

UK will see millions of COVID-19 infections this summer

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Boris Johnson's Conservative government is not only openly pursuing a herd immunity policy. It is revelling in its own indifference to the prospect of mass infection, illness and death.

From July 19, all businesses will be allowed to reopen and mass events authorised. Mask requirements and social distancing will be ended. Health Secretary Sajid Javid announced Wednesday that, from August 16, double-vaccinated adults and all under-18s will no longer have to self-isolate if they have been in close contact with a person who has tested positive for COVID-19. Quarantine bubbles in schools will be scrapped at the end of the summer term.

Transport Secretary Grant Shapps is expected to announce that fully vaccinated adults will soon be allowed to travel abroad to amber list countries without quarantining, as will unvaccinated children if they travel with family.

Yesterday evening, 60,000 football fans were encouraged to pile into London's Wembley stadium to watch the England-Denmark semi-final of the European Football Championship. Asked Wednesday morning if he was concerned about the match becoming a "super spreader" event, Business Secretary Kwasi Kwarteng replied, "There's always risk in life... We've just got to see what happens."

Johnson has said bluntly that the UK "must reconcile [itself] to more deaths" and that infections will rise to 50,000 a day. Javid, demanding the population "learn to live with the existence of Covid", admitted that daily case totals could reach 100,000 before the end of summer. Professor Neil Ferguson, an epidemiologist and modeller for the government, has warned that there is "the potential for the UK to have a very large number of cases, 150,000 to 200,000 a day."

The *Guardian* newspaper reports that there could be a staggering two million cases in the remaining six weeks of summer, but this is based on a very conservative estimate of an average 35,000 cases a day between now and July 19 and 60,000 from then until August 16.

A frenzied bloodlust has gripped Britain's boardrooms

and editorial offices who are pushing to tear away the last vestiges of a public health response. Yesterday's front pages were filled with complaints that the date for ending self-isolation requirements was too delayed, meaning millions would be forced to stay at home and causing "chaos" for employers.

The *Daily Mail* proclaimed, "Isolation Insanity", warning, "You cannot lose your nerve now, Mr Javid", calling for him to scrap restrictions "right away" and telling the nation, "It's time to let go of nurse." The *Daily Telegraph* declared that isolation rules "slam the breaks on freedom", quoting Tory right-winger and former party leaders Sir Iain Duncan Smith saying the government's plan "makes a mockery" of "Freedom Day." Its editorial said of ending self-isolation "why wait?... This country needs to move on."

Kate Nicholls, head of Hospitality UK, complained that self-isolation was causing "carnage" for businesses, and the plan to scrap it "doesn't go far enough, quickly enough."

The Labour Party weighed in, with Sir Keir Starmer telling Johnson in Prime Minister's Questions, "It won't feel like freedom day to the businesses who are already warning of carnage because of the loss of staff and customers." Labour accuses the government of a "reckless" reopening, but calls only for window dressing "baseline protections."

The logic of the government's policies leads to the August 16 date on self-isolation being brought forward. Based on the *Guardian* figures, some 10 million people will be forced to self-isolate this summer given the surge in infections. Every effort will be made to prevent this disruption to the profit-making of big business. According to a Whitehall source, speaking to the *i* newspaper, the government scrapped mandatory mask wearing after being told that keeping them risked losing the events and hospitality industry £4 billion due to the measure increasing public hesitancy.

The consequences of this criminal abandonment of public health measures will be terrible.

Vaccines have substantially reduced the mortality rate of COVID-19, with most estimates agreeing that the UK now

sees one death for every thousand infections. However, this still translates to between 100 and 200 deaths a day in just a few weeks' time. Increased pressure will be placed on a health service still reeling from the last year.

Modelling by the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE) suggests there will be 1,300 COVID hospitalisations a day by late July-early August, if daily cases reach 100,000. Coronavirus admissions are already surging, rising by 70 percent in England in the week to July 5 to 416 people.

Vast numbers of people will also contract debilitating Long Covid. The British Medical Association (BMA) told the *Independent* that as many as 10,000 people a day could develop the condition, with 20 percent of them likely to be unable to work, study or do normal day-to-day activities for more than a year. Two million people have so far been affected by Long Covid and 385,000 have lived with it for more than a year—only 9 percent of those were hospitalised when they were first infected. Dr David Strain, speaking for the British Medical Association, said there is currently no evidence of vaccines causing a decline in the 10-17 percent of infections estimated to result in Long COVID.

The highest levels of infection will be among the partially vaccinated and unvaccinated, young adults and especially children. Figures from the Department for Education show that, on July 1, 640,000 children were absent from school and 560,000 were self-isolating due to COVID, a 66 percent increase on the week before. This includes 28,000 children with a confirmed case and 34,000 with a suspected infection.

As before, the harm will fall overwhelmingly on the working class. A Health Foundation report published Tuesday found that, for people under 65, those in the most deprived 10 percent of areas had a COVID mortality rate 3.7 times higher than in the most affluent 10 percent. Those in the 5th most deprived decile were still more than twice as likely to die than those in the 1st.

None of this matters to the ruling class, who feel liberated from even the pretence of concern. The reopening strategy is being backed by an open embrace of herd immunity, still to be achieved in substantial part by mass infection. The *Daily Mail* reported a government source who said, "There is an element of herd immunity in what we are doing... it is inevitable that some people are going to acquire immunity through infection."

The government is seeking to rationalise lifting restrictions rapidly now based on the assertion that the resulting herd immunity will supposedly prevent a bigger surge later in winter, when children are back in school and the National Health Service is under greater strain. Chief Medical Officer Chris Whitty told the Downing Street press conference on Tuesday, "At a certain point, you move to the situation

where instead of actually averting hospitalisations and deaths, you move over to just delaying them... going in the summer has some advantages."

The blood price of illness and death will not buy an end to the pandemic. Professor Paul Hunter told the *i* on Wednesday that herd immunity was in reality "out of reach" due to Delta's substantially increased transmissibility outstripping the protection against infection offered by the vaccines.

Moreover, the government has announced no plans for the vaccination of children, leaving a huge reservoir of potential infection. The result will be persistent waves of COVID-19, especially in the colder months. As the *Guardian's* science editor Ian Sample explained on Monday, "For the health service, living with coronavirus means learning to endure a double wave each winter as coronavirus and flu arrive together." Whitty told the Local Government Association on Wednesday, "it will still be quite a difficult winter, especially for the NHS."

The government is in fact creating conditions for the development of a new, more vaccine-resistant and potentially more deadly variant of the virus, which will be given ample opportunity to mutate by the surge of cases being prepared.

The UK is now a bellwether for the world, the vast majority of which faces an even more devastating scenario due to significantly lower vaccination rates. With governments globally rushing to remove all public health restrictions, Britain shows the deluge of infections which will inevitably follow. Its example must be taken as a warning to the international working class that it must act now to take the response to the pandemic into its own hands, based on the fight for a socialist programme which puts trillions at the disposal of a globally coordinated public health programme for the eradication of the virus.



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