

UK government forced to enact new restrictions after pandemic let loose

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The Conservative government's claims to have brought the pandemic under control—its main justification for ending the national lockdown over the last weeks—are in a state of utter collapse.

Amid a national surge of coronavirus cases and fatalities, Prime Minister Boris Johnson convened a press conference Friday. He announced that the lifting of the last remaining national lockdown restrictions—scheduled to begin today—were now being postponed. Wedding receptions of up to 30 people and indoor live performances; the opening of bowling allies, casinos, and skating rinks; and larger gatherings in sports venues and conference centres will be delayed for at least two weeks.

More measures were required to stop the spread of the disease, Johnson said, announcing that face coverings would be mandatory in cinemas, museum, galleries, and places of worship from August 8.

Speaking alongside Johnson, Chief Medical Officer for England, Sir Chris Whitty, declared that Office for National Statistics (ONS) data suggested, “we have probably reached near the limits or the limits of what we can do in terms of opening up society.” He added that this created “difficult trade-offs” and that “The idea that we can open up everything and keep the virus under control is clearly wrong... what we're seeing is that we are at the outer edge of what we can do and therefore choices will need to be made.”

ONS figures indicate that the prevalence of the virus in the community is rising throughout the country for the first time since May. The number of infections per day in July shot up compared with June. Around 4,200 people are catching the virus each day in England, up 68 percent on the estimated 2,500 daily infections two weeks ago. This figure does not include care homes and hospitals and rates are thought to be twice as high in London, and still rising.

The government's Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE) admitted yesterday that it “does not have confidence that R [Reproduction rate of the virus] is currently below 1 in England,” which would mean the virus is now spreading significantly.

The surge was clear in Friday's infection and fatality figures. Along with 880 new infections—the highest spike for a month—120 deaths were reported. In just the five days to Friday, 367 have died of COVID-19, after the death rate declined to single figures as a result of the lockdown.

Johnson declared with unabashed hypocrisy, “we cannot be complacent,” and that it was time to “squeeze the brake pedal” on lifting restrictions “in order to keep that virus under control.”

In response to the resurgence of the virus, late Thursday evening and without any warning, the government was forced to impose new lockdown measures in a huge area of northern England. The areas selected contain some five million people—roughly equivalent to the entire population of Scotland.

The areas now under additional lockdown restrictions are Greater Manchester; Pendle, Hyndburn, Burnley, Rossendale, and Blackburn with Darwen in East Lancashire; Bradford, Calderdale and Kirklees in West Yorkshire and the city of Leicester, which saw the UK's first local lockdown.

Sixteen local authorities in the region have seen dramatic increases in rates of infection in recent weeks.

Greater Manchester alone has a population of over 2.8 million and is spread over an area of nearly 500 square miles. It includes two cities—Manchester and Salford—and eight towns: Bolton, Bury, Oldham, Rochdale, Stockport, Tameside, Trafford, Wigan. Another city included in the lockdown, Bradford, has a population of over 539,000.

In the seven days to July 20 and the seven days to July 27, the rate of coronavirus infections per 100,000 increased from 83 to 89 in Blackburn and Darwen, from 23 to 54 in Oldham, 45 to 48 in Bradford, 27 to 42 in Pendle and 15 to 41 in Trafford. Overall, the 19 local authorities affected by the new restrictions have recorded 1,536 new cases in the last week alone.

The northern England lockdown was rushed through in a way that could only undermine its effectiveness. At 9:16 p.m. on Thursday night, Health Secretary Matt Hancock

announced in a tweet that people living the north England areas would no longer be allowed to meet other households indoors from midnight—giving millions of people less than three hours' notice. After 11pm, less than an hour before the measures were due to come into effect, the government issued a statement saying that police forces would be given powers to prevent meetings between households either indoors or in private gardens.

On Friday morning, Hancock contradicted official guidance issued by the Department for Health and Social Care, which had asserted that visits by households in the restricted areas to households outside of the affected areas would be illegal. Hancock said this was against the guidance but not against the law.

The imposition of the lockdown was massively culturally insensitive. The north of England's many Muslim communities are celebrating the religious festival of Eid, which began exactly as the lockdown was being imposed. Major celebrations were to be held this weekend, normally involving gatherings of friends and family. The restrictions were sprung on them with no consultation, leaving no time to make new arrangements, and with no plans to offer support.

The restrictions still leave open the possibility for significant continued transmission. While meetings in outdoor gardens are banned, pubs and restaurants remain open (people are only allowed to visit in their household groups). In Leicester, pubs and restaurants will reopen on Monday, along with cinemas and museums, as elements of an earlier local lockdown limited to the city are simultaneously lifted! Wales, just 50 miles away from parts of Greater Manchester, is reopening pubs, bars, restaurants, cafes, bowling alleys, auction houses and bingo halls from Monday.

Many other parts of the country are seeing a resurgence of infections. Yesterday, the *Daily Mirror* reported that at least 51 employees at an Iceland food distribution centre in Swindon, in the south of the England, have been infected. Three local firefighters have also contracted the disease, and cases have been reported at a Honda plant and Royal Mail delivery office in the town with a population of over 192,000. The rate of infection per 100,000 in Swindon has increased from nine, two weeks ago, to 29 more recently.

To seriously confront the pandemic and contain the spread of the virus would require reverting back to a national lockdown. But this would require opposing the profit interests of big business—which are the government's only priority. Instead, Johnson's reckless ending of the national lockdown around a month ago—after it had succeeded in slowing the spread of the virus and saving many lives—has resulted in a catastrophic coronavirus resurgence.

Even while forced to bring in new measures, Johnson was at pains to say he had not “cancelled summer” and “would encourage people to still think of staycation-ing in the UK.” Workers would still be pressured to return to the workplace from August 1, with employers having been given “more discretion over how employees can work safely, whether by continuing to work from home, or attending a COVID-secure workplace.” Plans to remove shielding guidance for 2.2 million highly vulnerable people this Saturday will also go ahead.

Asked by a journalist at Friday's press conference, “Why are you lifting guidance from tomorrow, encouraging people to go back to work tomorrow and planning to reopen schools in September, when the virus is on the rise across the country?” Whitty responded that reopening schools was still an “absolute priority,” cynically invoking the “welfare of children.” Earlier that day, the Independent SAGE committee—a group of eminent scientists and academics critical of the government's handling of the lockdown—pointed to the growing evidence that children are effective spreaders of coronavirus.

The crisis-ridden Tory government is able to endanger the entire population due to it being unopposed by the Labour Party. Downplaying the grave risks to the health of the population, Labour, who are staunch backers of the Tories' back to work and re-opening of the economy agenda, merely complained that the government should improve its PR skills. Labour leader Sir Kier Starmer praised the government's “right decision,” only calling on the Tories to “improve communications” since “we are going to see more of these situations over the coming weeks and months.”

Labour Mayor of Greater Manchester Andy Burnham uncritically agreed with the plans for “modest measures to bring down the rate of new infections.” Sky News reported the comments of Lucy Powell, Labour MP for Manchester Central, who claimed she had not seen any “alarming data” beforehand that would suggest new restrictions were imminent. This under conditions in which it was common knowledge for weeks that there was a resurgence of cases in the region.



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