

Local lockdowns in West Yorkshire following UK workplace outbreaks

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Local lockdowns were enforced in the Bradford, Kirklees, and Calderdale municipal areas in West Yorkshire on August 4. The affected areas have a combined population of one million. The restrictions came on top of a local lockdown of several million people in Greater Manchester and Lancashire, in response to a growing number of COVID-19 cases.

On August 8, the *Examiner Live* reported 5,338 cases in Bradford, 2,576 in Kirklees, and 964 in Calderdale.

The new restrictions ban meetings between households in homes and private gardens. Any person found contravening the local lockdown regulations could be fined £100, with a maximum penalty of £3,200 for repeat offenders. However, shops, gyms, pubs, and restaurants can operate as normal.

Within the Kirklees town of Heckmondwike, public health officials are considering unannounced visits to ensure shops, pubs, and businesses are enforcing COVID-19 safety measures.

The Kirklees area has had several workplace-based outbreaks of COVID-19. In mid-June, it was revealed that there had been an outbreak at the Kober meat processing plant in Cleckheaton. The plant, owned by Asda, was temporarily closed after 150 cases of the disease were detected.

The public admission of the outbreak at the Kober plant only came out during a regular national briefing given by the Health Secretary, Matt Hancock. It was the first local Kirklees residents had heard of it.

The Labour Party in West Yorkshire participated in the cover up of the outbreak and downplayed the threat to the community. Local Labour MP Tracy Brabin criticised the manner of Hancock's announcement, equating it to residents being "thrown to the wolves." But she stressed that, in her view, "no-one in Kirklees should be concerned [about the outbreak]. Having

spoken to the council they've acted very swiftly, I'm proud of them but I'm really frustrated Matt Hancock took it on himself to announce it like that."

Labour-run Kirklees council had been aware of the outbreak but decided not to inform the public, "because it doesn't combat the spread of the virus, compromises patient confidentiality and it could discourage businesses and organisations from coming forward in future."

At the end of June, following the Kober meat processing outbreak, another outbreak of COVID-19 was discovered at Dura Beds in Batley, Kirklees. The company announced eight of its 107 workers had tested positive for the virus. The factory was closed for two weeks and the whole workforce tested for the virus.

In early July, four workers at the Deep Sleep Beds factory in Ossett tested positive. While Ossett is part of the Wakefield metropolitan area, it neighbours Dewsbury in Kirklees.

In the second week of July, eight workers at Highgrove Beds in Liversedge tested positive and production was closed-down following intervention by Kirklees council, the Health and Safety Executive, and Public Health England.

Shrugging his shoulders at the news, a Liversedge Conservative councillor told the *Telegraph and Argus* newspaper, "It's always going to be a concern if you do get an outbreak, but I think Kirklees, like every other local authority, should be prepared over the next few months to see quite a lot of isolated outbreaks."

The Tory government is fully aware that its back-to-work drive will produce a surge in outbreaks of COVID-19. The policy of local lockdowns is an inadequate response to the ongoing spread of the disease, premised on the ruling class' strategy of "herd immunity" rather than any plan for the eradication of

the virus.

Following the workplace outbreaks of COVID-19 in Kirklees, the council announced half-hearted measures to try and avoid a local lockdown. These included an “outreach” operation giving advice to people in the 20-40 age range in the most affected areas of Kirklees, Ravensthorpe, Saville Town, and Batley West. The council also stepped up the use of mobile testing units.

Kirklees’ Director of Public Health Rachel Spencer-Henshall, speaking to the *Examiner Live*, admitted the authorities have no plan beyond firefighting. She said, “We are very likely to see infection rates go up and down in communities and pockets in different parts of Kirklees in the coming weeks and months. We’re ready to deploy staff and testing units anywhere in Kirklees if we think it will help bring rates down ... We will be coming up with new ways of supporting people... We are focusing our efforts in parts of North Kirklees for now but the advice is the same for everyone, whatever age you are and wherever you live.”

Towards the end of July, with the COVID-19 infection rate four times above the national average, Kirklees council announced it wanted to prevent gatherings of more than 30 people. This was only another attempt to forestall a local lockdown.

Reported in a *Telegraph and Argus* article of July 29, a council spokesperson stated, “The Council wants to prevent large gatherings from taking place in the borough until rates of COVID-19 infection significantly drop for a sustained period of time and Kirklees is no longer an area of concern. Public health officials believe that large groups of people gathering will increase infections.”

Labour’s attempt to avoid a local lockdown was ultimately unsuccessful, although some local Tory MPs are already calling for its limitation—including Jason McCartney, MP for Colne Valley, and Tory representatives for Bradford, Calderdale, and Kirklees. They say the lockdown should only apply to the most affected postcodes within a lockdown area. Such measures would sow further confusion over implementing lockdown measures and undermine their impact.

A review of the current local lockdown measures by the government took place on August 6 and it was decided they must remain in place. Speaking to the press on August 7, Health Secretary Matt Hancock said,

“Yesterday I chaired a meeting of the Local Action Gold Committee, and unfortunately, the data does not yet show a decrease in the transmission of this terrible virus.”

Local lockdowns are being used by the Tory government to conceal and justify the absence of a coordinated national public health strategy, to avoid any disruption to corporate profit-making. This is at the cost of workers’ health and lives, as the COVID-19 pandemic resurges across the country.



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