not have the sensation that a huge lid had been put over their territory? When you look up at the blue sky, are you not aware that you are now under some sort of dome inside which you are locked?

Gone is the infinite space; now you are responsible for the safety of this overbearing dome as much as you are for your own health and wealth. It weighs on you, body and soul. To survive under these new conditions we have to undergo a sort of metamorphosis.

This is where politics enters. It is very difficult for most people used to the industrialised way of life, with its dream of infinite space and its insistence on emancipation and relentless growth and development, to suddenly sense that it is instead enveloped, confined, tucked inside a closed space where their concerns have to be shared with new entities: other people of course, but also viruses, soils, coal, oil, water, and, worst of all, this damned, constantly shifting climate.

This disorienting shift is unprecedented, even cosmological, and it is already a source of deep political divisions. Although the sentence “you and I don’t live on the same planet” used to be a joking expression of dissent, it has become true of our present reality. We do live on different planets, with rich people employing private fire fighters and scouting for climate bunkers, while their poorer counterparts are forced to migrate, suffer and die amid the worst consequences of the crisis.

This is why it is important not to misconstrue the political conundrum of our present age. It is of the same magnitude as when, from the 17th century onward, westerners had to shift from the closed cosmos of the past to the infinite space of the modern period. As the cosmos seemed to open, political institutions had to be invented to work through the new and utopian possibilities offered by the Enlightenment. Now, in reverse, the same task falls to present generations: what new political institutions could they invent to cope with people so divided that they belong to different planets?

It would be a mistake to believe that the pandemic is a crisis that will end, instead of the perfect warning for what is coming, what I call the new climatic regime. It appears that all the resources of science, humanities and

the arts will have to be mobilised once again to shift attention to our shared terrestrial condition.

- Bruno Latour is a philosopher and anthropologist, the author of After Lockdown: A Metamorphosis and the winner of the 2013 Holberg prize
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What I changed my mind about in 2021Dogs

Unlike cats, dogs used to leave me cold – until I met a puppy in a padded jacket

[Arifa Akbar](#)



A fateful train ride when we were coming out of lockdown this year taught me to question long-held opinions



Arifa Akbar with her neighbour's cat James. Photograph: Supplied

Fri 24 Dec 2021 11.00 EST

I have been a cat lover my whole life. That is to say, I have never liked dogs. Or at least, this was the case until earlier this year. There was no conscious desire to beat the aversion – it just happened, and all it took was a puppy in an orange jacket, shortly after the end of lockdown.

But before that, my low opinion of dogs. I decided at a young age that they were dangerous and uncouth – the pirates of the pet world who would cock their legs shamelessly on street corners and had great big wet dishcloths for tongues.

As a child, I remember clutching my mother's coat as the neighbour's dog growled at us every morning over the garden fence and bared its monstrous teeth. We had just emigrated from Lahore to a racially hostile Britain of the 1970s and this dog only made us feel more unwelcome. On top of that, my mother had been attacked when she was a girl; perhaps I saw her flinching every time a dog walked by and took on her fear as my own.

I have spent a lifetime crossing roads, leaving cafes and making excuses to dog-owning friends so that I am never at close quarters. This hasn't always

been easy. There was one blood-curdling lunch invitation from a friend who had just bought a puppy. I imagined a yappy little thing so I went along but it turned out to be a great dane who charged around the dining table and stuck its tongue in all the tubs of hummus at once.

Another time, a stranger invited me for coffee and at the end said we must do it again. “Yes,” I said, but just as he was leaving he added, “next time I’ll bring my Afghan hounds.”

I made sure to hold my smile in place but I thought, “Well, that’s the end of that.” Then, my 10-year-old niece started asking for a puppy for her birthday and I thought, “Oh God, am I going to have to ghost my niece, too?” Thankfully, she lost interest in dogs and started asking for an axolotl.

News stories of random maulings and child deaths kept my suspicions intact over the years and even if my visceral fear has lessened, there is still the disapproval of a dog’s ridiculously slobbering and ingratiatingly buoyant personality. The same goes for dog owners who assume you find their pet as lovable as they do. In the 1980s, when it was the rage to wear white trousers, a dog jumped on me while I sat on a park bench and left a permanent smear of mud across mine while its owner just stood and smiled.

But then the pup in the orange jacket. I was on a tube train and a couple came into my carriage, the woman carrying it in her arms. The dog was so little it was shivering even though it was dressed in the orange padded jacket. I waited for the discomfort to kick in but as I watched it take in the world with big, overwhelmed eyes and curled up paws, I felt a shift which couldn’t have occurred in that moment but must have been the accumulation of an unconscious process. The couple sensed my interest and brought the puppy over for me to stroke, which made me bristle, but I gave it a quick pat on the head and then felt bereft when they got off the train.

This was shortly after lockdown and I wrote it off as an aberration, born of so many months of isolation. But since then I have noticed that I no longer flinch when a dog walks past and increasingly throw backward glances at it. What’s led to this change? I think to myself, and can’t formulate an answer.

Maybe some of us have been marked by social isolation in ways that can't quite be rationalised yet.

Living alone for so many months, I did find myself questioning opinions and beliefs that had, over the years, become absolutes: that I never get lonely, that neighbours are never there for you in London, that independence is always empowering, that nature doesn't thrive in a city. The end of lockdown was a chance to reset and go back into the world slightly more joyfully, more open to things, even if most of the resolutions to work less, cook more and meditate every day quickly fell by the wayside.

I'm not sure that dogs featured in this mental recalibration, but maybe being more open to things has shifted my prejudice towards them.

Since the puppy on the train, I have found myself admiring the sleek silver fur of a greyhound resting in a sunny spot of a pavement cafe, and making eye contact with what I'd previously have dismissed as a scratty mongrel outside the supermarket. I'll occasionally stop and make clucking noises at a mutt, ready to make friends, but *it* will be the one to turn its back on me or simply stare, as if it's unsure. **Dogs**, I realise, are picky about humans too. Not so different from cats, after all.

- Arifa Akbar is the Guardian's chief theatre critic
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Waste

Latin America urges US to reduce plastic waste exports to region

Study finds exports to region doubled in 2020 with practice predicted to grow as US invests in recycling plants



A woman pulls a cart loaded with bags of recyclables through the streets of New York. Photograph: Johannes Eisele/AFP/Getty

[Joe Parkin Daniels](#)

[@joeparkdan](#)

Fri 24 Dec 2021 08.21 EST

Environmental organisations across Latin America have called on the US to reduce plastic waste exports to the region, after a report found the US had doubled exports to some countries in the region during the first seven months of 2020.

The [US is the world's largest plastic waste exporter](#), although it has dramatically reduced the overall amount it exports since 2015, when China – previously the top importer – said it “no longer wanted to be the world’s rubbish dump” and began imposing restrictions. Elsewhere around the world imports are rising, and not least in Latin America, with its cheap labour and close proximity to the US.

More than 75% of imports to the region arrive in Mexico, which received more than 32,650 tons (29,620 metric tonnes) of plastic waste from the US between January and August 2020. [El Salvador](#) was second, with 4,054 tons, and Ecuador third, with 3,665 tons, according to research carried out by the Last Beach Cleanup, an environmental advocacy group based in California.

While hazardous waste imports are subject to tariffs and restrictions, they are seldom enforced and plastic waste intended for recycling – which until January this year was not considered hazardous under international law – that enters importing countries can often end up as landfill, according to a researchers with the Global Alliance for Incinerator Alternatives (Gaia).

A Gaia report published in July also predicted further growth in the plastic waste sector in Latin America due to companies in the US and China investing in factories and recycling plants across the region to process the US plastic exports.

Some view the practice as a form of environmental colonialism. “The cross-border plastic waste trade is perhaps one of the most nefarious expressions of the commercialisation of common goods and the colonial occupation of territories of the geopolitical south to turn them into sacrifice zones,” said Fernanda Solíz, the health area director at the Simón Bolívar University in [Ecuador](#).

“Latin America and the Caribbean are not the back yards of the United States,” Soliz said. “We are sovereign territories, and we demand the respect of the rights of nature and our peoples.”

Most of the world’s countries agreed in May 2019 to stem the flow of plastic waste from the developed nations of the global north into the poorer ones of

the global south. Known as the plastics amendment to the Basel Convention, the agreement prohibited the export of plastic waste from private entities in the US to those in developing nations without the permission of local governments.

But critically, the US did not ratify the agreement, and has been accused of continuing to funnel its waste into countries around the world, including in Africa, south-east Asia, and Latin America.

“Regional governments fail in two aspects: the first is inspections at customs because we don’t really know what enters the country under the guise of recycling, and they also fail in their commitments with international agreements such as the [Basel convention](#).” said Camila Aguilera, a spokesperson for Gaia. “And here it is important to see what comes under the types of recycling because recycling is seen as a good thing.”

“Countries in the global north see recycling as something to be proud of, forgetting about redesigning the products and reducing waste,” said Aguilera. “It’s very difficult for governments to treat plastic like toxic waste, but that’s what it is.”

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US news

US to lift Omicron travel ban on eight African countries

Biden had barred nearly all non-US citizens who had recently been in the countries, over concerns about the Covid variant



Travellers queue at a check-in counter at OR Tambo International Airport in Johannesburg on 27 November 27, 2021, after several countries banned flights from South Africa. Photograph: Phill Magakoe/AFP/Getty Images

Reuters

Fri 24 Dec 2021 09.28 EST

The [Biden administration](#) will lift travel restrictions on eight southern African countries imposed last month over concerns about the fast-spreading Covid-19 Omicron variant, the White House said Friday.

Foreign nationals who are barred from the US because they have been in one of the eight countries within the prior 14 days will again be allowed on US-bound flights leaving after 12.01am US east coast time on 31 December, a senior official said, confirming an earlier Reuters report.

The United States on 29 November barred nearly all non-US citizens who had recently been in South [Africa](#), Botswana, Zimbabwe, Namibia, Lesotho, Eswatini, Mozambique and Malawi in an “abundance of caution” over the variant detected in South Africa.

White House spokesman Kevin Munoz tweeted that Biden “will lift the temporary travel restrictions on Southern Africa countries” effective 31 December.

He said the decision was recommended by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

“The restrictions gave us time to understand Omicron and we know our existing vaccines work against Omicron, esp boosted,” Munoz [tweeted](#).

On Dec. 31, [@POTUS](#) will lift the temporary travel restrictions on Southern Africa countries. This decision was recommended by [@CDCgov](#). The restrictions gave us time to understand Omicron and we know our existing vaccines work against Omicron, esp boosted.
<https://t.co/NdRTtntRuE>

— Kevin Munoz (@KMunoz46) [December 24, 2021](#)

Reuters reported earlier US public health agencies had recommended lifting the travel restrictions because retaining them would have not a significant impact on US cases given the widespread current US transmission, confidence that an Omicron-specific vaccine would not be necessary and that existing vaccines and booster shots are highly effective.

“This travel pause has served its purpose. It bought time to understand the science, it gave time to analyze the variant,” the official, who was unnamed prior to White House confirmation, told Reuters.

“This was not meant to keep Omicron out. We knew we couldn’t do that. The point was to reduce the number of cases coming in – in those early days and weeks.“

The restrictions have not prevented flights or Americans from returning from southern Africa.

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2021/dec/24/us-to-lift-omicron-travel-ban-on-eight-african-countries>

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Ukraine

Ukraine: Russian consulate in Lviv hit by molotov cocktail

Incident described by Moscow as terrorism and Ukrainian officials as hooliganism comes as tensions soar



Russia's president, Vladimir Putin, also announced a further successful test of the country hypersonic Zircon missile. Photograph: Alexei Nikolsky/Tass

Associated Press in Moscow

Fri 24 Dec 2021 12.10 EST

The Russian foreign ministry said on Friday that a molotov cocktail had been thrown at the the country's consulate in the Ukrainian city of Lviv and that it had formally protested about the attack, which it described as an act of terrorism.

The ministry summoned a Ukrainian official and demanded apologies from his country's authorities.

Ukrainian police in Lviv said they had launched an investigation into the incident, which they referred to as hooliganism.

The incident comes as tensions soar over a buildup of Russian troops near the border with Ukraine that has [stoked fears of an invasion](#).

The Kremlin also said on Friday that it expected the US to respond next month to its request for security guarantees that preclude Nato's expansion to [Ukraine](#).

The Russian president, Vladimir Putin, had urged the west on Thursday to meet the demand immediately, [accusing the US and its allies](#) of maintaining a military presence "on the threshold of our home".

Moscow [submitted draft security documents](#) last week demanding that Nato deny membership to Ukraine and other former Soviet countries and roll back the alliance's military deployments in central and eastern Europe.

"To discuss de-escalation, we expect our opponents in Washington to provide specific answers to our proposals in January," the Kremlin spokesperson Dmitry Peskov said during a Friday conference call with reporters.

The US president, Joe Biden, told Putin in a video call earlier this month that Russia would face severe consequences if it attacked Ukraine.

Moscow has denied it plans to launch an attack but has described [Nato](#) expansion and weapons deployment in Ukraine as a red line.

During a marathon annual news conference on Thursday, Putin said US-Russia talks expected to start in Geneva next month were a positive move, but that Moscow expected them to produce quick results.

The US and its allies, however, have said they will not give Russia the kind of guarantee on Ukraine that Putin wants. One of Nato's key principles is

that membership is open to any qualifying country. US officials are conferring with European allies in advance of the Geneva talks.

The Ukrainian foreign minister, Dmytro Kuleba, said on Friday that his country must be part of any Nato security talks with Russia.

“Euro-Atlantic security is at stake in Ukraine, therefore, Ukraine should be part of security consultations on the matter,” he tweeted. “We support the idea of the US, the EU, Nato talking to Russia as long as the primary topic is ending the international armed conflict, Russia’s war on Ukraine.”

Peskov rejected western concerns about the Russian troop buildup. He said the country was entitled to deploy its military wherever it considered necessary on its territory, and presented the recent movements as a defensive response to provocations from the west.

“Whatever Russia does with its troops, it does that on its own territory and we can’t allow anyone to challenge that sovereign right,” he said. “Russia takes certain action to move and redeploy its armed forces on its territory in view of unfriendly moves by our opponents from Nato, the US and some European countries that have made unambiguous manoeuvres near our borders, conducted reconnaissance flights and deployed warships.”

“It causes our deep concern and forces us to take certain measures to ensure our security.”

Russia annexed Crimea in 2014 and threw its support behind a separatist rebellion in eastern Ukraine. More than 14,000 people have been killed in the fighting, which has devastated also Donbas, Ukraine’s industrial heartland.

Putin said earlier this week that Russia would have to take “adequate military-technical measures” if the west continued its “aggressive” course.

On Friday, he hailed another successful test of a new hypersonic weapon. A salvo of Zircon cruise missiles had been fired “flawlessly”, he said. “This is a big event for the country and a major step in strengthening Russia’s security and enhancing its defence capability.”

Friday's launch was the latest in a series of tests of Zircon, which Putin has said is capable of flying at nine times the speed of sound to a range of more than 1,000 kilometres (600 miles). The missile is expected to enter service with the Russian navy next year and arm its cruisers, frigates and submarines.

Putin voiced concern last month that Nato could use Ukrainian territory to deploy missiles that would be able to reach Moscow in just five minutes and said Zircon would give Russia a comparable capability.

"It would also need just five minutes to reach those who issue orders," he said.

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/dec/24/ukraine-russian-consulate-in-lviv-hit-by-molotov-cocktail>

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James Webb space telescope

Astronomers on tenterhooks as \$10bn James Webb telescope set for lift off

Nasa's flagship mission counts down to launch at 1220 GMT on Christmas Day from Kourou, French Guiana



The Ariane 5 rocket with Nasa's James Webb Space Telescope onboard at the launch pad in Kourou, French Guiana. Photograph: Bill Ingalls/AP

[Ian Sample](#) Science editor

[@iansample](#)

Fri 24 Dec 2021 08.15 EST

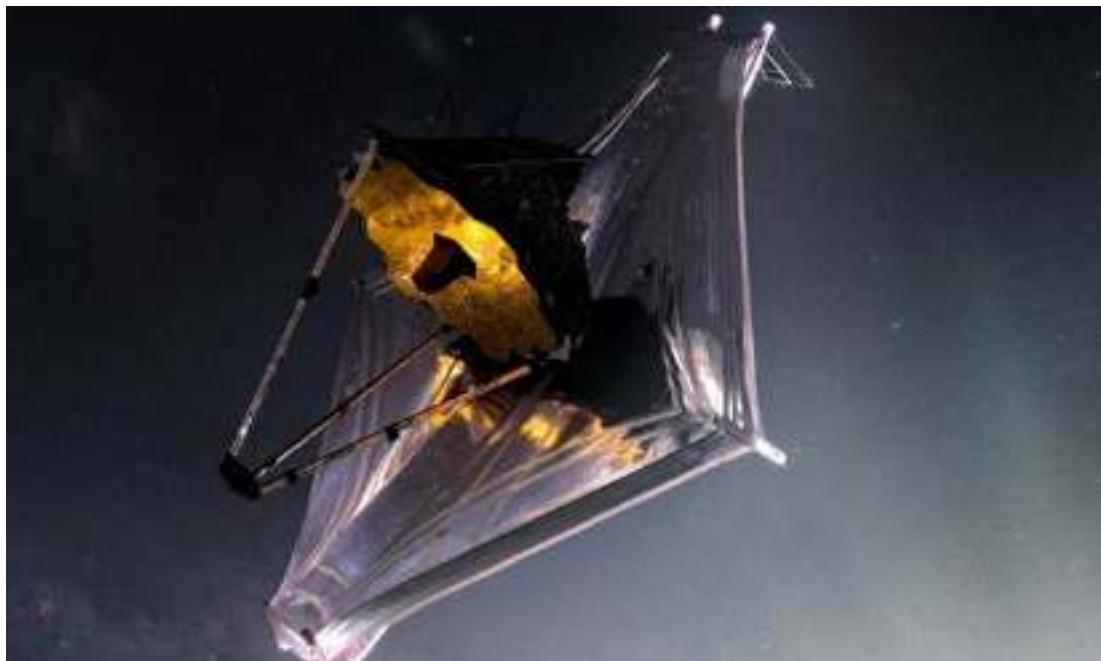
Final checks and fuelling are under way for the launch of the James Webb [Space](#) Telescope, a flagship mission for Nasa that aims to observe worlds beyond the solar system and the first stars and galaxies that lit up the cosmos.

If all goes to plan, the \$10bn (£7.4bn) observatory will become the largest and most powerful telescope ever sent into space when it blasts off at 12.20pm UK time on Christmas Day onboard an Ariane 5 rocket from the European Space Agency's spaceport in Kourou, French Guiana.

It has taken more than 30 years to conceive, design and build the telescope and the project has been beset with delays, cost overruns, redesigns, and technical glitches that postponed the launch as recently as this week.

“I’m excited and nervous at the same time,” said Prof Martin Barstow, chair of the Space Telescope Institute Council and director of strategic partnerships at Space Park Leicester. “It’s exciting to think that after so long, we might eventually get this telescope into space. But I’m nervous because we all know that however good the rocket is, there are risks in getting there, and a whole lot of things have to go perfectly for us to have a working telescope.”

At the heart of Webb is a 6.5-metre primary mirror that will enable the telescope to observe the faint glow from some of the oldest, most distant objects in the universe. Because the universe is expanding, light emitted from stars and galaxies is stretched as it travels, meaning that the glow from the earliest stars is “redshifted” into the longer wavelengths of infrared light.



An artist's illustration of the James Webb Space Telescope in space.
Photograph: Nasa/UPI/Rex/Shutterstock

Unlike the Hubble space telescope, which orbits the Earth, Webb will orbit the sun. It is bound for a spot called L2, or the second Lagrange point, a million miles from Earth. Here, gravitational forces will allow the telescope to observe the heavens in the infrared realm, with the Earth and the sun to its back.

Webb's primary mirror is so large that it must be folded up for launch and unfolded during the month-long journey to L2. Along the way, the telescope will also deploy a sunshade the size of a tennis court to help shield the telescope from the sun's rays.

"We want it really cold and space isn't that cold," said Barstow. "There's a lot of infrared out there from the Earth and sun that will warm things up. To cool everything down takes a long time."

Beyond observing the first stars and galaxies, Webb will watch alien worlds cross the faces of their stars and measure how infrared light is absorbed in the planets' atmospheres. This will provide hints about the atmospheric chemistry and potentially conditions ripe for life.

"In terms of the science, this is going to be transformational," said Barstow. "It's quite simply the largest, most sensitive telescope ever put in space. It's been designed to look back at the very early history of the universe and to understand the formation of the first stars and galaxies. And it's about us. It's about how we came to be and what our place is in the universe."

If Webb arrives at L2 unscathed, mission scientists will spend a further five months checking out the telescope's systems and ensuring they are working properly before taking data at the start of the summer.

"I just want it to be there and working," Barstow added. "There are thousands of astronomers waiting to use this telescope. It's important to remember this is a huge endeavour. There will be a lot of people around the world biting their fingernails tomorrow."

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from <https://www.theguardian.com/science/2021/dec/24/astronomers-on-tenterhooks-as-10bn-james-webb-telescope-set-for-lift-off>

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[Joe Biden](#)

Caller tells Joe Biden ‘Let’s go Brandon’ during White House Christmas event

The saying has became an internet sensation as a coded vulgarity among Trump supporters



Joe Biden and Jill Biden participate in an event to call Norad and track the path of Santa Claus on Christmas Eve 2021 in Washington DC. Photograph: Alex Wong/Getty Images

Reuters

Fri 24 Dec 2021 16.56 EST

A vulgar anti-Biden slogan made for an awkward moment on Friday during Joe Biden’s phone calls with children tracking Santa’s flight when a father said, “Let’s Go Brandon.”

The refrain, a sanitized version of “Fuck Joe Biden,” has been an internet sensation since a television journalist told race car driver Brandon Brown that a Nascar crowd shouting the vulgarity was actually saying, “Let’s go Brandon.”

Biden and his wife Jill Biden were taking calls into the North American Aerospace Defense Command Santa Tracker, which follows the progress of Santa’s reindeer-guided sleigh for millions of children.

At the end of one call, a parent who gave his name as Jared said, “Merry [Christmas](#) and Let’s go Brandon.”

“Let’s go Brandon, I agree,” a relaxed Biden responded, before asking Jared if he was in Oregon. By that point, the call was disconnected.

Much about the Christmas Eve exchange was not immediately clear, including what the caller intended, why Biden repeated the slogan and whether either knew the origin of the phrase.

The White House did not respond to requests seeking comment. Jared’s full name and contact information were not immediately available.

The slogan has become popular among supporters of [Donald Trump](#), the former US president who caused a social media storm during his own Christmas Eve phone call with children in 2018.

Trump asked seven-year-old Collman Lloyd from South Carolina if she still believed in Santa “because at seven it’s marginal, right?” Lloyd later told the media that she did indeed believe in Santa and had no idea what marginal meant.

Brandon Brown himself has expressed displeasure at the appropriation of his name for an anti-Biden slogan.

“I don’t want to be the substitute for a cuss word,” he recently told The New York Times.

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- [Live UK Covid: ministers ‘closely looking at the data’ before deciding on circuit breaker for England](#)
- [Coronavirus New year ‘too late’ for extra rules in England, scientists say](#)
- [Restrictions Tightening unlikely before Christmas but not ruled out](#)
- [Tax and spending Government borrowing surges again as Covid cases soar](#)

[Politics live with Andrew Sparrow](#)
[Coronavirus](#)

UK records 90,629 new daily cases as PM says not enough evidence for new curbs – as it happened

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/live/2021/dec/21/covid-coronavirus-uk-live-news-omicron-lockdown-circuit-breaker-boris-johnson>

Coronavirus

New year ‘too late’ for extra Covid rules in England, scientists say

Reaction comes after Boris Johnson announces there will be no additional measures put in place for now

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A steady stream of patients arriving at the Royal London hospital in Whitechapel on Monday as cases of coronavirus continued to rise.
Photograph: Mark Thomas/Rex/Shutterstock

[Linda Geddes](#)

Tue 21 Dec 2021 01.00 EST

Scientists have reacted with dismay to Boris Johnson's decision not to impose fresh restrictions to curb the spread of Omicron, emphasising that waiting until the new year would "almost certainly be too late to have a material impact on the epidemic".

Because the rate of growth in infection rates may already have plateaued or fallen by then, it may also be too late to know what impact those restrictions would have had if they had been introduced earlier. "We are damned if we do and damned if we don't," said Paul Hunter, a professor of medicine at the University of East Anglia.

The prime minister announced after a cabinet meeting that he would not be introducing any further Covid restrictions for now, adding: "The situation is extremely difficult and the arguments either way are very, very finely balanced."

Data on the hospitalisation rate for those infected with the Omicron variant would be kept under "constant review", he said, with government sources hinting that further restrictions were likely after Christmas, possibly starting a week tomorrow.

Yet, with Omicron infections currently doubling within 48 hours in most regions of the UK, the country may already have reached a ceiling where the rate of growth begins to fall and case numbers plateau.

Hunter believes that point could come within days, with or without interventions. "If we implement control measures now, they are unlikely to be sufficient to reverse the growth, only slow it," he said. "But there may still be benefits in slowing the peak, in terms of flattening the curve."

One solution that appears to be on the table is a return to the "step 2" measures introduced as part of the roadmap out of lockdown earlier this year – chiefly, people only being allowed to socialise indoors with members of their household or a support bubble, and outdoor socialising being limited to groups of six people or two households, including at pubs and restaurants.

Prof Christina Pagel, the director of UCL's clinical operational research unit, said: "Waiting for definitive evidence that it could cause the NHS to be overwhelmed will be too late to avert the crisis. Instead, the government should follow Sage [the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies] advice and return to step 2 of the roadmap immediately to prevent thousands of infections over the coming days and then monitor the situation hour by hour so that measures can be lifted as quickly as possible, hopefully even in time to enable limited household mixing over Christmas weekend."

Other scientists took issue with the prime minister's claim that the scientific arguments for further restrictions were "finely balanced". Trish Greenhalgh, a professor of primary care health services at the University of Oxford, said: "Mr Johnson claims that getting booster vaccinations 'could not be more urgent' but refuses to apply the same standards of urgency to the full range of preventive measures needed. There are strong scientific arguments for people to immediately cease the activities that are known to cause transmission of this exceptionally contagious variant."

Large indoor gatherings of unmasked people should be cancelled, and well-fitting, high-filtration masks should be worn at all times indoors, especially in crowded settings, such as on public transport, she said.

Yet other scientists highlighted the negative impact on people's mental wellbeing of continued uncertainty around coronavirus restrictions. Dr Charley Baker, an associate professor of mental health at the University of Nottingham, said: "Clear statements are required that set out exactly what paths are under consideration and which parameters need to be met for each path. Delay, prevarication and constant rumour leaves us all very much struggling as we try to prepare for the onslaught of the difficult days ahead."

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/dec/21/new-year-too-late-for-extra-covid-rules-in-england-scientists-say>

Coronavirus

Covid restrictions unlikely before Christmas but PM watching data ‘hour by hour’

Boris Johnson caught between scientific advisers and his sceptical cabinet over action on Omicron

- [Coronavirus – latest updates](#)
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'We won't hesitate': Boris Johnson says government can't rule out new Covid restrictions – video

[Aubrey Allegretti](#), [Peter Walker](#) and [Sarah Butler](#)

Mon 20 Dec 2021 16.06 EST

New Covid restrictions are unlikely to be imposed before Christmas amid deep cabinet divisions but [Boris Johnson](#) warned further measures remain on the table, with data on the threat of Omicron monitored “hour by hour”.

The prime minister was accused of failing to follow scientists' advice on the need for immediate restrictions while leaving millions of people and businesses in limbo after a two-hour cabinet meeting ended with no decision on Monday.

During the meeting, scientific advisers briefed ministers on the latest data including a steep rise in hospitalisations in London, with the UK's highest number of Omicron cases, while 91,743 people tested positive for Covid on Monday across the UK.

Afterwards, the prime minister said the arguments for and against stricter measures were “finely balanced” and the situation was “extremely difficult”.

With some people having already departed on Christmas breaks, government sources told the Guardian that fresh curbs were unlikely to be imposed before 25 December – though an announcement could be made in coming days on rules to be brought in before New Year’s Eve.

Measures under consideration include limits on households mixing indoors, social distancing and curfews for the hospitality sector. Parliamentary authorities are preparing for a possible request for the Commons to be recalled on Tuesday 28 December for a vote on any new measures.

Among cabinet ministers pushing for swift action were Sajid Javid, the health secretary, and Nadine Dorries, the culture secretary. However, the chancellor, Rishi Sunak, the foreign secretary, Liz Truss, and the education secretary, Nadhim Zahawi, were said to be holding out for “incontrovertible evidence” that a plan C for tackling Omicron was needed.

Among the plans considered by cabinet on Monday was a return to “stage two” of England’s roadmap out of lockdown, which came into effect on 12 April. People were only allowed to socialise indoors with members of their own household or support bubble, while outdoor socialising was limited to the rule of six or two households.

Johnson said hospitalisations were rising “quite steeply” in London, where Omicron has hit hardest so far, adding that while he understood the strain on hospitality firms, the current plan B restrictions “can be very helpful to us and the country” at slowing the spread of the variant.

The mayor of London, Sadiq Khan, announced the cancellation of the capital’s New Year’s Eve celebration in Trafalgar Square “in the interests of public safety” on Monday. The event had been due to be attended by 6,500 people.

The number of UK vaccines administered within 24 hours broke 1m for the first time this weekend, it was confirmed. Just over 50% of over-12s have now also received a booster dose.

Prof Christina Pagel, the director of University College London's clinical operational research unit, said that waiting for more definitive evidence of Omicron's spread could cause the NHS to be overwhelmed and may mean it is too late to avert a crisis.

She urged ministers to "follow Sage advice and return to step two of the roadmap immediately to prevent thousands of infections over the coming days and then monitor the situation hour by hour so that measures can be lifted as quickly as possible, hopefully even in time to enable limited household mixing over Christmas weekend".

A Department of Health source stressed that while Javid believed responding as early as possible to threats like Omicron was still the best way forward, the possibility of new restrictions remained unclear.

They said: "We want to be as open with people as we can, but it's not easy. There is new data coming in all the time that we have to look at, from several places. We're basically scouring for a signal within the noise."

A former minister said Johnson appeared to be hamstrung by some of his top team. They said: "I don't really see how it is scientifically defensible [not to act immediately] but it also feels about right in political and publicly-possible terms. The data about transmission points inexorably towards an approach that says 'better safe than sorry for the sake of the NHS'. But it would also be unforgivable to be too cautious."

A Tory MP resistant to new restrictions vowed to go ahead with their Christmas and New Year plans regardless of any new rules. They said: "If he tries to push ahead with new restrictions without convincing evidence, Boris is a dead man walking." Another backbencher, Esther McVey, said ministers had "for once pushed back on the scaremongering by the lockdown fanatics".

After the cabinet meeting ended with no certainty on restrictions, Labour accused Johnson of being "too weak" to stand up to his own MPs. Wes Streeting, the shadow health secretary, said: "While businesses across the country wonder if they can continue to trade, and families make frantic calls

about whether they will see each other this Christmas, true to form the prime minister has put his party before the public.

“Rather than set out a clear plan for the country, he has chosen to protect himself from his own MPs by simply not saying anything. Boris Johnson is unfit to lead.”

Kate Nicholls, the head of UKHospitality, said the industry needed notice of any restrictions that were to be placed on it next week, with financial support crucial. She said firms were in limbo, having lost up to 60% of their trade while still having big rent and rate bills as well as staff wages.

Greg Parmley, the chief executive of Live, which represents live music companies, said the government’s stance was “merely an excuse to withhold desperately needed financial support as sectors like live music and entertainment buckle under the weight of the latest Covid wave”.

Dehenna Davison, the Conservative MP for Bishop Auckland, said: “In the last two days, I’ve had pubs and restaurants contact me asking if they should place food and drinks orders. I’ve had emails from people asking if they should postpone their wedding for the fifth time, or if they can see their mum on Christmas. We really need some certainty.”

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Economics

UK government borrowing surges again as Covid cases soar

Figure of £17.4bn for November is down on last year but more than forecast by economists



The Treasury is thought to have pushed back against proposals for more Covid restrictions partly because of the cost of reintroducing financial support for businesses. Photograph: Chris J Ratcliffe/Getty Images

[Jasper Jolly](#)

[@jjpjolly](#)

Tue 21 Dec 2021 10.36 EST

The UK government borrowed £17.4bn in November, outstripping economists' predictions and suggesting debt could far overshoot officials' forecasts if the Omicron coronavirus variant slows the economy as expected.

It was the highest November borrowing since comparable records began 30 years ago, barring last year. During the furlough scheme in 2020, the Treasury under [Rishi Sunak set successive peacetime records for monthly borrowing](#) as it covered the costs of 80% of salaries for millions of people as well as support schemes for businesses.

Significant borrowing has continued in 2021, with £136bn borrowed between April and November, with the vaccine and test-and-trace programmes adding to costs, according to [data](#) published by the Office for National Statistics (ONS). That was the second highest since records began in 1993.

[Government borrowing chart](#)

The November borrowing was higher than the £16bn a poll of economists by Reuters predicted.

The government spent £32bn during November, £2bn more than it did a year before, thanks in part to spending on the vaccine programme and test and trace. Those costs are likely to rise in the coming months after the government raced to accelerate the uptake of booster jabs to try to reduce the number of hospitalisations in the Omicron wave.

Rising inflation also drove higher debt interest costs of £4.6bn. Higher inflation raises borrowing costs because the government issues some of its debt via inflation-linked bonds, the returns of which follow the retail price index (RPI) measure. Annual RPI inflation – acknowledged by authorities to be a flawed measure – hit 7.1% in November, far above the 5.1% rate of consumer price index inflation.

Government borrowing is likely to come under further scrutiny in the coming months from within the Conservative party. Public sector net debt – the amount borrowed over the years – was £2.3tn at the end of November, or 96.1% of GDP. That was the highest debt-to-GDP ratio since March 1963, when it was 98.3%.

Sunak and the Treasury are thought to have pushed back against proposals for more coronavirus restrictions partly because of the [cost to the government of reintroducing financial support](#) for businesses that would be forced to close, and officials have previously [briefed about the costs of regular booster jabs](#).

Yet businesses have argued that they are suffering from a quasi-lockdown anyway, with customers deserting crowded spaces in order to avoid catching coronavirus before Christmas. Sunak on Wednesday revealed an [extra £1bn in spending to help affected businesses](#).

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In his budget in October, Sunak said [he wanted to cut borrowing from 7.9% of GDP](#) in the current financial year, which ends in April, to 3.3% next year.

However, the arrival of the Omicron variant is likely to slow GDP growth and to lower tax receipts, as people [spend much less in pubs and restaurants](#). That will mean that official forecasts by the Office for Budget Responsibility are likely to have underestimated the amount the government will need to borrow to cover spending in the coming year.

Bethany Beckett, a UK economist at Capital [Economics](#), said: “These data predate the recent surge in coronavirus infections caused by the Omicron variant, with a near-term tightening of virus restrictions once again a possibility. Although the economy has got better at coping with restrictions with each new wave, we still suspect it would prompt a deterioration in the public finances via lower tax revenues and the potential reintroduction of government support schemes.”

The ONS has revised down borrowing over the financial year so far by £9bn, but Samuel Tombs, chief UK economist at Pantheon Macroeconomics, a consultancy, said it was “likely to overshoot the OBR’s forecast” of £183bn.

The drop in borrowing between November 2020 and November 2021 was the smallest so far this fiscal year, despite the absence of the furlough

scheme, Tombs said. He also pointed out that tax receipts rose more slowly than anticipated by the forecaster, and that “the trend in public borrowing is about to deteriorate markedly” with slower economic growth likely.

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- ['Better than a life cancelled' WHO chief suggests large festive gatherings should be postponed](#)
- [US Omicron is now dominant Covid-19 variant, officials say](#)
- [Germany Approval of new Covid jab raises hopes of persuading unvaccinated](#)

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Covid news: Israel announces fourth jab; hospital bosses in England brace for ‘dangerous situation’ – as it happened

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Coronavirus

WHO chief warns over festive gatherings: ‘An event cancelled is better than a life cancelled’

Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus says Omicron is infecting people who have been vaccinated and could double its infections every 1.5 to three days

- [Coronavirus – latest updates](#)
- [See all our coronavirus coverage](#)

01:00

‘An event cancelled is better than a life cancelled’: WHO urges rethink of holiday events – video

Guardian staff and agencies

Mon 20 Dec 2021 19.15 EST

The head of the [World Health Organization](#) (WHO) has warned that holiday festivities would in many places lead to “increased cases, overwhelmed health systems and more deaths” and urged people to postpone gatherings.

“An event cancelled is better than a life cancelled,” Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said.

Tedros said the Omicron variant was spreading faster than the Delta variant and was causing infections in people already vaccinated or who have recovered from the Covid-19 disease.

WHO chief scientist Soumya Swaminathan added it would be “unwise” to conclude from early evidence that Omicron was a milder variant that

previous ones ... with the numbers going up, all health systems are going to be under strain," Soumya Swaminathan told Geneva-based journalists.

The variant is successfully evading some immune responses, she said, meaning that the booster programmes being rolled out in many countries ought to be targeted towards people with weaker immune systems.

"There is now consistent evidence that Omicron is spreading significantly faster than the Delta variant," Tedros told the briefing.

"And it is more likely people vaccinated or recovered from Covid-19 could be infected or re-infected," Tedros said.



WHO director-general Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus puts on a face mask during a press conference in Geneva Photograph: Fabrice Coffrini/AFP/Getty Images

Their comments echoed the finding of study by Imperial College London, which said last week the risk of reinfection was more than five times higher and it has shown no sign of being milder than Delta.

WHO officials said however that other forms of immunity vaccinations may prevent infection and disease. While the antibody defences from some actions have been undermined, there has been hope that T-cells, the second

pillar of an immune response, can prevent severe disease by attacking infected human cells.

WHO expert Abdi Mahamud added: “Although we are seeing a reduction in the neutralisation antibodies, almost all preliminary analysis shows T-cell mediated immunity remains intact, that is what we really require.”

However, highlighting how little is known about how to handle the new variant that was only detected last month, Swaminathan also said: “Of course there is a challenge, many of the monoclonals will not work with Omicron.”

She gave no details as she referred to the treatments that mimic natural antibodies in fighting off infections. Some drug makers have suggested the same.

But the WHO team also offered some hope to a weary world facing the new wave that 2022 would be the year that the pandemic, which already killed more than 5.6 million people worldwide, would end.

It pointed towards the development of second and third generation vaccines, and the further development of antimicrobial treatments and other innovations.

“(We) hope to consign this disease to a relatively mild disease that is easily prevented, that is easily treated,” Mike Ryan, the WHO’s top emergency expert, told the briefing.

“If we can keep virus transmission to minimum, then we can bring the pandemic to an end.”

However Tedros also said China, where the Sars-CoV-2 coronavirus was first detected at the end of 2019, must be forthcoming with data and information related to its origin to help the response going forward.

“We need to continue until we know the origins, we need to push harder because we should learn from what happened this time in order to (do) better in the future,” he said.

“2022 must be the year we end the pandemic.”

Since it was first reported in South Africa in November, Omicron has been identified in dozens of countries, dashing hopes that the worst of the pandemic is over.

Tedros said the strain appears to have the ability to double its infections every 1.5 to three days. “That is really fast.”

Tedros pointed out that regardless of the variant’s severity, “the sheer number of cases … may overwhelm the health system” and more people could die.

More than 5.3 million people have died since the start of the pandemic, though the true toll is believed to be several times higher.

Many vulnerable people around the world are still waiting for a first vaccine dose, and the UN health agency has said it is better to prioritise them over providing fully vaccinated health adults with boosters.

“If we are to end the pandemic in the coming year, we must end inequity,” Tedros said.

With Reuters and Agence France-Presse

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Coronavirus

Omicron is now dominant Covid-19 variant in US, officials say

Variant accounted for 73% of new infections last week, nearly a six-fold increase within a week



People wait in long lines in Times Square to get tested for Covid-19 on Monday in New York. Photograph: Spencer Platt/Getty Images

Associated Press

Mon 20 Dec 2021 18.50 EST

Omicron is now the dominant version of the coronavirus in the US, federal health officials said on Monday, racing ahead of Delta and other variants and accounting for 73% of new infections last week.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention numbers showed nearly a six-fold increase in Omicron's share of infections in only one week.

In much of the country, Omicron's prevalence is even higher. It's responsible for an estimated 90% of new infections in the [New York area](#), the south-east, the industrial midwest and the Pacific north-west.

Since the end of June, the Delta variant has been the main version causing US infections. As recently as the end of November, more than 99.5% of coronaviruses were Delta, according to CDC data.

Scientists in Africa first sounded the alarm about Omicron less than a month ago and on 26 November the World Health Organization designated it as a "variant of concern". The mutant has since shown up in about 90 countries.

Much about the [Omicron variant](#) remains unknown, including whether it causes more or less severe illness. Early studies suggest the vaccinated will need a booster shot for the best chance at preventing Omicron infection, but even without the extra dose, vaccination should offer strong protection against severe illness and death.

"All of us have a date with Omicron," said Dr Amesh Adalja, a senior scholar at the Johns Hopkins Center for Health Security. "If you're going to interact with society, if you're going to have any type of life, Omicron will be something you encounter, and the best way you can encounter this is to be fully vaccinated."

Adalja said he was not surprised by the CDC data showing Omicron overtaking Delta in the US, given what was seen in South Africa, the UK and Denmark. He predicted spread over the holidays, including breakthrough infections among the vaccinated and serious complications among the unvaccinated that could stress hospitals already burdened by Delta.

CDC's estimates are based on thousands of coronavirus specimens collected each week through university and commercial laboratories and state and local health departments. Scientists analyze their genetic sequences to determine which versions of the Covid-19 viruses are most abundant.

In the week that ended 11 December, Omicron's share of new infections in the US increased to 2.9% from 0.4% the week before, the CDC previously reported.

But CDC on Tuesday said it was revising some of the earlier numbers, after analyzing more specimens. The new numbers indicate that about 13% of the infections the week of 11 December were Omicron, and not 3%, CDC officials said.

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Germany

Approval of new Covid jab raises hopes of persuading Germany's unvaccinated

First doses of protein-based Nuvaxovid are expected to be used in new year after European Medicines Agency gives go-ahead

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People receive a Covid jab at a church in Bad Wilsnack, in the state of Brandenburg, Germany. Photograph: Sean Gallup/Getty Images

[Kate Connolly](#) in Berlin

Mon 20 Dec 2021 13.34 EST

The approval of a new protein-based Covid-19 vaccine by the European Medicines Agency (EMA) has led to hopes that it could play an important

role in persuading millions of Germans who have refused jabs from existing vaccines to get protection against the disease this winter.

The EMA approved the two-dose Novavax vaccine on Monday afternoon. The German government's vaccination advisory board is expected to follow suit and allow for its use soon, a move that would be welcomed by health experts who are bracing for a huge and imminent wave of infections caused by the new Omicron variant. The first doses of Novavax are expected to be administered in [Germany](#) in the new year.

The rollout of the vaccine – called Nuvaxovid – by the US-based drugmaker Novavax has been repeatedly hampered by a series of lengthy delays including production issues.

It is making its appearance in the battle against the virus about a year after the novel mRNA vaccines produced by Pfizer/BioNTech and Moderna, and the viral vector vaccines made by Oxford/AstraZeneca and Johnson & Johnson.

While those four simulate a virus in the body, Nuvaxovid uses a more traditional type of technology. It has been found to have an efficacy of over 90% in preventing symptomatic infection with the Alpha variant, and is currently undergoing further tests to check its ability to protect against the Omicron variant.

Reluctance in Germany and other German-speaking countries to take the novel mRNA vaccines is put down to mistrust in the new technology, with people mainly citing safety concerns about side-effects or long-term health impacts, largely because of the apparent speed with which they were introduced.

In fact, the number of side-effects suffered has been very low despite the billions who have already taken the vaccines worldwide, as the head of the Robert Koch Institute, the German government's disease control agency, has repeatedly said.

The new Covid jabs made by Novavax and the French-Austrian manufacturer Valneva, whose VLA2001 is also based on the more

conventional method, are typically characterised as a *Totimpfstoff*, or “dead vaccine”, even though experts say the term is not scientifically accurate.

In November, Karl Lauterbach, the then health spokesperson for the Social Democratic party, who has since become the health minister, said that because of the popular use of the term “dead vaccine” among vaccine-hesitant Germans, the term would also generally be applied by health experts.

The Nuvaxovid vaccine is more accurately described as a protein vaccine, which in contrast to classical vaccines is genetically produced and contains minuscule particles from a version of the virus’s spike protein grown in moth cells in the laboratory that prompt the formation of antibodies in an individual. Valneva, which is still waiting for approval, is made up of Covid-19 virus that has been deactivated and cannot reproduce.

Both vaccines require the addition of a so-called proprietary adjuvant to boost the recipient’s immune response to them.

The EU has secured 100m doses of Novavax and 60m doses of Valneva, with 4m Novavax doses immediately destined for Germany.

Across Europe, but in particular in Germany, experts are hoping that both vaccines will have the effect of persuading those who have so far turned down the offer of a vaccine to change their minds, at a time when raising immunity levels by vaccination is one of the key weapons against halting the virus’s spread. So far, just over 70% of Germans are fully vaccinated. Unless this figure climbs to between 80 to 90%, the nation’s immunity will not be high enough to dampen the virus.

In a survey by the German pollster Forsa this autumn, 56% of participants said their vaccine willingness would rise if vaccines based on so-called “classical methods”, such as Novavax and Valneva, were approved. Only 5% said they would be lured to have a vaccination by monetary reward or the threat of being excluded from activities as a result of their unvaccinated status.

About 14 million German adults are yet to have the first two doses of a Covid vaccine. However, in a survey of unvaccinated people, 40% said they were merely hesitant and could indeed be persuaded if “dead vaccines” were available to them.

Nevertheless, experts have warned against expecting a significant rise in those willing to receive Novavax or Valneva jabs.

Dr Thomas Aßmann, a GP and vaccinator in Lindlar, about 30km (19 miles) east of Cologne, said: “I am a bit sceptical. If we take into account that the new mRNA vaccines they are fearful of have now been successfully administered around 7 to 8 billion times, I am concerned that those who say they’re holding out for the ‘classic’ vaccines will now look at the figures and say Novavax can’t be trusted yet,” he told the broadcaster NTV. “We must just hope that the new vaccine is good and stable and have a long efficacy, particularly against Omicron.”

Even Lauterbach, whose first two weeks in office have been dominated by his attempts to accelerate a vaccine drive, particularly booster shots, ahead of the expected emergence of Omicron as the main variant in Germany from around the end of the year, is sceptical.

“We should desist from assuming that Novavax will be a gamechanger,” he told the Bild newspaper in an hour-long interview broadcast live on Sunday night. He said based on studies and the fact that the mRNA vaccines had been administered between 7bn and 8bn times worldwide, they were “a whole lot safer”.

Confronted in the interview by a woman whose gynaecologist had urged her she should not get vaccinated because of a risk of thrombosis, Lauterbach shot back: “I would advise her to get a second opinion.”

Lauterbach has said he backs a proposal that is expected to be put before the Bundestag in January to bring in a nationwide vaccine mandate. He acknowledged the importance of enabling those who wanted a traditional vaccine to be able to access it before the introduction of any such measure.

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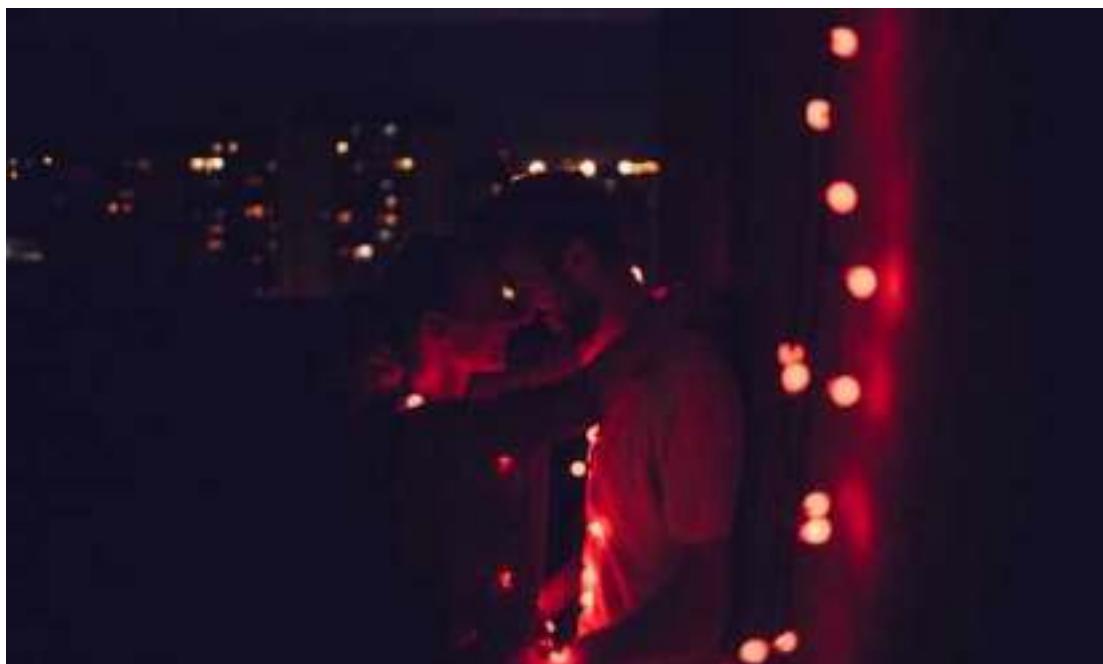
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My winter of loveLife and style

My winter of love: I was convinced no one wanted me. But there was a gorgeous man who did

The night of the party, I put my heartbreak aside. With nothing to lose, I walked up to a man and told him he was the most handsome one in the room



‘Screaming with joy and excitement and the lash, we tumbled in ...’
Photograph: Posed by models/AleksandarNakic/Getty



[Nell Frizzell](#)

Tue 21 Dec 2021 01.00 EST

In a warehouse in Ladywood, Birmingham, with a papier-mache spine down my back and breath like a dustpan, I walked up to a man and said, without any preamble: “You are the most handsome man at this party.”

It was December 2004, the theme of the party was dinosaurs and, being a fan of puns, I had decided to go as a thesaurus. In my little room in Lupton Flats – the cheapest halls of residence at Leeds University at the time – I’d sat on the floor, beside my single bed, and patiently glued down layers of paper into a string of points. Reluctant to sacrifice my actual thesaurus, I had rooted around my reading list for another book, eventually choosing *The French Lieutenant’s Woman*. Listening to Stevie Wonder’s *Innervisions* and drinking PG Tips, it had taken me at least two hours to make the dinosaur spine, which would attach around my neck like a backwards pendant. Slipping it on and looking in the mirror, I wondered if anyone would even notice me.

A few months earlier, I had broken up with my first boyfriend. The man to whom I had lost my virginity, learned about love with, and whose jumper I had wrapped around a pillow and slept beside for three months when he

went away on a gap year. That man was also living in Lupton Flats. But he was now seeing a girl from my course. It was a special flavour of agony to walk out of my block, to the shop, into a lecture or through the student union and be confronted with the woman who was now sleeping with my boyfriend. I cried endlessly and sourly, and my self-esteem was something woodlice crawled over in the dark.

The day of the dinosaur party, I togged up in a long-sleeved black vest, a black top, a pair of black tights, black leggings over those, thick black socks and high-heeled black boots. With the spine tied around my neck and tapping against my back, I looked more like a goth than a funny nod to a Jurassic-sounding book title. And so, like any good comedian flogging a patchy joke, I quickly whipped up a cardboard sign to hang around my neck: I Am A Thesaurus. That should do it.

We drove from Leeds to Birmingham in my friend Catherine's little car: me, my best friend Alice and Catherine at the wheel. On the way home from another party the year before, hungover and addled, we had got so hopelessly lost around the ring roads of Birmingham that we'd ended up driving all the way to Manchester, just to get our bearings and escape the Escher drawing that is the West Midlands road network.

Pulling up outside the warehouse, the grit of mud and broken glass and litter beneath our wheels, I could hear the faint thunk of music rumbling through concrete. My heart began to flutter. Here, in an old industrial estate in a strange city, I was cut loose from my past, my ex, my heartbreak, my course, my attempts to make a good fresher impression. Here I was just an idiot in a papier-mache costume ready to dance like everybody was looking.

We rang a buzzer and, eventually, the grey metal door was opened by a man with the word "Oomph" painted across his forehead and a buzz cut. Screaming with joy and excitement and the lash, we tumbled in, up the stairs and into a huge, cavernous space full of art students, locals, bands and folks from back home. There was a boxing ring, made out of lino, egg boxes and bungee ropes. There was a huge cardboard-box rollercoaster, disco lights and giant prehistoric creatures made of bubble wrap and poster paint. There were faux-fur sabre-tooth tigers with picnic-bench legs, volcanoes made

from chicken wire and, above it all, the smell of perfume and cigarettes and sticky booze and industrial, Victorian damp.

After an initial recce, Alice and I went to do our shift at the bar – selling cheese toasties for 50p from an old Breville machine and just a single choice of booze. Power Ball, for the uninitiated, is a sophisticated cocktail made from White Lightning and cherryade and it tastes precisely the same going down as it does being vomited back up. We sold it for 20p a glass. A man with a Power Pack – a premixed 2-litre bottle in a rucksack with a length of hose attached – was walking around the party offering gulps for 5p or a cuddle. About four hours in, I spotted Jamie. I remember his name because, at that stage, I was on a run of sleeping with men called James. There had been two already – a James and a Jimmy paving the way for this stranger. He was beautiful. His hair was a halo of dark brown curls, his eyes twinkled, his leather jacket creaked and, if you ignored the baked-bean-can velociraptor hanging above his shoulder, he looked like a lost member of the Strokes. I walked up to him and, with nothing to lose (since my dignity had been thrown down the stairwell of Lupton Flats), told him that he was the most gorgeous man in the room.

“And you’re the most beautiful girl,” he replied.

Shock, pleasure and hunger for the weight of a man against my skin shot through me. Could this person really find me beautiful? Was he kidding? And yet the steady, ravenous look in his eyes was not funny. I kissed him. Barely two sentences had passed between us and suddenly his taste was in my mouth, my hair in his hands, our knees pushing between each other’s thighs.

“Does anyone have a condom?” I hissed, into the pack of women I’d known since puberty. Handbags were ransacked; the score of one of us a source of joy for us all. Someone produced the perforated square of glad tidings, comfort and joy. I grabbed Jamie and headed to the staircase.

As the air hit my face, I realised quite how cold it was under that inky, sparkling, sodium-coloured sky. And how few trees there were. No grass to lie on. No river to slink beside. And yet I wanted this. I wanted it with my mind as well as my body. I wanted it because I had been so convinced that

nobody wanted me. I wanted it because he was beautiful and he thought I was beautiful and he smelled hot. So, with mouths steaming like dragons and chests thumping against each other in the cold, we stumbled into a dark corner of a car park, beside another warehouse and became entwined. If there were rats and broken glass and abandoned polystyrene cups, I don't remember them. If he whispered things in my ear and I moaned things to the sky, I don't remember them either. I don't even remember if we lay down on a folded coat or stood up against a fence. All I remember is that brilliant winter night. The cold, the heat, the thrill, the delight.

And a man who probably doesn't remember my name.

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Illustration: Guardian Design/Getty Images

[The long read](#)

How Shein beat Amazon at its own game – and reinvented fast fashion

Illustration: Guardian Design/Getty Images

By connecting China's garment factories with western gen-Z customers, Shein ushered in a new era of 'ultra-fast' shopping

by Louise Matsakis, Meaghan Tobin and Wency Chen

Tue 21 Dec 2021 01.00 EST

Last year, Julia King, a 20-year-old art student and [influencer](#) from Texas, noticed that a particular kind of sweater vest was taking over the internet. Celebrities including Bella Hadid had been [photographed](#) wearing shrunken, argyle-patterned styles, channelling classic 1990s movies like Clueless during a wave of millennium-era nostalgia. Soon, King found the perfect

example in a secondhand shop: a child-sized pink-and-red knitted vest that fit tightly and cropped on an adult. Using herself as a model, King paired it with jeans and a Dior bag, snapped a picture, and listed it for \$22 on Depop, an eBay-like resellers' app favoured by gen Z.

The vest sold instantly, and she quickly forgot about it. But a month or so later, King received a message from one of her Instagram followers. They alerted her to the fact that an obscure, now defunct Chinese shopping site called Preguy was using her photo to sell its own cheap reproduction of the thrift-store vest. "Seeing the pictures of me up on some random fast-fashion website I'd never heard of before made me really upset," King said.

Replicas of the vest soon began popping up on countless other clothing sites and e-commerce marketplaces, including Amazon, AliExpress, Walmart and Shein. Over time, the image of King's torso would be altered, warping her body shape; at one point, another person's manicured hand was awkwardly Photoshopped on to it.

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Eventually, retailers began using their own product photos, but that didn't make the experience any less surreal. Unknown brands with names such as GadgetVLot and Weania marketed their versions of the vest with jumbled strings of keywords: "Autumn Preppy Style Streetwear Clothes," "Plaid Cotton Knitted Vest Elastic V-neck Sweater Crop."

A vest that had started as a one-off vintage find was now available for anyone to buy, and often for an even lower price. As with many fashion trends, it had been plucked from social media and dropped into the frenzied machine of the global e-commerce market. It was multiplying, almost of its own accord, in the factories of China's swelling ultra-fast-fashion industry.

Over the past decade, thousands of Chinese clothing manufacturers have begun selling directly to international consumers online, bypassing retailers that traditionally sourced their products from the country. Equipped with English-language social media profiles, Amazon seller accounts, and access

to nimble garment supply chains, they have fuelled the acceleration of trends and flooded closets everywhere with a wave of impossibly cheap clothes.

Rest of World, a non-profit, tech-focused journalism outlet based in New York, spent six months investigating this new ecosystem, speaking with manufacturers, collecting social media and product data, making test buys and interviewing shoppers and industry experts in China and the US. The results of that reporting reveal how Chinese apparel makers have evolved to cater to the desires of internet-native consumers – and transformed their consumption habits in the process. Capitalising on this shift are companies such as Shein: the most successful, well-known and well-funded online retailer of its kind.

Shein is now one of the world's largest fashion companies, but little is known about its origins. It was founded in 2012 under the name SheInside, and [reportedly](#) began by selling wedding dresses abroad from its first headquarters in the Chinese city of Nanjing. (A spokesperson for Shein denied it ever sold wedding dresses, but declined to specify other details about its history.) The company says its founder, Chris Xu, was born in China, though a since-deleted [press release](#) described him as being from the US. Shein eventually expanded to offer apparel for women, men and children, as well as everything from home goods to pet supplies, but its core business remains selling clothes targeted at women in their teens and 20s – a generation who grew up exploring their personal style on platforms like Instagram and Pinterest.

Shein's clothes aren't intended for Chinese customers, but are destined for export. In May, the company became the most popular shopping app in the US on Android and iOS, and, [the same month](#), topped the iOS rankings in more than 50 other countries. It's the [second-most popular](#) fashion website in the world after Macys.com.

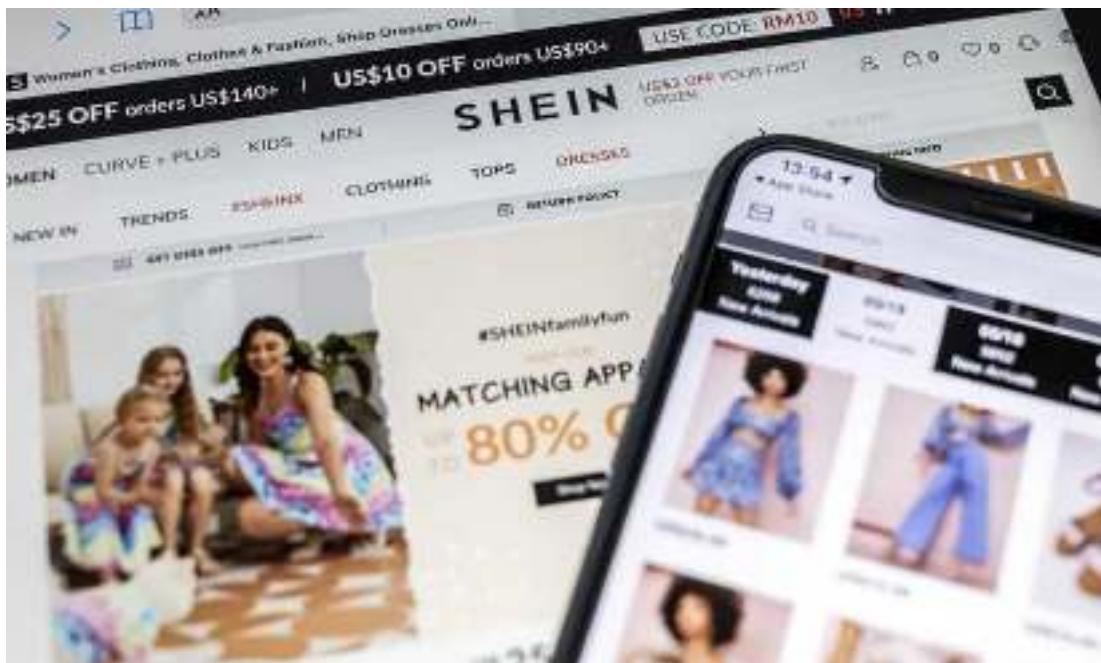
By 2020, Shein's sales had risen to \$10bn (£7.5bn), a 250% jump from the year before, according to [Bloomberg](#). In June, the company [accounted](#) for 28% of all fast-fashion sales in the US – almost as much as H&M and Zara combined. The same month, a [report](#) circulated that Shein was worth more than \$47bn, making it one of the tech industry's [most valuable](#) private

startups. (Shein declined to say whether the sales or valuation figures were accurate.)

Shein's fast growth has brought with it a series of controversies. Numerous [designers](#) accused it of stealing their work, and brands including Levi Strauss and Dr Martens have [sued](#) the company for trademark infringement. (The former settled for an undisclosed sum, and Shein said it doesn't comment on ongoing litigation). It was also pilloried for selling culturally or historically offensive products, such as [swastika necklaces](#). Most notably, advocacy groups and journalists have uncovered evidence that Shein's \$11 bikinis and \$7 crop tops were being made by people working under [brutal conditions](#), while environmental experts warned that those same items were often only being worn once before getting thrown away.

At the heart of these issues is Shein's aggressive business model. Comparisons to fast-fashion giants such as H&M miss the point: it's more like Amazon, operating a sprawling online marketplace that brings together about 6,000 Chinese clothing factories. It unites them with proprietary internal management software that collects near-instant feedback about which items are hits or misses, which allows Shein to order new inventory virtually on demand. Designs are commissioned through the software – some original, others picked from the factories' existing products. A polished advertising operation is layered over the top, run from Shein's head offices in Guangzhou.

Through its manufacturing partners on the ground in China, Shein churns out and tests thousands of different items simultaneously. Between July and December of 2021, it added anywhere between 2,000 and 10,000 individual styles to its app each day, according to data collected in the course of Rest of World's investigations. The company confirmed that it starts by ordering a small batch of each garment, often a few dozen pieces, and then waits to see how buyers respond. If the cropped sweater vest is a hit, Shein orders more. It calls the system a “large-scale automated test and re-order (LATR) model”.



Photograph: Bloomberg/Getty

“Fast fashion is well known for its very frequent replenishment of products,” said Sheng Lu, a professor at the University of Delaware studying the global textile and apparel industry. “But Shein is totally different.” From January to October of 2021, Lu’s research found the company offered more than 20 times as many new items as [Zara](#) and H&M.

Amazon’s activity in China may have inadvertently contributed to Shein’s success. Starting around 2013, the e-commerce giant began [aggressively](#) recruiting manufacturers in the country to sell cheap products abroad on its third-party marketplace. As Chinese sellers joined the platform, western consumers were flooded with thousands of [new brands](#) selling basic goods, from kitchen supplies to electronics chargers, under unfamiliar names like Nertpow, Fretree and BSTOEM.

Amazon gave these factories the enormous opportunity to cut out western middlemen and begin [learning about the tastes](#) of American shoppers. In turn, Amazon was able to undercut the prices of its competitors, and by 2020, [40%](#) of its third-party sellers were based in China.

But the partnership between Amazon and Chinese manufacturers eventually began to sour. Customer complaints about counterfeits and [dangerous](#)

[products](#) from China were putting a dent in the tech company's reputation, and this September, Amazon [banned](#) hundreds of Chinese merchants for allegedly using fake product reviews. Many of the sellers weren't entirely happy with Amazon either, which required them to abide by an ever-shifting set of policies, and to pay hefty fees for services such as warehousing and order fulfilment.

"This cost is very high," said Du Tianchi, the founder of an apparel company in China's Jiangsu province that sells on Amazon and AliExpress. "Once your Amazon storage is out of stock [in the US], you have to replenish it from China, which is time-consuming."

Rising frustration with Amazon among Chinese sellers opened a window for Shein, which recruited many of them to supply its own platform. But Shein didn't just try to compete with Amazon: it joined it. The company offers thousands of its own products on [Amazon's marketplace](#), including some that have become bestsellers.

"Amazon whet the palate for online shopping, taught [Americans] how to shop online, and created the habit," said Allison Malmsten, a China market analyst at Daxue Consulting in Hong Kong. "Shein realised that and decided to optimise it."

Rather than mimicking Amazon directly, Shein grew by bringing traits of China's gamified e-commerce market to the rest of the world. Online shopping in the country has evolved into a form of entertainment, featuring [livestreamers](#), flash sales and enticing pop-ups that compel consumers to scroll through the newest products. Taobao, a domestic Chinese e-commerce platform owned by Alibaba, helped pioneer interactive features such as custom product recommendations, and even built a miniature social network into its app. Shein has used similar components on its platform, including a [points system](#) that rewards shoppers for making purchases, leaving reviews and playing minigames.

Malmsten said that Shein has learned a lot from the strategies of Chinese e-commerce companies. "Shein brought that style [of shopping] to the west, and it really works with Gen Z," she said.

After watching the company's rapid rise, major Chinese tech giants and newer startups are now racing to imitate it. The competition includes ByteDance and Alibaba, which are both working on e-commerce platforms targeting the same international demographic as Shein. Then there are brands like Cider, a Hong Kong-based e-commerce clothing brand backed by the Silicon Valley venture capital firm Andreessen Horowitz. In a [blogpost](#) announcing its investment, the firm described Cider as a “marketplace of global factories that makes it possible for users to have more selection than Zara, at the price point of Forever 21, on-demand”.

Lin Zhen is a Chinese clothing manufacturer and the head of the largest organisation of Amazon sellers in Fujian, one of China's main garment-producing provinces. He has sold clothing to consumers in Europe and North America directly since 2011, long before they learned to buy everything from mattresses to toothpaste on Instagram. Today, Lin's clothing company, Xiamen Ouchengsheng, known as OCS, earns nearly \$100m in annual overseas sales, he told Rest of World. This year, about half came from Amazon, a third from the company's [website](#), and the rest came through AliExpress or selling to other businesses, including Shein.

Lin said Shein originally approached OCS because it was one of the top sellers of dresses on AliExpress, Alibaba's e-commerce platform for markets outside China. Lin said that the company mandated that he produce a certain number of different styles every month, and deliver some in as little as 10 days. “The requirements are kind of high,” he said.

Because of the variety of styles that Shein demands, suppliers that already have a range of production capabilities and function “more like factories” have an easier time working with the company, Lin explained.

Lin said he feels positive about what Shein has done for Chinese apparel sellers. The company's ability to persevere through a number of challenges – worsening tensions between the US and China, global supply chain slowdowns, and an ongoing pandemic – is a result of a “long-term vision” that has included “meticulous supply chain management”, he said.

The secret is Shein's internal software, which connects its entire business, from design to delivery. "Everything is optimised with big data," Lin said. Each of Shein's suppliers gets their own account on the platform. "You can see the current sales, and then it will tell you to stock up more if you sell well, and what you need to do if you don't sell well. It's all there."

The software contains simple design specifications that help manufacturers execute new orders quickly. "A big brand might need a very high-end designer, or a designer with top technology, and even then may only be able to produce 20 or 30 styles a month," said Lin. "But Shein does not have high design requirements. It is possible that a typical university student could get started designing quickly, and the output could be high."



Discarded clothes in the Atacama desert, Chile. Photograph: Martin Bernetti/AFP/Getty Images

A spokesperson for Shein declined to say much about the software, but said the company invests "heavily in training, technology and IT support to help our suppliers become more efficient and profitable".

For years, European brands such as Zara and H&M have embodied [fast fashion](#), shortening the route from catwalk to shop window from months to weeks. But Shein isn't chasing catwalk trends – rather, it often knocks off

items seen on TikTok and Instagram, where hype cycles move significantly faster. Whereas Zara typically asks manufacturers to turn around minimum orders of 2,000 items in 30 days, Shein asks for as few as 100 products in as little as 10 days. “They want factories to be much more nimble,” said Lu.

That pressure to produce clothes more rapidly ends up falling on Chinese garment workers, who sew products for Shein during long shifts in poorly regulated workshops, according to reporting by the Chinese media site [Sixth Tone](#). A knitting machine operator at a factory in the city of Zhejiang told Rest of World that, in China’s garment sector, working overtime is “a certainty”.

“Like all the manufacturing industries in China, the number of employees working overtime is basically already saturated,” said the worker, who asked to remain anonymous because they weren’t authorised to speak about their job publicly. “It’s impossible to go to work from nine to five.” (The factory where they work doesn’t supply for Shein, but does manufacture clothes for other foreign brands and for sale on AliExpress.)

In emailed comments, Shein said the company takes “all supply chain matters seriously and is fully committed to upholding high labour standards”. It added that it takes “immediate action” if it identifies that a supplier isn’t adhering to its code of conduct.

Shein’s software-driven model allows it to remain at arm’s length from the labour force actually making the products on its platform. It can also avoid directly managing inventory for almost any of the products it sells, minimising the amount of goods sitting unbought in warehouses.

To convince suppliers to join its system, Shein had to meet only a very basic bar: paying them on time. Receiving timely payments is a huge problem for factories in China, said Malmsten, the market analyst. “They’ve built a lot of loyalty from their suppliers, so they can have more urgency on their orders,” she said. The result is that more than 70% of products on Shein’s website were listed less than three months ago, Malmsten found, compared with 53% at Zara and 40% at H&M. “Shein just kind of blew Zara out of the water,” she said.

There is a downside to Shein working with so many different factories at the same time: similar products are popping up all over the internet. Because some suppliers such as Lin sell through multiple channels, consumers have complained on social media about seeing the same clothes appear on Shein, AliExpress, Amazon and stand-alone e-commerce sites, all at different prices. The duplicated products are often brandless basics such as T-shirts, or knockoffs of items from independent labels and major fashion houses. Since they don't seem exclusive or unique, consumers are wary about getting duped into paying more than they should.

Communities have sprung up on TikTok, Reddit and Facebook where shoppers share tips about how to find identical-looking clothes for half the price, or how to buy a convincing “dupe” (a copycat version) of this season's hottest designer handbag. Over the summer, when a \$16 crisscross crop top from Amazon went viral, TikTok users began pointing out that it was available for only \$13 on Shein and as low as \$3.83 on AliExpress.

These forums are the natural outcome of an online shopping ecosystem that has made international consumers more aware of the Chinese companies making their clothes. Because they know the bulk of what they buy is coming from China, many people, understandably, assume that similar items originated from the same factories.

While that can be the case, test buys conducted by Rest of World suggested that the truth is more complicated. In September 2021, Rest of World ordered five clothing pieces from different shopping sites (Cider, Shein, Amazon, Halara and Shop-Pêche), and what looked like imitations of the same products on AliExpress. While the items were often extremely similar, most weren't carbon copies. This suggests that while some suppliers are offering the same products on multiple websites, apparel factories in China are also extremely adept at mimicking one another and adapting to the same trends.

“Many of these companies are leveraging data to forecast what items they should produce,” said Lu, from the University of Delaware. “If you use the same data inputs, and you're using the same algorithm, maybe the outcome is also very similar, if not exactly the same.”

“At many of these companies these days – including, I suspect, at Shein – it’s not the fashion guys that are designing clothing,” he said. “It’s engineers. Engineers looking at data.”



Garment workers in China's eastern Jiangsu province. Photograph: AFP/Getty

Among the test buys were two sweater vests, both marketed using Julia King's Depop photo: one from Amazon and one from AliExpress. While constructed in the same way, the colours were different. There were similar differences, subtle but noticeable, between two cherry-print cardigans from Shein and AliExpress. Heart-print jeans from Cider and AliExpress differed in material and stitching. But a pair of yellow platform clogs from Shop-Pêche – a clothing brand with a website saying it was founded in New York – were indistinguishable from their AliExpress equivalent.

In an environment where the competition can rapidly copy your products, a company is set apart by its marketing. Shein has poured significant funds into Google and Facebook [advertising campaigns](#), influencer deals, and even its own social-media reality show co-hosted by Khloé Kardashian. “They’re spending truckloads of money trying to capture consumers who are searching for products,” said Cooper Smith, an e-commerce and fashion

industry analyst who previously worked as the head of Amazon intelligence at Gartner.

Shein's approach appears to be paying off: in August, its website had 150 million visitors, 40% of whom came via search, according to Similarweb, compared with 4% of Zara's. On social media, the company has partnered with countless micro-celebrities, fashion bloggers and reality show contestants, who show off deliveries of trendy clothes in "haul" videos posted to TikTok and Instagram. Before Shein's app was banned by the Indian government last year, the company was at one point [reportedly](#) working with about 2,000 influencers in that country alone.

The Shein model has firmly established a new norm. But alongside that is a question: is it a norm that the clothing industry wants? The company has become a poster child for the energy-intensive fast-fashion sector, which has become notorious for making goods with hazardous chemicals that quickly end up in landfills and oceans. In November, Shein appointed a global head of environmental and social governance, and the company told Rest of World that it has put in place "water and waste management systems within its supply chain", and is working on an "expanded strategy".

It's not clear how long ultra-fast-fashion's environmental impact can be ignored. Several experts expressed concerns about the model's long-term prospects. "Do we really need more companies like Shein? Is this really an exciting business model to celebrate?" said Lu.

But new and well resourced rivals are watching, and following close behind. In October, Alibaba – which pioneered the Taobao-style of shopping that Shein originally learned from – launched its own shopping site for North America and Europe, called AllyLikes. It appears to be a mirror image of Shein, except with far fewer items for sale and a negligible number of reviews.

Rui Ma, founder of the investment consulting firm Tech Buzz China and contributing columnist for Rest of World, said that Alibaba could leverage its existing e-commerce expertise for the project, but it's not clear how much it will be prioritised. ByteDance, meanwhile, is hiring for dozens of jobs

related to [international e-commerce](#), and a crop of other Chinese firms are trying to claim [their own slice](#) of the market, too.

The activity implies that the cycle of ultra-fast-fashion will only keep ticking up in speed and volume, as long as consumers continue to willingly buy into micro-trends – and discard them just as quickly.

“We’re already in this race to the cheapest product, and the number of products just goes up,” said Elizabeth Shobert, the director of marketing and digital strategy at the e-commerce analytics firm StyleSage. “I just keep thinking: where does this end?”

This article was first published on [Rest of World](#).

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A Christmas that changed me Life and style

My father was dying – and the kindness of NHS staff felt like a miracle

When I was a child, my GP father took us to visit lonely patients in hospital each Christmas Day. I was so grateful to see the care he was given in return



Rachel Clarke's father with her children, Finn and Abbey, at Christmas in 2016. Photograph: Courtesy of Rachel Clarke



Rachel Clarke

@doctor_oxford

Tue 21 Dec 2021 02.00 EST

Mummy, when Grampy's burnt will there be fireworks?" my six-year-old demanded. My heart sank as I realised I'd made a terrible job of explaining cremation. We were racing down the motorway so that Abbey and her older brother could see their grandad – my father – one final time. But it was only a few weeks after Bonfire Night. Abbey's one frame of reference for setting people alight was the guy that had so enthralled her on the school playing field, going up in a blaze of sparks and cinders.

As soon as we arrived – on an icy Christmas Eve in 2017 – the children stamped into the dining room where Dad lay on a hospital bed being drip-fed morphine, yellow with jaundice and skeletal. I'd worried that the sight of him might frighten them. But no. "Grampy!" they squealed as they raced to his bedside. Abbey instinctively leant downwards to kiss his forehead, while Finn took the bare bones of Dad's hand in the plumpness of his, and gently, tenderly, squeezed them. Tinsel and fairy lights twinkled around them. He was too weak to speak, but Dad's eyes danced with pleasure. My heart cracked as I watched his face – so very gaunt, stripped bare by cancer – glow with an unmistakable smile.

Christmas Eve was my father's 75th birthday. From the moment he had been diagnosed 15 months ago, he'd known in merciless detail all that would come his way. A retired GP, he had watched cancer claim too many patients to count. Determined not to be tucked away upstairs like a secret, he'd wanted the hospital bed he knew he would never leave to be cocooned in the warmth of his family. We gathered round – his three children, three grandchildren and wife of 47 years – and sang our hearts out to a dying man. And somehow, the children's belted Happy Birthday made genuine joy rise from the grief. Dad's eyes responded with silent delight as he managed to murmur "Thank you, all."

You might think that mistletoe and morphine wouldn't mix. But the truth was, Dad's being at home was a miracle of sorts – and what could be more festive than that? For [the NHS](#) wasn't merely administering opiates. The district nurses, community palliative care team, GPs and occupational therapists had rallied round my father with nothing less than love – smiling, listening, embracing, consoling – ensuring he felt safe and secure enough to die, as he longed to, at home. He was rushing towards the end of his life borne on a thousand tiny acts of kindness, bestowed with grace and effusiveness by NHS staff.

In the early hours of Boxing Day morning, with Mum sleeping on a camp bed at her husband's side, enclosing his palm in hers, he took his final breath. The undertakers arrived, sombre and stiff, with frost on the doorstep. All that remained of the man I had spent a lifetime adoring was an imprint of limbs in cooling, crumpled cotton. The absence was impossible to grasp.

Curled up under a duvet in the vastness of grief, I thought back to my own childhood Christmases when, in between unwrapping presents and devouring turkey, we'd drive to the local cottage hospital. There, the frailest of Dad's patients would lie marooned, facing the festivities alone. Their faces would light up as we trooped from bedside to bedside, Quality Street at the ready, as Dad, in a Santa hat, fussed and made them feel special. Now, I clung with gratitude to the knowledge that what he had given of himself to his patients so freely for four decades had been returned so abundantly, at no cost, by others who cared. I posted an impromptu [tweet of thanks](#) to the NHS: "Last night, cancer finally claimed my dearest Dad. One major surgery, countless chemotherapies, & a small army of community &

palliative care nurses so he could be at home with us. The bill? £zero. Grief, pain, emptiness – but not bankruptcy. Thank you, thank you NHS.”

Improbably, the message set off around the world, being retweeted about 40,000 times and reaching nine million people. Thousands of people I had never met shared their own experiences of the [NHS](#) stepping up when their loved one was dying. “I lost my wife to cancer in October,” wrote one man. “The care and dignity with which she was treated will stay with me for ever.” Then there were the haunting responses from the US: “My dad died too soon because he couldn’t afford chemotherapy.” “My family has been destroyed and bankrupted by mum’s cancer bills.”

No one in the UK, mercifully, has yet been forced to [do a Walter White](#) and build a crystal meth lab to fund their cancer chemotherapy. As a society, we still choose to provide through our taxes for universal healthcare according to need, not ability to pay. The NHS may be tattered, threadbare and at risk of collapse. Nevertheless – despite all our political and economic divisions – we continue to provide this radical act of collective kindness. As I learned the hard way, on this most painful of Christmases, the NHS is surely the greatest social miracle of all.

Breathtaking by Rachel Clarke (Little, Brown) is out in paperback now

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Snow joke: why the Christmas No 1 single is still big business



All for a good Claus ... LadBaby's success has turned the Christmas No 1 into a charity moneyspinner. Photograph: BBC/PA

Tis the season for novelty hits, charity records and, now, songs about baked goods. But though everyone wants a festive No 1, they rarely stay up longer

than the tinsel



[Michael Hann](#)
[@michaelahann](#)

Tue 21 Dec 2021 03.00 EST

For a nation so obsessed with the Christmas No 1 – as much part of the festive season as overboiled sprouts and [Lynx Africa](#) – Britons are awfully sanguine about what they put at the top of the charts each year. Since the chart began in 1952, only 12 Christmas No 1s have had some clear and unambiguous connection to the season: two of them have been versions of [Mary's Boy Child](#) and three have been [Do They Know It's Christmas?](#)

While we have our platonic ideals of what a Christmas No 1 should sound like – somewhere between Mariah Carey and [Slade](#) and slathered in sleigh bells – the history of UK Christmas No 1s tells a different story. The Britain reflected in our seasonal chart toppers is one that is nostalgic, silly and generous. And it is inconstant: at Christmas, Britain wants only something to make it feel good, and is happy to cast its December favourites aside the minute it's New Year's Eve.

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There was nothing terribly remarkable about the first 16 years of Christmas singles in Britain. Although Dickie Valentine (Christmas Alphabet, 1955) and Harry Belafonte (Mary's Boy Child, 1957) took actual Christmas songs to No 1, the top spot usually looked as it might have at any other time of the year. Between 1962 and 1967, Elvis, the Beatles and Tom Jones kept the No 1 position to themselves: no one thinks of Return to Sender, I Want to Hold Your Hand, I Feel Fine, Day Tripper, Green, Green Grass of Home or Hello, Goodbye as Christmas records. The first inkling that the role of the Christmas charts would change came in 1968, when another member of the McCartney family took Paul's place at the top of the charts. Mike McCartney's group the Scaffold may have had unimpeachable artistic credentials – the poet Roger McGough was a member – but [Lily the Pink](#) was clearly and indisputably a novelty song, and it set a trend for novelty songs to overperform at Christmas. The next year, Two Little Boys by Rolf Harris was No 1; in 1971 it was Benny Hill's Ernie (The Fastest Milkman in the West); in 1972, the nine-year-old Jimmy Osmond reached No 1, and any record by a child is, de facto, a novelty record.

There was a novelty revival again in the early 80s, with St Winifred's School Choir; Renée and Renato – not a novelty song, so much as a turgid ballad, but watch the video and you'll see why how in the heyday of Duran Duran this has to be called a novelty record – and the Flying Pickets (again, a cappella covers have to be counted as novelties). Only two novelty acts have taken No 1 since then – [Mr Blobby](#), in 1993, was the first – but the most recent, LadBaby, has colonised Christmas, topping the charts for the past three years and looking set to do so again this year.

[LadBaby](#) – singing cover versions of old hits, retooled to be about sausage rolls – is not some complete underdog championed by an indulgent public. It is a finely honed machine, with the specific purpose of reaching No 1 at Christmas. The LadBaby singles have been released through a company called Instrumental, which scrapes social media and streaming information

to analyse and predict musical success. Each year really is a campaign: fans are encouraged to download, not stream (each download is equivalent to 100 streams on a premium account, or 600 on a free account); there are team-ups with other artists and their fanbases (last year it was Ronan Keating) to promote the songs; and there is an unrelenting focus on timing. If all you want is to be the Christmas No 1, only Christmas week matters, so LadBaby's single is released one week before Christmas, hammered to death and then forgotten. Last year, [Don't Stop Me Eatin'](#) (Journey's Don't Stop Believin', rewritten to be about baked savouries) was straight in at No 1 for Christmas Day, then fell to No 78 the week after, then disappeared entirely. But in the meantime, it will have raised money for the Trussell Trust, to help alleviate hunger.

The true heyday of the [Christmas](#) No 1 lasted from 1973 to 1990. It is not that every No 1 over that period was brilliant, because many of them really weren't. It is more that this was the era of the tinsel arms race, when the bauble-industrial complex really went to work: eight of the 12 Christmas-themed festive No 1s come from this span of year, beginning with the song that, more than any other, embodies the British Christmas – Slade's Merry Xmas Everybody – and ending with Cliff Richard's Saviour's Day, a song that no one bar his fanbase wanted to hear a second time.

The 90s were an inchoate decade for Christmas hits – the Spice Girls had three seasonal chart-toppers in a row, and the nearest we got to a Christmas-themed No 1 was East 17's Stay Another Day, which was Christmassy only because it had bells on it, and the group dressed in snowy white for the video. But a new order was imposed in 2002, when reality TV first tightened its fingers round the Christmas charts, and the winners of the show Popstars: The Rivals had their first No 1. Girls Aloud's [Sound of the Underground](#) suggested a manufactured future might not be too bad, but the stream of X Factor winners who followed rarely looked designed for careers that would last beyond the tree coming down; we remember Alexandra Burke and Leona Lewis, but who mourns the disappearance of Shayne Ward, Leon Jackson, Matt Cardle, Sam Bailey and Ben Haenow? All of them have had a Christmas No 1 thanks to the efficiency of Simon Cowell's Syco machine.

The effect of the Syco hegemony was to provoke another change. People evidently wanted Christmas to be about something more than Simon Cowell being able to buy another supercar or house. The first stirrings came in 2009, when an organised campaign sent [Rage Against the Machine](#)'s Killing in the Name to No 1, but that was just rage. It took others to harness the rage and turn it into something benevolent, and so came the rise of the Christmas charity single.

Of the last 10 Christmas No 1s, six have raised money for charity. You might never wish to listen to the Lewisham and Greenwich NHS Choir or Military Wives With Gareth Malone ever again. You might crave Mull of Kintyre (Christmas 1977) by comparison, but at least no one need feel nauseous about where the money goes to from so many of the last decade's Christmas No 1s.

Like Christmas itself, the Christmas No 1 is almost always a disappointment. But that's perhaps as it should be: a Christmas hit is a last-minute stocking filler, something to be played with and dispensed with. It is not a work of art. It's just that sometimes, somehow, it strikes a nerve (even if that's songs that didn't reach No 1 – by Mariah Carey or the Pogues or [Wizzard](#) – that seem more Christmassy). If Christmas No 1s seemed better in the past, that's just a function of ageing, and it was ever thus. "Does your granny always tell you that the old songs are the best?" sang Noddy Holder on Merry Xmas Everybody. And, really, is I Love Sausage Rolls actually any worse than Mr Blobby or There's No One Quite Like Grandma? Of course it's not. Christmas is as Christmas was and Christmas will ever be.

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2021.12.21 - Opinion

- 'Foreign criminals' are just an excuse: the Tories are trying to take away rights from all of us
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‘Foreign criminals’ are just an excuse: the Tories are trying to take away rights from all of us

[Daniel Trilling](#)

The idea that the UK is not deporting enough people is a convenient justification for overhauling the Human Rights Act



A protest in London against government plans to deport people to Jamaica, February 2020. Photograph: Aaron Chown/PA

Tue 21 Dec 2021 01.00 EST

Boris Johnson’s government is trying to chip away at your rights, but it wants you to believe that this is only a problem for other people. The [police bill](#) threatens the right to protest, but it is presented as a measure to deal with “extremist” political activists. The [judicial review bill](#) threatens to curtail the

right to judicial review – a process that allows individuals to seek redress from public institutions that may have harmed them – but it is framed as an effort to reclaim power from “unelected” judges. The [elections bill](#), which seeks to introduce voter ID, could effectively disenfranchise [2 million people](#), but the government claims it will address “fraud”.

Each time the government wishes to push forward with measures such as these, it evokes a folk devil – a threatening outsider or internal enemy whose presence is used to justify the harsh new reform. These folk devils are more myth than reality, but they can cause great social damage if left unchallenged. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the government’s most recent initiative: its wide-ranging plans to [overhaul the Human Rights Act](#), which were announced last week.

Writing about the plans [in the Times](#), the justice secretary, Dominic Raab, evoked the spectre of a “dangerous criminal” who was able “to frustrate deportation on human rights grounds”. The case certainly sounded serious. A convicted drug dealer, who had also been found guilty of battery against his partner and paid no maintenance to his child, appealed against a deportation order, claiming a right to family life under article 8 of the European convention on human rights. “This,” wrote Raab, “is the kind of case that gives human rights a bad name.”

Yet if the example sounded strangely familiar, that’s because it’s not the first time it has been aired. Not only did Raab tell the same story during [his speech to the Conservative party conference](#) in October, but as several [legal observers](#) have [pointed out](#), the case he was appearing to reference actually dates from 2009. It is so old, in fact, that Theresa May made a passing mention of it in [her conference speech](#) when she was home secretary, an entire decade ago.

Why, then, would Raab turn to such a worn-out example to make his case for a major reform of the justice system in 2021? One reason, perhaps, is because there aren’t many such cases around. The government has already made it much more difficult to appeal against deportation, not least with the 2014 [Immigration Act](#). In recent years, the media has been full of headlines about deportees being pulled off flights after last-minute legal appeals, but these tend to be on technical rather than human rights grounds. In February

2020, for instance, several people were removed from a [scheduled deportation flight to Jamaica](#) because they had not been given proper mobile phone access in detention, and were therefore unable to contact their lawyers in the days before departure.

Another reason is that when it comes to folk devils such as these, the facts don't really seem to matter. The stereotype of the foreign criminal has exerted a powerful hold over British politics for years. It is where popular fears about crime, immigration and race – almost always focused on people with roots in Africa, Asia or the Caribbean – merge together. Successive governments, both Labour and Conservative-led, have frequently promised to crack down on the issue by speeding up deportations and reducing people's rights, yet the idea remains as politically potent as ever.

To many people, it will seem like common sense that people from other countries who commit serious crimes in the UK should be expelled as a matter of public safety. What's actually been happening over the past two decades is that governments have sought to widen the category of who counts as a “foreign criminal”, and who is therefore eligible to be expelled.

The UK Borders Act of 2007 introduced automatic deportation for foreign national offenders who served prison sentences of 12 months or more. Under David Cameron, the coalition government introduced Operation Nexus, a data-sharing initiative between police forces and the Home Office, which saw [people convicted of minor offences](#) – or even merely suspected of being involved in crime – refused the right to stay in the UK. Immigration itself is increasingly criminalised, with a new offence of “illegal working” created in 2016, and [a proposal in the nationality and borders bill](#) currently making its way through parliament to impose prison sentences of up to four years on people who overstay their visas.

This is a vicious cycle, because even as the law has become harsher, the idea that the UK is not deporting enough people persists. The result is not that the British public has been made safer necessarily, but that large parts of the public are having their right to belong thrown into question. The toughening of immigration laws has helped create a growing number of people who live in forms of legal limbo – around 215,000 children, for instance, half of whom were born in the UK, [lack proper documentation](#). At the same time,

the push for greater powers to deport and remove rights from people with roots in other parts of the world unsettles millions of people in a country as diverse as the UK. That's why another recent government proposal – to extend the state's powers to strip citizenship from dual nationals and people born overseas – [struck a nerve](#).

When there is public opposition to deportations – usually when a charter flight has been scheduled – the government will always try to keep the focus on the serious crimes committed by some of the deportees. It skates over the fact that many are convicted of lesser offences, and that in many cases the deportation will rip families apart. “The whole thing is messing with my head – he’s my dad,” said 17-year-old Nico McLean [to the Independent](#) this summer, on learning his father was being placed on a flight to Jamaica on the basis of an ABH offence committed in 2014. “It will affect me and my little brother. How do you explain to a seven-year-old that he’s not going to see your dad?”

This is the sort of human reality that underlies the government’s rhetoric. At the moment Labour is choosing to oppose these moves on the grounds of competence alone. “A quarter fewer foreign criminals have been deported in the last year than in the previous year,” complained the shadow justice secretary Steve Reed while debating Raab’s proposals last week. “It is clearly not the [Human Rights Act](#) that is preventing foreign criminals from being deported; it is this incompetent Conservative government.” Seeking to out-compete the Tories on toughness may or may not be useful electoral positioning for Labour. But unless we directly challenge the stereotypes on which the government’s hardline new laws are based, the vicious cycle is likely to continue.

- Daniel Trilling is the author of *Lights in the Distance: Exile and Refuge at the Borders of Europe*

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What I changed my mind about in 2021Veganism

Going vegan this year was one of the best decisions of my life

[Shaista Aziz](#)

Having long Covid made me reassess my health and wellbeing, and the benefits have been profound



Tibits vegetarian and vegan restaurant in London. Photograph: Wilfrido Tunon/Alamy

Tue 21 Dec 2021 03.00 EST

At the start of 2021, I was diagnosed with long Covid. It was a huge relief to finally know why I had been struggling so much with my health – extreme fatigue, continuous coughing and, most distressing of all, brain fog and panic attacks. The diagnosis was also the beginning of a journey that would take me – of all places – to a life-changing decision about what I eat.

After further tests, I was told it was very likely that I had caught Covid a while ago, possibly at the start of the pandemic, before tests were available. I'm very fortunate to have a brilliant and caring GP who listens to me and provides me with support. He signed me off work for two months and helped me understand that I needed real rest to assist my recovery.

Once I received my diagnosis I spoke to two friends who had also been instrumental in helping me with my recovery and health. One of them had become a vegan a few years ago in order to manage her own health issues. She gently suggested I should think about trying a plant-based diet to help reduce the inflammation in my body, which was causing me pain, contributing to the deep fatigue, and harming my mental health. And that's how I became a vegan.

I've always been curious about veganism but never really thought it was something I would embrace. I also don't know any women of colour or Muslims who are vegan. This was part of the reason why I had never really explored it . You cannot be what you cannot see.

In the west, veganism is seen as an indulgence for the white middle classes; and in this country at least, it's expensive and difficult to envisage for anyone who doesn't fit into these categories. There's a kind of elitism linked to veganism, which I think puts people off from exploring it.

Part of this is based in economic reality: it's often more expensive to buy fresh vegetables and fruit – and spend time cooking them – than it is to rely on fast food or processed food, especially for people and families on budgets or struggling with the cost of living. There's so much judgment heaped on people over the food they consume in the UK; it's inherently linked to class – as most things are here. I'm understanding and seeing this more clearly.



Shaista Aziz at the Happy Friday vegan kitchen in Oxford. Photograph: Neetu Singh

This is just one of the reasons why vegans are also frequently portrayed as people without humour or joy; whose entire personalities are reducible to what they eat. We're portrayed as smug people who spend time making our own yoghurt, trying out new ways to make a Sunday roast from mung beans. Oh and, of course, winding up the likes of Piers Morgan. The latter accusation I have no problem with.

Forget the stereotypes. Changing my mind about veganism has radically changed my life and vastly improved my health. The inflammation has eased off hugely, I have far more energy generally, I'm sleeping better, I feel less exhausted and stressed, and the panic attacks have receded. I've resumed counselling too, which is also really helping my recovery.

To be clear, I do not believe that anyone can wish away long Covid or any other illness through veganism alone or a change in lifestyle. But I do believe that we create healthier and more equal societies when everyone has the same opportunity to consciously be aware of how we eat and live.

There's a big rise in the numbers of people in the UK exploring veganism. Research by BBC Good [Food](#) shows more than 20% of children in the UK

are either already vegan or would like to become so in the near future.

According to a recent report from the University of Illinois, food production contributes around 37% of global greenhouse gas emissions; animal-based foods are estimated to produce twice the emissions of plant-based ones. The arguments in favour of changing our diets – whether for less meat or no animal-based products – are overwhelming.

I'm very much at the beginning of my vegan journey. However, I've learned that being vegan doesn't require having to spend lots of money or shopping in fancy places. It does require being organised and planning meals and shopping visits. I've been reading up on new recipes and learning how to eat well on a budget. I'm of Pakistani heritage: a lot of the food I've grown up eating is vegan or can easily be adapted to be so.

Changing my mind about veganism has also introduced me to a community of people, including people and women of colour, who are on the same journey as me. It's simply one of the best decisions I've ever made.

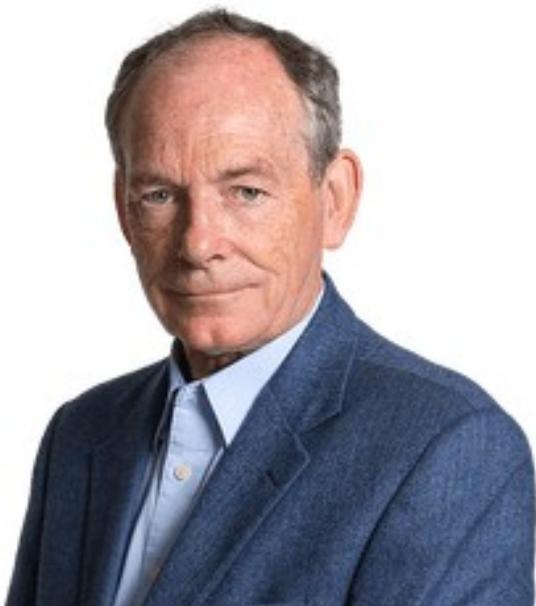
Shaista Aziz is a journalist, comedian, writer and Labour councillor for Oxford city council

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[Opinion](#)[Coronavirus](#)

Pity a public that has so many questions about Covid. Who should be believed?

[Simon Jenkins](#)



People need evidence if they are to accept more curbs on their liberties, but all we get are bland, unqualified statistics



An NHS vaccination bus in Farnworth, near Manchester, 20 December 2021. Photograph: Oli Scarff/AFP/Getty Images

Mon 20 Dec 2021 12.50 EST

British politics this week faces an intellectual crisis. It is one of whom to believe. With yet another [wave of Covid](#) at full throttle, the cabinet is reportedly split on whether to rely on its one “winner” from the pandemic, vaccination, or whether to return to mass lockdown. There is no disputing that the Omicron variant is highly infectious. There is bitter argument about how to contain it.

On one side is a prime minister, Boris Johnson, and much of his party, pleading for no lockdown. Vaccination, they say, is the one sure defence against this disease. What matters is hospitalisations and, at [about 1,000 a day](#), they are [far behind the 4,200](#) of January this year. Deaths are still further behind. Lockdown would savage the economy, even if relieved by state subsidy. It would bring back social and psychological isolation and devastate not just elderly people but often young people, too. The costs would be enormous.

These, mostly Tory, politicians, believe the new outbreak should be dealt with via health policy. The NHS coped a year ago, but the service remains

desperately inefficient. Only now is it apparently looking at how to expand care of elderly people to relieve hospital beds. Only now is it [proposing to treat more patients at home](#), while making greater use of GPs, pharmacies and private testing clinics. The NHS is there to absorb pressure. That it may need more money cannot justify a return to lockdown. To these politicians, we should bank on vaccination and take a risk.

On the other side are the massed ranks of what is called “the science”. While frontline doctors and medical staff face a sudden rise in patient numbers, scientists on the Sage committees face a nightmare. It is that of a relentlessly mutating virus that nobody yet knows whether vaccination can contain, let alone a vaccination that is readily available to all. They are backed by a strident train of statisticians, modellers, researchers and drug corporations.

Each of these groups is a lobby with a vested interest in caution. Their motto is protect the NHS; or – by implication – the NHS will fail to protect you. Don’t take the risks, they cry. This year may not be as bad as last, but you don’t know. When you are racing the devil, you do not stop to ask if he is tiring. Lock down now.

Both sides in this argument are political because both are playing a political game. They are exploiting fear and toying with risk. The public’s only sensible reply is constantly to demand evidence for what is claimed.

Just now we are being told that the Omicron variant may be a weaker and possibly final form of the virus. Some [scientists say it is, some say not](#). Professor of social psychology Stephen Reicher, who sits on a Sage subcommittee, says alarmingly that by 2022 it will be too late for an effective circuit-breaker lockdown, but how and why? What sort of lockdowns are most effective in reducing infection? Why might shops and schools be left open but indoors pubs and restaurants forced to close? Is that a cost-benefit equation? How many more lives are saved by 2-metre distancing compared to 1 metre? What is the real effect of a two-week “circuit breaker”, or is it just a macho gesture? These seem reasonable questions to which the coronavirus bureaucracy must have answers if it is so sure of the solutions.

The public should now be deluged with evidence if it is to trust government with renewed infringements on its liberties. Yet all it gets are bland, unqualified statistics that have lost any shock value.

This is now a political battleground, one of lives lost, devastated and diminished, of costs collateral and unseen, and of ever-dwindling faith in authority. The British government is taking the power to apportion those costs across the nation. Its one duty in return is to present evidence. It must give reasons, reasons galore.

- Simon Jenkins is a Guardian columnist
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OpinionConservatives

Look at the lauding of David Frost and see a government deranged by the poison of Brexit

[Polly Toynbee](#)



A once great election-winning machine is in freefall, brutally exposed by the exit of Johnson's guru, and the mess left behind



‘Of all the airily out-of-touch Conservative party conference speeches, Lord Frost’s was the wildest: ‘The British renaissance has begun!’’ Photograph: BBC News

Mon 20 Dec 2021 11.00 EST

Off he stomps in his union jack socks, the pantomime John Bull who caused so much damage by doing his master’s bidding. As [David Frost](#), the former Brexit minister, departs in a self-important huff, his reasons for going illuminate the strange decline of a once great election-winning machine.

Frost’s resignation letter – which takes aim at Covid restrictions – usefully captures the Tory party’s deranged state of mind. Its call for “a lightly regulated, low-tax, entrepreneurial economy” brims with a primal yearning to liberalise health, safety and food regulations, and workers’ rights. Recently he [warned](#) that Brexit will fail if “all we do is import the European social model”. Of all the airily out-of-touch Conservative party conference speeches, his was the wildest: “The British renaissance has begun!”

He walks away just as all the world can see the consequences of Brexit: acute job vacancies, supply blockages, daffodils set to rot in the fields, pigs incinerated on farms and the latest figures from the Office for National Statistics [showing](#) £12bn lost in EU trade in October alone. Frost was a

bellicose negotiator who lacked the cunning, tact or subtlety for the job, [reneging](#) on the Northern Ireland protocol in his *own* deal: his value was slavish obedience to Boris Johnson, who plucked him from obscurity at the Scotch Whisky Association, after he had left a career at the Foreign Office.

But he's a useful emblem for the state of a party whose fact-denying Brexit disease now infects every other policy. These irrationalists, like the court of King Canute, think the waves of Covid can be commanded by cabinet fiat, defying Sage's [dire warnings](#) that the NHS will be overwhelmed without stronger restrictions now. Ten cabinet ministers, a third, are [reported](#) to be resisting. Though Frost's letter calls for a post-Brexit Britain at the "cutting edge of modern science", these eccentrics deny science, evidence, probability and numbers. After "freedom day", where were their preparations for this variant – or the next? They share Johnson's contempt for the precautionary principle, despite the public seeing security as any government's first duty: will voters ever forgive him for an NHS meltdown or more preventable deaths after his capitulation on Monday?

Look at how out of kilter this party is with most opinion. "High on their own supply," as one pollster tells me, their ideologies are not shared by Tory voters, or even Tory members, as Prof Tim Bale of Queen Mary University of London, finds. The party has lost the ballast of those "men in grey suits" who used to get a grip on the guy ropes. Now even Graham Brady, chair of the 1922 Committee of Conservative backbenchers, is [damning](#) current restrictions as a "disastrous assault on liberty" that evoke the Soviet Union.

01:13

David Frost says his resignation is not about PM's leadership – video

In contrast, the pollsters at Savanta ComRes [find](#) half of voters support a two-week lockdown and 64% would ban large events. The public is not blasé about this disease. Meanwhile, in the Sunday Telegraph, a flurry of hand-wringing rightwingers [beseech](#): "We need to return to our core beliefs and remember what makes us Conservatives." (Danny Kruger MP, co-author of that article, was stood down by Michael Howard as a Tory candidate after calling for "creative destruction" in public services.) Old Labour hands will laugh knowingly at Tories responding to public rejection by diving deeper into their more obscurantist true religions: that's usually the far left's

affliction. People in Westminster normally worry about getting “cut-through” to voters; everything is upside down when voters see how little cut-through their own views have with the party in power.

When exactly did the Tories lose their chameleon talents? Labour used to despair of the party’s skill at remaking its image with whatever it took to tune into the public mood. Remember David Cameron’s pre-2010 brand, his [hugging huskies](#), his “big society” – disguising the austerity axe to come.

That self-preserving instinct deserted them the day they set aside caution and chose [Boris Johnson](#), knowing his every fault, his reckless life of alternative truths and his unfitness for any responsible job. The Faustian pact yielded them gold in the 2019 election – but now the price is paid. Their punishment is disaster after disaster. Much worse may happen if the unexpurgated tapes of former No 10 spokesperson Allegra Stratton emerge. Long recordings of her rehearsals exist, reports the Mail on Sunday, where she is thrown all the unanswerable questions about Johnson’s “love children”, “mistresses”, his money and every lifelong wrongdoing. No wonder they scrapped those press conferences.

If Downing Street parties took place, 63% of people [say](#) the prime minister should resign. The Guardian’s picture of his cheese-and-wine event in May 2020 was taken when the rest of us could meet just one person outside for a single hour, two metres apart. The Tories steel themselves for a possible brutal verdict from Sue Gray, the new head of the inquiry into whether several parties took place in Downing Street and elsewhere (she is dubbed the “battleaxe” by nervous insiders).

If the Tories purge their leader, they’ll install someone infected by yet more unpopular small-statery. It’s in their nature. But it’s those who chose Johnson who are the problem, too many of them are the fanatics and fantasists who brought us the great Brexit delusion. Look how Steve Baker just “[cancelled](#)” the culture secretary, Nadine Dorries, from his 100-strong Clean Global Brexit [WhatsApp](#) group of MPs to see quite how divided and factious they are; how remote from voters. Can they recover from this frenzy in time? Never underestimate their focus on power, but what would it take to revive a party that lionised David Frost, and basks in all this outlandish Steve Bakerism?

- Polly Toynbee is a Guardian columnist
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China

China mulls bolstering laws on women's rights and sexual harassment

Draft safeguards would mark major development in women's rights as China faces calls for gender equality



Zhou Xiaoxuan, widely seen as the face of the country's #Metoo movement, lost a sexual harassment case she had brought against a well-known TV host in September. Photograph: Noel Celis/AFP/Getty Images

Rhoda Kwan in Taipei

Tue 21 Dec 2021 02.56 EST

China is considering strengthening its laws on women's rights to provide more robust protection against gender-based discrimination and sexual harassment in the workplace.

The draft regulations come amid the rise of a nascent [#MeToo movement](#) in China, which activists say has been hampered by the country's strict regime of censorship and oppression against all signs of dissent.

The major draft revision was presented to China's top lawmaking body for deliberation on Monday. The amendment marks a significant development in the country's women's rights legislation since it was implemented almost three decades ago.

Under the proposal, any comments with sexual connotations, inappropriate bodily behaviour, sexually explicit images, or suggestions of benefits in exchange for sex towards a woman without her consent constitutes sexual harassment, according to Reuters.

The definition is the clearest to be provided since the law protecting women's rights was introduced almost three decades ago. Previous provisions stated merely that sexual harassment against women was prohibited.

An employer would also breach the proposed laws if they fire or reduce a woman's salary for getting married, becoming pregnant, taking maternity leave, or breastfeeding in the workplace. All schools and employers are also encouraged to implement systems to prevent sexual harassment.

The new regulations also extend to the home, granting women who bear the responsibility of taking care of the household the right to demand compensation from her husband in a divorce. The amendment comes after a court in Beijing granted a housewife a 50,000 yuan payout from her former husband as labour compensation in February, in a case that sparked nationwide attention and debate.

The standing committee of the National People's Congress is expected to debate the amendments to the Law on the Protection of Women's Rights and Interests on Friday at the earliest. The implementation timeline remains unclear.

The proposal comes amid a whirlwind of international attention on gender and power inequality in China, after the tennis star Peng Shuai made apparent allegations of sexual assault against a former vice-premier in early November.

The [Women's Tennis Association has continued to voice concerns over Peng's welfare](#) after the player on Sunday denied having accused anyone of sexual assault in what appeared to be an informal interview with a Singaporean Chinese-language outlet.

Peng had earlier posted a social media post describing a non-consensual sexual encounter with the former vice-premier Zhang Gaoli, which was removed by censors within 30 minutes. Peng disappeared from public life for three weeks after the post, sparking concerns among the international sporting community about her welfare.

The WTA has announced it will suspend all tournaments in China after several failed attempts to reach the player directly.

China's patriarchal society is reflected in its ruling and business elite, which is dominated by men.

The country's fledging #MeToo movement hit a major setback in September, when [Zhou Xiaoxuan, a 28-year-old woman, lost a high-profile sexual harassment court case](#) she had brought against a well-known broadcasting host with strong political ties. Zhou is widely seen as the face of the country's #MeToo awakening.

Earlier this month, a former Alibaba employee accused the company of firing her after [she made sexual harassment allegations against a colleague](#).

[Philippines](#)

Philippines Typhoon Rai death toll reaches 375 as desperate survivors plead for supplies

Calls for urgent aid as some residents remain without drinking water and food in the aftermath of Typhoon Rai

01:29

Philippines reels from devastation wrought by Typhoon Rai – video

AFP

Mon 20 Dec 2021 20.47 EST

The death toll from the strongest typhoon to hit the [Philippines](#) this year has surged to 375 , as desperate survivors pleaded for urgent supplies of drinking water and food.

The Philippine Red Cross reported “complete carnage” in coastal areas after Super Typhoon Rai left homes, hospitals and schools “ripped to shreds”.

The storm tore off roofs, uprooted trees, toppled concrete power poles, smashed wooden houses to pieces, wiped out crops and flooded villages - sparking comparisons to the damage caused by Super Typhoon Haiyan in 2013.

“Our situation is so desperate,” said Ferry Asuncion, a street vendor in the hard-hit seaside city of Surigao, which was devastated by the storm.

Residents urgently needed drinking water and food, he said.



Cars pass by a toppled electrical post due to Typhoon Rai in Surigao city, Surigao del Norte, Philippines. Photograph: Jilson Tiu/AP

At least 375 people were killed and 56 are missing in the latest disaster to hit the archipelago, with 500 more injured, the national police said.

More than 380,000 people fled their homes and beachfront resorts as Rai slammed into the country on Thursday.

One of the hardest-hit islands was Bohol - known for its beaches, "Chocolate Hills" and tiny tarsier primates - where at least 94 people have died, provincial Governor Arthur Yap said on Facebook.

Many wooden houses in Bohol's coastal town of Ubay were flattened and small fishing boats destroyed on the island, where a state of calamity has been declared.

A senior official at the national disaster agency said he had not expected as many deaths.

"I was proven wrong as it appears now coming from the reports," said Casiano Monilla, deputy administrator for operations.

Rai hit the Philippines late in the typhoon season: most cyclones develop between July and October.

Scientists have long warned that typhoons are becoming more powerful and strengthening more rapidly as the world becomes warmer because of human-driven climate change.



Surigao City was among the regions hardest hit by the typhoon. Photograph: Jilson Tiu/GREENPEACE HANDOUT/EPA

The Philippines, which is ranked among the most vulnerable nations to the impacts of climate change, is hit by an average of 20 storms every year, which typically wipe out harvests, homes and infrastructure in already impoverished areas.

In 2013, Typhoon Haiyan was the strongest storm ever to have made landfall, leaving over 7,300 people dead or missing. The death toll from Rai is not expected to get anywhere close to that number.

The Philippines has an established disaster management system that provides early warnings of approaching storms and moves vulnerable communities into evacuation centres.

But the storm has dealt a savage blow to the tourism sector, which was already struggling after Covid-19 restrictions decimated visitor numbers.

“SOS” has been painted on a road in the tourist town of General Luna on Siargao Island, where surfers and holidaymakers had flocked ahead of Christmas, as people struggled to find water and food.

“There’s no water any more, there’s a water shortage, on day one there was already looting in our neighbourhood,” Siargao resort owner Marja O’Donnell told CNN Philippines.

There has also been widespread destruction on Dinagat and Mindanao islands, which along with Siargao bore the brunt of the storm when it hit, packing wind speeds of 195 kilometres (120 miles) an hour.

Police reported 167 deaths in the Caraga region, which includes Dinagat, Siargao and the north-eastern part of Mindanao.

At least 14 people died on the Dinagat Islands, provincial information officer Jeffrey Crisostomo told broadcaster ABS-CBN, saying the area had been “levelled to the ground”.



Rai hit the Philippines late in the typhoon season – most cyclones typically develop between July and October. Photograph: Angeli Cantillana/GREENPEACE HANDOUT/EPA

With electricity knocked out in many areas, there was no signal or internet, hampering efforts to assess the storm's damage.

Thousands of military, police, coast guard and fire personnel were deployed along with food, water and medical supplies, while heavy machinery - including backhoes and front-end loaders - were sent to clear roads.

President Rodrigo Duterte vowed to “look for another” two billion pesos (\$40m) in aid, which would double his previous pledge.

But some expressed frustration at the government's response.

“No one showed up, I don't know where the politicians and (election) candidates are,” said a visibly angry Levi Lisondra, a resident in Surigao, on the northern tip of Mindanao.

“We paid big taxes when we were working and now they can't help us.”

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/dec/21/philippines-typhoon-rai-death-toll-reaches-375-as-desperate-survivors-plead-for-supplies>

Ghislaine Maxwell

Ghislaine Maxwell's sex-trafficking trial: jury begins deliberations

Prosecutors say Maxwell, who has pleaded not guilty to all charges, manipulated victims and groomed them for sexual abuse

- *This article contains depictions of sexual abuse*



Maxwell's team has maintained that she is a scapegoat for Jeffrey Epstein, who cannot be prosecuted because he is dead. Photograph: Jane Rosenberg/Reuters

[Victoria Bekiempis](#) in New York

Mon 20 Dec 2021 17.06 EST

The jury began deliberating late on Monday afternoon in [Ghislaine Maxwell](#)'s sex-trafficking trial in New York.

Closing arguments had wrapped up in federal court in Manhattan earlier on Monday with a simple, chilling message.

“She was a grown woman who preyed on vulnerable kids,” prosecutor Alison Moe told jurors.

“She targeted a girl whose father had just died. She targeted a girl whose mother was an alcoholic. She targeted a girl with a single mom who was struggling to raise her daughters.

“Maxwell was a sophisticated predator who knew exactly what she was doing. She ran the same playbook again and again and again.”

The 59-year-old Briton was arrested in New Hampshire in July 2020 for alleged involvement in the sexual abuse of minor teenagers by Jeffrey [Epstein](#), her longtime boyfriend.

The financier and convicted sex offender, who mixed with powerful associates including Prince Andrew and former presidents Bill Clinton and Donald Trump, was arrested in July 2019 for crimes against girls as young as 14. He [killed](#) himself in custody about a month later.

Maxwell pleaded not guilty to all charges.

Four of her siblings – Kevin, Isabel, Christine and Ian – attended court on Monday. Approaching the courthouse, they walked arm-in-arm. In court, they spoke with their sister in French. As Moe detailed the allegations, the siblings appeared to look down much of the time. Maxwell sometimes scribbled notes.



Kevin, Christine, Isabel and Ian Maxwell arrive in court on Monday.
Photograph: Peter Foley/EPA

“She manipulated her victims and she groomed them for sexual abuse,” Moe said. “She caused deep and lasting harm to young girls.”

Prosecutors say Maxwell’s romantic relationship with Epstein, from the early 1990s until the early 2000s, showed her complicity in his crimes.

“Maxwell and Epstein were partners,” Moe said. “They were partners in crime who sexually exploited young girls together.

“Ladies and gentlemen, when you’re with someone for 11 years, you know what they like. Jeffrey Epstein liked underage girls. He liked to touch underage girls. Maxwell knew it.”

Moe pointed to photos that showed Epstein and Maxwell with “doting looks ... cheek-to-cheek, arms wrapped around each other”. She showed pictures of Maxwell and Epstein swimming naked and Maxwell “massaging his foot with her breasts”.

Maxwell was Epstein’s house manager.

“She managed all the details down to the lotion and the oils,” Moe said. “She was in on the whole thing.

“Remember that you see nothing, hear nothing, say nothing,” Moe added, referring to a manual Maxwell for staff at Epstein’s mansion in Florida. “In that house, behind closed doors, Maxwell and Epstein were committing horrifying crimes.”

Moe recapped testimony from four accusers.

There was [Jane](#), whom Epstein started to sexually abuse at age 14. She said Maxwell was sometimes present for, and participated in, his abuse.

“There were hands everywhere,” said Jane, who testified about group sexual encounters. Jane, who testified pseudonymously, said she met Maxwell in summer 1994, while attending a youth arts camp in Michigan.

There was [Carolyn](#), who was also 14 when Epstein started to abuse her in the early 2000s. Once, before a massage, Carolyn said Maxwell “came in and felt my boobs and my hips and my buttocks and said … that I had a great body for Mr Epstein and his friends”. Carolyn, who testified with her first name, said Virginia Giuffre, a longtime Maxwell and Epstein accuser, introduced her to them. Maxwell allegedly said: “You can bring her upstairs and show her what to do.”

[Kate](#), another accuser to testify pseudonymously, said she was 17 when she met Maxwell in Paris around 1994. Not long after Maxwell introduced her to Epstein in London, she said, Maxwell called to say Epstein’s masseuse had canceled and could she give him a massage. Kate said Maxwell led her to Epstein, who initiated a sexual encounter. Kate said she saw Epstein, and had sexual encounters, several times over the next few years.

Another accuser, Annie Farmer, said she went to Epstein’s property at 16, in spring 1996. Maxwell, Annie said, said she wanted her to experience a massage.

“She said to get undressed and get [under] the sheet on the massage table, and I did … She pulled the sheet down and exposed my breasts, and started

rubbing on my chest and on my upper breast.”

In court on Monday, Moe said: “They’re not all suffering from the same mass delusion. Being molested is not something you forget, ever. You remember an adult woman groping your breast. You remember a middle aged man touching your vagina. You remember feeling scared and frozen and trapped and confused.”

Moe contended that Maxwell’s willingness to procure girls stemmed from money. From 1999 to 2007, Epstein gave Maxwell around \$30m, the court heard.

“You don’t give someone \$30m unless they’re giving you exactly what you want, and what Epstein wanted was to touch underage girls,” Moe said. “When Maxwell took that money, she knew what it was for and now you do, too.”

Moe also pointed to a Maxwell’s “little black book with her victims’ names in it”.

Concluding after more than two hours, Moe told jurors: “When you consider all of the evidence, and use your common sense, you will reach the only version consistent with the evidence: Maxwell is guilty.”

Defense attorney Laura Menninger insisted the allegations against Maxwell were the “product of erroneous memories, manipulation, and money”.

“The money brought the accusers to the FBI with their personal injury lawyers sitting right there next to them … the government played you a montage of Epstein’s houses, his bank accounts, his artworks, his cars, his planes, his helicopters, his bank accounts, his message pads – just like a sensationalist tabloid would.”

When Epstein died, Menninger said, prosecutors “pivoted” to Maxwell.

- *Information and support for anyone affected by rape or sexual abuse issues is available from the following organisations. In the US, [Rainn](#) offers support on 800-656-4673. In the UK, [Rape Crisis](#) offers support*

on 0808 802 9999. In Australia, support is available at [1800Respect](#) (1800 737 732).

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Donald Trump

Crowd boos Trump after he reveals he took Covid booster

Trump once again claimed credit for producing the vaccine, saying vaccine wariness was ‘playing into the hands’ of his opponents



Donald Trump gestures to the crowd as he arrives to speak at a campaign rally in July 2019. Photograph: Carolyn Kaster/AP

Guardian staff and agencies
Mon 20 Dec 2021 19.09 EST

Donald Trump revealed he received a booster shot of the Covid-19 vaccine, drawing boos from a crowd of his supporters in Dallas.

The former president made the disclosure on Sunday night during the final stop of The History Tour, a live interview show he has been doing with the former [Fox News](#) host Bill O'Reilly.

“Both the president and I are vaxxed,” O’Reilly said at the American Airlines Center, drawing some jeers from the audience, according to video shared online by O’Reilly’s “No Spin News.”

“Did you get the booster?” he asked the former president. “Yes,” Trump responded. “I got it, too,” O’Reilly said, eliciting more hectoring.

“Don’t! Don’t! Don’t! Don’t! Don’t!” Trump told the crowd, waving off their reaction with his hand.

While Trump has expressed opposition to vaccine mandates, he has long taken credit for the vaccines developed on his watch, a stance he reiterated during the interview.

“We got a vaccine done,” he said, telling supporters that wariness of the vaccine was “playing into the hands” of his opponents. “Don’t take it away from ourselves. You’re playing right into their hands when you sort of like, ‘oh the vaccine’ … no mandates, but take credit.”

'You're playing right into their hands' when you doubt the vaccine, President Trump says. pic.twitter.com/xJc7JTL0cR

— No Spin News (@NoSpinNews) [December 20, 2021](#)

At the same time, he has refused to urge his supporters to take them, even though Republicans remain far less likely than Democrats to be protected.

For instance, while other world leaders, including Mike Pence, Joe Biden, and Kamala Harris received their doses publicly to promote the lifesaving medicine, Trump chose to receive his in private – an acknowledgement of the unpopularity of the vaccine with large swaths of his base.

While he has blamed the Biden administration for high levels of vaccine skepticism, he repeatedly undermined public health recommendations while in office, encouraging the use of unproven treatments and playing down the threat the virus posed as he tried to prioritize economic recovery and secure a second term.

Trump had told the Wall Street Journal in a September interview that he “probably” wouldn’t get a booster shot.

The US government has been urging all eligible Americans to get booster shots as quickly as possible as the country faces a surge in the new, highly contagious omicron variant, which recently overtook delta to become the [dominant variant in the US](#).

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2021/dec/20/trump-covid-19-booster-shot-crowd-boos>

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[Joe Biden](#)

Commander in, Major out: White House pet shakeup after biting incidents

Joe Biden brings in new German shepherd puppy, to be joined by a cat in January



Commander shows what he can do. Photograph: The White House/AFP/Getty Images

Associated Press in Washington
Tue 21 Dec 2021 03.59 EST

President [Joe Biden](#) on Monday introduced the newest member of his family, a purebred German shepherd puppy named Commander, while the first lady's office said the cat she promised more than a year ago to bring to the White House would finally join them in January.

But the news was not so good for another member of the Biden animal family. The family decided it was best for their other German shepherd, Major, to live in a quieter environment with friends after some biting incidents.

Biden shared a photo on his official Twitter account of the three-month-old male puppy with a caption that said: “Welcome to the White House, Commander.” He also released a brief video of him tossing a ball to Commander and walking the leashed dog into the White House.

Commander was born on 1 September and arrived at the White House on Monday afternoon, a gift from the president’s brother James Biden and sister-in-law Sara Biden, according to Michael LaRosa, a spokesperson for the first lady, Jill Biden.



Champ, right, and Major. Photograph: Mandel Ngan/AP

His name appears to be a play on Biden’s status as commander-in-chief of the US armed forces.

The first lady said shortly after Biden won the November 2020 presidential election that they would be getting a cat. LaRosa said the feline would join the family in January.

The Bidens had two other German shepherds – Champ and Major – with them at the White House before Commander.

But Major, a three-year-old rescue dog, ended up in the proverbial dog house following two biting incidents in the months after his arrival last January. He was [sent home to Delaware for training](#) before he was returned to the White House. White House officials had explained Major's aggressive behaviour by saying he was still getting used to his new surroundings.

But he was sent away again. Now, his permanent exile from the executive mansion appears official.

“After consulting with dog trainers, animal behaviourists, and veterinarians, the first family has decided to follow the experts’ collective recommendation that it would be safest for Major to live in a quieter environment with family friends,” LaRosa said in an emailed statement. “This is not in reaction to any new or specific incident, but rather a decision reached after several months of deliberation as a family and discussions with experts.”

Champ died in June at the age of 13.

CNN first reported Commander’s arrival after he was seen scampering around the White House south lawn on Monday.

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2021/dec/21/commander-in-major-out-white-house-pet-shakeup-after-biting-incidents>

Headlines monday 20 december 2021

- [Boris Johnson Raab says PM and staff's garden gathering was within lockdown rules](#)
- [Live UK Covid: Labour ridicules claim No 10 picture shows staff meeting](#)
- [Exclusive Boris Johnson and staff pictured with wine in Downing Street garden in May 2020](#)
- [Chatting over cheese and wine Anatomy of No 10 gathering](#)

[Boris Johnson](#)

No 10 says garden photo shows PM and staff having work meetings

Spokesperson says wine-drinking was within rules and it is impossible to tell if people were 2 metres apart

- [Anatomy of a lockdown gathering](#)
- [Coronavirus – latest updates](#)



Boris Johnson and staff pictured with wine in the Downing Street garden in May 2020. Photograph: The Guardian

*Peter Walker Political correspondent
@peterwalker99*

Mon 20 Dec 2021 09.55 EST

Downing Street has defended a photograph showing [Boris Johnson](#), his wife and up to 17 staff seemingly having drinks in the Downing Street garden during the first lockdown, insisting they were discussing work at the time.

The prime minister's spokesperson said that while it was a work meeting after a Covid press conference on 15 May 2020, the fact it happened outside normal work hours meant it was within the regulations for them to be drinking wine.

The photo, [shared with the Guardian](#), appears to show several groups sitting or standing closely together. However, Johnson's spokesperson said it was impossible to tell whether or not people were 2 metres apart, as was the rule at the time for work meetings.

Labour has suggested the picture shows apparent law-breaking, with Keir Starmer saying the argument it portrayed a work meeting “is a bit of a stretch by anybody’s analysis”.

On Friday, Downing Street denied anything social took place on that evening, following a 5pm Covid press conference hosted by Matt Hancock, then the health secretary.

Johnson's spokesperson said on Monday the photo showed “individual debriefings following a press conference, discussing work issues”. He said: “There were meetings taking place both inside and outside No 10. This shows colleagues who were required to be in work, meeting following a press conference to discuss work.”

Asked about the presence of bottles of wine and glasses, the spokesperson said: “These were individuals working outside of normal working hours. It was not against the regulations for those individuals to have a drink outside working hours, but still discussing work.”

Covid rules at the time stated that if in-person work meetings had to be held, people should remain at least 2 metres apart. The spokesperson said: “I can’t comment on exactly the level of social distancing based on a single picture

from May 2020. Obviously, all individuals required to be in work sought to obey social distancing guidelines.”

Q&A

What were the Covid rules in England on 15 May 2020?

Show

The Downing Street gathering on 15 May 2020 took place under the rules of England's first coronavirus lockdown. Two days earlier, an amendment to Covid regulations had come into force allowing the first between-household contact since lockdown began. However, this was limited to two people, who could only meet outdoors and at a distance of at least 2 metres.

The rules were less specific about social gatherings at work. Very few workplaces were open, and when this was the case, staff were urged to keep as distanced as possible. No 10 staff were allowed to be at their office, as national government staff were classified as key workers.

However, a key objective set out in the guidelines for workplaces that remained open was to “maintain 2-metre social distancing wherever possible”. In-person meetings should only take place if “absolutely necessary”, they said, and if that was the case, a 2-metre distance should be kept at all times.

Was this helpful?

Thank you for your feedback.

The picture shows Johnson's wife, Carrie, sitting next to him, apparently holding their then newborn son. Asked why she was there, the spokesperson said that was because she lived there: “The prime minister's wife has use of her garden. It is effectively her garden.”

The shadow chancellor, Rachel Reeves, claimed on BBC Radio 4's Today programme that the photo did seem to suggest rules being broken. “I do think there is evidence of law-breaking ... The country is sick of it,” she said.

Speaking later Starmer said there were “very serious questions to be answered”. The Labour leader said: “Just look at the photo and ask yourself: is that a work meeting going on, or is that a social event? I think the answer is pretty obvious.”

Speaking earlier, [Dominic Raab](#) had argued the photo simply showed people “having a drink after a busy set of work meetings”, and that other workplaces would have acted similarly.

00:59

'They would sometimes have a drink': Raab defends picture of wine in No 10 garden – video

Asked about the photo, Raab, the justice secretary, told BBC One's Breakfast: “I know how hard that No 10 team were working, as the hub, the fulcrum of the crisis response. I think there's a lot of exhausted people, and they, as people do in work, were having a drink after the formal business had been done.”

Asked why the photo appeared to show people standing more closely together, Raab appeared to argue that this mattered less as they were outdoors, something not mentioned in the guidance: “There is significant difference. It's always been clear from the public health advice that outdoors you've got a much greater chance of reducing the risk because of the ventilation that comes with it.”

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2021/dec/20/raab-says-pm-and-staffs-garden-gathering-was-within-lockdown-rules>

[**Politics live with Andrew Sparrow**](#)

[**Politics**](#)

Johnson says he must ‘reserve possibility of taking further action’ after 91,743 new cases – as it happened

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/live/2021/dec/20/uk-covid-news-labour-picture-staff-meeting-christmas-cases-restrictions-lockdown-coronavirus-omicron-latest-updates>

Boris Johnson

Boris Johnson and staff pictured with wine in Downing Street garden in May 2020

Exclusive: photograph raises fresh questions for No 10 after denial of a social event at time of Covid restrictions

- [Chatting over cheese and wine: anatomy of Downing Street lockdown gathering](#)



The picture shows Boris and Carrie Johnson, bottles of wine and a lack of social distancing, calling into question No 10's insistence that a 'work meeting' was under way.

[Rowena Mason, Heather Stewart and Peter Walker](#)

Sun 19 Dec 2021 13.37 EST

Boris Johnson has been pictured with wine and cheese alongside his wife and up to 17 staff in the Downing Street garden during lockdown, raising questions over No 10's insistence a "work meeting" was taking place.

The photograph was shared with the Guardian following No 10's denial last week that [there was a social event on Friday 15 May 2020](#) including wine, spirits and pizza inside and outside the building. Johnson's spokesman said Downing Street staff were working in the garden in the afternoon and evening.

However, the picture raises questions over that assertion. Bottles of wine are in evidence, there is a lack of social distancing and 19 people are gathered in groups across the Downing Street terrace and lawn.

Q&A

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The rules were less specific about social gatherings at work. Very few workplaces were open, and when this was the case, staff were urged to keep as distanced as possible. No 10 staff were allowed to be at their office, as national government staff were classified as key workers.

However, a key objective set out in the guidelines for workplaces that remained open was to "maintain 2-metre social distancing wherever possible". In-person meetings should only take place if "absolutely necessary", they said, and if that was the case, a 2-metre distance should be kept at all times.

Was this helpful?

Thank you for your feedback.

At the time social mixing between households was limited to two people, who could only meet outdoors and at a distance of at least 2 metres. In workplaces, guidance said in-person meetings should only take place if “absolutely necessary”.

Angela Rayner, the deputy leader of the Labour party, described the picture as “a slap in the face of the British public”, adding: “The prime minister consistently shows us he has no regard for the rules he puts in place for the rest of us. Alleged drinking and partying late into the evening [at No 10] when the rest of us were only recently getting one daily walk.”

The prime minister has faced a [string of allegations of partying](#) and socialising in No 10 while Covid restrictions were in place. He was forced to order a civil service inquiry, though its [head stepped down on Friday](#) over allegations of his own Christmas party.

The past week has been described as the worst of the prime minister’s premiership, with a [major rebellion by Conservative MPs](#) over Covid regulations followed by a historic [byelection defeat](#) and the shock [departure of the Brexit minister, David Frost](#).

In the new image shared with the Guardian, Boris Johnson and Carrie, who appears to be holding their newborn baby, are seen sitting around a table with a cheeseboard and wine, along with two people believed to be a civil servant and an aide. Last week No 10 said Johnson was working in the garden before retiring to his flat at 7pm.

On that day Matt Hancock, then health secretary, had given a 5pm [press conference](#) urging people to stick to the rules and not take advantage of the good weather over the May weekend to socialise in groups.

At the time schools were still shut and pubs and restaurants were closed, with strict controls on social mixing. More people had been allowed to return to their workplaces, but guidance said social distancing of 2 metres should be followed at all times and “only absolutely necessary participants should attend meetings and should maintain 2-metre separation throughout”.

The Guardian reported last week, as part of a joint investigation with the Independent, that [Johnson had been present for an alleged social gathering](#) in Downing Street on 15 May 2020. Sources said the prime minister had spent about 15 minutes with staff, telling an aide inside No 10 that they deserved a drink for “beating back” coronavirus.

Insiders claimed about 20 staff drank wine and spirits and ate pizza following a press conference on that day, some in offices inside No 10 and others going into the garden. Some staff stayed drinking until late into the evening, they alleged. The sources described the event as having a “celebratory” feel given the initial loosening of some restrictions and the good weather in London that day.

[contact the Guardian](#)

In response, No 10 said Johnson and staff had been working in the garden and made no reference to the allegations of drinking alcohol and socialising. The prime minister’s official spokesperson said last week: “In the summer months Downing Street staff regularly use the garden for some meetings. On 15 May 2020 the prime minister held a series of meetings throughout the afternoon, including briefly with the then health and care secretary and his team in the garden following a press conference.

“The prime minister went to his residence shortly after 7pm. A small number of staff required to be in work remained in the Downing Street garden for part of the afternoon and evening.”

Hancock, who was health secretary before he had to resign after breaking social distancing rules with his aide, Gina Coladangelo, said it was “not true” that he was involved in a social gathering. “After the press conference, which finished at approximately 5.53pm, Matt debriefed his own team, then went to the Downing Street garden to debrief the prime minister. He left Downing Street at 6.32pm and went back to the Department for Health and Social Care,” Hancock’s spokesperson said. There is no suggestion he was drinking or stayed late.

In light of the new picture, it is understood No 10 maintains that people drinking at work was not against regulations at the time. A Downing Street

spokesperson said on Sunday: “As we said last week, work meetings often take place in the Downing Street garden in the summer months. On this occasion there were staff meetings after a No 10 press conference.

“Downing Street is the prime minister’s home as well as his workplace. The prime minister’s wife lives in No 10 and therefore also legitimately uses the garden.”

There have been a string of accusations that Downing Street staff broke rules by having Christmas parties, with the prime minister presiding over a Zoom quiz and giving a speech at a leaving do.

Johnson ordered an investigation after a video was leaked to ITV showing aides laughing about a Christmas party with wine and cheese, and suggesting passing it off as a business meeting. Simon Case, the cabinet secretary, stepped down from leading that investigation after it emerged his own office had held a Christmas party, and has been replaced by another senior civil servant, Sue Gray.

Rayner said: “This picture is utterly heartbreaking to see for the people that spent the first wave of the pandemic on the frontline of our health service, desperately missing their loved ones, enduring loneliness, missing funerals ... Every day that passes seems to add another event to Sue Gray’s growing list of investigations into alleged unlawful gatherings in Downing Street.”

“Boris Johnson’s government is run with the attitude that it is one rule for them, and another for everyone else. He is totally unfit to lead our country.”

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2021/dec/19/boris-johnson-and-staff-pictured-with-wine-in-downing-street-garden-in-may-2020>

Boris Johnson

Chatting over cheese and wine: anatomy of Downing Street lockdown gathering

No 10 says no rules are being broken in photograph that has come to light from first coronavirus lockdown

- [Boris Johnson and staff pictured with wine in Downing Street garden in May 2020](#)



The event took place amid the first lockdown, at which point specific rules against workplace socialising had yet to be set out.

Peter Walker

[@peterwalker99](#)

Sun 19 Dec 2021 13.38 EST

At first glance, it has all the hallmarks of a laid-back post-work social gathering on an uncommonly warm British spring evening. There are 19 people present, sitting or standing in four distinct groups, each one of which appears to have drinks. There are bottles of red wine and a cheeseboard.

The [event, on Friday 15 May 2020](#), took place in the garden behind Nos 10 and 11 Downing Street, a mix of terrace, lawn and formal planting that is used variously for formal entertainment, domestic leisure and work.

Across England, people were still banned from meeting more than one adult from another household socially – and then it had to be outdoors and at a 2-metre distance.



The full image from 15 May last year.

On the terrace in the foreground, sitting at a rectangular garden table surrounded by rattan-style chairs, Boris Johnson chats to his then fiancee, Carrie Symonds, who is cradling what appears to be the couple's newborn son, [Wilfred](#).

On the same table, at which a civil servant and an aide are chatting to each other, is a half-empty bottle of wine, a wine glass and a wooden board with bread and cheese.

There are two other small groups – another terrace table of four people, also with wine, and a man and a woman sitting on the grass behind them. There is also a congregation of eight men and one woman standing around an apparently bottle-laden table, also on the lawn.

Q&A

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Was this helpful?

Thank you for your feedback.

Even if you did not know this was the Downing Street garden, it might be evident these are work colleagues, with most wearing formal office clothes. But the sense of the occasion, as portrayed in the photo, seems very much social.

These are, it would seem, people who had been working – in this instance, the then health secretary, Matt Hancock, had fronted a televised Covid press

conference in Downing Street at 5pm – but were now winding down afterwards.

The presence of Carrie next to her partner, the prime minister, reinforces that sense. Attenders' body language is relaxed and there are no laptops, files or notepads to take minutes on show.

Reports about the evening in question, [passed to the Guardian](#) before the photo emerged this weekend, said about 20 staff drank wine and spirits and ate pizza, both in offices inside No 10 and in the garden on 15 May 2020, with some people allegedly staying drinking until late into the night.

Presented with the photograph, Downing Street said it showed colleagues having work meetings, which, given the hours involved, sometimes included drinks, and were not against the then regulations.

The event took place amid the first lockdown, at which point specific rules against workplace socialising had yet to be set out – but only because people were only supposed to be in work if absolutely necessary.

Downing Street staff were permitted to do this, as key workers, but the guidelines on in-person meetings were very clear: these should only take place if absolutely necessary, and then with everyone distanced at least 2 metres. That is very much not happening in the photograph.

Ultimately, it will come down to the watching public looking at the photograph, reading the No 10 explanation, and being asked to accept that this was purely a work event. For many, this could feel like quite a leap of faith.

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2021.12.20 - Coronavirus

- [Live Coronavirus news: Thailand to consider ending quarantine-free travel; EU set to back Novavax vaccine](#)
- [Christmas Omicron dashes high streets' hopes of bumper weekend](#)
- [Netherlands Shopkeepers say lockdown has left them 'broken'](#)
- [Fauci Omicron 'raging through the world' and travel increases risk](#)

[Coronavirus live](#)

[Coronavirus](#)

Covid news: Queen changes Christmas plans; EU drug regulator approves Novavax vaccine – as it happened

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Consumer spending

Omicron dashes high streets' hopes of bumper weekend before Christmas

Visits to retailers over last weekend before holiday fail to fulfil hope of windfall after pandemic struggles



People dressed as elves in central London on the last Saturday for shopping before Christmas. Photograph: Tolga Akmen/AFP/Getty Images

[Kalyeena Makortoff](#)

[@kalyeena](#)

Sun 19 Dec 2021 14.47 EST

Shoppers have pulled back from UK high streets in the crucial final weekend of shopping before Christmas, figures reveal, as the retail and hospitality sectors continue to struggle amid fears over the spread of the Omicron coronavirus variant.

The latest data from retail intelligence firm Springboard showed that visits to retailers around the UK on Saturday and Sunday were up just 0.8% and down 1.8%, respectively, compared with a week earlier, reversing the usual trend for footfall to soar ahead of the big day.

Guardian graphic

Hopes of a bumper December to compensate for losses over the pandemic have been thoroughly dashed, with the number of overall visits 25.2% lower across all retail sites on Sunday compared with 2019, while for shopping centres they plunged by 32.9%. Saturday's visits were down 18.1% and 25.2%, respectively.

“Shoppers are clearly cautious about venturing out and are self-censoring,” Springboard’s insights director, Diane Wehrle, said. “All of this drop has been driven by fewer trips being made to high streets and shopping centres, with high streets particularly hard hit.”

Pubs and restaurants have also been suffering since England’s chief medical officer, Prof Chris Whitty, [urged the public to keep socialising to a minimum](#), prompting a swathe of cancellations. The world-renowned chef and restaurateur Michel Roux Jr said the sector was now facing its worst drop-off in bookings since the start of the pandemic.

“This is as bad as March in 2020, the first lockdown,” he told Sky’s Trevor Phillips on Sunday. “The biggest issue for me is the lack of communication from the government, we have been told one thing, the public has been told one thing … it means what should be our most prosperous month as restaurateurs and hoteliers and publicans, is now turning into a loss because people are not turning up.”

The bleak figures will add to pressure on the government, which has been accused of [bringing in a “lockdown by stealth”](#) without providing the accompanying financial assistance. Rishi Sunak, who [jetted back to the UK](#) from California on Friday, is under intense pressure to intervene.

Roux warned this lack of support could not only affect the nearly 3 million people employed across the hospitality sector, but the wider “ecosystem” of

security, cleaners, refuse collectors and suppliers.

According to Springboard, total high street footfall was flat on Saturday and down 5.9% on Sunday, with shoppers in particular avoiding trips to London, where local authorities [declared a major incident on Saturday](#) linked to the surge in Omicron cases. It came after Britain [reported the largest 24-hour increase](#) in the number of new cases since the pandemic began on Friday.

On the Saturday before Christmas – usually the climax of the entire festive season – footfall was down 0.3% compared with a week earlier and just 1% higher than on 4 December, according to a separate measure by Sensormatic Solutions.

Central London suffered a 13.6% week-on-week drop in visits on Sunday, according to Springboard, while footfall in outer London fell 8.6%. In total, visits to city centres outside the capital dropped by 13.4% in the same period, though smaller high streets benefited from the pullback, with market towns experiencing a 3% increase compared with last weekend. Open-air retail parks were among the few destinations where visits increased, up 4.8%.

Overall footfall on Saturday was 23% higher compared with 2020, while Sunday's figure was 33.2% higher. That reflects last year's disastrous festive season with tier 3 Covid restrictions in place across much of the country, and soaring cases, which eventually led to the south-east and east England being put into the strictest tier 4 just days before Christmas.

Meanwhile pub and restaurant bosses are warning that [thousands of hospitality firms could go bust](#) by January without financial support. "We don't know whether we are coming or going in our industry, we are losing business, we are losing livelihoods," Roux said.

Jeff Galvin, co-owner of Galvin Restaurants, a group of five upmarket venues in London, described the situation for cancellations as "pretty devastating", telling Associated Press: "For private hires, bigger tables of say eight to 16 people, those have pretty much disappeared. These are the bread and butter for restaurants at Christmastime."

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streets-over-omicron-fears](https://www.theguardian.com/business/2021/dec/19/shopper...)

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Coronavirus

Dutch shopkeepers say Christmas lockdown has left them ‘broken’

‘Everyone will go shopping in Belgium and Germany,’ retailers warn as coronavirus closure begins



Christmas lights in the centre of Eindhoven in the Netherlands. Photograph: Nicolas Economou/NurPhoto/Rex/Shutterstock

[Daniel Boffey](#) in Brussels and [Sam Jones](#) in Madrid

Sun 19 Dec 2021 11.00 EST

Dutch shopkeepers say they have been “broken” by the Netherlands’ new [Christmas lockdown](#), which has come into effect.

“Nowhere in Europe is there such a strict regime as in the [Netherlands](#),” said Jan Meerman, the director of INretail, the Dutch retailers association.

He added: “From a health perspective, I understand that something needs to be done, but then it is important that the cabinet also makes a grand financial gesture and generously reimburses entrepreneurs. As far as we are concerned, 100% compensation. Many colleagues are still heavily indebted from the first lockdowns, they can’t take this any more … They are broken by these harsh measures.”

As of Sunday, all non-essential stores, bars and restaurants in the country are closed until at least 14 January, and schools and universities shut until 9 January.

In a devastating blow to many Christmas plans, households are allowed only four visitors a day on Christmas Eve, Christmas Day, Boxing Day and 31 January and New Year’s Day. Two visitors are permitted on other days.

The announcement on Saturday night by the prime minister, Mark Rutte, who had described the lockdown as “unavoidable” due to the wave of the Omicron Covid variant “bearing down”, came ahead of what would be the biggest sales week for many shops.

There had been a rush to do last-minute Christmas shopping in many Dutch cities on Saturday night as people became aware of the impending deadline. But the retailers organisation warned that “soon everyone will be going shopping in Belgium and Germany, where everything is open as usual”.

The Dutch government provides financial support in the form of compensation for fixed costs where there is 30% loss in turnover in a quarter compared to the previous year and wage support where there is a 20% loss.

But Gonny Eussen of the hairdressers’ union, Anko, said the enforcement of the lockdown late into the quarter would leave businesses unable to claim compensation despite losing their best financial weeks.

She said: “For the support packages, don’t look at the turnover per quarter, but per month. Because now an important part of December is gone, but we did generate turnover for the rest of the fourth quarter. As a result, many

entrepreneurs are probably not eligible for support, even though they miss out on the best weeks.”

Across [Europe](#), governments are contemplating tougher restrictions in the light of the spread of the Omicron Covid variant, including in Italy.

In Belgium, where thousands of protesters demonstrated in central Brussels on Sunday for a third time against further restrictions, Christie Morreale, the minister for health in the Walloon region of Belgium, could only say a further lockdown was “not on the table for the government at this stage”.

Spain’s prime minister, Pedro Sánchez, called on his country to keep its guard up as the Omicron variant spread and as the number of cases per 100,000 people in [Spain](#) rose to 511.

“Although the incidence is still lower than in neighbouring countries, it isn’t good because it’s a clear and real warning of the threat to the health of our fellow Spaniards, and as such it must compel us to intensify our actions as the virus grows,” Sánchez said in a televised address on Sunday morning.

In the Netherlands, Boris van der Ham, from the Association of Free Theatre Producers (VVTP), said his sector had already resigned itself to a miserable Christmas period following a decision on 27 November to force hospitality to shut at 5pm.

He said: “The biggest blow fell two weeks ago when the evening lockdown was announced. Performances cannot simply be moved to the afternoon.”

Maurice Limmen, the president of the Association of Universities of Applied Sciences, said the higher education sector recognised the need for the closure of institutions but Loes Ypma, from the organisation representing childcare, said she was concerned.

She said: “The closure of schools and out-of-school care has emotional consequences for all children, especially children in a vulnerable situation. Children deserve a safe place, school and out-of-school care is that for many.”

The European Commission said on Sunday it had reached an agreement with BioNTech and Pfizer for an extra 20m doses of their Covid-19 vaccine to be delivered to EU member states in the first quarter of 2022.

These doses were in addition to a scheduled delivery of 195m doses, bringing the total number of Pfizer/BioNTech doses to be delivered in the first quarter to 215 million, a commission statement said.

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/dec/19/dutch-shopkeepers-christmas-lockdown-netherlands-left-them-broken>

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Coronavirus

Fauci: Omicron ‘raging through the world’ and travel increases Covid risks

- Chief White House medical adviser: breakthroughs will happen
- [22,000 new cases but New York says hospitals can cope](#)
- [Harris: White House did not see Omicron coming](#)



A mobile coronavirus vaccine clinic in Manhattan. In New York, authorities said 22,000 people tested positive for Covid-19 on Friday, eclipsing the previous record since testing became widely available. Photograph: Andrew Kelly/Reuters

*[Richard Luscombe](#)
[@richlusc](#)*

Sun 19 Dec 2021 12.10 EST

The [Omicron variant](#) of Covid-19 has “extraordinary spreading capabilities”, the top US infectious diseases expert said on Sunday, and promises to bring a bleak winter as it continues “raging through the world”.

Dr Anthony Fauci’s warning came ahead of the busy holiday travel period, which he said would elevate the risk of infection even in vaccinated people.

In an interview with NBC’s Meet the Press, Fauci, Joe Biden’s chief medical adviser and head of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, urged Americans to get [booster shots](#) and wear masks.

He also appeared to attempt damage control over Vice-President Kamala Harris’s contention that the Biden administration [“didn’t see”](#) the Omicron or Delta variants coming.

Harris’s comments on Friday were “taken out of context”, Fauci insisted, and referred to the “extraordinary number of mutations” of Covid-19 rather than any lack of readiness.

“We were well prepared and expected that we were going to see variants,” he said. “There’s no doubt about that.”

Fauci looked ahead to a scheduled national address by Biden on Tuesday, in which he said the president would “upscale” elements of the White House Covid winter plan.

“He’s going to stress several things,” Fauci said. “... Getting people boosted who are vaccinated, getting children vaccinated, making testing more available, having surge teams out, because we know we’re going to need them because there will be an increased demand on hospitalisation.”

The White House reset comes at the end of a week in which the US [surpassed 800,000 deaths](#) from coronavirus and saw a [17% surge in cases](#) and a 9% rise in deaths.

Medical experts have warned of an Omicron-fueled [“viral blizzard”](#) sweeping the country. Biden has spoken of a [“winter of severe illness and death”](#) among the unvaccinated.

Fauci repeated such dire predictions on CNN's State of the Union.

"One thing that's clear is [Omicron's] extraordinary capability of spreading, its transmissibility capability," he said. "It is just raging through the world."

"This virus is extraordinary. It has a doubling time of anywhere from two to three days in certain regions of the country, which means it's going to take over. If you look at what it's done in South Africa, what it's doing in the UK, and what it's starting to do right now, the president is correct."

"It is going to be tough. We can't walk away from that because with the Omicron that we're dealing with it is going to be a tough few weeks to months as we get deeper into the winter. We are going to see significant stress in some regions of the country, on the hospital system, particularly in those areas where you have a low level of vaccination."

Many cases of Omicron are so-called "breakthrough" infections. [Florida](#), one of the hardest-hit states throughout the pandemic, reported on Sunday that about [30% of new infections](#) were in people vaccinated but yet to receive a booster.

Fauci and other experts have said immunisations alone will not prevent the spread of Omicron, but are confident that the risk of serious disease or death is vastly reduced in those who are vaccinated.

Dr Francis Collins, director of the National Institutes of Health, told CBS's Face the Nation he was concerned about the effects of Omicron on those who are not vaccinated.

"It's a brand new version and so different that it has the properties to potentially be evasive of the vaccines and other measures that we've taken," he said.

"The big message for today is if you've had vaccines and a booster you're very well protected against Omicron causing you severe disease. Anybody who's in that 60% of Americans who are eligible for a booster but haven't yet gotten one, this is the week to do it. Do not wait."

In New York, authorities said [22,000 people tested positive](#) for Covid-19 on Friday, eclipsing the previous record since testing became widely available.

Meanwhile, a study in South Africa this week suggested that the Pfizer vaccine has a weaker efficacy against Omicron in patients who have received two doses than it does against the Delta variant.

The [research by Discovery Health](#), the country's largest medical insurance administrator, calculated a 70% protection from hospitalization compared with the unvaccinated, and 33% protection against infection. The group said that represented a drop from 93% hospitalization protection and 80% infection prevention for Delta.

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2021.12.20 - Spotlight

- The big news quiz of 2021 Do you know your Jackie Weavers from your German leaders?
- 'It makes me cry with laughter!' Readers recommend 15 fabulous Christmas films
- My winter of love I had three exciting dates that Christmas – one ended with a charge of armed burglary
- One pay packet away from the streets The workers who became homeless in the pandemic

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The big news quiz of 2021 – do you know your Jackie Weavers from your German leaders?



Illustration: Lalalimola/The Guardian

A Catholic president, a cake, an inconvenient ship and a very clever tennis player: all this and more in trivia expert Bobby Seagull's news quiz of the

year

Try our [kids' quiz](#), [culture quiz](#) and [bumper Saturday quiz](#), too

Bobby Seagull

Mon 20 Dec 2021 04.00 EST

1.1 In January, Joe Biden became the second Catholic US president. Who was the first?

Harry S Truman

John F Kennedy

Lyndon B Johnson

2. In January, 22-year-old Amanda Gorman became the youngest poet to read at a presidential inauguration, with which work?

One Today

Praise Song for the Day

The Hill We Climb

3. In January, online retailer Boohoo purchased which British brand and website for just £55m?



Debenhams

John Lewis

Selfridges

4.In February, Jackie Weaver became an overnight star via a Twitter video showing her calm behaviour overseeing a Handforth parish council meeting on which platform?

Skype

Teams

Zoom

5.In February, what was the name of Nasa's Mars Exploration Program rover that landed on the Martian surface?

Beagle

Curiosity

Perseverance

6.In February, Captain Sir Tom Moore passed away, aged 100. He raised more than £30m for NHS charities by initially walking how many laps of his garden?

10

100

1,000

7.In March, the Ever Given ship blocked the Suez canal. What was its length?

200 metres

400 metres

800 metres

8.In March, which American star turned her Covid vaccination into a public service announcement for the vaccine?



Cyndi Lauper

Dolly Parton

Tina Turner

9. In April, M&S launched legal action against Aldi, claiming they had infringed the trademark of what cake?

Cedric the Caterpillar

Colin the Caterpillar

Cuthbert the Caterpillar

10. In April, Rachael Blackmore became the first female jockey to win the Grand National riding which horse?



Minella Times

One For Arthur

Tiger Roll

11. In April, longest-serving royal consort Prince Philip died two months before his 100th birthday. Where was he born?

Denmark

Greece

Scotland

12. In May, how did Bill and Melinda Gates tweet their divorce announcement after 27 years of marriage?

“A conscious uncoupling”

“We no longer believe we can grow together as a couple”

“We entered our relationship with love, and it’s with love we leave it”

13. In May, which cryptocurrency fell 30% after Elon Musk jokingly mentioned buying it as a Mother’s Day gift during his debut on Saturday Night Live?

Bitcoin

Dogecoin

Litecoin

14. At Euro 2020 in June, Spain took no players from which club for the first time?



Atlético Madrid

Barcelona

Real Madrid

15. In July, US parents were reported as saying their children are acquiring British accents due to what?

Doctor Who

Peppa Pig

The royal family

16. In July's summer Olympics opening ceremony, who was a Team GB joint flag bearer with rower Mohamed Sbihi?

Hannah Mills

Jade Jones

Laura Kenny

17. In July, Unesco removed its world heritage status from which UK site?

Bath

Liverpool

Stonehenge

18. In July, which broadcaster quit GB News after being suspended for taking the knee in a discussion about racism towards England's black footballers?

Andrew Neil

Guto Harri
Stephen Dixon

19. In August, who succeeded John Humphrys as Mastermind host?



Clive Myrie
Fiona Bruce
Kirsty Wark

20. In August, what was stuck open for 12 hours due to a “technical failure”?

Channel Tunnel
Thames Barrier
Tower Bridge

21. In August, Geronimo was ordered to be put down by Defra. What was he?

Alpaca
Guanaco
Llama

22. In September, Emma Raducanu became the first qualifier to win a tennis grand slam title, a month after reportedly getting an A* in which A level?



Biology

English

Mathematics

23. In October, what Papers leaked world leaders' secret offshore accounts?

Panama

Pandora

Paradise

24. In October, Star Trek actor William Shatner became, at 90, the oldest person to go to space. Which British Dame described him as a "fool"?

Helen Mirren

Joan Collins

Judi Dench

25. In October, which pop star claimed to be a millionaire again due to Only Fans subs from "people with foot fetishes"?



Geri Halliwell

Jessie J

Kerry Katona

26.Cop26 took place from 31 October in Glasgow. What does Cop stand for?

Conference of the Parties

Climatology Policy

Conference for Policy

27.In November, Twitter CEO Jack Dorsey resigned. What was his first ever tweet?

“Hello world”

“I love twitter”

“Just setting up my twttr”

28.In November, Nobel prize winner Malala Yousafzai married Asser Malik. Malik works for which organisation?



Pakistan Cricket Board
Pakistan International Airlines
United Nations

29. In November, whose first female PM resigned hours after her coalition partner quit, before later being re-elected?

Denmark
Norway
Sweden

30. In December, Olaf Scholz, of which party, became Germany's chancellor?

Christian Democratic Union
Free Democrats
Social Democratic party

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Movies

‘It makes me cry with laughter!’: readers recommend 15 fabulous Christmas films

Festive movies have never been more popular – and there’s nothing like a classic. Here are some to enjoy now, from Scrooged to Paddington to You’ve Got Mail



Thanks for the memories ... Composite: Guardian design team; Allstar/Paramount Pictures; Universal Pictures; Warner Bros; New Line; ©Everett Collection/Rex Features; StudioCanal; Moviestore Collection Ltd/Landmark Media/Alamy

[Guardian readers](#)

Mon 20 Dec 2021 01.00 EST

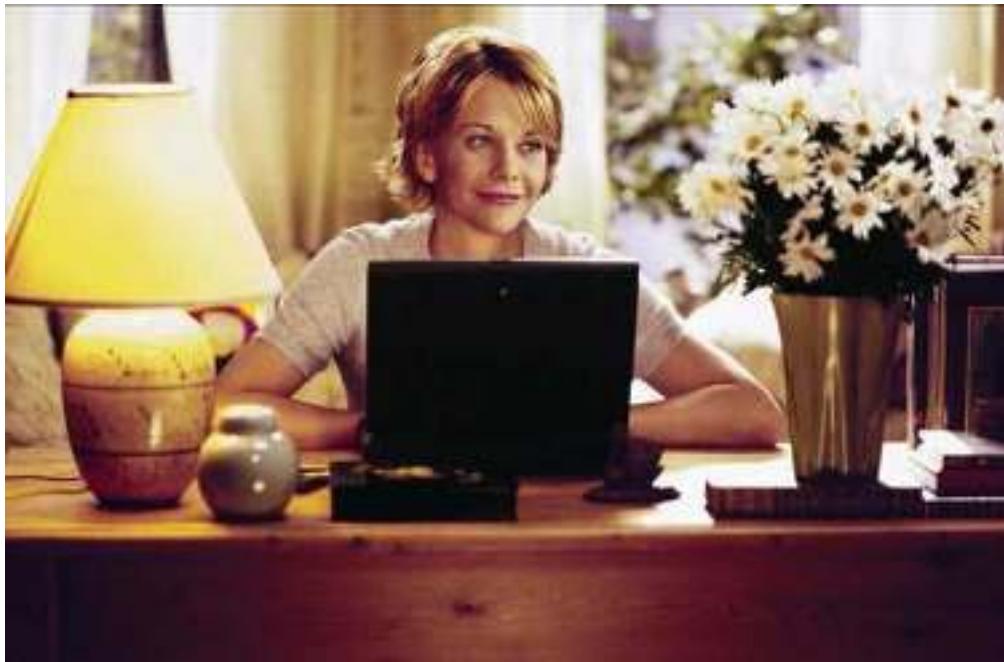
[Scrooge \(1951\)](#)



Alastair Sim in Scrooge. Photograph: Everett Collection Inc/Alamy

The original Ebenezer is, of course, Alastair Sim. Ideally, I like to watch this on an old videotape with the early 1980s BBC logo and announcer before the film starts. Every [Christmas](#), we would watch Mr Sim transform from a hard, cold, pastry-faced man into a very huggable uncle. Just thinking about it makes my eyes well. I sit down with my kids to watch Scrooge as often as I can get away with it, and I'm always moved by this wonderful film.

Cait Hurley, trainee Alexander technique teacher and domiciliary carer, Mitcham



Meg Ryan in You've Got Mail. Photograph: Allstar Picture Library Ltd./Alamy

You've Got Mail (1998)

I first fell in love with this film age 14, while staying at my cousin's house for the Christmas holidays. One scene that comes to mind is Kathleen Kelly (Meg Ryan) decorating the Christmas tree in the window of her bookstore and mentioning the Joni Mitchell song, River. I watch You've Got Mail every year, but it was only last Christmas, in the furrows of heartbreak and missing a loved one deeply, that I listened to what Kathleen actually says in this scene, as she talks of how she "misses her mother so much she almost can't breathe". I paused the film to listen to River, as tears streamed down my face. It soothed my heart through Christmas and well into the new year.

Mustafa Ahmed, web designer, Manchester



Jaroslav Dusek and Eva Holubova in Jan Hrebejk's Pelišky. Photograph: Collection Christophe/Alamy

Pelišky (Cosy Dens, 1999)

This is a Czech film about families living in a flat in 1967 in Prague. It is set around the Christmas holidays and presents generational conflicts with both humour and sadness. I watch it every year with my mother, who is originally from Slovakia. We are the only family members who live in the United States, and it helps to connect us to our culture every Christmas.

Maya Kavulicova, student, North Carolina, US



John Cusack and Kate Beckinsale in Serendipity. Photograph: PictureLux/The Hollywood Archive/Alamy

Serendipity (2001)

For my wife and I, this film starring John Cusack and Kate Beckinsale is the one that heralds the festive season. It's a hugely underrated film with a big heart, brilliant soundtrack and sparky dialogue. We watch it every year during the last weekend in November and our bottom lips always tremble when Nick Drake's exquisite Northern Sky begins to play over the film's final moments. It was also the music we chose to play when we walked down the aisle.

James Tuck, Thirsk



Lenny Henry and Alan Cumming in *Bernard and the Genie*. Photograph: BBC

Bernard and the Genie (1991)

Bernard and the Genie is a BBC movie from the 90s. My mum taped it off the TV and my brothers and I just loved it. Lenny Henry plays a genie (who was friends with Jesus). He discovers the modern world and how enjoyable Christmas is. Rowan Atkinson plays the bad guy, and Alan Cumming is a man who's down on his luck before finding the lamp. It's full of Christmas cheer – everybody should watch it at this time of year. **Angelo Virciglio, assistant operations manager at a GP practice, Waltham Cross**

A Christmas Story (1983)



Jeff Gillen and Peter Billingsley in A Christmas Story. Photograph: MGM/Allstar

I have a weakness for A Christmas Story. It was filmed in Toronto, and although it's set in the 40s in Cleveland, it reminds me of home. In some scenes, you can see the old Red Rocket streetcars that I used to take to university in the 80s. The film's snow and night sky look just like what we experience in Canada. I can also relate to getting bundled up by your mum before braving the cold outside – the scene where Randy can't lower his arms is accurate.

Adrienne Matte, artist, North Vancouver BC Canada



Snow business like ... *The Snowman*. Photograph: Moviestore Collection Ltd/Alamy

The Snowman (1982)

The Snowman always brings a tear to my eye. I watch it with my mum every Christmas Eve without fail, followed by *The Bear* (1998) – at which point she goes off to wrap presents while I continue to watch, like a child. The scene where the little boy and the snowman turn to hug each other and say their final goodbyes gets me every time. A beautiful Christmas classic.

Anna Edgell, graphic designer and illustrator, Leeds



Steve Martin in *Planes, Trains and Automobiles*. Photograph: AA Film Archive/Alamy

Planes, Trains and Automobiles (1987)

To me, a Christmas film is the kind of movie you can watch whenever it happens to be on – no matter if it's just beginning, halfway through, or nearing the end. In that sense, *Planes, Trains and Automobiles* is a great Christmas movie: it's one of the best films starring the great John Candy; it is very funny and touching; and it never gets old. That the movie is actually about Thanksgiving is no problem for non-Americans – it's still about time spent with family.

Aris Tekelenburg, the Netherlands



Barbara Stanwyck and Fred MacMurray in *Remember the Night*.
Photograph: United Archives GmbH/Alamy

Remember the Night (1940)

This is a film that rarely makes Christmas film lists – but it should. It was written by Preston Sturges and was the film that convinced him that directing his own work was the way forward – leading to some of the great screwball comedies, such as *The Lady Eve* (1941) and *Sullivan's Travels* (1941). But *Remember the Night* is a brilliant, and brilliantly melancholic piece of Hollywood studio-era counter-holiday programming. It's the first, and best, of the four films pairing Barbara Stanwyck and Fred MacMurray. If saccharine holiday movies set your teeth on edge, give *Remember the Night* a go: it captures the sorrows and joys of Christmas in equal measure – and how family can be both a blessing and a curse.

Tim Palmer, university professor, Wilmington, North Carolina, US



Dan Aykroyd and Eddie Murphy in Trading Places. Photograph: c Everett Collection/Rex Featu

Trading Places (1983)

I love Trading Places, because craziness on screen gives us permission to be wacky, and original in real life too. I love that, when the rich character played by Dan Aykroyd loses his money, he becomes just as desperate as we can all become on a bad day; the scene where he drunkenly eats smoked salmon on a bus while dressed as Santa is etched into my mind. Each of the actors is brilliant, every character is believable, and the moral of the tale is great – but most importantly, it is very funny. **Magali Fradet, acupuncturist, Javea, Spain**



Bill Murray and Carol Kane in Scrooged. Photograph: Paramount/Allstar

Scrooged (1988)

I saw Scrooged at the cinema with my dad in 1988 and I've watched it most Christmases since. It's Bill Murray's snidest performance. He's perfect as Frank Cross, a TV exec who is visited by three ghosts on Christmas Eve, during a live broadcast. I laugh every time I see it. It features the best comedy fall on film (when Frank slips leaving the restaurant), Karen Allen's sweetest performance, and a lot of heart. True, it gets cheesy towards the end, but thanks to all the laughs, this film gets away with it.

James Keaton, west London



Bear necessities ... Paddington. Photograph: Studiocanal/Allstar

Paddington (2014)

When Paddington was released, I had been working in Australia. A hold-up at the immigration department delayed my return home, meaning I wasn't sure I would make it back to Blighty for a family reunion. Thankfully, my visa came through and I made it back in time for a trip to the cinema to see Paddington. As we watched, my brother and I relived our youth, when we first listened to the Paddington stories on a very old, battered tape, narrated by Bernard Cribbins. We had also been big fans of the Paddington board game. There was much laughter and nostalgia – and when we got home, we made marmalade sandwiches.

Helen, secondary school teacher, Manchester

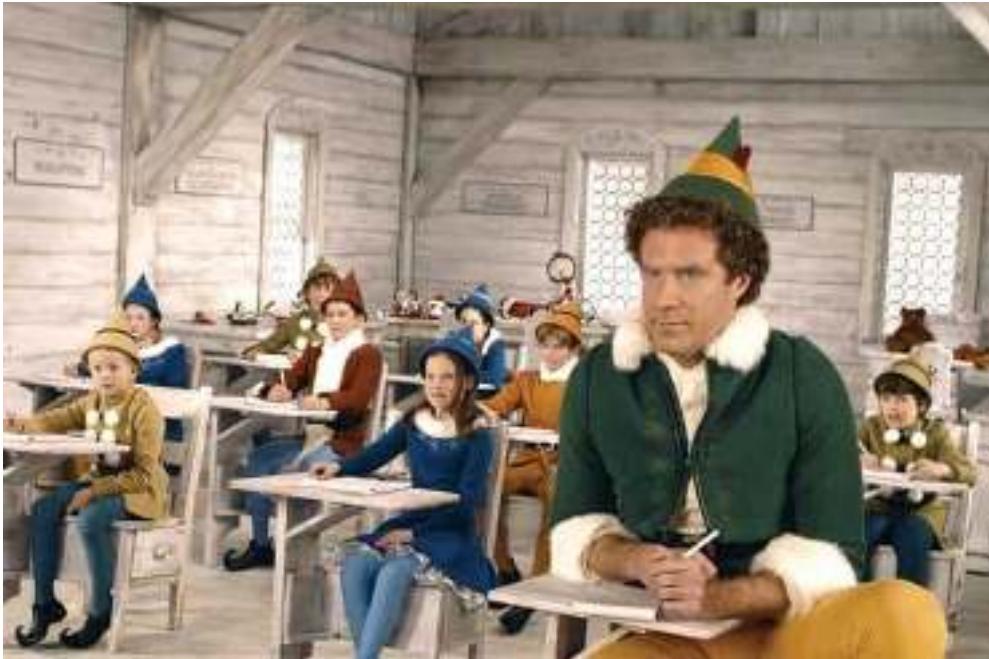


Karolyn Grimes and James Stewart in *It's a Wonderful Life*. Photograph: Rko/Allstar

[It's a Wonderful Life \(1946\)](#)

This is a great film at any time of year, but at Christmas it has an extra piquancy. It deals with fate, memory, age, abandoned dreams and thwarted desires. It's about the value of life. It is anchored by a range of excellent performances and, having seen it at an early age, it was so long until I saw it again that I began to think I'd dreamed it. I only had to abandon it once: it was just after my father, who passed on his love of films to me, had died. I sat down to watch it, but kept bursting into tears, so I had to stop.

Adam Kimmel, retired, London



Will Ferrell in Elf. Photograph: Moviestore Collection Ltd/Alamy

Elf (2003)

My wife and I love the slapstick, frenetic pace and gentle send-up of the Christmas tradition in this film. We also appreciate the acting, from Will Ferrell's totally over-the-top characterisation to James Caan's impeccably straight portrayal of the long-lost father. Bob Newhart also plays a deadpan elf, giving the film a slightly hallucinatory feel. When Buddy gets super excited about Father Christmas coming to Gimbel's, we cry laughing. It ticks all the Christmas film boxes: humour, sentiment, snow, elves and a nicely characterised Father Christmas. As they grow older, my daughters appreciate different jokes in the film too – it will always be a family favourite.

Peter, architect, London



Taylor Momsen and Jim Carrey in *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*.
Photograph: Universal Pictures/Allstar

How The Grinch Stole Christmas (2000)

My dad took me to see this at the cinema when it first came out. We have watched it together every year since, so we both now know the entire script by heart. As a child, I loved Cindy and absolutely wanted to be her friend, but as I've got older, the Grinch is becoming increasingly relatable. He has some classic quotes that I use daily, to the frustration of my family. The humour is very much my taste – sometimes silly, sometimes dark, lots of jokes with hidden meanings. It is hilarious and timeless.

Anonymous, Blackburn

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My winter of loveRelationships

My winter of love: I had three exciting dates that Christmas – one ended with an accusation of armed burglary

I was drunkenly eating a kebab outside Halfords when I was mistaken for a master criminal. It wasn't the only thing that went wrong that lovely, eventful winter



Kissing under the mistletoe ... Photograph: Posed by models/AleksandarNakic/Getty



Rich Pelly

Mon 20 Dec 2021 01.00 EST

No one, my friends decided, should be alone at [Christmas](#). Especially no one as desperately, soul-searchingly, what's-wrong-with-me single as me. In the late 00s, when internet dating was for nerds, meeting people wasn't easy – unless you got talking to someone at a party or something, which I never did, because I was too busy banging on to my mates about why I was so achingly single.

Thus, a plan was hatched. Three friends would each set me up on a [blind date](#). I'm good-looking (with a squint), charming (after a few drinks) and a good catch, they assured me. What could go wrong?

My first date on a cold mid-December Friday evening was organised by my friend Caroline. I would be meeting Thom (Thomasina) for drinks. Things went uncharacteristically well (she was amused and not repelled by me spraying on emergency deodorant as I walked through the pub door) and I ended up being sneaked into her house – just for a snog – to avoid waking her flatmates. The snag was that I had to be up for work at 9am the next morning. As a freelance journalist, I didn't know which scared me more:

being sneaked into a house in the middle of the night by an attractive young woman, or having to get up so early on a Saturday.



Rich Pelley in 2007. Photograph: Courtesy of Rich Pelley

It was all before everyone had smartphones, and there was no clock in the bedroom, so I relied on half-sleeping and half-squinting at the bright LCD I could see through the bedroom doorway. Nine o'clock arrived sooner than I imagined, so I grabbed my trousers and blundered into the Christmas tree in the hallway, waking all the flatmates. Who was this strange bloke picking up baubles in his underpants?

"Odd," I thought as I set my bearings to the nearest tube. "Why is it still dark at 9am?"

"Also," I thought, shortly afterwards, "why is the tube shut at 9am?"

The clock I'd been looking at was the oven timer. It was 4am, and I'd only slept for 45 minutes. Thus my date and her flatmates were delighted to hear me ring the doorbell, get back into bed and repeat my exit strategy at 9am, again crashing full pelt into the Christmas tree.

My second date, two days before Christmas Eve, was lovely – until I tried to get back home. I drunkenly overslept my stop in south London and woke up

in Staines, in Surrey. Too late for a train back, it was obviously time for a kebab outside a branch of Halfords. “Is this a taxi office?” I remember wondering. Then: “What are those flashing lights?” And, most worrying of all: “Why am I being handcuffed, bundled into the back of a police car and accused of attempted armed burglary?”

It turns out that, according to CCTV cameras high above Staines’ high street, a drunken man eating a kebab outside Halfords looks exactly the same as a master criminal about to burgle a shop full of car tyres armed with a handgun. The police were legally permitted to lock me up for the 24 hours it took to retrieve the CCTV footage of me eating a kebab with curry sauce and salad, in pitta bread, and not concealing a weapon. My mind wandered during my time in the clink. Mainly to: “I bet this wouldn’t have happened if I had a girlfriend.”

You can bet that the third lucky woman, to whom I was introduced on New Year’s Eve, was delighted when I accidentally broke her key off while chivalrously trying to open her front door, forcing her to cancel her plans for New Year’s Day while I queued to buy a new lock at Homebase. A new lock that – it turned out – you needed a professional, and not someone who would fail GCSE DIY, to fit.

These are my dating ghosts of Christmases past. And, to Thom, Louise and Katie: I am truly sorry.

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[Homelessness](#)

One pay packet away from the streets: the workers who became homeless in the pandemic



Hassan, who found himself homeless after losing his job in hospitality during the pandemic. Photograph: Jill Mead/The Guardian

Over the last two years, homelessness has rocketed – and for many people a job has not been enough to maintain a roof over their head

Daniel Lavelle

Mon 20 Dec 2021 02.00 EST

Heavy rain soaked Grace's clothes as she huddled in the doorway of an empty building in Derbyshire. Just weeks before, the 57-year-old had been a care worker, looking after vulnerable adults with severe learning disabilities. But she had lost her home, and then her job after her boyfriend's violence escalated.

The pair had been together for five years. "I was in love," she says. "I thought this was it. But then things changed, and I think it was because he didn't want me there any more."

Her partner became physically and verbally abusive and played psychological games. "He'd put my shoes on the other side of the room. I'd leave, make a cup of tea, come back, and they'd be obviously not where I left them, and he'd say I was imagining things," Grace says of this manipulative tactic, known as gaslighting. He'd pull the same trick with her shoelaces, food and towels; whenever things went wrong at home, Grace was always to blame. She told her family, but they didn't believe her and "thought I had gone mad", even threatening to have her sectioned.

Work wasn't much better. Short-staffing during the pandemic meant that Grace was often working 15-hour shifts, and given drastically different tasks, often with little notice. One evening, she was attacked by a young man she was trying to help. When she returned from A&E, her partner was more concerned with fixing a broken CD player than her ordeal at work. He dismissed her as "the bitch from hell" when he dropped a part, and told her to get out.

He had assaulted her before but one day he strangled her until she lost consciousness. When she awoke disoriented on the floor, he was nowhere to be seen. She frantically gathered up her belongings to flee, but before she

was finished, he returned. Terrified of further violence, Grace placated him until she was able to get out.

When she finally escaped, Grace sofa surfed with friends and family, but before long she ran out of places to stay, ending up in that Derbyshire doorway. “I didn’t know where else to go. I hadn’t slept in about a day and a half. I just thought, ‘If I go, I go.’”

Meanwhile, her career imploded. First she had been signed off with stress, then she had to give up work entirely.

Grace’s story is sadly familiar. The idea that low-income workers are one missed pay cheque away from ruin was dismissed as a crude exaggeration long ago. However, when Britain went into lockdown for the first time, and [more than 1 million people overwhelmed the Department for Work and Pensions](#) with universal credit (UC) claims, it looked like cold reality.

Homelessness mushroomed due to an epidemic of domestic violence, with lockdown making it harder for victims to move in with friends and family. [More than 13,000 calls were made](#) to Refuge’s National Domestic Abuse helpline every month between April 2020 and February 2021, an increase of 60% on the months before.

For many, being employed is not enough to avoid homelessness. According to the [most recent government figures](#), of the 284,480 homeless people in England, 58,590 of them are in work. These statistics are almost certainly an underestimate due to the chaotic lifestyle of homeless people.

For others, it was insecure jobs that led to homelessness. Employees lucky enough to have steady work with full-time permanent contracts and full employment rights were furloughed and received most of their wages. The self-employed, temps, interns and gig-economy workers were not so lucky. Their employers often opted to terminate their contracts despite government subsidies covering most of the costs, and even when they didn’t sack their workers, many simply slashed their hours. The result: [130,000 homeless households by the end of the first year of the pandemic](#).

This happened despite formal evictions [falling by 90% between April 2020 and March 2021](#). Unscrupulous landlords, predicting a steep shortfall in rent receipts, either [illegally evicted their tenants](#) or made life so unbearable that they had little choice but to leave.

This is the situation that confronted Hassan, who worked in hospitality before Covid struck. Hassan is Senegalese and began his career in a restaurant near Trafalgar Square 15 years ago. “I loved it and was really starting to work my way up. When the pandemic hit, I had just changed jobs so wasn’t eligible for much money with the furlough scheme, so I started to fall behind with my rent payments, and I had to leave my home.”

Hassan received £800 a month from his employer; the Department for Work and Pensions decided that he wasn’t eligible for UC. But £800 wasn’t nearly enough to cover his rent and living costs, which caused friction between him and his live-in landlord. He wasn’t officially evicted from his flat in south London; instead he says the landlord made life so uncomfortable there that he felt forced to leave.

Hassan moved in with a friend, staying in his living room. Things were stable for a while, then his friend announced that Hassan had to leave – during the dead of night in the middle of winter. “I thought he was joking,” Hassan says. He wasn’t – even going as far as calling the police, who ushered Hassan out of the flat on to London’s freezing streets.

Hassan had nowhere to go. His wife and children were back in Senegal, but he didn’t want to worry them. “They are my world, and everything I do is to make sure I can be a good father. I’d love to get back to work, find a suitable home and look after my little family. I really just want to be a good dad,” he says.

He spent the next 10 days braving the cold in a park near Elephant and Castle, south London. Hassan has asthma, and after the first week he felt like there was a vice squeezing his chest. So he took to sleeping on buses for warmth and shelter, catching as much shut-eye as he could between first departure and final destination, then doing it all over again until 6am, when he would revitalise with a coffee and a croissant.

StreetLink, a homeless outreach charity, eventually referred him to St Mungo's, which placed him in a hostel near Southwark station until the council found him temporary accommodation in Peckham. Hassan is settled there, but not secure. "I don't feel safe because I see so many people coming here, making noise," he says. The room he is in is not ideal either. "The windows won't close properly, and it's getting so much colder outside."

Still, relief is on the horizon. While living in temporary accommodation, he was referred to [Beam](#), a homeless charity that helps its members through crowdfunding. The organisation has raised nearly £2,000 to help him buy work clothes, a laptop, a phone, and the training required to be a security guard. He has given up his career in hospitality, reasoning that if another lockdown happens, security guards will always be in demand. "Without Beam, I don't know where I would be. I'm so grateful for them, and I had 45 people donate to me, which is very nice. I'm very happy," he says.

Anna Kolosova also benefited from funds offered by Beam after spending much of the pandemic squatting and sofa surfing. An artist who also worked as an admissions administrator for a London university, she says she lived "like Harry Potter" in a broom cupboard before [Boris Johnson](#) announced the first lockdown. Then she lost her job and could no longer afford to pay the rent on her flat and her art studio. The organisation that let the studio wouldn't allow her to sleep there, so she ended up living in a north London squat.



Anna Kolosova in her east London studio. Photograph: David Levene/The Guardian

“Living in squats is not a big leap. I was really lucky that I happened to meet someone who took me in and gave me a little room and a roof over my head,” Kolosova says. Yet it was stressful, with little privacy and the threat of eviction always hanging over her.

Kolosova was able to sell some of her artwork to stay afloat until she started receiving universal credit. And one benefit of squatting was she never had to go hungry. “Everyone shared food with each other. Some people go skip-diving, some people buy food, and usually it gets shared.”

But one day the eviction came: 10 men with a dog stormed the building and ordered them all to leave. Kolosova scrambled all her things together and fled – first to another squat, then to friends’ sofas, until [Beam helped her raise £2,264](#) towards finding more stable housing. “I kind of feel I’m lucky that I’ve gone through this even though it’s been stressful,” Kolosova says. She’s been commissioned to paint murals and is working on putting together an exhibition.

Beam’s founder and CEO, Alex Stephany, says the charity has helped 500 people like Hassan and Kolosova in London. Unlike other crowdfunding,

where payments are earmarked for specific projects, “the least competitive crowdfunding platform in the world” encourages general donations and distributes them equally among its members.

“I think what it has that the other models don’t have is this real community-driven quality,” says Stephany. “It brings a support group around each individual. When people use the service, strangers support them through their campaign.” Stephany hopes that Beam could one day support “millions of people” far beyond London.

Yet however well-intentioned Stephany is, this is still hi-tech begging for things that should be – and are, according to the United Nations – fundamental human rights. A blueprint already exists for solving homelessness.

Developed in New York in the 1990s, the policy known as Housing First has virtually ended rough sleeping in some countries. The idea is to provide homeless people with a home without pre-conditions. Then, and only then, are their other needs addressed. Housing First has been highly effective in states such as Utah, [which has reduced chronic homelessness by 91%](#). Finland virtually [eliminated rough sleeping](#) after it introduced Housing First in 2007.

In the UK, meanwhile, we often treat poverty as if it was a vice that could be remedied by pulling up one’s socks. [Housing](#) provision is a kafkaesque labyrinth, which could be construed as a conspiracy to make life as hard as possible for the nation’s poor. Local connection laws exclude homeless people from accessing support in areas they’re not from (discriminating against Roma, Traveller communities, refugees and people fleeing violence). Even if there is a local connection, councils and charities demand that every time they’re in need, housing applicants divulge their private lives in exhaustive detail and relive the traumas, failures and mistakes that made them homeless in the first place.

Rick Henderson, CEO of Homeless Link, an umbrella organisation for homeless charities, says this disclosure should only have to happen once. “Then that should be their passport into services,” Henderson says. “I’m not against the idea of there being some process. But forcing people to

constantly relive the trauma of their past life is unhelpful and should be avoided.”

Housing First would right this wrong; instead, we have a hostel system, which is where Grace ended up after two miserable days in her doorway. She was grateful for the shelter, but as she sat on her bed with all her worldly possessions at her feet, she had little hope. “I was the wrong side of 50; I’d lost everything. I’d worked so hard and got nothing … absolutely nothing.”

She spent most of that night in the hostel crying and struggling to sleep due to the fighting that had broken out in the building.

Eventually, she found help from St Mungo’s Recovery College, an education and employment service. Now she is more settled and thinking of the future. She has reconnected with her children and grandchildren; she’s working with an employment specialist at the Recovery College, who is helping her to find a job. She’s currently in supported accommodation, and the next step is to find a more permanent home.

“I’m gonna fight this. At least I’ve got somewhere,” she says. “I’ve got a roof, for Christ’s sake. There’s people out there on the road, living in a doorway.”

Some names have been changed.

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2021.12.20 - Opinion

- Like everyone, I'm so tired of fighting Covid. But we must keep going
- Anonymous Omicron is terrifying – so why won't we learn from past mistakes?
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OpinionCoronavirus

Like everyone, I'm so tired of fighting Covid. But we must keep going

[Nesrine Malik](#)

The pandemic has given us new kinds of exhaustion, all of them equally draining. Yet there's hope in perseverance



‘With the dashing of each raised hope and resurrected plan, a new tiredness sets in.’ Photograph: Maureen McLean/REX/Shutterstock

Mon 20 Dec 2021 01.00 EST

During the past two years, each stage of the pandemic has brought with it a new species of tired. The first was a heady sort of tiredness, all jittery over-vigilance when the first lockdown happened. The memory of that time has an almost lunar quality: it felt like being marooned in a pod on a hostile deserted landscape but with your lights and radars still blinking, still whirring, powered by adrenaline and restlessness. It was a short, sharp fear,

in anticipation of a crisis that would be intense but soon over.

And it was soon over. Sort of. And then it wasn't. Then it was over again, then around Christmas last year, it wasn't. And now, after a brief late-summer of almost normal, the emergence of the Omicron variant means that Covid is threatening the holiday season for the second year in a row, as [restrictions tighten](#) around Europe and scientists advising the UK government turn up the volume on their demands for [more curbs](#) before the new year.

The British experience is distinguished from much of the world by the in-plain-sight element of our government's incompetence and corruption. But the uncertainty, the stop-starts, that marooned feeling of waiting to be rescued, the anticipation of life changing overnight, has been a global experience that is still ongoing. Once again, borders are sealed and airports shut down. Once again, infections are rising and as many start planning to travel home for holidays, a ripple of rumours has started. I have heard them from Nairobi to Norwich, predicting another lockdown, another domestic travel ban, another last-minute intervention by authorities who wait too long and act too late.

With the dashing of each raised hope and resurrected plan, a new tiredness sets in: a turbulent kind of tired, hot with anger towards politicians whose reckless behaviour claimed your loved one; a confused, self-berating tired, when you don't seem to be able to complete the most simple of tasks. It's a glass-eyed tiredness, endlessly scrolling but not absorbing, trying to become animated by force-feeding yourself the news and images of a world you can't experience.

And now, creeping in, is a sloppy tiredness. If you haven't felt it you will recognise it in someone who has. The kind of tired where – after months of following every single rule, from the sensible to the unreasonable – you are tempted to skip a test and go about your business if you're feeling poorly. You might cancel your Christmas party, but still make a couple of what you know are not strictly wise visits to the pub. You might not do other small things that do not seem worth the effort, you might let your mask slip on a journey home, you might, as I have often done on a long commute, take the packed train because you are too tired to wait for the next one an hour later.

Multiply that tiredness by a thousand if you live in a country where there are not only no boosters, but barely any vaccines at all; where the only means to combat Covid are cyclical lockdowns and curfews, all of which merely keep calamity at bay rather than eliminate it. I have written over the past year of family and friends across the African continent clubbing together to pool resources in the absence of public health support, but now I can see their resolve weakening with every death, with every economic blow. Their efforts at social distancing and mask-wearing have been effaced by time and the realisation that without vaccines and proper healthcare, their trials will not end. There is now only resignation, both to the virus and the poverty and corrupt governance that have allowed it to spread.

We tend to think of our pandemic behaviour in binary terms: compliance with the rules or rebellion. But the reality is that in the middle there is drift: metaphorical knees buckling after two years of carrying the weight of responsibility for your safety but also your family's – and, in fact, every single stranger with whom you share airspace.

And this is where the jeopardy comes in. Despite the [cartoonish antics](#) of a government branding lockdown easing as "freedom day", the big victories don't come in one heave, one big push in the right direction that will deliver normal life. They come in the small moments of perseverance and resolution. And those are harder to muster because they are solitary and unrewarded.

Whether you are in Africa or Europe, whether you are well-off or struggling, your efforts to maintain good pandemic manners and protocols will appear trivial, dwarfed by epic systemic failings of governance and mocked by the hypocrisies of those who make the rules but do not follow them.

Whenever I reach what I am sure is rock-bottom, I try to purge this jeopardy of defeatism by reading the words Seamus Heaney gave to a graduating class in 1966. "Getting started, keeping going, getting started again – in art and in life, it seems to me this is the essential rhythm not only of achievement but of survival, the ground of convinced action, the basis of self-esteem and the guarantee of credibility in your lives, credibility to

yourself as well as others.”

The key, I think, is to acknowledge the fatigue and make allowances for it – to view it not as a catalyst or a moral failure, but as a place from which to make a recovery.

The end of a year offers the temptation of neat resolutions and trite pledges for the future. But as we find ourselves grappling with a new variant and a new wave – once again making grim calculations and weighing up risks to elderly people, steeling ourselves for the prospect of new restrictions and searching for the willpower to follow them – I am just shooting for survival.

My only hope and ambition is to make peace with the fact that being tired and being tempted to give up is part of the essential rhythm of life. My hope for you is the same, that your year-end is one of respite and replenishment. If it isn’t, keep going. Get started again.

- Nesrine Malik is a Guardian columnist
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NHS

Omicron is terrifying – so why won't we learn from past mistakes?

[The Secret Consultant](#)

Even if vaccinations hold back the tide of infections, there will still be too many patients for us to look after

- [Coronavirus – latest updates](#)
- [See all our coronavirus coverage](#)



An intensive care ward treating coronavirus patients at Frimley Park hospital in Surrey last year. Photograph: Getty Images

Mon 20 Dec 2021 01.00 EST

Across the country, even before Omicron admissions have started to rise, the [bed occupancy in our hospitals is 94%](#).

That seems a luxury to me; it is quite a while since I saw an empty bed in mine. Our bed occupancy hovers around 100% and has done so for some weeks.

There is nothing unusual in this, however. Successive decades and serial A&E closures, combined with rising healthcare demands from an elderly and growing population, have meant our bed provision is far too small for our area. Even in a normal winter, critical bed crises are a common problem, with operations cancelled and patient care often compromised as a result. The whole system has been slowly gutted to the point that there is not even enough capacity to deal with routine fluctuations in demand.

This, however, is not shaping up to be a normal winter. The [Omicron variant is spreading](#) with a speed that is terrifying to me, even after all I have seen and done over the past months.

I don't even need to look at the figures to know this; the evidence is all around me. Friends and family, even the careful ones, have started testing positive and having to isolate. There are multiple outbreaks in schools again. Football matches [are being cancelled](#). And there are already many colleagues unable to attend work, leaving rota gaps that we are already struggling to cover.

And the worst of it is yet to come.

Extrapolating from the current figures, it looks like within our local area we will have infections in the tens of thousands by the middle of *next week*. And here comes the biggest unknown.

Is this variant really, as we all hope, less virulent than its predecessors? Will our vaccines and immunity be enough to keep people out of hospital? Even with a hopelessly optimistic low rate of hospitalisations, it still looks like there will be far too many patients for us to look after.

A small proportion of a very large number is still a large number. Remembering also that there is a lag of a week or two between infection rates rising and people becoming unwell enough to present to hospital, this

means the potential point of maximum pressure comes around Christmas and New Year, when many of us were hoping, finally, to take a few days off, and many more will be sick or isolating with Covid.

And we have significant other pressures working against us. GPs are [scaling back the routine care they offer](#) in favour of vaccinations. Some hospitals are also cancelling elective care so that their consultants can join in the jabbing.

Despite this, the new variant has some power to evade the vaccine, meaning that even the current heroic effort may not put the requisite protections in place in time. Vaccinated patients are unlikely to get critically ill, but even relatively well patients coming into hospital could overwhelm us.

The reduction in usual care is likely to result in more patients seeking help in hospitals, despite best efforts.

One glimmer of hope is the [new treatments for Covid](#) now available for patients who are particularly vulnerable, with the aim of stopping the disease progressing and reducing the need for hospitalisations.

The first centres for this went live this week, using staff redeployed from other vital work. The problem is, however, that these were set up and resourced based on numbers calculated from the Delta variant. Within the first 24 hours of opening it became clear that the numbers now identified for treatment already exceeded capacity fivefold and [are rising exponentially](#).

So even this hope must be tempered with realism: how much will these really be able to hold back the tide?

I find myself grudgingly admiring the Covid-19 virus, that with all our modern medicine and incredible science, it is still managing to confound us even 20 months on. It is a fearsome opponent.

So why, yet again, do we seem to be underestimating it? Why do we not learn from our mistakes?

For a healthcare system already strained beyond capacity the potential threat that Omicron poses is obvious, even though its virulence is yet unknown.

Why not therefore take at least some sensible precautions to try to hold back the spread, to buy us time to vaccinate some more and make sure we are set up to give all the therapies at our disposal?

Plan B will make very little difference to a strain this infectious. In any case, these measures take time to work.

By the time that hospitalisations start to rise, it will be too late. Surely it would be better to make the mistake of introducing early restrictions unnecessarily than to make the mistake of not doing so and causing unnecessary deaths?

Boris Johnson “[know\[s\] the pressures on everyone in our NHS](#)”. But does he really? Has he got any idea of the exhaustion, burnout and low morale that I see and feel every day? The dread that my colleagues and I express as we talk about what this winter holds in store, again? How it feels to be potentially facing yet another wave?

And yet still we sit on the fence, pretending we can vaccinate our way out of this while carrying on with life as normal. Talk of shielding the [NHS](#) rings hollow in the face of this inaction.

And while we have been working on throughout to keep people safe, it seems that in Downing Street they found the time to have [unmasked quizzes and after-hours gatherings](#). How nice.

It really is hard to put into words exactly how shameful, deceitful, and hypocritical this is.

In medicine we sign up to a “[duty of candour](#)” that we all owe to our patients, whereby if mistakes are made we admit them, apologise, do our best to make amends. It is a basic thing that even the most junior medical student knows about. Too basic, it seems, for some important people to be concerned with.

What we have achieved in the NHS over the past year is little short of amazing. And now we are being asked to make another “extraordinary

effort” by leaders who show themselves to be above such things yet too cowardly to admit it.

Yet without measures to protect us, will it be enough?

The writer is an NHS respiratory consultant who works across a number of hospitals

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The age of extinctionEnvironment

2021: when the link between the climate and biodiversity crises became clear

[Max Benato](#)

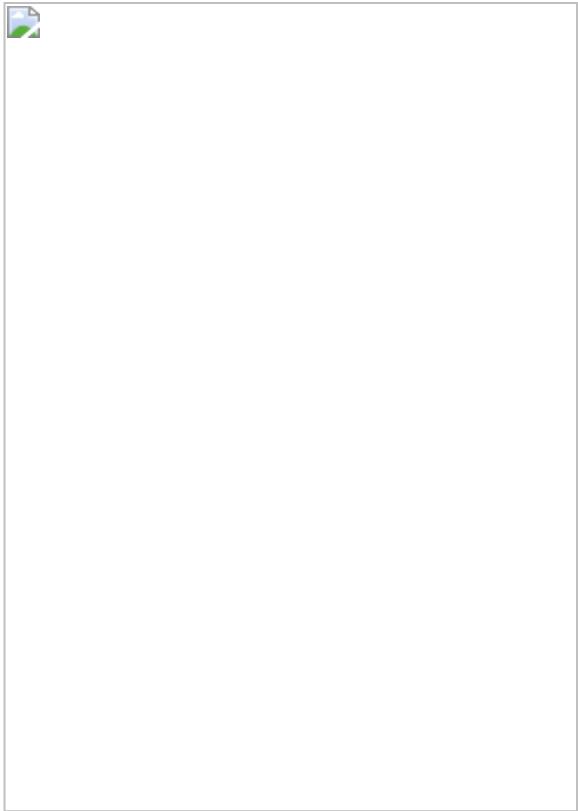
Looking back on a year in which the Age of Extinction reported on everything from summits to species loss, solutions and community involvement

- [Read more in our series Biodiversity: what happened next?](#)



A poster at September's IUCN world conservation congress in Marseille, which covered topics as diverse as human-wildlife conflict and genetic engineering. Photograph: Xinhua/Rex/Shutterstock

The age of extinction is supported by



About this content

Mon 20 Dec 2021 02.30 EST

Bats sweltering in their boxes, polar bears and narwhals using up to four times as much energy to survive, birds starving as Turkey's lakes dry up, and unique island species at high risk of extinction as the planet warms. If there was ever any doubt about the inextricable link between the climate emergency and the biodiversity crisis, those doubts were well and truly dispelled in 2021.

“The science is clear: climate, biodiversity and human health are fully interdependent,” Frans Timmermans, the European Commission vice-president who heads the European Green Deal; Achim Steiner, of the UN Development Programme; and Sandrine Dixson-Declève, of the Club of Rome, [wrote before the Cop26](#) climate conference.

While the much-anticipated Cop15 Kunming biodiversity conference was [delayed yet again](#), Cop26 brought together leaders from across the globe to discuss the climate emergency. Although the pledges on emissions cuts fell short of those required to limit the increase in temperatures to 1.5C, there were [promises to halt and reverse global deforestation](#) over the next decade.

Meanwhile, dozens of countries have committed to protecting 30% of the planet’s land and oceans by 2030, and in September, nine philanthropic foundations [pledged \\$5bn](#) (£3.75bn) to finance the 30x30 pledge.

Despite the coronavirus pandemic and the many lockdowns, 2021 saw the world’s scientists, volunteers and conservationists continuing their efforts to protect nature. The International Union for Conservation of Nature launched its new [green list](#) of protected and conserved areas, researchers at the [Natural History Museum](#) worked on digitising its vast collection, Kenya held its [first animal census](#), and a [multimillion-pound project](#) was launched that aims to describe and identify the web of life in large freshwater ecosystems with “game-changing” DNA technology.

In September, the [IUCN world conservation congress in Marseille](#) brought together innovators and policymakers from across the world for talks and debates on subjects as diverse as the universal declaration of the rights of the river, alien species, human-wildlife conflict, the use of smart technology in conservation, genetic engineering and much more.



While its doors were closed to the public because of Covid-19, the Natural History Museum's scientists and researchers were busy digitising its vast collection. Photograph: David Levene/The Guardian

Not all conservation efforts are down to scientists and policymakers though. There is growing recognition of the vital role communities and indigenous people play in conserving biodiversity and building livelihoods and this year we highlighted projects that included a [shade-grown coffee](#) initiative in Peru, islanders rallying to save the [coco de mer](#) nut in Seychelles and an [army of nature recorders](#) and [seed conservers](#) in the UK.

There was good news elsewhere. The [flatpack homes for animals that fall victim](#) to wildfires that we highlighted in April have since been trialled in Sydney, where [a “housing estate”](#) of the biodegradable cardboard pods has been put up to give shelter to wildlife after the bushfires.

In response to our piece on conservationists criticising Marks & Spencer for [releasing 30 million honeybees](#), the British retailer filled 500 stores with little signs telling shoppers about the importance of native bumblebees in producing a number of foods. M&S has been “really open to learning”, said Gill Perkins, chief executive of the Bumblebee Conservation Trust, who believes it is the first UK supermarket to introduce bumblebee labels highlighting the work of these pollinators. She hopes others will follow suit.

Andrew Kerr, who spoke to the Guardian about [wanting to create a UK eel rewilding programme](#), is having discussions with the relevant government ministry in January about the feasibility of getting rewilding permits sorted for this coming eel season.

Since we reported on the proposals to extend Barcelona airport, [threatening neighbouring wetlands](#) and a wealth of biodiversity, the plans have been [put on hold](#). The future of the red wolf in North Carolina still hangs in the balance but the US Fish and Wildlife Service says it is planning [to release nine wolves from captivity](#) this winter. And an experimental feeding programme has been approved for [Florida's manatees](#), after a record year of deaths.

Over the coming weeks, we will follow up on some of the stories that we covered during 2021 in more depth, but in the meantime, you might like to take a look at some of our favourite articles from the year that celebrate the planet's beautiful and intricate biodiversity: why we need to [stop treating soil like dirt](#); the wonderful world of [fungi](#); the value of [dead wood](#); how a [wild night out](#) could help you reconnect with nature; and, lastly, a lesson in why some things are [worth waiting for](#), especially when they turn out like this ...

01:08

Moonflower: timelapse of rare Amazonian cactus blooming for one night only – video

Find more [age of extinction coverage here](#), and follow biodiversity reporters [Phoebe Weston](#) and [Patrick Greenfield](#) on Twitter for all the latest news and features

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OpinionNursing

As a nurse I see people worried about vaccines: that doesn't mean they're anti-vaxxers

[Heather Randle](#)

We help everyone at our vaccination centre – a kind word can make all the difference



‘We’ll go to any length to provide people with the support they need’: A mobile NHS vaccination centre, Gerrards Cross, 10 December 2021.
Photograph: Maureen McLean/REX/Shutterstock

Mon 20 Dec 2021 03.00 EST

I started working as a nurse in 1987. I’m coming up for my 35th year: I knew it was an anniversary, but I had to count which one. Sometimes I feel I’ve been doing this for too long. But the Covid vaccination programme has

been amazing. We have seen how, when we want to do something, we can pull it off. I work as a vaccinator at a centre in Coventry where we get through 440 a people a day, usually between five vaccinators; about 80 people each.

The mobilisation of this workforce and the rollout has been outstanding. The camaraderie is the best bit of the job for me – that we’re working together and it’s positive when so much is doom and gloom. We’re doing something to fix the pandemic, and fixing things is what nursing is about. I find myself smiling under my mask; I’ve realised people can see it in my eyes, even if they can’t see my mouth.

Our centre is in a clinical setting, but there are many in other places like Sikh temples and mosques, which is great, I think, to get to people more hesitant, to allow people to have their vaccine in a more comfortable, or familiar setting – and to reach all communities. I notice the loud person, the quiet person, the person who may be scared. One went pale when I drew up the vaccine – my colleague was administering – and I thought, “He’s about to faint.” I gave him what we call in nursing “the reassuring arm”. I spoke to him, about nothing in particular; I held his hand. The colour came back to his face.

Afterwards, my colleague said I’d acted fast, but that’s what we do. As a nurse, I’m always looking around to see what is going on: who may need more care. I see a lot of fear in people’s faces, people are scared. Some come in who have lost family members. I’ll never forget the young mum with lung disease right at the beginning of the vaccine drive, last winter, who said, “I think I might actually survive this.” I always well up in this job.

Nurses in GP surgeries, which is my background, often feel invisible. But we are the first people you talk to when you want to set up a vaccine clinic: we run them all the time in general practice – for flu, HPV, baby vaccines. It’s as much about the logistics of running a service – getting the staffing numbers right, ensuring adequate PPE for the team, the safe disposal of needles and syringes – as it is about delivering vaccines.

Vaccinators work swiftly, but I have seen cases where people do hurry, and we say to them to take their time. I've learned to spot the people who might have concerns; I try to build trust with them and ask them to look at the science. It's hard in a fast-moving environment, I have to build a relationship with someone in three to four minutes. But I think it's important vaccine-hesitant people are not labelled anti-vaxxers: I would say to anyone who has doubts about having their vaccine, ask questions.

People always apologise to me for asking, but they're the ones I want to spend the time with. Two extra minutes could mean they come back for their second jab or their booster. Occasionally someone will walk out and decide not to get the vaccine, and that's fine. It's a personal decision at the end of the day, but it's important to leave the door open so they know they can come back and get it another time.

We vaccinate people in their homes, too. We work with people's carers. We'll go to any length to provide people with the support they need. Nurses have helped and responded like this throughout the pandemic, going the extra mile. Colleagues are burning out, of course, but when we're asked to do more we will. That's in our nature as nurses. And I want Christmas dinner with my parents, who are in their 70s, as much as the next person, so I know how important it is to deliver vaccinations. It's a real undertaking, but I'm proud to be involved.

- Heather Randle is a general practice nurse and a professional lead for primary care at the Royal College of Nursing
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2021.12.20 - Around the world

- ['We need free speech' Protests erupt across Poland over controversial media bill](#)
- [Who is Gabriel Boric? Radical student leader who will be Chile's next president](#)
- [Unesco New head of world heritage centre wants to put Africa on the map](#)
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- ['Almost satanic' Pope Francis damns domestic violence against women](#)

Poland

‘We need free speech’: protests erupt across Poland over controversial media bill

The bill, yet to be signed into law, would tighten rules around foreign ownership of media



Protesters march in Krakow on Sunday to demand Poland’s head of state veto a law they say would limit media freedoms in the country. Photograph: Alex Bona/Sopa Images/Rex/Shutterstock

Guardian staff with agencies
Sun 19 Dec 2021 21.29 EST

Poles have staged nationwide protests including a thousands-strong rally outside the presidential palace to demand the head of state veto a law they

say would limit media freedoms in the European Union's largest eastern member.

Unexpectedly rushed through parliament on Friday, the legislation would tighten rules around foreign ownership of media, specifically affecting the ability of news channel TVN24, owned by US media company Discovery Inc, to operate.

The bill, yet to be signed into law by president Andrzej Duda, has soured ties between Nato-member state Poland and the United States at a time of heightened tension in eastern Europe amid what some countries see as increased Russian assertiveness.

It has also fuelled wider fears about attacks on media freedoms that have been running high since state-run oil company PKN Orlen said last year it was taking over a German-owned publisher of regional newspapers.

“This is not just about one channel,” the Warsaw mayor and a former opposition candidate for president, Rafal Trzaskowski, told the crowd on Sunday. “In a moment [there will be] censorship of the internet, an attempt to extinguish all independent sources of information – but we will not allow that to happen.”

At demonstrations outside the president’s palace, 38-year-old Emilia Zlotinska told Agence France-Press: “We need free speech. I would like the president not to sign it.”

TVN24 footage showed protesters in Warsaw waving Polish and EU flags and chanting “free media”.



Thousands of people attended protests at the Main Square in Krakow.
Photograph: Beata Zawrzel/NurPhoto/REX/Shutterstock

“We have to be here today because free media are a pillar of democracy,” said Beata Laciak, a member of the crowd and a sociology professor.

Demonstrations took place across the country. Pictures from the southern city of Krakow showed protesters brandishing banners with slogans like “Hands off TVN” and “Free [Poland](#), free people, free media”.

As of 8.20pm local time, more than 1.5 million people had signed a petition in TVN24’s defence, the channel said.

The ruling Law and Justice (PiS) party has long said that foreign media groups have too much power in the country and distort public debate.

Critics say the [moves against foreign media groups](#) are part of an increasingly authoritarian agenda that has put Warsaw at loggerheads with Brussels over LGBT rights and judicial reforms.

Last week, the US state department called on Duda to protect free speech, freedom to engage in economic activity, property rights and equal treatment.

“The United States is deeply troubled by the passage in Poland today of a law that would undermine freedom of expression, weaken media freedom and erode foreign investors confidence in their property rights and the sanctity of contracts in Poland,” state department spokesperson Ned Price said in a [statement](#) on Friday.

The European Commission said the new law sent another negative signal about the respect of rule of law and democratic values in Poland.

“Once this bill becomes a law, the commission will not hesitate to take action in case of non-compliance with EU law,” commission vice-president Vera Jourova said in a statement.

Reuters and Agence France-Presse contributed to this report

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Chile

Who is Gabriel Boric? The radical student leader who will be Chile's next president

Boric comes from a cohort that is grimly determined to bury dictator Augusto Pinochet's bitter legacy once and for all



Gabriel Boric reacts before giving a speech to his supporters after the presidential runoff election in Santiago, Chile. Photograph: Marcelo Hernández/Getty Images

[John Bartlett](#) in Santiago

Sun 19 Dec 2021 22.10 EST

Four months ago, 35-year-old Gabriel Boric confounded the polls to claim victory in a presidential primary he had barely been old enough to compete in. But on 11 March next year, he will now be sworn in as Chile's youngest

ever president – having [amassed more votes than any presidential candidate in history.](#)

Boric is the driving force behind Chile's abrupt changing of the guard. He belongs to a radical generation of student leaders who are grimly determined to bury dictator Augusto Pinochet's bitter legacy once and for all.

“Chile was the birthplace of neoliberalism, and it shall also be its grave!” he shouted from a stage the night of his primary win, his forearm tattoo peeking out from beneath a rolled-up sleeve.

General Pinochet’s brutal dictatorship bestowed Chile with its extreme economic model, and Boric and his influential cohort of student leaders have taken it upon themselves to dispose of it.

“I know that history doesn’t begin with us,” he declared on stage on Sunday night as president-elect before a baying crowd.

“I feel like an inheritor of the long trajectory of those who, from different places, have tirelessly sought social justice.”

Boric was born in Punta Arenas in 1986 and is fiercely proud of his home region, Magallanes, below the Patagonian ice fields.

In 2011, as he entered the final year of his law degree, Boric became a leader of education protests across the country, in which thousands of students took over their campuses and faculties across a long, cold winter, spilling out into the streets to demand free, high-quality education for all.

The protests were quelled with a modest compromise, allowing some students to study for free. Several of the movement’s young leaders later ran for office and joined the country’s congress or took up positions in local government.

Boric never completed his degree, instead winning election to Chile’s congress in 2013 and serving two terms as a deputy, becoming one of the first congresspeople to come from beyond Chile’s two traditional coalitions in the process.

But since narrowly losing the presidential first round to José Antonio Kast, a far-right supporter of General Pinochet, he has moderated his programme markedly, appealing to the centrist voters who have now propelled him into La Moneda.

Unlike his firebrand days at the front of the marches, Boric is now neatly groomed, humble and serious – while he often wears a smart blazer covering his tattoos. His girlfriend Irina Karamanos joined him on stage on Sunday night after the results.

He has pledged to decentralise Chile, implement a welfare state, increase public spending and include women, non-binary Chileans and Indigenous peoples like never before. But it is Boric's ultimate goal of extricating the country from the binds of Pinochet's dictatorship that will define his legacy.

The next four years will see this process begin, as the 2011 student generation led by Boric, take on an even more important role than before.

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/dec/20/who-is-gabriel-boric-the-radical-student-leader-who-will-be-chiles-next-president>

Global development

New head of Unesco world heritage centre wants to put Africa on the map

Lazare Eloundou Assomo wants to address imbalance that benefits rich nations and protect sites threatened by climate crisis and war



Djingarey Berre mosque in Timbuktu. Unesco led the restoration of the world heritage sites after Islamist fighters badly damaged them in 2012.
Photograph: Marco Dormino/MINUSMA

Global development is supported by



[About this content](#)

[Lizzy Davies](#)

Mon 20 Dec 2021 03.30 EST

It covers 9 million sq miles from the Atlantic to the Indian Ocean and from the Sahara in the north to Cape Point in the south. And in between lie some of the world's most ancient cultural sites and precious natural wonders.

However, despite its vast size, sub-Saharan Africa has never been proportionately represented on Unesco's world heritage list, its [98 sites dwarfed by Europe, North America and Asia](#).

Now, the first African to be made [head of the world heritage centre](#) has said that needs to change – and fast. Lazare Eloundou Assomo, a Cameroonian who led the reconstruction [of the Timbuktu mausoleums](#) after they were badly damaged in 2012 by Islamist fighters allied to al-Qaida, has said it will be a priority of his time in office.

“What we think has room for improvement is that, when you look at the list, you still, 50 years after [the signing of the [world heritage convention](#)], see that there are some regions of the world that are not equally represented in the list as compared to others,” he told the Guardian.

“This is something that we, together with the [Unesco] member states and other state parties, have ... to address.”

Assomo, who started in his new job earlier this month, said small island developing states had also historically suffered from a disproportionately low number of recognised sites. Of the 27 countries [with no sites](#) of any kind on the Unesco list, only four are not either in Africa or classed as a small island state.



Lazare Eloundou Assomo says he learned the value of cultural heritage in the aftermath of conflict when he led Unesco’s reconstruction of Timbuktu’s mausoleums, which were damaged by Islamist fighters. Photograph: Unesco

At the other end of the spectrum, wealthy countries – such as Italy (58), China (56) and Germany (51) – have ratcheted up dozens of sites, making the most of the very tangible influx of [money and tourism](#) that comes from the more abstract notion of recognising a country’s heritage.

For Assomo, it is not a question of chasing numbers, but of using Unesco’s collective cultural and financial clout to help underrepresented countries overcome the lack of resources and expertise that has proved an obstacle in the complex and costly nomination process.

“The training and capacity-building of heritage experts is an area where we will have to put more emphasis [on] in the future to help address this imbalance,” said Assomo. Unesco would like to see greater cooperation between member states, he added, with countries in Europe and other regions helping to fund training programmes.

“Africa is the cradle of humankind. It has so many cultural, natural sites that are important, which people value a lot,” said Assomo. “But some categories of site in [Africa](#) are not necessarily the same type of categories that you find in other regions.”

The “sacred forests” of west Africa – patches of land preserved over countless generations because of their religious and cultural significance – were a good example, he said. According to [a recent study](#) in Togo, the forests are as environmentally important as they are culturally precious, and, on a continent bearing the brunt of the climate crisis, their protection is vital.

“Africa is today ... on the frontline of the effect of climate change. This is also something ... which makes us believe that mobilising our efforts for [existing] world heritage sites in Africa should be a priority,” said Assomo.



San Sebastian fort, which was built on the Island of Mozambique by the Portuguese colonial rulers in the 16th century. Photograph: Dmitry

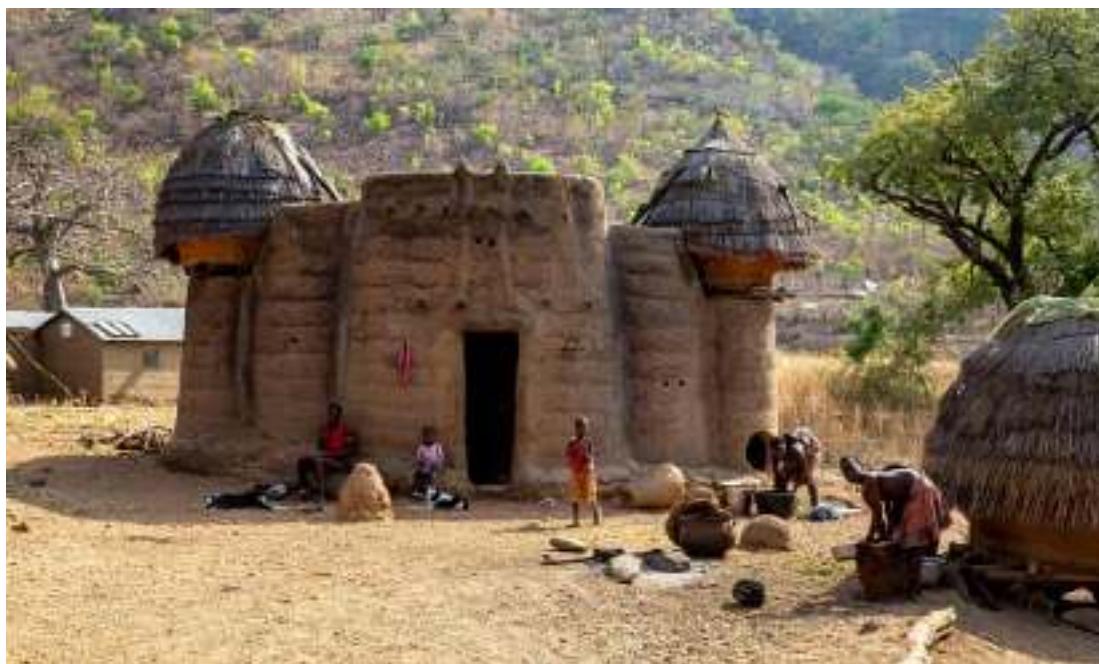
Malov/Alamy

Both natural habitats, such as the [Niokolo-Koba national park in Senegal](#), and cultural treasures, such as Mozambique's [San Sebastian fortress](#), battered by increasingly intense cyclones and heavy rains, are vulnerable to the changing climate. Assomo, a former Unesco head representative in Mali, is particularly worried about the impact on Timbuktu, the fabled city in the Sahara – and world heritage site since 1988, which has been affected by [long-term desertification](#).

“If we don’t do something about the effect of climate change, about the natural disasters [that] continue multiplying ... If we don’t do something about the growing [number of] forest fires; if we don’t do something about hurricanes ... these sites are going to disappear.

“Our responsibility is to work with countries to ensure that we maintain them and we preserve them and we pass them on to the next generation. So for me, it’s an urgent matter,” said Assomo.

Africa’s 98 world heritage sites range from the famous – Tanzania’s Serengeti national park, for example – to the lesser-known, such as [Koutammakou, the Land of the Batammariba](#), in Togo.



The Batammariba's traditional fortified mud tower houses of Koutammakou in Togo.

Photograph: Godong/Alamy

Fifteen African sites make up nearly 30% of the “[in danger](#)” world heritage list, due to a variety of threats including poaching, illegal logging and conflict. One site that is not yet on the endangered list is [Lalibela](#) in north Ethiopia, a place of pilgrimage and home to 11 medieval monolithic cave churches carved out of the rock, which in recent weeks has been fought over by [government forces](#) and [Tigrayan rebels](#).

Assomo said he could not comment on “national issues”. But whenever heritage sites became involved in conflict, Unesco has urged those in control to protect the sites from looting and vandalism, he said. Through his work in Timbuktu, where Unesco helped reconstruct the mausoleums wrecked in 2012, he has learned the value that cultural heritage can have in the aftermath of conflict.

He said: “[That work] has shown how culture and cultural heritage are important to help people recover from trauma, start having an economic living after the conflict, but also help bring back the social cohesion that was lost because of the conflict.”

This article was amended on 20 December 2021. Kruger national park in [South Africa](#) is not a Unesco world heritage site as an earlier version said.

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2021/dec/20/new-head-of-unesco-world-heritage-centre-wants-to-put-africa-on-the-map>

James Webb space telescope

James Webb space telescope mission gets ready for Christmas Eve launch

After many delays, Hubble's successor is set to travel to a cosmic parking spot 1m miles from Earth



Artist's impression of the James Webb space telescope folded in an Ariane 5 rocket during launch. Photograph: ESA/D.Ducros handout/EPA

Ian Sample Science editor

[@iansample](#)

Mon 20 Dec 2021 01.00 EST

Final preparations are under way for the launch of the [James Webb space telescope](#), a landmark observatory built to peer back through space and time to the first stars and galaxies that lit up the universe.

Regarded as the [successor to Nasa's Hubble space telescope](#), the mission is scheduled to blast off at 12.20pm UK time on Christmas Eve onboard an Ariane 5 rocket from Europe's spaceport in Kourou, French Guiana. More than 30 years in the making, the telescope is bound for a parking spot in space 1m miles from Earth.

At about 100 times more powerful than Hubble, the \$10bn observatory will detect the faint glow from stars that brought the astronomical dark ages to an end when they blinked into existence 100m to 200m years after the big bang 13.8bn years ago. It will probe the atmospheres of planets around distant stars, looking for signs of molecules such as methane and water which are indicative of conditions ripe for life.

"It has incredible potential for expanding our knowledge of the universe," said Prof Beth Biller, an astronomer at the University of Edinburgh who is due to use Webb to observe planets outside the solar system. "Many more scientific discoveries are going to come from this."

[Image of the telescope's machinery](#)

While the launch itself will be nerve-racking enough, it will be early summer before mission staff can relax and take data. The size and complexity of the telescope, along with its orbit, mean the six months after launch will be critical.

Unlike [Hubble, which circles the Earth](#), Webb will orbit the sun. Its destination is a spot known as the second Lagrange point, or L2. Here, gravitational forces will allow Webb to hold a position with the Earth and sun lined up behind it. Webb will take a month to reach L2.

Several more months will be needed for Webb to unfold itself and prepare for at least five years in operation. The telescope must deploy a sunshield the size of a tennis court to keep it cool, and then unfold 18 hexagonal segments that together form its 6.5m-diameter primary mirror. It must also run checks and calibrations to ensure its systems and instruments are working properly.

If anything goes wrong, any troubleshooting must be done by beaming commands from Earth. A repair mission of the kind needed to correct

Hubble's faulty vision in 1993 is out of the question for a telescope four times more distant than the moon.

Dr Jonathan Gardner, the deputy senior project scientist on Webb at Nasa's Goddard [Space](#) Flight Center in Maryland, has been working on the telescope for more than 20 years. "I don't know if I'm going to be terrified or excited," he said of the upcoming launch. "It all has to work."



Technicians lift the mirror of the James Webb space telescope using a crane at the Goddard Space Flight Center in 2017. Photograph: Laura Betz/AP

The size of Webb's primary mirror and the sensitivity of its infrared detectors will enable it to see some of the faintest, most distant objects in the universe. Because the cosmos is expanding, light emitted by stars and galaxies is stretched as it travels, elongating its wavelength and turning visible light into infrared. The [oldest objects](#) – those that formed first – are “redshifted” the most, and it is these that Webb has been built to observe.

“The very most distant galaxies are so far away that the light from them has travelled for most of the age of the universe to get to where we are. That allows us to use the telescope as a time machine,” Gardner said. “We look backwards in time to when the universe was younger, hoping to see the very first galaxies that formed.”

By working in the infrared, the telescope can look deep inside the dust clouds in which stars are born to see their formation in action.

More than a quarter of the projects awarded time on Webb will observe exoplanets – alien worlds that circle stars beyond our solar system. Astronomers have detected thousands such planets, ranging from giant, hot Jupiters to water worlds and rocky planets more like Earth.

Scientists plan to watch some of these planets as they cross in front of their parent stars. Using spectrographs on the telescope, they can analyse how light from a star is absorbed by a planet's atmosphere, providing hints of its chemical composition. “What Webb is focusing on is the conditions for life,” said Gardner. “We have small rocky planets, like Earth, Venus and Mars. What are their temperatures, what do their atmospheres look like, is there an indication of water in their atmospheres, and what kind of organic chemistry is going on in those atmospheres?”

But first the telescope must reach its destination and unfold without a glitch. For now, that is enough to keep many scientists occupied. “This is going to be a real nail-biter,” Biller said. “Launch is just the beginning.”

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Pope Francis

Pope Francis says domestic violence against women ‘almost satanic’

Head of Catholic Church makes some of his strongest comments yet on violence against women



Pope Francis said the number of women who are abused at home was ‘very high’. Photograph: Evandro Inetti/Zuma Press Wire/Rex/Shutterstock

Reuters

Sun 19 Dec 2021 19.16 EST

Pope Francis has said that men who commit violence against women engage in something that is “almost satanic”.

He made the comment – some of the strongest language he has used to condemn such violence – during a programme broadcast on Sunday night on

Italy's TG5 network in which he conversed with three women and a man, all with difficult backgrounds.

"The number of women who are beaten and abused in their homes, even by their husbands, is very, very high," he said in answer to a question by a woman named Giovanna, a victim of domestic violence.

"The problem is that, for me, it is almost satanic because it is taking advantage of a person who cannot defend herself, who can only [try to] block the blows," he said. "It is humiliating. Very humiliating."

Giovanna said she had four children to care for after they escaped from a violent home.

Since the Covid-19 pandemic began nearly two years ago, the pope has several times spoken out against domestic violence, which has increased in many countries since lockdowns left many women trapped with their abusers.

Police figures released last month showed there are about 90 episodes of violence against women in Italy every day and that 62% were cases of domestic violence.

The pope said women who were beaten and abused had not lost their dignity. "I see dignity in you because if you didn't have dignity, you wouldn't be here," he told Giovanna.

Turning to other examples of human misery, he listened to a homeless woman speak of life on the street and a man trying to get back on his feet after 25 years in jail.

Francis has set up services in the area around the Vatican to give Rome's homeless healthcare, bathing, and hair-cutting facilities.

In 2020, when a palazzo just off St Peter's Square that was once a convent became vacant, he ordered it to be turned into a homeless shelter, overruling suggestions that it be converted into a luxury hotel.

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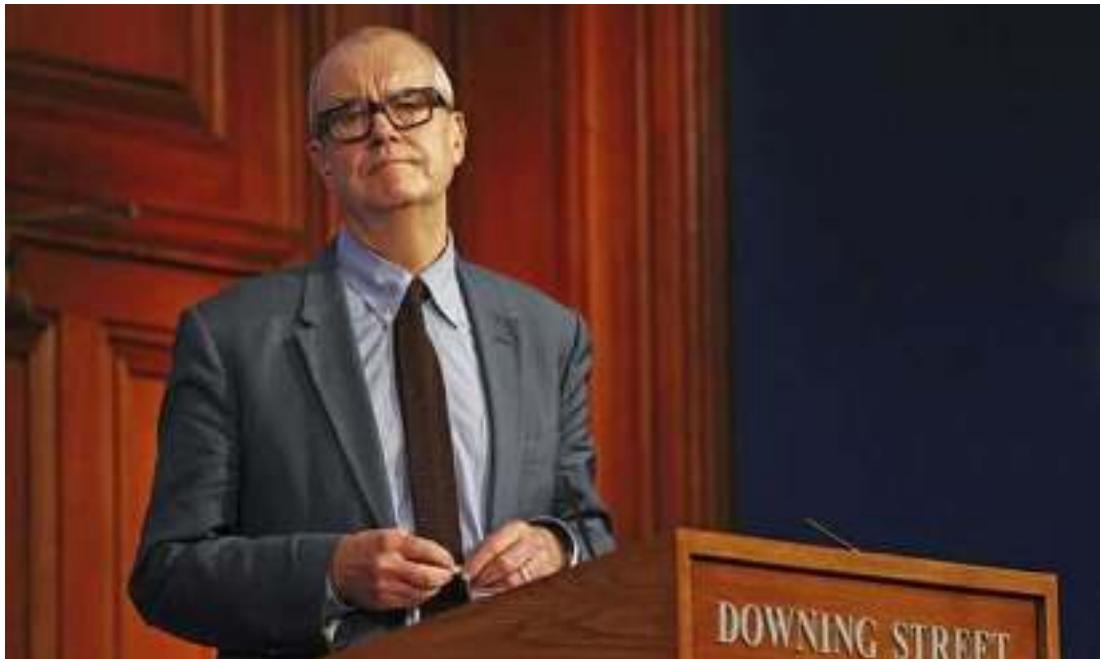
- [Omicron variant Vallance hits back at Tory accusations of fear mongering](#)
- [Live Covid: UK science chief denies claims of ‘fear mongering’; airlines cancel hundreds of Christmas flights](#)
- [Boris Johnson Getting Covid booster follows ‘teaching of Jesus Christ’, says PM](#)
- [Mental health Hugging has slumped under Covid, anxious Britons tell pollsters](#)

Omicron variant

Vallance hits back at Tory accusations of Omicron fear-mongering

Chief scientific adviser responds to criticism that Sage modelling has ‘spread gloom’ about Omicron variant

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Patrick Vallance at a press conference in Downing Street earlier this month.
Photograph: Adrian Dennis/AP

[Matthew Weaver](#)

Fri 24 Dec 2021 04.27 EST

The UK government’s chief scientific adviser has hit back at accusations from Conservative MPs that epidemiological modellers had “spread gloom”

about the [Omicron variant](#).

Sir [Patrick Vallance](#) said it was not the responsibility of the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (Sage) “to take a particular policy stance or to either spread gloom or give Panglossian optimism”.

He used an [article in the Times](#) to respond to criticism that was widely circulated among Tory MPs and ministers that suggested Sage’s Omicron modelling had been an exercise in fear-mongering.

The Spectator’s editor, Fraser Nelson, had a Twitter exchange with the Sage member Graham Medley over the weekend, suggesting ministers asked Sage to model worst-case scenarios. The exchange was reportedly widely shared in the WhatsApp groups of Tory MPs.

In an account of the exchange in his [column in the Telegraph](#) on Monday, Nelson complained that Sage projections that Omicron could kill [up to 6,000 in a single day](#) had been seized on in the press, and more cautious projections ignored.

Nelson wrote: “The 6,000 is the top of a rather long range of ‘scenarios’, not predictions.”

He added: “I’ve been contacted by a few ministers saying they were alarmed to think Sage modellers were not giving the probability of various outcomes but cooking up gloomy scenarios to order.”

In an apparent riposte, Vallance wrote science was “self-correcting” and about making “advances by overturning previous dogma and challenging accepted truths”.

He wrote: “Encouraging a range of opinions, views and interpretation of data is all part of the process. No scientist would ever claim, in this fast-changing and unpredictable pandemic, to have a monopoly of wisdom on what happens next.”

A widely reported statement from the Spi-M group of scientists, who report to Sage, on 18 December warned hospitalisations could peak at between

3,000 and 10,000 a day and deaths at between 600 and 6,000 a day based on models assuming no new restrictions were introduced.

Vallance said modellers were “trying to model lots of different scenarios of how the wave of Omicron might grow, determine which factors are likely to have the biggest impact on spread and its consequences, and to assess how different interventions might alter the outcomes”.

He added: “They do not, contrary to what you might have heard, only model the worst outcomes.”

The comments follow an interview the scientist did with BBC Radio 4 in October in which he said his job was “not to sugarcoat” reality.

He said at the time: “My mantra for a long time during this [pandemic] has been ... ‘You’ve got to go sooner than you want to in terms of taking interventions. You’ve got to go harder than you want to, and you’ve got to go more geographically broad than you want to.’”

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[**Coronavirus live**](#)

[**Coronavirus**](#)

1.7 million people in UK had coronavirus last week; thousands of Christmas flights cancelled – as it happened

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Boris Johnson

Getting Covid booster follows ‘teaching of Jesus Christ’, says Boris Johnson

PM urges public to take up jab in Christmas message that echoes archbishop saying vaccination is ‘how we love our neighbour’

- [Coronavirus – latest updates](#)
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02:59

Boris Johnson urges Britons to get vaccinated in Christmas message – video

[Heather Stewart](#) Political editor

Thu 23 Dec 2021 19.01 EST

Boris Johnson has invoked the teaching of Jesus Christ to urge the public to get a Covid booster jab, in a message issued to mark a Christmas he said would be “significantly better” than last year’s.

In a video statement filmed in front of a Christmas tree in Downing Street, the prime minister celebrated members of the public who were “getting jabbed not just for themselves, for ourselves, but for friends and family and everyone we meet”.

“That, after all, is the teaching of Jesus Christ, whose birth is at the heart of this enormous festival – that we should love our neighbours as we love ourselves,” he said.

His words echoed the message from the archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, who said earlier this week: “I would say, go and get boosted, get vaccinated. It’s how we love our neighbour. Loving our neighbour is what Jesus told us to do. It’s Christmas, do what he said.”

The prime minister said he could not say the pandemic was over, but pointed out that many people were able to celebrate with more family members this year than last.

“If this year you need a bigger turkey and there are more sprouts to peel and more washing up to do, then that is all to the good, because these rituals matter so deeply. And I hope that people will enjoy this Christmas this year all the more keenly because of what we had to miss last year,” he said.

There had been fears the government might impose limits on socialising over the festive period in a bid to slow the spread of the highly transmissible [Omicron variant](#), but ministers decided to wait and monitor the data.

In 2020, some parts of the country, including London, the home counties and the east of England, were placed under tier 4 restrictions just days before Christmas that meant a “stay at home” order was in place. Elsewhere, up to three households could gather, but only for a single day.

The NHS has accelerated the pace of booster vaccinations significantly since the arrival of Omicron, and in some parts of the country will continue to deliver jabs even on Christmas Day.

Johnson was baptised a Catholic but has rarely discussed his own religion. He married his wife, Carrie, at the Catholic Westminster Cathedral earlier this year. When ITV’s Robert Peston asked if he was a practising Catholic, Johnson replied: “I don’t discuss these deep issues.”

The Labour leader, Keir Starmer, used his Christmas message to mark the contribution of frontline workers, including soldiers and nurses, during what he called an “incredibly difficult” year.

“For too many, there will be one less chair at the table for the Christmas meal. But, in the darkest of times, Christian values of kindness, of compassion and hope have shone through. Communities have come together to help one another,” he said.

Looking forward to 2022, Starmer said: “If we stick together, support each other and work together, we can find a path through. I know a better future is

possible.”

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2021/dec/24/covid-booster-jab-boris-johnson-christmas-message>

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Mental health

Hugging has slumped under Covid, anxious Britons tell pollsters

Survey also finds a third think the pandemic will never be over, as ONS records highest anxiety in 11 months



More than half of people surveyed by YouGov and PA have cut down on hugging people they don't live with. Photograph: coldsnowstorm/Getty Images/iStockphoto

[Kevin Rawlinson](#) and agency

Thu 23 Dec 2021 19.01 EST

People are less likely to shake hands and hug people they do not live with than they were before the pandemic, a poll suggests, while separate research indicates that anxiety levels have increased markedly in the run-up to this Christmas.

Data collected by YouGov and the PA news agency suggests that nearly two-thirds of people shake hands less now than they did before Covid-19 and more than half have cut down on hugging people they do not live with.

Meanwhile, provisional figures from the Office for National Statistics (ONS) show that more than a third of adults are experiencing high levels of anxiety, the highest proportion since the UK's third national lockdown in January.

The latest official data suggests the proportion of adults experiencing high levels of anxiety has reached 38%. Such high anxiety levels have not been seen since similar data was collected between 13 and 17 January this year.

The average level of anxiety experienced by adults – calculated as the mean of all anxiety levels expressed on a scale of one to 10 – is also at its highest since January. The ONS said the rating had been increasing since the end of November, and the 4.3 average figure recorded this month had not been seen since similar figures were collected between 27 and 31 January.

The ONS estimates are based on a poll of 3,314 adults in Britain done between 15 and 19 December this year as part of its opinions and lifestyle survey.

Other widespread behavioural changes identified in the YouGov research include the use of hand sanitiser more often and the observance of social distancing around people whom respondents do not live with. About half of the people surveyed said they were more inclined to wipe down trolleys or baskets in supermarkets, and more than a third said they were more likely to meet people outdoors.

The poll of 1,652 people in Britain also investigated feelings about the pandemic and what it will mean for the future. A third of people said they thought it would never be effectively over in the UK, while 4% thought it was already effectively over. A majority thought it would be over within one or two years.

And the survey suggested that fewer people felt their lives had returned to normal since the emergence of the Omicron variant than had felt that way before. In the first two days of this month, 20% of respondents said they felt a return to normality. That proportion fell to just 12% in the latest data.

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2021.12.24 - Spotlight

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Kamil Syller, 50, and his wife have started an unofficial network of local residents and activists trying to shelter refugees.

‘My grandmother hid Jewish children’: Poland’s underground refugee network

Kamil Syller, 50, and his wife have started an unofficial network of local residents and activists trying to shelter refugees.

As thousands attempt to cross the Belarus-Poland border seeking asylum in Europe, local activists are trying to help

by [Lorenzo Tondo](#) in Hajnówka and Narewka; photographs by Alessio Mamo

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Fri 24 Dec 2021 02.00 EST

In the attic of a cottage in the woods near the Polish village of Narewka, a young Iraqi Kurd crouches, trembling with cold and fear. Through the skylight, the blue lights of police vans flash on the walls of his hiding place. Outside, dozens of border guards are searching for people like him in the snowstorm. Downstairs, the owner of the house sits in silence with his terrified wife and children.

The young Kurd is one of thousands of asylum seekers who [entered Poland across the border with Belarus](#), where countless others have become trapped on their way to Europe. The Polish family have offered him shelter. But if the Polish police find him, he risks being sent back across the frontier into the sub-zero forests of Belarus, while his protectors risk being charged for aiding illegal immigration.

As people fleeing conflict or starvation have become trapped on the Poland-Belarus border in the middle of a freezing winter, Polish families have been secretly hiding hundreds of desperate people in their homes.

Fears of the knock at the door as border police launch a manhunt bring back terrible echoes of the second world war, when thousands of Polish Jews were given refuge by their neighbours during the Nazi occupation.



A young Iraqi Kurd hiding in a small attic in the woods near Narewka, Poland, as dozens of border guards search for him and his travel companions.

“Let’s make one thing clear, this is far from being the Holocaust,” says a Polish woman who has sheltered a Syrian family in her home for five days. “At the same time … when you have six people hiding in your attic forced to stay in the dark to avoid being sent back, as a Pole you can’t help thinking of the similarities with that time.”

Every day since early October, Jakub*, 38, from Narewka, has searched the forests near the border to find people in need of water, food and a safe place to sleep. With his dog, Jakub follows signs of the presence of people who attempted to cross the frontier: nappies, damp blankets, or makeshift huts built with tree branches.

During the war one of his uncles, who died a few years ago, helped dozens of Jewish families in Warsaw avoid deportation. Now, 80 years later, Jakub has hidden and helped at least 200 people who risked being herded back

over the border to Belarus. “I’ve never compared what I’m doing today to what my uncle did,” Jakub says. “I help these people because they need help. It’s that simple.”



Jakub and a volunteer follow signs of the presence of people who attempted to cross the border.



Two men from Syria talk with an interpreter by phone before submitting an asylum application in Poland. They have called border guards to reveal

themselves but are worried that police will send them back to Belarus.

The European Union has accused Belarus of deliberately provoking a new refugee crisis by organising the movement of people from the Middle East to Minsk and [promising them with safe passage to the EU](#), in reprisal for sanctions that Brussels has imposed on its regime. Poland, in turn, has been accused by human rights organisations of violently pushing back thousands of people across the border. People such as Jakub, seeing the desperate families huddled in the snow, have taken it on themselves to help. Often it is a race between local volunteers and police to find the border crossers first.

In his room in a small home a few miles from Sokółka, Bartek, 14, has invented a device to locate people at risk of being sent back into Belarus. “I opened accounts to connect migrants’ phones,” he says. “I set up their accounts on Google and WhatsApp and linked their phones to one of my accounts. This way I can see where they have recently logged in and send help.”

Bartek and his aunt, Ewa, aided a Syrian family whose oldest child was five. They had been pushed back to Belarus 17 times.



Bartek, 14, has invented a device to locate people who have been pushed back into Belarus.

“What is happening here is totally unacceptable,” says Ewa, 40, whose grandmother smuggled pork fat and potatoes into the Jewish Ghetto during the second world war.

“My grandmother hid Jewish children in her house too,” she says. “The flap in the floor was covered with a bed on which my great-grandmother lay. I feel like I am carrying on my grandmother’s work.”

Ewa has bought thermal cameras to locate people at night. “When you go to the forest, you don’t know what awaits you, if someone is behind you,” she says. “Next year when you go to the forest to pick mushrooms, you don’t know whether you will find mushrooms or dead bodies. Some people said they found bodies of refugees torn apart by animals. In the area where migrants are camping, sometimes you can smell an intense smell of decay.”

At least 19 people have died since the beginning of the border standoff between [Poland](#) and Belarus. Most of them froze to death. Some of their bodies were buried in the Muslim graveyard in the village of Bohoniki, near Sokółka, in the heart of the forest that claimed their lives.



A Muslim graveyard in the village of Bohoniki, near Sokółka, where some asylum seekers have been buried

As temperatures dip near freezing, Bartek, Jakub and Ewa belong to a network of Poles who are working desperately to prevent more deaths.

“We’re doing something normal to help others,” says Ewa, “but they make you out to be a criminal.”

Since Poland imposed a state of emergency, all help for the people in the woods is on the shoulders of local residents and activists. In recent weeks more and more aid workers and citizens have been stopped by police forces, who have searched at least three homes looking for migrants.

“The situation seems to have escalated and officers became more violent towards aid workers,” says Witold Klaus, a professor at the University of Warsaw’s Centre for [Migration](#) Law Research. “This is part of intimidation and is probably calculated for its chilling effect – a discouragement to offer help to immigrants. Providing humanitarian assistance is not a crime. But this is the law in books and it doesn’t stop authorities from breaking it.”



Polish border guards during an operation near the border

On 14 December a group of activists were stopped by military personnel in the forests near the village of Zabrody. They were forced to lie face down on the ground and searched. On 15 December Polish armed police forces raided

one of the humanitarian aid hubs in the border region of Podlachia, seizing mobile phones and laptops.

“They suspect us of organising illegal border crossings”, says Anna Alboth, from the NGOMinority Rights Group. “But if anybody is creating a space for illegal crossing the border it is Belarusian and Polish authorities, who forced freezing and hungry people without any choice to cross the frontier.”

The Polish ministries of interior and defence did not comment when approached by the Guardian.

During recent pro-migration protests in Michałów and Hajnówka, young activists met elderly people who had sheltered fugitives during the second world war. Jakub says: “They said that they had hidden Jews during the war and that they had something in common with us.”

In 1939, Tatiana Honigwill, a young Polish Jew from Warsaw, was deported to the German concentration camp in Ravensbrück. After Russian liberation in 1945, Tatiana returned to Poland. She died a few years ago, survived by several granddaughters. One of them is Maria Przyszychowska, 43, a painter, who now lives near the border town of Hajnówka.



Maria Przyszychowska and her daughter in their home near the border town of Hajnówka

She and her husband, Kamil Syller, 48, have started an unofficial network of local residents and activists who have placed green lights in their windows to show that their home is a temporary safe space for refugees. At first it was a symbolic gesture. Then, suddenly, the first people started to show up at their doors.

The couple welcome them into their home and give them basic necessities. “We are trying to protect asylum seekers and now our activity has become a form of resistance,” says Kamil. “But we don’t want to be heroes. And it’s becoming really frustrating.”



Maria Przyszychowska and her husband, Kamil Syller, place green lights in their windows to show their home is a temporary safe space for refugees

For weeks, Maria and Kamil’s home has been under surveillance. Border guards patrol the streets around their building. Green lights have also started to attract the guards, who hide in the forests and wait for people to come out and then push them back.

Prohibiting an individual from the right to apply for asylum is an infringement of human rights. Despite individuals expressing their intention to apply for asylum, arrivals in Poland have been forced back in systematic mass expulsions.

“Maybe someday, when this is over, we’ll be able to talk openly about what the police did to migrants and what we went through to help them,” says Jakub. “I don’t know when, but I’m sure that day will come. Until then, we’ll continue to work in the dark. In the end, we are what they called us: secret guerrillas.”

(*Some names have been changed to protect people’s identities)

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My winter of loveOnline dating

My winter of love: I was not expecting a hot first date. Then I found love in a terrible pub

Ten years after my dad died, I felt rudderless – a manchild still making sense of life. But suddenly, surprisingly, I met someone with whom I had an immediate bond



Simon Usborne and his girlfriend, Jess, in April 2012, about six weeks after they started dating. Photograph: Courtesy of Simon Usborne

[Simon Usborne](#)

Fri 24 Dec 2021 01.00 EST

For most of the winter of 2011-12, I was a slightly reluctant member of the Guardian's spin-off dating site, Guardian Soulmates. I was still in my 20s, just about, and pouring the energy and naivety of youth into a busy social

life, a career as a writer of newsprint ephemera and a room in a shared flat. I think I was also a bit lonely and rudderless – a manchild still making sense of life 10 years after the sudden death of my dad. Whatever it was, something was missing.

By late February, I had been on half a dozen first dates – and no second dates. I was getting tired of the whole thing. It was all so procedural. But I'd agreed to meet a girl called Jess, whose profile handle – "good_grammar_is_hot" – had somehow not entirely put me off.

Temperatures in London that night were due to hit freezing, so I wore two unattractive jumpers under an unattractive coat. I was not anticipating a hot date. Jess and I both had house parties to go on to. We planned to meet for a quick drink at a sub-Wetherspoons pub by Victoria station. It would be handy for a prompt underground getaway.

It turned out Jess had low expectations too. She'd been on Soulmates for a bit longer. In the early days of the site, an algorithm ranked matches for compatibility. Jess's top match, with a rating of 99.7%, turned out to be her own brother. It was downhill from there.

I cannot picture now the moment our eyes first met, but I do remember feeling a warming spark and an immediate sense of ease. We drank bad lager and sweet white wine. As shoppers and theatregoers swirled about the tables around us, waiting briefly for trains home, we held fast like rocks in an eddy.

Later, when Jess popped to the loo, we furtively texted our respective flatmates. "Like her a lot," my message said. It helped that we had basically zero degrees of separation – Jess was a journalist too and we had mutual friends – but it was more than that.

Death is not always good chat fodder for a first date – even for oversharers like Jess and me. But at some point we learned that we had both lost fathers way too soon. We had both been on the brink of adulthood when that earthquake hit, and the crockery was somehow still rattling.

It was the first time I'd met someone who had gone through something similar, and it strengthened our bond. I don't know what else we talked

about – the usual cringey first-date stuff – but and it quickly became clear that neither of us would make our next engagement. We braved the cold to go on instead to a sub-Wagamama noodle place round the corner, and kept chatting.

We lived at opposite ends of the Victoria line. We waited between platforms for the first train to arrive, squeezing every last second out of the evening. As a rumble approached from the north, we agreed, before a chaste hug and a dash, that we should meet again. Inbox archaeology can be an embarrassing pursuit, and I can see now that I waited until 10.17 the next morning before emailing: “Is this too soon for post-date correspondence?”

A year later, I moved into Jess’s flat in Brixton. It was in a development that had been advertised as a converted Victorian school. Jess later discovered that this had been an estate agent’s fudge. When she found an old photo of the building in the council archives, she gasped when she saw the huge white letters that had once stretched under the roofline: “BRIXTON ORPHANAGE FOR FATHERLESS GIRLS”. The word “fatherless” had been painted directly above Jess’s windows like a label.

It was a spooky slice of history, but then felt like serendipity as the flat became a happy refuge for a fatherless couple. We would not be schooled in Bible stories or domestic service, as the residents 150 years earlier had been (Jess would have appalled an orphanage matron), but we would learn how to be settled adults.

Ten years ago, we found each other – and love – on a cold and unpromising winter’s night in a terrible pub. Then we found ourselves. In 2015, we got married and later moved into a house with space for Jake and Betty, now four and one. The photo of the orphanage, which Jess had framed, hangs on the wall just inside our front door.

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The best of the long read in 2021



Composite: Valerie Chiang; David Levene/the Guardian; Steven Collins; Alamy; Nathalie Lees; Sarah Lee/the Guardian

Our 20 favourite pieces of the year

Fri 24 Dec 2021 01.00 EST

‘Colonialism had never really ended’: my life in the shadow of Cecil Rhodes – Simukai Chigudu

After growing up in a Zimbabwe convulsed by the legacy of colonialism, when I got to Oxford I realised how many British people still failed to see how empire had shaped lives like mine – as well as their own

‘A managerial Mephistopheles’: inside the mind of Jeff Bezos – Mark O’Connell

The Amazon founder’s relentless quest for ‘customer ecstasy’ made him one of the world’s richest people – and now he’s looking to the unlimited resources of space. Is he the genius our age of consumerism deserves?

Hunting the men who kill women: Mexico’s femicide detective – Meaghan Beatley

Although femicide is a recognised crime in Mexico, when a woman disappears, the authorities are notoriously slow to act. But there is someone who will take on their case

The student and the algorithm – Tom Lamont

Josiah Elleston-Burrell had done everything to make his dream of studying architecture a reality. But, suddenly, in the summer of 2020, he found his fate was no longer in his hands

The rich v the very, very rich: the Wentworth golf club rebellion – Samanth Subramanian

When a Chinese billionaire bought one of Britain’s most prestigious golf clubs in 2015, dentists and estate agents were confronted with the unsentimental force of globalised capital

The clown king: how Boris Johnson made it by playing the fool – Edward Docx

Johnson is the archetypal clown, with his antic posturing and his refusal to take anything seriously. So how did he end up in charge?

Out of thin air: the mystery of the man who fell from the sky – Sirin Kale

In 2019, the body of a man fell from a passenger plane into a garden in south London. Who was he?

Letting go: my battle to help my parents die a good death – Kate Clanchy

My parents were determined to avoid heroic medical interventions in their dying days, even before the pandemic. Why wasn't anybody listening?

Cruel, paranoid, failing: inside the Home Office – Daniel Trilling

Something is badly wrong at the heart of one of Britain's most important ministries. How did it become so broken?

'We are witnessing a crime against humanity': India's Covid catastrophe – Arundhati Roy

It's hard to convey the full depth and range of the trauma, the chaos and the indignity that people are being subjected to – while Modi and his allies tell us not to complain

'The Silicon Valley of turf': the UK's pursuit of the perfect pitch – William Ralston

They used to look like quagmires, ice rinks or dustbowls, depending on the time of year. But as big money entered football, pristine pitches became crucial to the sport's image – and groundskeepers became stars

'We tried to be joyful enough to deserve our new lives': what it's really like to be a refugee in Britain – Zarlasht Halaimzai

As a child, I fled [Afghanistan](#) with my family. When we arrived in Britain after a harrowing journey, we thought we could start our new life in safety. But the reality was very different

The clockwork universe: is free will an illusion? – Oliver Burkeman

A growing chorus of scientists and philosophers argue that free will does not exist. Could they be right?

The secret deportations: how Britain betrayed the Chinese men who served the country in the war – Dan Hancox

During the second world war, Chinese merchant seamen helped keep Britain fed, fuelled and safe – and many gave their lives doing so. But from late 1945, hundreds of them who had settled in Liverpool suddenly disappeared. Now their children are piecing together the truth

The last humanist: how Paul Gilroy became the most vital guide to our age of crisis – Yohann Koshy

One of Britain's most influential scholars has spent a lifetime trying to convince people to take race and racism seriously. Are we finally ready to listen?

The disastrous voyage of Satoshi, the world's first cryptocurrency cruise ship – Sophie Elmhirst

Last year, three cryptocurrency enthusiasts bought a cruise ship. They named it the Satoshi, and dreamed of starting a floating libertarian utopia. It didn't work out

'Iran was our Hogwarts': my childhood between Tehran and Essex – Arianne Shahvisi

Growing up in Essex, my summers in Iran felt like magical interludes from reality – but it was a spell that always had to be broken

How two BBC journalists risked their jobs to reveal the truth about Jimmy Savile – Poppy Sebag Montefiore

Listening to the women who alleged abuse, and fighting to get their stories heard, helped change the treatment of victims by the media and the justice system

What lies beneath: the secrets of France's top serial killer expert – Scott Sayare

An intrepid expert with dozens of books to his name, Stéphane Bourgoin was a bestselling author, famous in France for having interviewed more than 70 notorious murderers. Then an anonymous collective began to investigate his past

Burying Leni Riefenstahl: one woman's lifelong crusade against Hitler's favourite film-maker – Kate Connolly

Nina Gladitz dedicated her life to proving the Triumph of the Will director's complicity with the horrors of [Nazism](#). In the end, she succeeded – but at a cost

And finally: In case you're curious, [these were our Top 10 most read pieces of 2021](#) and [these were the 10 most read pieces from our archive](#).

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From Pieces of Britney to Sweet Bobby ... the 2021 podcasts of the year.
Composite: PR

The 20 best podcasts of 2021

From Pieces of Britney to Sweet Bobby ... the 2021 podcasts of the year.
Composite: PR

Celebrities' bizarre snacking habits, a true crime tale about stripping troupe The Chippendales, and the realisation that there's no such thing as too much Louis Theroux: it's the pods of the year

- Want more of the year's best culture? Here are [our best TV shows of 2021](#)

by [Hannah J Davies](#) and [Rachel Aroesti](#)

Fri 24 Dec 2021 01.00 EST

Harsh Reality

Combining a prescient story with unparalleled access to the people at its heart, Wondery and Novel's co-production was a revelation. Miriam Rivera – the trans woman whose identity was the secret at the heart of the 2003 reality series *There's Something About Miriam* – is no longer the object but rather the subject here, as the perpetrators and participants of the original, highly problematic, series wrestle with their complicity and naivety.

19

The Bias Diagnosis

Does your race really affect your outcomes in the British medical system? Dr Ivan Beckley investigated the shocking inequalities in the health system, from conditions diagnosed incorrectly or perilously late, to the racist stereotypes which lead some clinicians to underestimate their patients' pain. Without blood, guts or a hint of sensationalism, this standout series painted a horrifying picture of prejudice.

18

Pieces of Britney



A fortuitously timed look at Spears's plight ... Pieces of Britney.
Photograph: Mario Anzuoni/Reuters

This fortuitously-timed podcast (it launched in July, days after Spears appeared in court protesting her conservatorship) didn't simply act as a much-needed explainer for a complex legal situation – it also did a great job of contextualising the popstar's plight. Amid archive recordings and the dramatisation of key events, host Pandora Sykes offered a potted history of the disturbing ways 00s celebrity culture preyed on young female stars.

17

Teach Me a Lesson



Bella Mackie and Greg James wrestle with the big issues – and exploding rodents ... Teach Me a Lesson. Photograph: BBC

Bella Mackie and [Greg James](#) – media personalities, married couple, keen students – grew a devoted audience with their series about getting to grips with the lessons they didn't learn at school. Is love at first sight real? Are people born evil? And, er, did exploding rodents help Britain win the second world war? There was never a dull moment.

16

Dear Me

Hosted by comics Katy Wix and Adam Drake, this gentle, meandering travel miniseries returns comedian guests to their childhood homes to commune with their former selves. Liam Williams thoughtfully reflects on 00s life in Leeds, the reliably daffy Lou Sanders travels to Broadstairs to surprise an old pal, and Wix's Stath Lets Flats co-star Kiell Smith-Bynoe takes a trip back to London's East Ham.

15

Death at the Wing

Adam McKay (Vice, The Big Short, Succession) hosted this look at the US basketball stars of the 80s and 90s who shone brightly but whose lives were cut short, tying in individual tragedies to wider societal issues in Reagan's America. From drugs to gun violence and the pressures of celebrity, each chapter smartly weaved the personal with the political to devastating effect.

14

The Line

Apple's gripping non-fiction series explored the controversial war crime trial against former US Navy Seal Eddie Gallagher. Was Gallagher – accused by his colleagues of erratic, aggressive behaviour – responsible for killing an Iraqi prisoner in Mosul in 2017? And what does the case tell us about the conflict at large? Dan Taberski (Missing Richard Simmons) was our guide to this most murky of cases.

13

Prison Break



The truth about being a ‘prison wife’ ... Josie Bevan’s Prison Break.
Photograph: Josie Bevan

When Josie Bevan’s husband was convicted of fraud and sentenced to nine years in jail, prison – previously a barely-considered prospect – became her new obsession. Upon Rob’s release, Bevan interrogates the very foundations our justice system is predicated on. Is prison a cure? A deterrent? A safety measure? If not, then what exactly is it for? This thoughtful, personal and empathetic podcast investigates.

12

The 33 1/3 Podcast

This companion podcast to the literary series of the same name – a collection of brief, insightful books on era-defining albums – sees producer Prince Paul (best known for De La Soul’s seminal debut, *3 Feet High and Rising*) dissect the same records with a roster of musician guests. Hole’s Patty Schemel examines Metallica’s Metallica, Danny Brown surveys Bowie’s *Low*, and Victoria Monét celebrates Janet Jackson’s *The Velvet Rope*. Nerdy insight and enthusiasm unite in a succession of fascinating deep dives.

11

The Battersea Poltergeist

During the making of his ghost story podcast Haunted, Danny Robins stumbled upon this extraordinary story of a violent, 12-year haunting in 1950s London. Amazingly, the teenage girl at its centre, Shirley Hitchings, is alive to tell the tale. Alongside her testimony, re-enacted with the help of actors Toby Jones and Alice Lowe, Robins tries his damnedest to offer a rational explanation with the help of sceptics and scientists – but it turns out to be no easy task.

10

The Witness

In 2005, Joseph “Joey” O’Callaghan became the youngest person to enter witness protection in Ireland when his testimony put two gang members behind bars for murder. He was 19 at the time, and has now spent nearly two decades with a new identity. This striking series saw O’Callaghan outline his harrowing experiences in Dublin’s criminal underworld, which began when he was just 11 years old.

9

Things Fell Apart



Cultural oracle ... Jon Ronson, host of Things Fell Apart. Photograph: Christopher Lane/The Guardian

With his 2015 book, *So You've Been Publicly Shamed*, [Jon Ronson](#) proved himself a cultural oracle, anticipating the way social media cancellations would soon grip the public imagination. In this typically fascinating show, the documentarian traces some of the root causes of America's current internet-based culture wars: namely, the individual – and often surprisingly arbitrary – protests that became tangled up with the Christian right, prompting mass hysteria in the process.

8

The Daily

Michael Barbaro and the New York Times team kept the bar high through another year of pandemic drama and ever-changing news agendas. The Daily's in-depth reporting on everyone from Ghislaine Maxwell to [Britney Spears](#) has been impressive, alongside copious amounts of Covid analysis – recently evidenced in an episode dedicated to the scientific questions provoked by Omicron.

7

Grounded with Louis Theroux



Revelatory ... Louis Theroux's Zoom-based interview series. Photograph: BBC

Multiple books, TV shows, merch, podcasts: it can sometimes feel as if the bespectacled documentary-maker has saturated pop culture on all fronts. But Grounded, his Zoom-conducted interview series, proved once again that you can never have too much [Louis Theroux](#). This second outing hosted everyone from zeitgeisty cultural figures (Michaela Coel) to past rivals (Ruby Wax), overlooked TV mainstays (Rylan) and family members (Justin Theroux), each conversation as revelatory as the last.

6

Unread

In 2019, writer and university professor Chris Stedman received a scheduled email from his friend Alex, informing him that he had killed himself. The message also contained a link to some recordings of a Britney sound-alike Alex had met on one of the popstar's fan forums. In this incredibly moving

series, Stedman attempts to uncover the woman's significance, all the while meditating on grief, friendship, fan culture and his friend's life.

5 **Day X**

A loaded gun found in a toilet in Vienna in 2017 led to the discovery of a military officer with a dramatic double life, as told in this chillingly brilliant show from the New York Times. "Franco A" assumed the identity of a Syrian refugee, seemingly looking to place the blame for an upcoming attack on his false persona. How deep into the German military did such far right influences extend?

4 **Slow Burn**

Not one but two series of Slate's acclaimed podcast were released in 2021, zooming in once again on little-known aspects of major events in US history. Noreen Malone hosted a smart look at the shaky moral judgments that led to the Iraq war, while Joel Anderson expertly examined the events triggered by Rodney King's beating by the LAPD in a series dedicated to the LA riots.

3 **Comfort Eating with Grace Dent**



Charming and bizarre ... Comfort Eating with Grace Dent. Photograph: Ilka & Franz/The Guardian. Food stylist: Lucy-Ruth Hathaway. Hair and make-up: Sarah Cherry using NARS Cosmetics. Set build: Lost Boys. Food assistant: Valeria Soledad Russo

In her capacity as the Guardian's restaurant critic and Masterchef guest judge, Grace Dent is well-versed in cutting-edge cookery – but here she is confronted with culinary experimentation like never before. From Scarlett Moffatt's Wotsit-sprinkled toast to Laura Whitmore's raw mushroom-and-mayo combo, celebrities' bizarre snacking habits prove the perfect conversation-starter in this charming interview podcast, which journeys onwards into (even) more serious topics.

2

Welcome to Your Fantasy

The Chippendales were an unlikely source of pop culture inspiration in 2021, with the male strippers inspiring an Amazon docuseries, a Hulu drama (currently in development) and this podcast from Pineapple Street Studios and Gimlet, hosted by historian Natalia Petrzela. Welcome to Your Fantasy deftly balanced the camp mayhem of this “Disneyland for adults” and its

colourful cast of characters, with the insalubrious true crime story behind it all.

1

Sweet Bobby



Kirat Assi, the victim of a disturbing example of catfishing ... Sweet Bobby.
Photograph: Andrew Testa/Andrew Testa for Tortoise Media

Catfishing – the act of misleading somebody with a fake internet persona – is a well-known phenomenon, but as our lives move ever more online, it remains far too little understood. This initially shocking, consistently riveting series chronicles one such outrageous deception, in which a woman genuinely believed herself to be in a decade-long relationship with a non-existent man. Once the perpetrator is revealed, host Alexi Mostrous begins conducting his own investigation into the catfisher's motivations – as well as the seemingly lacklustre police response to this disturbing and distinctly modern criminal activity.

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[G2 quiz of 2021](#)[Life and style](#)

Can you beat Mastermind? It's Clive Myrie's Christmas quiz!



Your Christmas quizmaster ... Clive Myrie. Photograph: Linda Nylind/The Guardian

Imagine yourself in the big black chair on the general knowledge round, with the G2 quiz of the year

Clive Myrie

Fri 24 Dec 2021 03.00 EST

1.What did Jacob Chansley do in January this year that later caused him to say he needed to re-evaluate his life?

Super-spread Covid

Published a guacamole recipe that used peas instead of avocado

Stormed the US Capitol

Caused a statewide fire after his pyrotechnic gender reveal party went wrong

2.Cumbria county council attracted criticism for plans to build what?

Beatrix Potter Land

A coalmine

A statue of Alfred Wainwright

An M6 extension into the Lakes

3.Who recited her poem The Hill We Climb at Joe Biden's inauguration ceremony?



Alice Walker

Amanda Gorman

Rita Dove

Pam Ayres

4.Which leader was ousted after a military coup in February?

Aung San Suu Kyi

Nicolás Maduro

Daniel Ortega

Bah Ndaw

5. At the 2020 Summer Olympics, postponed until 2021, at which event was there a tie for first place and two gold medals awarded?

Women's long jump

Men's high jump

Women's high jump

Men's triple jump

6. Where was the Ever Given – the container ship that launched a thousand memes after getting wedged across the Suez Canal – towed to after finally being freed?



Suez port

Port Said

Alexandria

The Great Bitter Lake

7. Of the 12 football teams – from England, Spain and Italy – to sign up to the European Super League, which was the first to withdraw?

Chelsea

Manchester City

Arsenal

Tottenham

8. Who did the UK supreme court rule could not return to Britain?

Shamima Begum

Edward Snowden

Snoop Dogg

Martha Stewart

9. Which country became the first in the world to accept bitcoin as an official currency?



El Salvador

Russia

China

United States

10. Which act – a protest against racism originally inspired by Dr Martin Luther King Jr – did the England football team perform before every match they played during the Euro 2020 tournament?

Whistling loudly the tune to Kumbaya My Lord, Kumbaya

Saluting

Taking the knee

Performing the dance to the Birdie Song

11. In October, the World Health Organization endorsed the first vaccine for what?

HIV
Malaria
Cancer
Covid-20

12. For what reason did SpaceX's Inspiration4 mission to space make the news?



The rocket was powered by leftover cheese and wine
It was the first to send an all-civilian crew into orbit
William Shatner was on board
The crew wore Star Trek costumes

13. Jill Mortimer became Conservative MP for where in May?

Berwick-upon-Tweed
Hexham
Sedgefield
Hartlepool

14. Jack Grealish became the most expensive footballer to have been signed by a Premier League club. How much was the transfer fee from Aston Villa to Manchester City?



£60m

£80m

£100m

£120m

15. Who did the Bank of England make the new face of the £50 note?

Alan Turing

Captain James Cook

Virginia Woolf

John Lennon

16.What did Facebook change the name of its holding company to in October?

Faceplant

Meta

The Facebook

Virtuel

17.Prince Philip died in April this year. How old was he?

91

99

101

109

18. Which author's estate announced that it would cease publishing six of his books after taking "a moral decision of choosing not to profit from work with racist caricature in it".

JRR Tolkien

Dr Seuss

Roald Dahl

Ian Fleming

19. Marcus Rashford received an honour from Prince William at Windsor Castle. What was it?



A knighthood

The Rear of the Year award

MBE

OBE

20. In March, it was announced that I would be the new host of Mastermind. I replaced John Humphrys, who first started presenting the show in which year?



1995

2000

2003

2010

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Guardian business Christmas quiz 2021



Does your talent for financial facts sparkle like these Christmas baubles?
Photograph: Geoffrey Swaine/Rex/Shutterstock

Do you know your Alphabet from your AstraZeneca? Test your 2021 business knowledge here with our annual quiz ...

- For your overall score, please complete all the questions

Fri 24 Dec 2021 01.00 EST

1.Boris Johnson lost his place during his speech at the annual CBI dinner for 21 excruciating seconds. How many times did he say either “erm” or “forgive me” while riffling through his notes?

Four times

Five times

Eight times

2.Brewdog, the Scottish brewery, upset one of its customers when the “solid gold” beer can he won turned out to be largely brass. How much did Brewdog say it was worth?



£5,000

£15,000

£50,000

3.The price of Bitcoin reached an all-time high. How much would one Bitcoin have set you back in November 2021?

\$68,000

\$86,000

\$96,000

4.What did Sir Richard Branson do just before Amazon's Jeff Bezos this year?

Guarantee to pay staff worldwide a living wage

Sign up for full global tax transparency across his businesses

Fly to the edge of space

5.How did West Midlands Trains teach its staff about cybersecurity awareness?



It sent a fake email from the boss promising a bonus for working through Covid

It asked them to hack the onboard wifi used by passengers

It put them on a three-day residential course in a luxury Cotswolds hotel

6.What will the national living wage rise to from April, from the current level of £8.91 an hour?

£9.21

£9.50

£11.35

7.Who said their company's flotation, or IPO, in London had "just sucked from start to finish"?

Matt Moulding of THG

Will Shu of Deliveroo

Poppy Gustafsson of Darktrace

8. Pictures released by the Treasury press office showed Rishi Sunak preparing for the autumn budget while wearing a pair of £95 pool sliders. But what was printed on the chancellor's Gen Z footwear?



Thug Life
Fiscal Rulz
Palm Angels

9. Which company explained its change of name by saying it wanted a "modern, agile and digitally enabled" identity?

Facebook, which became Meta
Royal Dutch Shell, which is becoming Shell
Standard Life Aberdeen, which became abrdn

10. What did the London stockbroking firm FinnCap give its staff to stop burnout in November?

Unlimited coffee
Unlimited holiday
Unlimited massages

11. When the Omicron variant emerged in November, Pfizer and BioNTech said they could tweak their Covid-19 vaccine in how many days if needed?



100

200

50

12. Rivian raised \$12bn in the biggest US stock market float this year, despite lacking what?

It doesn't have any offices

It hasn't made any sales

It doesn't have any products

13. How did Elon Musk describe Dogecoin during his guest-host spot on Saturday Night Live?

Great value

The future currency of Mars

A hustle

14. What was the name of the huge container ship that blocked the Suez canal in March?



Ever Given

Ever Green

Ever Sailing

15. How many UK energy suppliers have gone bust in 2021?

14

22

27

16. Who said: “If governments are serious about the climate crisis, there can be no new investments in oil, gas and coal, from now – from this year”?

Boris Johnson, the UK prime minister

Fatih Birol, the executive director of the International Energy Agency

Bernard Looney, the chief executive of BP

17. Which event caused UK electricity prices to surge to £2,500 a megawatt hour, from a norm of about £50/MWh, in September?



Storm Arwen

Russia amassing up to 100,000 troops on the border of Ukraine

A fire that shut down a cable bringing electricity from France to Kent

18.Which British retailer was not bought by a US company this year?

Asda

Morrisons

Depop

19.Why did Tesco's Christmas ad attract more than 5,000 complaints to the advertising watchdog?

Santa's reindeer were not wearing masks

Santa had a Covid passport

The elves were being too naughty

20.How many days was the Marble Arch Mound open to paying visitors before being closed for refurbishment?



17

34

2

21. Spacs took US stock markets by storm in the first half of 2021, with a flood of businesses using mergers with "blank-cheque" companies to list on stock markets. What does Spac stand for?

Stock purchase arrangement corporation

Special purpose acquisition company

Share partnership and commission

22. How much is the highest outstanding student loan in the UK, as revealed earlier this year by a freedom of information request?

£51,400

£93,900

£189,700

23. A new £50 note went into circulation in June this year, but who's the famous face from the past on it this time?



The scientist Alan Turing

The painter JMW Turner

The civil engineer Isambard Kingdom Brunel

24.Which city has the most dollar millionaires (those with assets of more than \$1m), according to the estate agent Knight Frank?

New York

Hong Kong

London

25.The telecoms billionaire Patrick Drahi has been building a stake in BT before a potential takeover next year. How big is his stake currently?

12.1%

18%

21.1%

26.Official data revealed that how many people in the UK were leading a “cashless life” (where they never or only extremely rarely use notes and coins) last year?



7.7 million people

13.7 million people

23.7 million people

27.Which celebrity did the Financial Conduct Authority reference earlier this year when it was warning on paid-for crypto posts by social media influencers?

Kim Kardashian

Ed Sheeran

Billie Eilish

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Vaccines and immunisation

NHS urges people to get ‘gift of a jab’ at booster centres open on Christmas Day

200,000 appointments available on Christmas Eve, Christmas Day and Boxing Day in England

- [Coronavirus – latest updates](#)
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The NHS is trying to meet the PM’s target of giving everybody eligible a booster jab by the end of year. Photograph: Maureen McLean/Rex/Shutterstock

[Dan Sabbagh](#)

Thu 23 Dec 2021 19.01 EST

NHS England has said there are 200,000 vaccination appointments available on Christmas Eve, Christmas Day and Boxing Day and urged anybody due a booster to consider coming forward “to get the gift of a jab”.

Staff and volunteers will continue to deliver jabs in some locations on 25 and 26 December, as the NHS tries to meet Boris Johnson’s target of giving everybody eligible a booster by the end of the year amid a surge in the number of Covid cases.

Vaccination centres that were open “over the festive period” included Redbridge town hall in north-east London from 10am to 5.50pm and Grim’s Dyke golf club in Pinner, Middlesex, the NHS said. Walk-in appointments can be obtained in Eastbourne, Dewsbury and Hartlepool.

Dr Emily Lawson, the head of the NHS Covid vaccination programme, praised those willing to work over the Christmas weekend and argued that people should consider getting a booster as a last-minute present to family members.

“This Christmas, before sitting down to your dinner with your family, I would encourage anyone not already boosted to come forward, book an appointment and get the gift of a jab,” the NHS official said.

The latest figures show that 840,000 people across the UK received a booster on Wednesday, the seventh consecutive day that jabs exceeded 800,000, taking the number who had received a third jab to nearly 31.7 million.

Daily vaccination rates have leapt by about three-quarters in a little over a week as the NHS has rapidly organised to try to meet Johnson’s pledge, opening more sites, increasing hours and calling for volunteers to help.

But health service chiefs had no warning that the booster jab target was being brought forward to help tackle the sudden upsurge in Covid cases, and reaching the goal has become increasingly demanding.

About 13.2 million are people yet to be boosted, with nine days to go before the end of the year. Allowing for a day off to account for reduced

vaccination rates over the holiday period, that would mean 1.65m jabs a day would need to be given to hit the target.

Sajid Javid thanked NHS workers for their commitment to helping dramatically increase vaccination rates. The health secretary said: “You have shown our country at its best and achieved phenomenal things this year including delivering our turbocharged booster rollout.”

Everybody over 18 is eligible for a booster if their second jab took place more than three months ago and they have not caught Covid in the past 28 days.

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2021/dec/24/nhs-urges-people-to-get-gift-of-a-jab-at-booster-centres-open-on-christmas-day>.

Health

Keep Christmas plans small to help NHS fight Omicron, doctors plead

Fresh evidence that variant is milder is countered by record new infections and sharp rise in health staff off sick

- [Coronavirus – latest updates](#)



Shoppers pass a Christmas window display in London. Photograph: Neil Hall/EPA

[Denis Campbell](#), [Andrew Gregory](#) and [Heather Stewart](#)

Thu 23 Dec 2021 15.13 EST

Doctors have made an urgent plea to keep Christmas celebrations small as scientists said mounting evidence that the [Omicron variant](#) of coronavirus is milder may not be enough to stop the NHS being overwhelmed.

In the first government study of its kind, the UK Health Security Agency (UKHSA) found that the risk of being admitted to hospital is up to 70% less for people with Omicron compared with those infected with Delta.

But the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (Sage) warned ministers that the new variant would have to be about 90% less severe for hospital admissions not to reach previous peak levels, “unless the wave peaks early for other reasons”, according to minutes published on Thursday.

The health secretary, Sajid Javid, welcomed the UKHSA findings as “promising” but said cases were rising at an “extraordinary rate” and it was still “too early to determine next steps”.

The Scottish government announced on Thursday that nightclubs would close for three weeks from 27 December, the latest in a series of Covid curbs introduced by the devolved governments in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. The UK government has said no further measures in England will be announced before Christmas.

Official data on Thursday showed there were 119,789 new Covid infections across the UK in the previous 24 hours – a record number – meaning more than 600,000 people will be in isolation on Christmas Day. A further 147 coronavirus deaths were recorded on Thursday, with daily deaths relatively stable.

With millions of Britons now already with their Christmas companions or travelling to spend the weekend with family or friends, Dr Nick Scriven, a past president of the Society for Acute Medicine, told the Guardian: “I personally would advocate caution, especially as the Omicron variant seems so transmissible, even if only for a few days.

“What I mean by this is doing lateral flow tests before any gatherings and perhaps limiting the numbers people mix with over the next few days. [And] if you are not fully vaccinated with a booster, I would be very cautious about mixing outside your family circle.”

In a pointed reminder of revelations of rule-breaking get-togethers involving Downing Street last Christmas, Scriven, a senior doctor in Yorkshire, said: “We are really relying on people doing what experts suggest and not using politicians as role models.”

Dr Andrew Goddard, the president of the Royal College of Physicians, acknowledged that while people may find it hard to avoid being in a large group, they should do so to help limit soaring sickness absence among NHS staff.

“While we are all looking forward to time with loved ones this year, we need to think very carefully about the number of people we mix with over the next couple of weeks. That’s not a message people want to hear and not one that’s easy to deliver. But if we aren’t cautious, we risk the number of available health and care staff falling to very dangerous levels,” Goddard said.

NHS England data released on Thursday showed that the number of health service staff days lost to Covid in England [soared by 38%](#) last week, to 124,855. Hospital bosses privately voiced deep unease that the sharp rise, coming on top of the service’s almost 100,000 vacancies, could hinder its ability to cope with a feared wave of hospitalisations driven by the new variant.

Prof Stephen Powis, NHS England’s national medical director, declared that the NHS was “on a war footing”. Matthew Taylor, the chief executive of the NHS Confederation, said the service was facing “a double emergency” of a growing number of staff off sick at the same time as hospitalisations because of the virus were rising sharply.

Chris Hopson, the chief executive of NHS Providers, cautioned that despite Omicron being milder, the health service could still come under very serious pressure.

“We still don’t have conclusive data in terms of what impact Omicron could have in terms of level of hospitalisations. We have some very early studies, but it’s a bit like trying to predict the result of a football game when you’re only a third of the way through,” he told BBC Radio 4’s Today programme.

The leader of Britain's family doctors also advised restraint in personal behaviour in the face of Delta and Omicron fuelling a new surge in Covid cases. "Even if vaccinated, it's important that people behave cautiously while new cases remain high," said Prof Martin Marshall, the chair of the Royal College of GPs.

As well as wearing a mask, washing their hands and practising social distancing, people should be prepared to isolate over Christmas if they test positive in order to not spread Covid to others, he added.

According to the UKHSA research, people with Omicron are between 31% and 45% less likely to go to A&E compared with those with Delta, and 50% to 70% less likely to require admission to hospital. The early findings are consistent with analysis published on Wednesday by Imperial College London and the University of Edinburgh.

Lockdown-sceptic Conservatives have seized on the analysis as fresh evidence to support the idea that more restrictions are unnecessary.

"It does look like it's less severe," said Mark Harper, the chair of the backbench Covid Recovery Group. "I just don't buy the idea you're going to have immense numbers of people in hospital, given that most people have been boosted now. You might want to have some guidance, but I can't see much of a case for restrictions, to be honest."

Harper was among the 100 Conservative MPs who voted against the introduction of compulsory Covid passes this month.

Boris Johnson has promised to recall parliament if he decides stricter rules are needed in the coming days, but he would be likely to face a fierce backlash from his own MPs, including in cabinet.

One minister told the Guardian they believed the UKHSA analysis, together with "people's self-control" and higher immunity from the booster campaign, supported the idea that "draconian" restrictions could be avoided.

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Omicron variant

Good news is Omicron may be less severe, bad news is it's surging faster

Analysis: smaller proportion of people hospitalised with Covid variant means little when rise in infections is so huge, warn experts

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Three separate pieces of research this week suggest those with the Omicron variant were far less likely to require hospitalisation. Photograph: Justin Tallis/AFP/Getty Images

[Richard Adams](#)

Thu 23 Dec 2021 12.13 EST

Evidence that infections caused by Omicron may be less severe than other Covid variants is good news but is [likely to make little or no difference](#) to the duration of the pandemic, according to experts.

Several pieces of research published this week suggest that people infected with Omicron are much less likely to require hospitalisation.

Those with the variant are estimated to be between 31% and 45% less likely to attend A&E compared with the Delta variant, and 50% to 70% less likely to require admission to hospital, the UK Health Security Agency (UKHSA) said on Thursday.

Separately, researchers at the University of Edinburgh [studied infections from the Delta and Omicron](#) variants since November and said the results “suggest that Omicron is associated with a two-thirds reduction in the risk of Covid-19 hospitalisation when compared with Delta”.

But experts warned that the results suggested no change in the level of infection. In the UK, the huge surge in cases – with another [119,789 new infections](#) reported on Thursday – means that even if only a small proportion of people with Covid need to attend hospital, it could cause difficulties for the NHS.

Mark Woolhouse, a professor at the University of Edinburgh and one of the co-authors of the Scotland study, said the weight of new research meant that projections would be less pessimistic, although Omicron’s rapid spread meant there were still dangers ahead.

“It’s good but it doesn’t get us out of the woods. Severity of infection is clearly very important but it is only one factor in terms of the public health burden,” Woolhouse said, speaking in a personal capacity.

“The other thing is the sheer size of the wave. The simple way of looking at that, according to our data in Scotland, is an Omicron infection is about one-third as severe or likely to put you in hospital as a Delta infection. But if there are three times as many cases, then we are back where we started.

“We should still be worried about the sheer size of the wave, the very fast growth rates, very fast doubling time. These peak numbers of cases that we have seen in the UK are still climbing, so it is the size of that wave that is worrying people most at the moment.”

Dr Raghib Ali, a senior clinical research associate at the University of Cambridge, told Reuters that the hospital data was encouraging and “may help justify the government’s decision not to expand restrictions on social gathering over Christmas in England”.

Another scientist, who did not want to be named because of involvement in ongoing research, said Omicron infections were going to be “hugely disruptive” because of the numbers needing to self-isolate “There’s a tremendous impact on the NHS because of the workforce getting infections,” they said. “But obviously it’s good news if a smaller fraction of those infections lead to severe illness.”

Separate research published by scientists at Imperial College London found a reduction in hospital visits between Omicron and Delta cases, and estimated that those infected with Omicron were 40%-45% less likely to be hospitalised overnight than those with Delta.

But the study also suggested that two doses of a Covid vaccine were not enough to combat Omicron alone. Prof Neil Ferguson, one of the co-authors of the Imperial study, said: “Given the high transmissibility of the Omicron virus, there remains the potential for health services to face increasing demand if Omicron cases continue to grow at the rate that has been seen in recent weeks.”

Woolhouse said there remained substantial gaps in scientists’ knowledge of Omicron, such as how the UK’s booster campaign would affect the spread of infection.

“Particularly, whether [boosters] not only stop people getting ill but also stop them getting infected and passing the infection on. That would also be very helpful – at the moment we don’t know that it has much impact on the spread of these cases,” Woolhouse said.

“If it did have an impact on the spread of cases that would be further good news, and that would affect the size of the wave and therefore the public health burden.”

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Retail industry

Dismal post-Christmas forecast for Omicron-hit high streets in UK

Lockdown fears thought to have led shoppers not to wait for sales, as bars and restaurants also face financial distress



Spending in physical stores is expected to be 23% lower than in pre-Covid 2019
Photograph: Nathan Stirk/Getty Images

[Sarah Butler](#)

[@whatbutlersaw](#)

Thu 23 Dec 2021 13.45 EST

More than 35,000 British retailers and 20,000 bars and restaurants are facing significant financial distress, according to new data, while shoppers are forecast to spend almost a quarter less in physical stores this Boxing Day than before the pandemic.

If fashion and footwear shops, furniture businesses and other “non-essential” retailers are allowed to remain open from 26 December, £3.94bn is expected to be spent in stores and online that day, 10% less than before the pandemic and 1% lower than last year.

Spending in physical stores alone is expected to fall by 23% compared with 2019 as many shoppers avoid high streets, shopping centres and retail parks amid fears over the Omicron variant of coronavirus.

The forecast for the whole post-Christmas week is not much brighter, according to a report by GlobalData for VoucherCodes. A total of £13.9bn is expected to be spent between 25 and 31 December, down 9% on 2019 and up just 1% on 2020 when many high streets were in lockdown.

Online retailers will be the big winners, with over £1bn expected to be spent on Christmas Day alone as shoppers snap up bargains while digesting their festive meals.

Angus Drummond, a director at VoucherCodes, said fears of a lockdown had pushed shoppers to buy before Christmas rather than waiting for discounts, a trend that he said would “negatively impact the performance of Boxing Day sales”.

Meanwhile, data released by the insolvency firm Begbies Traynor revealed the parlous financial position of 55,000 retailers, bars and restaurants across the UK amid reduced footfall and cancellations during a key trading period.

The figure represents an improvement on the same quarter of 2020, but a 2% rise in retailers facing financial difficulty versus the period between July and September, as inflation and supply issues continue to bite.

Julie Palmer, a partner at Begbies Traynor, said: “While many bars, restaurants and hotels have flourished since the summer as the UK has reopened … many now face the prospect of trading through what is typically the leanest part of the year with the double whammy of falling trade and very limited government support.”

The disappointing sales for the post-Christmas week are likely to pile pressure on businesses that have suffered because of the pandemic and months of high street lockdowns. Cancelled holidays, parties, weddings and other events have also put a dampener on clothing sales, which account for a large chunk of the retail market.

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City centres appear to have been hit particularly hard by advice to work from home and nervousness about sharing public transport. Data from the retail intelligence firm Springboard on Wednesday showed a 17.3% drop in footfall in central London compared with the same day last week, and regional cities have recorded a 3.4% drop.

Ailing finances could lead to a wave of business failures around the latest quarterly rent day, on Christmas Eve. Creditors often step in to secure their cash before the rental bill payouts at a time of the year when businesses are likely to be more flush with cash because of festive spending. Often administrators are not called in until the new year, however, as many leases have a “Santa clause”, which gives leeway on rent payment until after the Christmas holiday.

Retailers have not been included in the government’s latest £1bn bailout package, which focused support on hospitality and leisure businesses. Hospitality businesses say that up to £6,000 in grants for each outlet is not enough to make up for lost takings.

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Britain through the looking glass: my dead goldfish is now a registered waste disposer

[George Monbiot](#)



Algernon Goldfish is long gone, but I was able to sign him up. No wonder so many crooks are illegally dumping and ruining our environment



Illustration: Ben Jennings

Fri 24 Dec 2021 01.00 EST

It's a tragic story, with a happy ending. Until I was seven, I had a goldfish called Algernon. He wasn't the most exciting pet, but I was quite upset when I found him floating one morning on the surface of his little tank. This, or so I thought, was the end of a short and uneventful existence.

But a few weeks ago, I [wrote a column](#) about the failure to regulate waste disposal in the UK. It showed how millions of tonnes of waste, some of it extremely hazardous, are now being handled by organised criminal networks, and illegally dumped or burned, presenting major hazards to our health and to the living world. It showed how the Environment Agency in England and its equivalents in the rest of the UK have lost control, to the extent that anyone can now get themselves [officially licensed](#) as a waste disposer, using false information that can remain unchecked.

Some people found this hard to believe. But as chance would have it, at that very moment, the spirit of my dead goldfish spoke to me. With a clarity he had never exhibited in life, he explained that he wished to be registered as an upper-tier carrier, broker and dealer in waste. This would ensure that anyone paying him to dispose of waste materials could be confident that he had met

the requisite standards, and was not the kind of fishy operator who would take your money, dump your waste illegally, evade landfill tax and potentially land you, the unwitting householder, with a £5,000 fine for failing to exercise your “[duty of care](#)”.

Perhaps motivated by a sense of guilt, as I had neglected him in life, I sought to fulfil his wishes. On the Environment Agency’s website, I affirmed that he was a, ahem, sole trader and had no unspent convictions. I gave his name as Algernon Goldfish, of 49 Fishtank Close, Ohlooka Castle, Derby, and paid the requisite fee. It took less than four minutes. A month on, my long-deceased goldfish [remains on the register](#) as a bona fide upper-tier waste dealer. If you want your rubbish safely removed, no job too big or too small, Algernon is your man. Or your fish.

The screenshot shows a web page from the Environment Agency's Public Registers Online service. At the top, there are links for 'Environmental Agency', 'Public Registers', and 'Home'. A banner at the top states: 'We are currently working on improving the Public Registers Online services. You can help us identify potential areas for improvement. Thank you to all those who have provided their feedback so far.' Below this, a 'BETA' label indicates it's a trial service. The main content area shows the registration details for 'Registration CBDU414534 – Algernon Goldfish'. The details are as follows:

Registration number	CBDU414534
Business name	Algernon Goldfish
Registered as	Carrier, Broker, Dealer - Upper Tier Help with this type
Applicant type	Sole trader
Registration date	24/11/2021
Expiry date	24/11/2024
Business address	
Address	49 Fishtank Close, Ohlooka Castle, Derby, DE3 8JH
Postcode	DE3 8JH

The registration details of George Monbiot’s goldfish as a waste dealer.

Already, in other words, the system has fallen apart. The government says, “We have pledged to reform the licensing system for waste carriers”, but this has been going on for a long time, and the situation is likely to get worse. Last month, the [Environment Agency](#) circulated two memos to its managers. They explained that while reports of pollution, illegal dumping and other kinds of damage are rising, grants for incident management have been reduced in real terms “by 90% in 10 years”. The only events to which it can

still respond are those it is specifically funded to investigate, which means incidents at “regulated sites” (such as places handling radioactive waste, certain kinds of illegal waste and those involved in flood control) and water companies.

The memos instructed staff to “not routinely spend time” on anything other than acute catastrophes caused by other businesses. Members of the public reporting incidents at unregulated sites should be “reassured that their report is useful to help us prioritise our work”, and are effectively advised to take the law into their own hands, by speaking directly to the perpetrator. The agency’s officers are then instructed to “shut down report”.

In other words, unless you run a regulated site or are a water company, you can do what you damn well like. Mind you, as a [constant stream of filth](#) suggests, if you are a water company or a regulated site you can also do what you damn well like. Everything is fishy now, except our rivers.

There are two categories of crime in this country: those for which you can expect to be prosecuted, and those for which you can’t. There’s no consistent connection between the seriousness of the crime and the likelihood of prosecution. Bag snatchers stealing a couple of hundred pounds a week are more likely to be caught and charged than fraudsters [emptying the bank accounts](#) of elderly people. Carrying a few grams of cannabis is more likely to land you in trouble than dumping hundreds of tonnes of hazardous waste.

On one estimate, aside from the fake companies registered on the Environment Agency site, there are more than [250,000 unlicensed](#) (in other words outright illegal) waste disposers in the UK. The number of con artists involved in ripping off vulnerable people and in white-collar fraud must also be high. According to the latest report by the auditors Crowe UK and the University of Portsmouth, in 2020 fraud [cost people and businesses](#) in the UK £137bn. Their estimate has risen by 88% since 2007. Yet only [0.4% of fraud](#) is believed to result in a criminal sanction.

Many tens of thousands of people are likely to be involved in the [industrial-scale money laundering](#), tax evasion, shell companies, corrupt practice and concealment of assets in the City of London and its satellites, and the UK’s

property market. Large numbers are running coercive [labour rackets in farming](#), car washes, [nail bars](#), restaurants and other businesses. Altogether, it would not be surprising if more than a million people in the UK were engaged in the kind of organised crime that seldom leads to prosecution.

This is what you get from 40 years of deregulation. While good citizens are bound by ever [more oppressive laws](#), “the market”, according to [neoliberal theory](#), should be released from regulatory constraint. Deregulation is a euphemism for destroying the effective capacity of the state to protect us from chancers, conmen and criminals. Empowered to cut corners, fishy businesses outcompete responsible ones and we begin to shift towards an organised crime economy.

As crime syndicates extend their reach and expand their wealth, they become politically powerful. Eventually, mafias become embedded in public life. This is what happened in the US during prohibition. You can see it at work today in Russia, Italy, Mexico and Lebanon. There is no obvious mechanism to prevent it from happening here.

When Steve Bannon, Donald Trump’s chief strategist, announced that his aim was “[the deconstruction of the administrative state](#)”, people were horrified. But in reality, it has been happening for years, on both sides of the Atlantic. It’s just that they do it subtly. Our government couldn’t simply close down the Environment Agency: people would be up in arms. Instead, it hacks the budget and creates an institutional culture of demoralisation and failure. The same goes for the other regulatory bodies. Probity, integrity, trust? They sleep with the fishes.

- George Monbiot is a Guardian columnist

[Opinion](#)[LGBT rights](#)

Why am I being abused for trying to improve the gender recognition process?

[Caroline Nokes](#)

Some of those caught in the system find it cruel, while some of those attacking plans to change it ignore their plight



‘We spent months speaking with trans rights and women’s rights groups and sought to strike a path that safeguarded the rights of both.’ Caroline Nokes.
Photograph: UK Parliament/Jessica Taylor/PA

Thu 23 Dec 2021 08.00 EST

It is 17 years since the Gender Recognition Act was enacted in the UK, permitting those aged over 18 to have their acquired gender legally recognised and recorded on a new birth certificate, as long as certain criteria are met. However, for many transgender people the process is outdated, intrusive and bureaucratic.

In order for an individual to have their acquired gender recognised, a person has to prove to a panel of strangers that they will never meet – the gender recognition panel – that they are either feminine or masculine. It has caused a great deal of concern in the transgender community that the panel, in effect, sits in judgment upon them and their transition. Who is anyone to decide whether someone is feminine or masculine enough? Gender identity is no longer as rigid as it once was, thank goodness. Women wear trousers. Some of us choose to eschew makeup altogether, others only on some days. Hair can be long, or short, or shaved off. But there is no way of knowing whether the panel is making judgments based on outdated stereotypes because it is devoid of transparency.

Those wishing to transition also require a medical diagnosis of gender dysphoria – a mental health condition, effectively giving the view that being transgender is an illness. They also have to live in their acquired gender for two years (something they need spousal consent for), a pretty arbitrary period of time, and again, upholding stereotypical views of what it is to live as a woman or a man.

In a [report](#) published this week, the women and equalities select committee is calling for the requirements to be updated, pretty much in line with the extensive consultation carried out, but not acted on, by the government more than two years ago. This would mean replacing the gender recognition panel, dropping the requirement to have a diagnosis of gender dysphoria and to live in the acquired gender for two years. Gaining a gender recognition certificate would still require a formal statutory declaration – a safeguard that ensures “genuine intent”, and possibly other legal safeguards, but the process would be respectful and accessible.

We spent months speaking to trans rights and women’s rights groups and sought to strike a path that safeguarded the rights of both. They are not zero sum – both can be supported. As the chair of the committee, I spent Tuesday on broadcast media discussing our recommendations. I understand this is a highly contentious issue, with very polarised views, but the correspondence I have received in my inbox over the following 24 hours suggests that the most determined correspondents have not read a word of the report.

The most common objection people have raised is the issue that any changes to the GRA would make it easier for men to legally change their gender, access women's spaces and pose a serious threat to their safety.

First and foremost, even with our proposed reforms, the process for an individual to have their acquired gender legally recognised is a drawn-out process, with numerous stages to go through. Waiting lists are incredibly long for NHS consultations, and I can think of my own constituents who have waited years for just a referral to one of the very few clinics, before having given up and paid for private treatment they could ill afford. The suggestion that someone could change legal sex on a whim is quite patently nonsense; the process takes years.

The [new clinics announced](#) last year were of course welcome, but they had already been commissioned by NHS England and, at only three, are a drop in the ocean compared to what is needed.

Second, we have specifically called for single-sex exceptions to be not only upheld but clarified. We have asked the Government Equalities Office and the Equality and Human Rights Commission not only to improve their guidance for female-only spaces, such as refuges, but to use worked examples, so that there can be no doubt about the right of service providers to restrict use to natal women only. There should also be best practice to provide trans and non-binary inclusive and specific services, including those relating to domestic violence and sexual abuse. Sometimes it will be appropriate to provide exclusive spaces. Those that argue I am against this are plain wrong.

I urge those currently directing the bile and abuse I have received on this issue to read our report in full. Ultimately, the current process is clunky, time consuming and, in many cases, those going through it find it downright cruel. All I have ever sought is to make the GRA kinder, quicker and much more understanding of the needs of transgender people and the concerns of women's rights groups. Is that so bad? From my email inbox you would have thought so, but I don't.

- Caroline Nokes is the Conservative MP for Romsey and Southampton North
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What I changed my mind about in 2021Pop and rock

I used to avoid pop music, but this year I embraced its joyful, sexy escapism

[Oscar Quine](#)

My eclectic musical tastes encompassed indie, hip-hop, and modern classical. But it took a pandemic to make me love pop



‘As Lorde says ‘I’m kinda like a prettier Jesus.’ You are, goddamit, Lorde. And I’m your disciple.’ Photograph: Paula Lobo/ABC/Getty Images

Fri 24 Dec 2021 03.00 EST

This was the year I started listening to non-stop pop music. It could be something to do with everything seeming hard and sharp at the moment, like those morphing spikes on the coronavirus. Those jaggedy little ridges tearing through our day-to-day lives.

Growing up, pop was a dirty word and instead indie music was the soundtrack of my youth. I'll probably never be as happy as I was stumbling around [the Pavilion Tavern](#) in Brighton drenched in lager, as the Futureheads' [Hounds of Love](#) blared from the speakers. Hip-hop figured heavily too. The [crunchiness of Wu Tang Clan](#), like gravel underfoot. The [ego of Kanye](#). [The erudition of Kendrick](#). [The melancholy of Frank](#). [The swagger of Jay-Z](#). And latterly, [the sheer hot-diggety of Skepta](#) and the [seductive hallucinatory quality of A\\$AP](#).

Then I went to university and everyone did too many drugs and listened to dubstep, so I listened to that too. I never rated it, but a friend was a DJ for a pirate radio station in London and it all seemed pretty cool. I'd stagger around clubs to [Benga](#), [Skream](#) and [Crookers](#) instead, covered in sweat, wondering where I'd left my mind. It was usually in the loos. Along with my phone.

Recently, I decided I couldn't "do" music with a BPM over 120 any more, it conjured too many memories – men I hadn't slept with; men I shouldn't have slept with, a few women I'd slept with too, actually; nights I'd missed out on; nights I shouldn't ever have gone on. So I got pretentious and started listening to modern classical. [Philip Glass](#), [Ólafur Arnalds](#), [Max Richter](#), that sort of thing. I "explored" the intersection of classical and dance: [Actress](#), [Nicolas Jaar](#), [Nils Frahm](#). I spent a lot of time at [the Barbican](#). That was as much about the boys as the music, though. And from Nicolas Jaar, I sidestepped to [FKA twigs](#) – with [Sampha](#) and [Solange](#) providing stepping stones along the way – and I was only one leap away from [Lorde](#) really.

Then the pandemic hit. [Lorde](#), [Lil Nas X](#), [Lana](#) provided a much needed comfort blanket, along with [Ariana](#), [Bey](#) and the occasional dose of [RiRi](#). I wouldn't tell anyone I was listening to pop for many months to come. I learned to dance, instead, by myself, in my bedroom. A perfect remedy for lockdown. In that, I learned humility. I was a body that responded to aural stimuli, I had rhythm, I was a person, not just a mind. A fleshy lump of humanness, gyrating, and it was lovely. Delicious, even. There's no avoiding it: pop is sexy and sex is joy. For three and a half minutes we can forget the impending doom and just [shimmy](#).

There's the queer thing too. Pop is subversive, we all know that. Lil Nas X has done [more for gay rights](#) than anyone since [whoever threw that first brick at Stonewall](#). Pop is a nightclub, to extend the metaphor, with no door policy. A world unto itself, entry gratis, as long as you have a subscription to a music-sharing service, or can bear the ads on YouTube. You can be yourself, or someone else if you can't handle that just now. There are no rules, have fun.

As Lorde says ["I'm kinda like a prettier Jesus"](#). You are, goddammit, Lorde. And I'm your disciple. But, [Lil Nas X, if you're reading this: my DMs are open](#).

- Oscar Quine is a writer and journalist based in Glasgow

This article was downloaded by **calibre** from <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2021/dec/24/i-used-to-avoid-pop-music-but-this-year-i-embraced-its-joyful-sexy-escapism>

Opinion**Music streaming**

A Christmas hit can be the gift that keeps on giving, so why have so many artists given up?

[Jessica Mizrahi](#)

As Mariah Carey and Wham continue to rule the yuletide charts with decades-old songs, it seems many contenders have abandoned the festive fight



Mariah Carey's All I Want for Christmas Is You has returned to the Australian Top 10 every year since 2017, while crooners such as Bing Crosby continue to release festive albums every year. Photograph: Gregory Pace/REX/Shutterstock

Thu 23 Dec 2021 22.54 EST

To me, the Christmas season doesn't start when offices close. It's not when the first person on the street turns on the Christmas lights, or even once the [Christmas pageant](#) has been held.

It's the first day I hear a carol.

Everyone's got their favourites. It might be a classic or a cover, religious or secular, joyful or sad. Whatever it may be, and however much we might roll our eyes, it's a great time for music.

Which means a great time for musicians. Christmas music has long been helping artists make money. In fact, the [Guinness Book of World Records](#) calls Bing Crosby's 1942 White Christmas the bestselling single of all time, with more than 50m sales worldwide.

There was a time when releasing a Christmas album was an artist's best hope at making a few dollars, and while there's no exhaustive source of album releases, [Allmusic data](#) suggests there were more than 230 Christmas albums released in 2001.

[Number of Christmas albums released](#)

Source: author calculations based on [Allmusic](#)

By [2011](#), that number had plunged to a little over 90. A rough early count suggests that this year, the tally will be [about 60](#).

What's with the decline of Christmas albums?

First, it's symptomatic of the slow demise of albums more broadly. As musical technology and formats have changed, so too have preferences. In the [2010](#) calendar year, Australians bought 33m CD albums. By [2020](#), the number had dropped to 3.3m – one-tenth of the value it was 10 years ago. In a return to retro, forecasts suggest that in 2021, we probably spent [more on vinyl](#) than on CDs.

CDs defined the album format. A CD can fit [74 minutes](#) of content – the length of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony. Fans were willing to pay a premium for an album (\$20-\$30) over a single (\$5-\$10). Labels and artists designed

albums with two to three hopeful hits (which would be spun out into singles), and a balance of filler tracks. The practice was both common and common sense.

Now, of course, there is streaming.

According to 2020 figures, streaming represents [89%](#) of total recorded music sales in Australia by value. By all accounts, you're more likely to see a subscription gift card in your email this year than you are to see a CD wrapped underneath a tree.

Artists and labels have adapted accordingly. Under streaming models, music makers get paid every time someone listens to a track – or the first 30 seconds of it. The result is more focus on singles, and [shorter track lengths](#). You could break a three-minute song into two one-and-a-half minute songs, or three one-minute songs, and get paid double (or triple) as much for your efforts.

The other contributor is that streaming provides better access to a wider catalogue.

In a physical music store, constraints around distribution and physical space meant that artists were very reliant on labels and networks to get access to consumers. Whether a single or an album, you could only take up shelf space for so long. Music had a short half-life.

Online, however, there are few limits. Musicians can reach audiences of millions without labels – a [Scottish man](#) singing a [Kiwi folk song](#) on a [social media platform](#) became the song of a pandemic, with more than 75m views.

It's also enabling access to golden oldies – and increasing focus on them. Older Christmas songs have become increasingly prominent on Spotify charts over the last five years. As an example, consider the most streamed songs in Australia on 20 December from 2017 (the first year Spotify chart data is available) onwards.



Elvis Presley and Bing Crosby albums on sale in the US last year.
Photograph: Mark Makela/Reuters

In [2017](#), every song in the Top 10 had been released that year. In [2018](#), Mariah Carey's 1994 festive hit All I Want for Christmas Is You made the list – and it has featured in the Top 10 [every year since](#). Three out of the Top 10 streamed songs on [Spotify in Australia](#) on 20 December 2021 were from previous years.

This is not to say that there have been no new contenders. This year, Ed Sheeran, Kelly Clarkson and Megan Thee Stallion have all thrown their hats in to the ring. Yet none have made the Christmas week Top 50. It's no wonder that festive new releases have declined.

Nostalgic Christmas listening is not limited to streaming. Consider the classic crooners making money from beyond the grave. There has been at least one Christmas album release from Bing Crosby, Elvis Presley, Dean Martin, Frank Sinatra or Nat King Cole every single year for the last decade. Not bad considering none of them have not seen a Christmas in more than two decades.

[Number of Christmas albums released by year](#)

Source: author calculations based on [Allmusic](#)

Love them or hate them, Christmas songs are here to stay. So turn it up and make the most of it while it lasts – January is only a week away.

Jessica Mizrahi is an economic consultant and commentator. She has taught, researched and applied economics for over a decade

The author previously served on the board of the Australian Live Music Business Council and has previously co-authored research commissioned by the Australian Independent Record Labels Association. All opinions and analysis are her own

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Bangladesh

River ferry fire kills dozens in Bangladesh

Passengers jumped off vessel carrying 800 passengers and tried to swim ashore, officials say

01:06

Bangladesh: dozens dead after fire sweeps through ferry – video

Associated Press

Fri 24 Dec 2021 06.54 EST

A massive fire has swept through a crowded river ferry in [Bangladesh](#), leaving at least 39 people dead and 70 injured, officials have said.

Many passengers leaped from the vessel into cold waters to escape the fire. It took 15 fire engines two hours to control the blaze and another eight to cool down the vessel, according to Kamal Uddin Bhuiyan, the fire officer who led the rescue operation.

Afterwards, the blackened hull of the ferry sat anchored at the river's edge. Many relatives gathered on the banks while divers continued to search the waters.

The fire broke out at about 3am local time on the MV Avijan-10, which was carrying 800 passengers, many of whom were travelling to visit family and friends for the weekend, officials said.

"I was sleeping on the deck and woke up hearing screams and a loud noise," one survivor, Anisur Rahman, told reporters, adding that he saw smoke coming from the back of the ferry. "I jumped into the freezing water of the

river in the thick fog, like many other passengers, and swam to the riverbank.”

A police officer, Moinul Haque, said rescuers recovered 37 bodies from the river, while two people died from burn injuries on the way to the hospital. All of the 70 injured were hospitalised, including some with severe burns.

Ferries are a leading means of transportation in Bangladesh, which is crisscrossed by about 130 rivers, and accidents involving the vessels are common, often blamed on overcrowding or lax safety rules.

The ferry was travelling from Dhaka, the capital, to Barguna, about 250km (155 miles) to the south. It caught fire off the coast of Jhalokati district on the Sugandha River, towards the end of the journey.

Bhuiyan said the fire may have started in the engine room. The government has set up two committees to investigate the blaze and ordered them to report their findings in three days.

In April, 25 people died after a ferry collided with another vessel and capsized outside Dhaka.

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Park Geun-hye

Former South Korean president Park Geun-hye pardoned for corruption

Moon Jae-in, her successor, has freed Park from 22-year sentence three months ahead of presidential election



Park Geun-hye arriving for a court hearing in Seoul, October 2017.
Photograph: Ahn Young-joon/AP

[Justin McCurry](#) in Tokyo and agencies

Fri 24 Dec 2021 19.15 EST

[South Korea](#)'s disgraced former president [Park Geun-hye](#) has been pardoned by her successor, Moon Jae-in, in a special amnesty that could influence voters in a presidential election that is just three months away.

Park has been [serving a 22-year sentence following her impeachment in 2017](#) and conviction for corruption and abuse of power, after a scandal that

exposed webs of double-dealing between political leaders and conglomerates.

“We must overcome the pain of the past and move forward into the new era,” said Moon, who was propelled into power in 2017 following public backlash against Park and her conservative party.

“Considering the many challenges we face, national unity and humble inclusiveness are more urgent than anything else,” he said, adding that Park’s deteriorating health had also been a factor.

Park has been hospitalised three times with chronic shoulder and back pain and has undergone surgery once, the Yonhap news agency said.

Park, who will be freed on New Year’s Eve, thanked Moon through an aide. “I express my deep gratitude to president Moon Jae-in and the government authorities who decided to grant amnesty despite many difficulties,” she said.

Her freedom could have a bearing on the 9 March presidential election, given her influence among conservative voters who are expected to back the candidate for the conservative People Power party.

While her release from prison could cause a backlash among liberal voters, it could also divide conservatives, some of whom lost faith in Park during the corruption scandal.

A poll by Gallup Korea in November showed 48% of respondents opposed pardoning Park and another former president, Lee Myung-bak, but the numbers have dropped from around 60% early this year.

Yoon Suk-yeol, the main People Power party candidate in the presidential election, welcomed the pardon while his rival, Lee Jae-myung from the ruling Democratic party, said he understood “Moon’s anguish for national unity”.

But, he added: “A sincere apology from former president Park is needed for the Korean people.”

Moon, who can only serve a single term as president due to term limits, lost to Park in the race for the presidential Blue House in 2012.

Park, the daughter of former South Korean dictator Park Chung-hee, is the country's first female president, and its first democratically elected leader to be thrown out of office after the constitutional court upheld a parliament vote to impeach her in 2017.

She was brought down after being found guilty of colluding with a [longtime friend](#), [Choi Soon-sil](#), to secure tens of millions of dollars of funding from Samsung and other major South Korean companies, and allowing her to influence policy. The money went to foundations run by Choi.

The revelations provoked a wave of anger across the country, sending Park's approval rating to a record low of 4%.

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US Capitol attack

Trump could face charges for trying to obstruct certification of election, legal experts say

Analysis: charges could be well founded given Trump's incendiary remarks to a rally before the Capitol attack and aggressive pressuring of officials



The panel could make a criminal referral of evidence for the justice department to investigate. Photograph: Leigh Vogel/UPI/REX/Shutterstock

[Peter Stone](#) in Washington DC

Fri 24 Dec 2021 02.00 EST

Expectation is growing that [Donald Trump](#) might face charges for trying to obstruct Congress from certifying Joe Biden's election this year as a House panel collects more evidence into the 6 January attack on the Capitol, former prosecutors and other experts say.

Speculation about possible charges against the former US president has been heightened by a recent rhetorical bombshell from Republican representative and 6 January panel vice-chair Liz Cheney suggesting the House panel is looking at whether Trump broke a law that bars obstruction of “official proceedings”.

Former prosecutors say if the panel finds new evidence about Trump’s role interfering with Congress’ job to certify Biden’s election, that could help buttress a potential case by the Department of Justice.

In varying ways, Cheney’s comments have been echoed by two other members of the House select committee, Republican Adam Kinzinger and Democrat Jamie Raskin, spurring talk of how an obstruction statute could apply to Trump, which would entail the panel making a criminal referral of evidence for the justice department to investigate, say DoJ veterans.



Representative Liz Cheney said the 6 January panel is considering whether Trump could be charged with obstructing official proceedings. Photograph: Elizabeth Frantz/Reuters

Cheney’s remarks raising the specter of criminal charges against Trump came twice earlier this month at hearings of the committee. Experts believe the charges could be well founded given Trump’s actions on 6 January,

including incendiary remarks to a rally before the Capitol attack and failure to act for hours to stop the riot, say former justice department officials.

“Based on what is already in the public domain, there is powerful evidence that numerous people, in and out of government, attempted to obstruct – and did obstruct, at least for a while – an official proceeding – i.e., the certification of the Presidential election,” said former DOJ inspector general and former prosecutor Michael Bromwich in a statement to the Guardian. “That is a crime.”

Although a House panel referral of obstruction by Trump would not force DOJ to open a criminal case against him, it could help provide more evidence for one, and build pressure on the justice department to move forward, say former prosecutors.

Attorneygeneral Merrick Garland has declined to say so far whether his department may be investigating Trump and his top allies already for their roles in the Capitol assault.

The panel has amassed significant evidence, including more than 30,000 records and interviews with more than 300 people, among whom were some key White House staff.

The evidence against Trump himself could include his actions at the “Stop the Steal” rally not far from the White House, where he urged backers to march to the Capitol and “fight like hell [or] you’re not going to have a country any more”. Trump then resisted multiple pleas for hours from Republicans and others to urge his violent supporters to stop the attack.



Donald Trump spoke at the rally before his supporters stormed the Capitol building. Photograph: Shannon Stapleton/Reuters

Recent rulings by Trump-appointed district court judges have supported using the obstruction statute, which federal prosecutors have cited in about 200 cases involving rioters charged by DOJ for their roles in the Capitol assault that injured about 140 police officers and left five dead.

Still, experts note that the House panel's mission has been to assemble a comprehensive report of what took place on 6 January and work on legislation to avoid such assaults on democracy. They caution that any criminal referral to DOJ documenting Trump's obstruction of Congress will take time and more evidence to help bolster a DOJ investigation.

Some DOJ veterans say that any referral to DOJ by the House panel for a criminal case against Trump – and perhaps top allies such as ex chief of staff Mark Meadows, whom the House last week cited for criminal contempt for refusing to be deposed – might also include Trump's aggressive pressuring of federal and state officials before 6 January to block Biden's win with baseless charges of fraud.

Bromwich stressed that “the evidence is steadily accumulating that would prove obstruction beyond a reasonable doubt. The ultimate question is who

the defendants would be in such an obstruction case. Evidence is growing that, as a matter of law and fact, that could include Trump, Meadows and other members of Trump's inner circle."

Cheney teed up the issue about Trump's potential culpability first at a House panel hearing last week, when she urged that Meadows be held in contempt for refusing to be deposed, and then hit Trump with a rhetorical bombshell.

"We know hours passed with no action by the president to defend the Congress of the United States from an assault while we were counting electoral votes," Cheney said.



'Hours passed with no action by the president to defend the Congress of the United States from an assault while we were counting electoral votes,' Cheney said. Photograph: Roberto Schmidt/AFP/Getty Images

"Did Donald Trump, through action or inaction, corruptly seek to obstruct or impede Congress' official proceeding to count electoral votes?"

Cheney's comments about Trump were very precise, including language from the criminal obstruction statute, and she stated that her question is a "key" one for the panel's legislative tasks.

Raskin too has told Politico that the issue of whether Trump broke the law by obstructing an official proceeding is “clearly one of the things on the mind of some of the members of the committee”.

“The possibility of obstruction charges is legally valid,” said Paul Rosenzweig, a former DOJ prosecutor who worked on Ken Starr’s team during the impeachment of former President Bill Clinton, noting that two district judges appointed by Trump “have recently said that the statute covers the efforts on January 6 to stop the electoral count”.

For instance, Judge Dabney Friedrich in a recent opinion rejected the claim by some defendants who were challenging the DOJ view that the 6 January meeting of Congress fit the legal definition of an “official proceeding”.

Rosenzweig posited that given Trump’s various attempts before 6 January to undermine the election results, a broader conspiracy case may be another option for prosecutors to pursue. Should DOJ look at broader conspiracy charges, Trump’s persistent pressures on acting attorney general Jeffrey Rosen and his top deputy for help blocking Biden’s victory would probably be relevant, say ex-prosecutors.

On one call on 27 December 2020, Trump pressed Rosen and his deputy to falsely state the election “illegal” and “corrupt” despite the fact that the DOJ had not found any evidence of widespread voter fraud.

Paul Pelletier, a former acting chief of the fraud section at DOJ, said that Cheney’s statements were “carefully crafted and obviously based upon evidence the committee had seen. Should Congress ultimately refer the case to DOJ for investigation and prosecution, the DOJ’s investigation would not be limited to a single obstruction charge, but would more likely investigate broader conspiracy charges potentially involving Trump and other key loyalists.”

The panel has accelerated its pace recently by sending out dozens of subpoenas for documents and depositions, some to close Trump aides. Meadows has become a central focus of the inquiry, in part over tweets he

received on and near the insurrection that are among approximately 9,000 documents he gave the panel, much to Trump's chagrin.

As Trump's efforts to thwart the panel from moving forward have had limited success, he has relied on sending out spleenetic email attacks, including one last month that read: "The Unselect Committee itself is Rigged, stacked with Never Trumpers, Republican enemies, and two disgraced RINOs, Cheney and Kinzinger, who couldn't get elected 'dog catcher' in their districts."

Despite Trump's angry attacks on the panel, some ex-prosecutors say that prosecuting Trump – if enough evidence is found to merit charges – is important for the health of American democracy.

Former Georgia US attorney Michael J Moore told the Guardian: "I hate to think of a legal system that would allow the most powerful person in the country to go unchallenged when he has abdicated his highest priority, that being to keep our citizens safe. Trump's conduct that day was not unlike a mob boss."

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Solomon Islands

China to equip and train Solomon Islands police after anti-China unrest

Pacific Island nation to host six Chinese officers as well as receiving shields, helmets and batons, says government



Solomon Islands police and Australian federal police man road blocks in Honiara early this month. China will now send six police liaison officers.
Photograph: Gary Ramage/AP

Reuters

Fri 24 Dec 2021 00.00 EST

China will send police officers to the [Solomon Islands](#) to help train its police force, the Pacific island nation says, after rioting last month sparked by the country's 2019 switch of diplomatic relations to Beijing from Taiwan.

The unrest, in which dozens of [buildings were burnt down](#), arose after the decision by prime minister Manasseh Sogavare to launch relations with China fuelled a dispute between the national government and the most populous province, Malaita. Other domestic issues also stirred the discontent.

Six Chinese police liaison officers will equip and train the Solomon Islands police force, a statement from the Solomon Islands government said on Thursday.

The Chinese equipment includes shields, helmets, batons and “other non-lethal gears that will further enhance Solomon Islands police ability in confronting future threats”, the statement said.

Zhao Lijian, a Chinese foreign ministry spokesman, told a press conference in Beijing: “China firmly supports the Solomon Islands government in safeguarding its domestic stability, bilateral ties and the rights and interests of Chinese citizens in Solomon Islands.”

Sogavare has blamed “agents of Taiwan” in Malaita province for the protests, in which dozens of buildings were torched in the Chinatown district of Honiara and shops looted, after the premier refused to speak with protesters.

Taiwan has denied any involvement in the unrest.

China claims the democratically governed island of Taiwan as its own territory and has stepped up military and diplomatic pressure to assert its sovereignty claims, fuelling anger in Taipei and deep concern in the United States.

To counter China’s expanding interests in the Indo-Pacific region, Australia has ramped up its presence in the Pacific via its membership [of the “Quad” group](#), together with the US, India and Japan.

“We are aware of China’s expected engagement in the security sector in Honiara. This is a matter for the Solomon Islands government,” a

spokesperson for Australia's foreign affairs department said in an emailed response.

Around 200 police and soldiers from Australia, New Zealand, Fiji and Papua New Guinea arrived in the Solomons capital of Honiara within days of the riots, at Sogavare's request.

Some Australian soldiers who had been deployed in Honiara began returning home on Thursday.

Australia has a bilateral security agreement with the Solomon Islands. Australian police were previously deployed there in 2003 under a regional peacekeeping mission and stayed for a decade.

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US television

Singer Lisa Gentile is fourth woman to accuse Chris Noth of sexual assault

Gentile said the Sex and the City actor threatened to ruin her career if she ever came forward about the alleged assault



Chris Noth has been accused of sexual assault by four women, the most recent singer-songwriter Lisa Gentile. Photograph: Caitlin Ochs/Reuters

[Edward Helmore](#) in New York

Thu 23 Dec 2021 17.42 EST

A fourth woman has come forward to accuse [Chris Noth](#) of sexual assault, days after the actor best known for his character Mr Big on Sex and the City was fired from the CBS TV drama The Equalizer.

Singer-songwriter Lisa Gentile gave an account on Thursday that Noth had forcibly kissed and groped her in her New York apartment after she met him

at Da Marino, a restaurant in midtown Manhattan where another of Noth's accusers has said she was assaulted by the actor.

Gentile said she met Noth in 1998, when they were both regulars at the restaurant. One night in 2002, he gave her a ride home and asked to see her apartment. Gentile said he pushed her against a countertop, forcibly kissed her and groped her breasts.

"He was slobbering all over me, and I quickly became uncomfortable. He became more aggressive, put both hands on my breasts and began squeezing them very hard over my shirt," she said on Thursday at a press conference.

Gentile, who alleges Noth then put his hands under her shirt, said she tried to push him off.

"I kept pushing his hands down while he was pushing mine up. I was trying to get him to stop. Then he pushed my hands down toward his penis."

After she managed to push him away, she recalled "he became extremely angry and started screaming and calling me a tease and a bitch. He stormed out of my apartment."

The next morning, Gentile added, Noth called, warning her that "if I ever told about what happened the night before that he would ruin my career that I would never see him again and that he would blacklist me from the business."

"I was afraid to come forward because of Noth's power and his threats to ruin my career," Gentile said, adding that she was going public now to support the women who spoke out before her, anonymously, and to call for laws to extend legal limitations on adult claims of sexual assault.

The new account [follows claims](#) by three other women who say the actor sexually assaulted them between 2004 and 2015.

Noth has [previously described](#) the allegations as "categorically false".

“These stories could’ve been from 30 years ago or 30 days ago – no always means no – that is a line I did not cross,” [he told The Hollywood Reporter](#).

“The encounters were consensual,” he added. “It’s difficult not to question the timing of these stories coming out. I don’t know for certain why they are surfacing now, but I do know this: I did not assault these women.”

Noth’s [co-stars](#) in Sex and The City and its sequel And Just Like That – Sarah Jessica Parker, Cynthia Nixon, and Kristen Davis – jointly voiced their support for his accusers.

Noth could not be immediately reached for comment on Gentile’s allegations. Representatives for the actor had no comment on Thursday.

Reuters contributed reporting.

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