

Johnson government announces token delay in UK's reopening plans

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Prime Minister Boris Johnson has delayed lifting Britain's last remaining public health restrictions by up to four weeks.

Current restrictions on nightclubs, indoor gatherings, some large events and pub and restaurant capacity will remain until July 19, unless a review at two weeks brings that date closer. An exception was made for weddings and wakes where the 30-person limit will be lifted with social distancing rules maintained.

This is the most minimal of measures. But the fact that the Conservative government so determined to end the "last lockdown" on "Freedom Day" in a week's time, has been forced to make even such a limited gesture points to the serious dangers posed to the working class by the resurgent pandemic. Johnson, a man who declared in October that he would rather "let the bodies pile high in their thousands" than enforce a lockdown, only adjusts course on the pandemic when the situation is potentially catastrophic and a backlash is threatened in the population.

Last week, an Opinium poll found that 54 percent of the public felt the date should be delayed, 62 percent did not want mask-wearing to end, 60 percent thought nightclubs should stay shut and 57 percent thought the 30-people limit on outdoor gatherings should be kept. This concern is in response to the mounting proof that Britain is at the beginning of a third wave of COVID-19, driven by the more dangerous Delta variant.

In the last few days, the evidence and warnings from scientists and medical professionals have been overwhelming.

The seven-day average for daily new infection in the UK is now over 7,000, up from around 1,500 at the end of the New Year lockdown. Cases are doubling roughly every week.

Public Health expert Anthony Costello, a member of Independent SAGE (Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies), told the *Daily Mirror* that the real number of new cases each day was likely double the official total and that "In a month you'll be up to 100,000 new cases a day."

SAGE member Professor Andrew Hayward appeared on BBC One's *Andrew Marr Show* on Sunday to warn of a "substantial chance we could have a wave of hospitalisations that would put very substantial pressure on the NHS [National Health Service] at a time that it's really trying to deal with the enormous backlog of cases of people waiting for hospital care."

The increased transmissibility of the Delta variant was "extremely worrying" and its higher likelihood to hospitalise people "also extremely concerning".

Surges in certain areas of the country like the North West are beginning to spread across the country. Over 7 million people, one in eight, are living in areas recording more than 100 cases per 100,000 population.

Once again, the pandemic is falling heaviest on the working class. A disproportionate number of the most-affected locations are in the most deprived areas in the country. These areas are more likely to have lower vaccination rates than the national average.

London is particularly at risk. By June 8, just 55 percent of adults in the capital had received their first dose of the vaccine. The next lowest was the West Midlands at 69 percent and the highest was the South West at 73 percent. The gap is even starker on second doses—34 percent in London versus 51 percent in the West Midlands and 56 percent in the South West.

All regions of the country have communities with extremely low first-dose vaccination rates—around 25 percent in Stamford Hill North in London, Hockley and Jewellery Quarter in Birmingham and Harehills South

in Leeds, and around 30 percent in Northampton Town Centre, Oldham Town South and Barton Hill in Bristol.

Nationally, there are 15 million adults, 2 million of them aged over 50, who have not received a vaccination.

Cases are for the moment concentrated among school-aged children and young adults but are rising among all age groups. As SAGE member Professor Devi Sridhar told BBC Radio 4's *Today* programme, "the worry is that this will slowly move, like it has in previous waves, into older groups."

Current levels of vaccination are not enough to prevent a surge in cases and hospitalisations. According to Public Health England, a single dose of any vaccine is only 33 percent effective at preventing symptomatic infection with the Delta variant. Two doses of AstraZeneca are 60 percent effective and two doses of Pfizer 88 percent effective. Combining these figures with the number of people still unvaccinated, 68 percent of people effectively have no protection against getting coronavirus symptoms.

Vaccines have significantly reduced the chances of an infected person ending up in hospital, but admissions have begun to increase again with the spread of the Delta variant. At the start of the year, roughly 10 percent of people recorded as infected with COVID-19 ended up in hospital. That figure was pushed down to below 5 percent by the vaccination programme, but it has risen to 5.4 percent since the Delta variant became more prominent.

A surge in cases on the scale of last January will therefore see thousands admitted to hospital every day. Rates of hospitalisation are already increasing in areas most affected by the third wave. The seven-day average for COVID-19 patients in hospitals in the North West is 246, the highest since April 24. For London, the figure is 253, the highest since May 19. Overall, COVID-19 hospital admissions in the UK have increased by 15.2 percent in the last week.

Professor Neil Ferguson, an epidemiologist at Imperial College London who advises the government, has said his team's latest modelling does not rule out "a fairly disastrous third wave".

Nothing Johnson announced yesterday will avert this disaster. Delaying the final reopening leaves in place all the conditions which are currently allowing cases to explode, including open schools with no virus

mitigation measures and an almost wholly reopened economy. The government's model remains "learning to live with the virus", rather than suppressing it.

This murderous policy finds its most grotesque and hysterical expression in statements from the Tory backbenches which oppose even the semblance of attention being paid to the pandemic.

Sir Charles Walker, a vice chairman of the Conservative backbench 1922 Committee, said in parliament yesterday, "I just have an overwhelming sense of pessimism now that, if you can't lift restrictions at the height of summer, then you are almost certainly looking at these restrictions persisting and tightening into the autumn and winter... I'm afraid this is one-way traffic towards further lockdowns... The government made the argument that we have to live with COVID-19. Existing is not living."

Steve Baker, the deputy chairman of the anti-lockdown Coronavirus Recovery Group of Tory MPs, claimed, "It is increasingly clear that the modellers are our masters now... Boris Johnson will need to be extremely careful he doesn't allow them to lead us into a lockdown that lasts all winter."

A senior Tory MP told the *Sunday Telegraph*, "I am very worried the people who want to keep us shut down now want to keep us shut down permanently and are aiming for 'zero Covid'."

Johnson pursues fundamentally the same policy as these open advocates for suffering and death. His four-week delay now is designed to better prepare for an "irreversible" reopening later, even as cases continue to rise.



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