

Surge in COVID-19 on UK's Isle of Wight overwhelms health care infrastructure

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COVID-19 infection rates have risen so sharply that the Isle of Wight's medical director has planned “unthinkable options” to meet the crisis, including using military helicopters to transport patients to the mainland.

Ambulance demand is up 40 percent on this period last year. The island's one hospital, St Mary's, has seen a fourfold increase of Covid patients since Christmas and is in danger of being overwhelmed. Stephen Parker, medical director of the island's National Health Service (NHS) Trust, has warned this could be imminent: “If the NHS is going to be overwhelmed, it is going to be in the next two to four weeks.”

The island, with a population of 140,000, lies off the south coast of England. Its offshore isolation was hailed as one of the safest places in the country for much of last year. When Boris Johnson's Conservative government introduced its inadequate new tier system of restrictions in November, the island was one of only a handful of places in the lowest Tier 1.

But in the second wave of the pandemic, shortly before Christmas, after a rapid rise in infections, it was elevated straight to Tier 3, and placed in Tier 4 a week later. A month after being classed in the lowest risk category, a 71-fold increase in cases gave it the 13th highest infection rate across the UK.

By January 15, the island had seen 4,770 cases since the beginning of the pandemic. Of these 3,091—nearly 65 percent—have been recorded in 2021. Since January 1, there have been 20 more deaths recorded in hospital where the person had either tested positive for Covid-19 or had Covid-19 on their death certificate, taking the cumulative total to 113. By January 5, St Mary's Hospital in the island's principal town, Newport, had 40 confirmed Covid-19 patients with five on mechanical ventilation.

As of January 12, there were 66 COVID patients in St Mary's, compared to 40 the week before. From the beginning of the pandemic to January 3, St Mary's had treated 355 patients. A week later this had risen to 424.

While 90 percent of the current cases are being attributed

to the new variant of the virus, which is more transmissible than the earlier strain, the catastrophic and worsening situation is not just, or even primarily, a medical question.

The island's Conservative council and MP have backed every twist and turn in the government's “herd immunity” response to the pandemic. The government's over-riding concern has not been to combat and control the virus, but to keep businesses open and profits rolling in, facilitating its spread.

The Isle of Wight was used by the government as a test area for an early contact tracing app. This was quickly shown to be of no practicable use because of its incompatibility with other technology.

Even while Tory MP Bob Seely was echoing the government's propaganda, he had to apologise for breaching lockdown regulations by attending a barbecue where at least four other people had been present. Seely claimed he only stayed long enough to eat “half a sausage.”

The barbecue, two weeks after the high-profile breach of regulations by Boris Johnson's key advisor Dominic Cummings, was hosted by Freddy Gray of the right-wing *Spectator* magazine, at his mother-in-law's house, despite clear guidance against travelling to second homes. Also present were Brexit Party chairman Richard Tice and his partner, journalist Isabel Oakeshott, who boasted of travelling to her second home on the island to work.

Seely and the council supported the government's insistence on reopening schools in September. The ensuing upsurge in cases demonstrated that the government's isolation advice had nothing to do with limiting the spread of the virus.

When a staff member at Christ the King college in Newport, tested positive in September—the second case there within a week—parents of children who had been in contact were told to keep that child at home for a week.

One parent with two children at the school was emailed, but not told which child was involved. When it was clarified, the parent was advised that the rest of the household—including the other sibling at the same

school—did not need to isolate unless the first child developed symptoms!

The college remained open. In December, a Learning Support Assistant there, Lynne Morgan, died weeks after testing positive.

Compounding the lie that spread in schools was either minimal or not dangerous, the island's authorities supported keeping them open, and encouraged a resumption of "responsible" tourism during the October half-term break.

This was a clear prioritisation of profit over health. Council leader Dave Stewart looked forward to "a busy couple of weeks," saying, "That is good and visitors are welcome."

Will Myles, managing director of Visit Isle of Wight declared, "Attractions are open and there are plenty of events and activities for our visitors to enjoy."

These policies enabled the continued spread of a virus known to be likely to mutate, ensuring it was a question of *when*, not *if*, the variant would arrive on the island, leading to an increase in infections. Stewart is now blustering about there being "some people over here who shouldn't be."

When the island was in Tier 1 in November, the nearest mainland towns, Southampton and Portsmouth, were both in higher tiers (3 and 4 respectively). Naturally, with no restrictions in place, there was anecdotal evidence of travellers coming over to enjoy the greater leniency.

The result was predictable. When a pub in Shanklin closed over Christmas following an outbreak among staff, management said they had taken all the required precautions, noting customer details and only permitting entry to Tier 1 and 2 residents. Tier 2 residents, however, had to travel through worse-affected areas to get there.

The half-term situation was repeated over Christmas, with more devastating effect. The Council's latest urgent email, "Please stay at home to keep the Island safe," contains exemptions for the benefit of business.

The results now being seen across the island are worsened by the infrastructural failures caused by decades of cuts and privatisation. St Mary's hospital was already struggling. Placed in Special Measures in 2017, it was cancelling operations because it could not cope with patient numbers.

To cope with the COVID influx, the hospital has now had to clear a ward to use as a dedicated second Medical Assessment Unit. Rumours that Isle of Wight COVID patients were already being treated on the mainland were denied, but Parker's announcement about possible military airlifts strongly suggests it may happen. Firefighters are being deployed as ambulance drivers to meet increased demands.

Parker pinned the rapid rise in infection on social interaction over Christmas, both with visitors to the island

and with islanders visiting the mainland. Many islanders, including in essential services, work on the mainland. Seely, mindful of his earlier embarrassment, insists there is "no basis in fact" for suggesting second-home owners are responsible for spreading the new variant.

The surge in infections has exposed the island's transport crisis, with all ferry services run by private companies. Services have been reduced during lockdown, primarily for the benefit of the companies rather than health.

Wightlink, Red Funnel, and Hovertravel, have received between them some £11.5 million in government support during the three lockdowns over the last year.

Transport workers have just voted to take strike action against Wightlink's plans to close its Defined Benefit Pension Scheme to existing members, and in opposition to the reintroduction of flexible working practices implemented during the first six months of the pandemic.

The Rail, Maritime and Transport workers union (RMT) said the ferry workers had "bent over backwards to help the company survive during this pandemic only to be treated as cannon fodder." The RMT agreed to this implementation of flexible working practices, and the deferment of 20 percent of all salaries until the end of September 2020.

While corporations look to exploit the pandemic to implement their cost-cutting and profiteering, the crisis brings home the need to reorganise society for social need not profit.

Under the profit system, the slashing of services will only continue and worsen. The Isle of Wight Council is already discussing a "significant increase" in council tax next year. A £10 million funding gap caused by the pandemic has been reduced to £5.5 million with government funding. The council is looking to balance this through increased taxation, while also implementing a further £3.5 million in cuts.



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