

UK COVID-19 “alert” system overseen by UK spy chiefs

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19 October 2020

More than half of England's population are under tougher social restrictions, due to the three-tier localised COVID-19 framework introduced by the Johnson government.

The restrictions are largely ineffectual as educational institutions and workplaces—the largest source of infections—remain open in every tier. These localised tiers are part of the national alert level, currently set at four, which is set by the Joint Biosecurity Centre.

Established in May, little is known about the JBC, except that it is modelled on the UK's Joint Terrorism Analysis Centre and is overseen by spy chiefs. But it is this body that is setting the government's pandemic response.

According to the *British Medical Journal*, the purpose of the JBC is to provide “independent, real time national and local analysis of infections” and to “build on the UK’s public health infrastructure and surveillance network... to understand the COVID-19 threat at any given time.” It will provide information to local public health teams, such as “levels of hospital bed occupancy, including critical care beds; the number of local people who have tested positive and registered with the track and trace service, and the number of their contacts who have been identified; and mortality data.”

Some £9 billion is being invested in the JBC. Chief Medical Officer Chris Whitty told the House of Lords Science and Technology Committee on July 17 that “so much resource has rightly had to be put into the JBC ... because ... we really have not invested in health protection over the last several years.”

The decision to invest in this secretive body, rather than the National Health Service (NHS) which is struggling to function after years of austerity and privatisation, confirms that the official response to the COVID-19 pandemic has nothing to do with

safeguarding public health and saving lives. It is part of the policy of herd immunity, while using the pandemic to restructure economic and social relations and strengthen the state apparatus.

The JBC is led by Clare Gardiner, the head of cyber resilience and strategy at the National Cyber Security Centre, part of UK's spy agency GCHQ (Government Communications Headquarters).

Gardiner took over from senior Home Office counter-terrorism official, Tom Hurd. The son of former Tory foreign secretary Douglas Hurd, he was initially charged with getting the JBC operational. According to the *Guardian*, Hurd—who has no scientific background—“is considered the frontrunner to take over after Sir Alex Younger retires from MI6” (the UK's foreign intelligence agency) once he completed his JBC remit.

The JBC is based “in the Cabinet Office, alongside the existing security coordination apparatus”, the *Guardian* reported. It comes under the NHS Test and Trace service, whose executive chair is Dido Harding, Tory peer and a former McKinsey consultant. Like Harding, the Test and Trace service has little to do with the NHS. It is largely provided by private corporations, with the involvement of the Ministry of Defence (MoD).

No other information on the wider membership or staffing of the JBC is known. The *Financial Times* reported, “A small number of personnel from GCHQ’s headquarters in Cheltenham have already been seconded to help the centre develop its data analytics capabilities”, citing an anonymous Whitehall official.

The JBC sidelines the government Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE). It has also taken over responsibility from Public Health England (PHE) which, as part of a further reorganisation in

August, now sits alongside the JBC under the umbrella of the National Institute for Health Protection (NIHP). The interim executive chair of NIHP is none other than Dido Harding.

Professor Allyson Pollock from Newcastle University, a member of the Independent SAGE group, said, “Even the term biosecurity is really worrying. We should be thinking about surveillance for epidemics and disease control.” Pollock noted that the number of public health labs had been cut from 50 to eight over the last 30 years.

Professor Devi Sridhar, chair of global public health at Edinburgh University tweeted, “UK Joint Biosecurity Centre (JBC) brings security approach to COVID. This virus isn’t going to change tactics, hack into secure systems or plot future attacks with underground cells. It’s a biological phenomenon that requires public health leadership. Secrecy only helps virus.”

The JBC is not the only area of state intelligence involved in the government response to COVID-19. It includes the Ministry of Defence Strategic Command, whose “innovation hub”, jHub, was brought in by government “to provide assistance, coordination and coherence of the COVID-19 symptom tracker apps”.

NHS England confirmed in July that the contract for US data-mining company, Palentir, to work on UK Covid data projects had been extended for four months. Run by pro-Trump oligarch Peter Thiel, it has extensive links to the Pentagon and US spy agencies.

Also in July, the government was forced to admit that the UK's Test and Trace contact-tracing programme had been operating unlawfully since it was established in May, as it had failed to complete a mandatory Data Protection Impact Assessment.

The admission was forced following a legal challenge by the Open Rights Group (ORG). The ORG said it had been “forced to threaten judicial review to ensure that people's privacy is protected.” In response, the government said it would reduce the period in which COVID-19 related data was retained from 20 years to eight years.

Under the draconian Coronavirus Act, introduced in March without a vote in Parliament as agreed by Labour, then under the leadership of Jeremy Corbyn, the police are empowered to arrest and isolate anyone suspecting of being able to spread COVID-19. The

powers of the police have now been strengthened by granting them even greater surveillance abilities, with police forces given access to the contact details of potentially millions of people who are self-isolating.

The Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC) website has been updated with guidance that people who fail to self-isolate “without reasonable justification” could have their name, address and contact details passed on to their local authority and then to the police. It adds, “A police force may request information relating to positive COVID-19 tests from the NHS Test & Trace programme directly.”

A positive test for COVID requires people in England to self-isolate for 10 days after displaying symptoms or face fines starting at £1,000. Penalties can rise £10,000 for repeat or serious breaches.

According to the *Health Service Journal*, the police were handed the powers after an “incredibly forceful” intervention by Health Secretary Matt Hancock. The BBC reports that following Hancock’s intervention, “a memorandum of understanding was issued between the DHSC and National Police Chiefs' Council to allow forces to access information that tells them if a ‘specific individual’ has been told to self-isolate...”

A spokesman for the National Police Chiefs' Council confirmed that the new snooping powers were in operation, saying they would “encourage voluntary compliance but will enforce the regulations and issue fixed penalty notices where appropriate and necessary”.

A British Medical Association spokesman responded that the test-and-trace system required “the full confidence of the public” to be effective. He said, “We are already concerned that some people are deterred from being tested because they are anxious about loss of income should they need to self-isolate—and we are worried should police involvement add to this.”



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