

UK Johnson government's autumn/winter COVID-19 plan declares virus is endemic

Robert Stevens
14 September 2021

Conservative Prime Minister Boris Johnson and Health Minister Sajid Javid yesterday confirmed that they will do nothing to oppose the escalating spread of the COVID-19 pandemic as autumn gives way to winter.

Johnson chaired a Downing Street press conference to confirm a “Plan A” that the government describes as “a comprehensive approach designed to steer the country through autumn and winter 2021-22.” Earlier, Javid said the plan would be imposed “without the need for stringent economic and social restrictions”.

Plan A was released in a 32-page document. It is based almost exclusively on encouraging additional vaccinations, with barely a nod towards other measures of mitigation.

“Building our defences through pharmaceutical interventions: vaccines, antivirals and disease modifying therapeutics” is centred on rolling out a booster jab programme for all over-50s and offering the vaccine to 12- to 15-year-olds, on the advice of the chief medical officer.

Aside from this, there are deliberately vague commitments to “Test, Trace and Isolate” measures, “Supporting” the National Health Service [NHS] and social care by “managing pressures and recovering services”, “Advising people on how to protect themselves and others”, and “helping to vaccinate the world and managing risks at the border.”

The real core of the government's strategy was outlined in the *Telegraph* in a Monday article, “No more national lockdowns as Boris Johnson rips up Covid rules.”

The newspaper gloated, “Boris Johnson will make clear this week he is ‘dead set’ against another national lockdown as he rips up the old system of Covid rules and adopts a new approach for winter... A senior

government source told The *Telegraph* of the argument Mr Johnson would make: ‘This is the new normal. We need to learn to live with Covid’”.

The government avoids such a naked declaration only because it is fully aware of the terrible consequences of letting the virus rip. Cases, hospitalisations and deaths all higher than they were this time last year, despite the vaccination programme.

On the day the government's plan was released modellers on the government's own SAGE advisory committee warned that without swift intervention, between 2,000 and 7,000 people a day could be hospitalised with Covid in England alone by next month compared with 1,000 a day now. Even then it advised only “more light touch measures,” including “encouraging home working... clear messaging that recommends people acting cautiously, more widespread testing, a return to requiring all contacts of cases to isolate, and more mask-wearing.”

This is merely an appeal for a swifter implementation of the government's Plan B, which consists of a few minimal measures to be implemented only if the NHS faces being overwhelmed. What is being advanced as a contingency plan is not a plan at all. The entirety of Plan B covers just four short paragraphs, with the first of three “measures” consisting of a commitment to communicate “clearly and urgently to the public that the level of risk has increased, and with it the need to behave more cautiously”, introducing “mandatory vaccine-only COVID-status certification in certain settings,” and “Legally mandating face coverings in certain settings.” Mass participation gatherings indoors and outdoors would still be permitted, providing businesses running them operated mandatory vaccine passports for entry.

Plan B final stipulation is that “The Government

would also consider asking people once again to work from home if they can, for a limited period,” while stressing that “this causes more disruption and has greater immediate costs to the economy and some businesses than the other Plan B interventions, so a final decision would be made based on the data at the time.”

Johnson described Plan B as having “a number of different shots in the locker”, while insisting that they would only be used as a very last resort to avoid moving to a lockdown and hitting the profits of the corporations. “You wouldn’t necessarily play them all at once, far from it, you would want to do things in a graduated way,” he said.

Point 76 of the autumn/winter plan states, “Given the high levels of protection in the adult population against COVID-19 by vaccination, relatively small changes in policy and behaviour could have a big impact on reducing (or increasing) transmission, bending the epidemic curve and relieving pressure on the NHS. Thanks to the success of the vaccination programme, it should be possible to handle a further resurgence with less damaging measures than the lockdowns and economic and social restrictions deployed in the past.”

The government’s Plan A and Plan B both proceed on the basis that COVID-19 is now endemic and cannot be eradicated. This is no longer based on the claim that “herd immunity” will be reached through a combination of vaccination and infection, but a naked assertion that “living with the virus” means mass deaths for many years to come.

The *Telegraph*’s Monday editorial: “Britain must put an end to all Covid restrictions” declares, “Covid is now an endemic disease, which means people will still catch it—including many who have been vaccinated—and some will end up seriously ill in hospital and even die.”

A *Times* column Monday by Science Editor Tom Whipple and Science Reporter Kaya Burgess noted that “This time last year there were 4,000 daily cases and 1,000 Covid patients in hospital. Today there are 30,000 daily reported cases and 8,000 patients in hospital. We are going into autumn from a far higher base.”

The widespread belief previously was that “if we just got the nation over the herd immunity line all would be fine.” But “thanks to the Delta variant, that line is less clear and seems ever-receding. Immunity drops off over

time, each wave of boosters and infections tops it up. So it is that the country approaches an equilibrium of endemicity, a point that is our true finish line.”

For “equilibrium of endemicity”, read an “acceptable” level of illness and death. Last month the *i* newspaper revealed that the government has already conducted as closed-door “cost-benefit analysis” declaring that an “acceptable level of Covid-19 deaths” of around 1,000 deaths a week was preferable to a renewed lockdown. And even then this would only prompt a “discussion” of possibly more stringent containment measures.

The *Times* ended its ruminations with a tortured simile comparing the Covid pandemic to “a bell struck in a dark cave. The first echo comes back loud and clear. So too does the second. But each subsequent echo is diminished and distorted until it is just a faint reminder, barely discernible. The clanging din of Covid is far quieter today. One day it will cease.”

This is anti-scientific nonsense. There is no reason assume that the virus will steadily become more benign, to be treated like flu. Further mutations made possible by the failure to contain and end the pandemic can lead to yet more deadly strains. Preventing this means the mobilisation of the working class, organised in rank-and-file safety committees in every workplace and neighbourhood, against Johnson’s criminal government and its de facto allies, the Labour Party and the trade unions. This must be based on a conscious plan for the final elimination of the virus through measures including the shutdown of non-essential industries, schools and universities, with all necessary cost borne by the major corporations and banks.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact