



COVID-19

UK Political Analysis

By Tim Hames, Senior Adviser | 7th August 2020



[Anxious August. The case for quiet confidence on the virus in the UK.](#)

Nothing much ever happens in August. There have, admittedly, been a few minor exceptions to this rule; these include the outbreak of the Great War (1914), the dropping of two atomic bombs on Japan forcing its surrender in World War II (1945), the first resignation of an American President (1974), the invasion of Kuwait by Iraq (1990) and an attempted coup in the Soviet Union which ultimately led to the dissolution of the USSR and the de facto end of the Cold War (1991). Apart from that, little of note.

The understandable concern at the outset of this August is that a second wave or spike of the coronavirus will join this list of exceptions to the general anonymity of the eighth month of the year. The international outlook remains grave, with many very sizeable countries still not through the first round of the virus never ready for any repeat of it. There have been some spectacular flare-ups in an array of locations from Australia to Spain. In the UK, the city of Leicester found itself excluded from the lifting of the lockdown as regards bars, pubs and restaurants for two further weeks. Blackburn became the cause of high alert. Much of Greater Manchester had restrictions on the indoor meetings of separate households re-imposed and, perhaps most strikingly of all, the city of Aberdeen now faces the return of many of the limitations on life that

lockdown had involved for at least seven days. Will this be a long, hot and difficult August?

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Recent events in the UK have raised fears of multiple local lockdowns, regional lockdowns or even a second national lockdown to avoid a second wave of the virus.
- While such anxiety is legitimate, there are reasons for quiet confidence that such a drastic situation can be averted over the remainder of the summer.
- The degree of planning in advance of the staggered lifting of the lockdown was conducted in a more measured and sophisticated manner than circumstances rendered possible during the weeks before the national lockdown came in.
- The legal powers of national and local authorities to conduct highly specific lockdowns are considerable and would be backed up by the credible threat of force if required. This should prove an effective incentive for compliance.
- The extent of knowledge about the disease is much greater than was the case when the virus first struck, and that is also an asset in strategic planning.
- The existence of NHS Test and Trace has also provided the authorities with much more precise information as to which people and places might contract the virus.
- Previous difficulties with securing sufficiently timely testing are largely resolved.
- Those most likely to acquire the virus (the young) are also the least likely to fall seriously ill as a result, to need to be hospitalised, to enter an ICU and to die.
- The balance of probability is, thus, that a summer second wave can be avoided.

Pride before a fall?

Three weeks ago in Downing Street, the Prime Minister issued a statement that was the most optimistic in comment and tone since the coronavirus crisis in the UK started. He noted that the number of new cases was down sharply (now at just 1% of the absolute peak), that the R number remained below 1, that the figure for infections overall was shrinking at a rate between 1% and 5% a day, and that the tallies both of patients newly

admitted to hospital with the virus each day and the number of patients in mechanical ventilation beds had fallen by more than 90% from their absolute zenith in early April.

Furthermore, what had been the two serious problem children in policy terms earlier in the crisis – supplies of PPE and levels of testing – had now become examples of (belated) policy triumphs. Some 30 billion pieces of PPE had been acquired and distributed. The figure for antigen testing had soared from 2,000 a day in early March to 200,000 plus by early July. The PM was now willing to pledge that there would be “at least” 500,000 tests a day by October. The UK was testing a larger number of people each week than any other nation in Europe, and in per capita terms more than France, Germany, Italy and Spain.

As a result, Boris Johnson could announce another series of liberalisations of the lockdown. In England, anyone would be able to use public transport for any reason provided that they wore face coverings. From eight days later, indoor gyms, pools and other sports facilities could resume their activities. From August 1, there would be more discretion afforded to employers on reopening places of work, most remaining leisure settings (bowling alleys, ice rinks and casinos) could once again throw open their doors and the ‘shielded’ would be afforded more liberty. Wedding receptions of up to thirty people could occur. There would be pilot projects held to test whether live indoor theatre performance could be restored and whether mass sporting gatherings might soon once again be viable. The conferences and events industry, long in hibernation, would be allowed out in October.

The spirit of his address was definitely one of “light at the end of the tunnel”. He said:

“It is my strong and sincere hope that we will be able to review the outstanding restrictions and allow a more significant return to normality from November at the earliest – perhaps in time for Christmas.”

If anything went wrong, though, “we will not hesitate at any time to put on the brakes.”

Not much more than two weeks later, the brakes have indeed been, to use the Prime Minister’s own words, “squeezed”. There have been serious concerns about the virus levels in Blackburn and Bradford. Much of the Greater Manchester area has had the old

rules limiting the indoor interaction of independent households reintroduced. The city of Aberdeen is in semi-isolation. Many of the changes that had been scheduled for August 1 had, almost at the last minute, been postponed for a further fortnight. Professor Chris Whitty, Chief Medical Officer for England, stated openly that we might be at or near the limit of the extent to which the lockdown could be safely lifted. Another SAGE member mused that the price of allowing schools to come back in September might be shutting the pubs.

Is this thus a classic case of pride before a fall? Have ministers and officials lifted the lockdown too broadly and too swiftly (largely to assist the battered economy) and will they now find themselves compelled to move back towards a shuttered society? No.

The case for quiet confidence about containing the virus in the UK this summer.

Any increase in mobility and rise in the number of 'contact points' between people involves some danger that the reproduction number will rise (and it is edging up), that transmission levels will increase and that the number of recorded cases will become higher. This is not, in itself, a 'second wave'; it is better thought of as an aftershock of the first one. A true second wave would involve the numbers of infections, hospital admissions and deaths returning to the sorts of levels which were witnessed in late March and April. There is a strong set of reasons for believing that nothing close to this at the national level will happen, and that even intense local outbreaks will fall short as well.

Better Planning

The weeks leading up to the formal declaration of lockdown on March 23 had, by necessity, to involve decisions taken at high speed on the basis of patchy information. There was a national pandemic plan, but it was designed for an intense outbreak of influenza and not the entirely new form of coronavirus that emerged instead.

Once the decision to move towards lockdown had been taken, executed and it was clear that the public would overwhelmingly choose to co-operate with it, the inner sanctum in

Whitehall would move almost immediately towards planning as to how lockdown would be lifted. This was done in the knowledge that it would be at least six weeks before the most incremental steps were taken and probably nearer to ten weeks before any really impactful changes could be introduced. This allowed time to take three key steps: to model what the safest early steps would be, to assess what would be needed for different sorts of facilities to be truly 'COVID safe', and to learn lessons from other countries that had entered lockdown before the UK (and would therefore be exiting it earlier as well).

This allowed for a much more sophisticated and subtle approach to be taken. On May 10, the Prime Minister set out a conditional plan for easing the lockdown in England. Those who could not work from home but who could operate safely at work were to be permitted to do so (although no one expected a vast flood of employees to follow). On May 13, the first alterations to the lockdown in England came into effect. People could spend an unlimited amount of time outdoors on their own or with another member of the same household. Shortly after that, a plan for partial restoration of schools was set out (though this would prove to be too ambitious). A few days after that, Boris Johnson announced that car showrooms and outdoor markets would resume on June 1 and that all other non-essential retail outlets would follow on June 15. On May 28 the announcement came that outdoor contact between two households rather than one was to be admissible by June 1. On May 28, the Culture Secretary asserted that competitive sports (minus audiences) could restart.

In all of this, the public was largely responsive and responsible. The only major incidents were related to particularly nice weather at weekends and a flurry of Black Lives Matter demonstrations in the aftermath of the death of George Floyd in the United States. From there, it was declared that 'support bubbles' between single adult households and one other household would be allowed and that attractions in which people stayed inside their automobiles (such as safari parks) would reopen. By June 23, the Prime Minister was able to state that in certain conditions the '2-metre rule' would be replaced by a new '1-metre plus' rule in England on July 4. From that date, two households could meet indoors. Pubs, restaurants, hairdressers, nail bars, campsites and places of worship would all be encouraged to resume their business. A timetable for outdoor swimming pools and outdoor theatres to open was set out in early July. Boris Johnson's address on

July 17 was, therefore, the latest in a long and cautious series of measures – arguably the most extended timetable seen in Europe – and one which was designed to allow evidence on the R number to be assessed as liberalisation slowly came to pass.

Extensive legal powers

If anything went astray, however, ministers had allowed themselves stringent powers to correct matters. On the same day that the Prime Minister made his tub-thumping “normal by Christmas” oration, his Government published the innocuous-sounding *COVID-19 contain framework: a guide for local decision-makers*. This might have the feel of the sort of document that accompanies a new dishwasher but the contents were, in any ordinary context, astonishing. UTLAs (Upper Tier Local Authorities) would have the authority to close individual premises, seal off public outdoor places and prevent specific events from occurring, all without the need to consult a magistrate. If a UTLA seemed to be reluctant to exercise these legal rights, ministers were in a position to overrule them. A public standoff between Downing Street and the elected Mayor of Leicester appears to have ended when the hint was dropped that if he did not desist from complaining and did not oversee the lockdown himself then the military would be despatched to do it. Although the measures and the methods are eye-watering and would not have been thought remotely conceivable in the UK nine months ago, there is absolutely no doubt that if the Government wanted to carry out a super-glued local lockdown then it could achieve it.

Enhanced medical knowledge

There may have been many areas of dealing with the virus where ministers have encountered serious difficulties, but there have been others where the UK has been at the absolute forefront. These include modelling for the spread of the virus, deeper understanding as to what it is and how it might mutate and (hopefully) a vaccine.

That enhanced understanding is a considerable asset when compared with other countries in devising an approach for lifting the lockdown and assessing how to respond to local surges when they take place. The UK is no longer ‘flying blind’ as it was in early March, when many in the scientific community thought that there was a high chance

that the virus would – like influenza – simply rip through the population at such a speed that any attempt at containment and suppression was doomed to failure. There is today a much more robust appreciation as to how the virus spreads and therefore how to shape a blueprint for easing the lockdown that has the strongest chance of working.

NHS Test and Trace

This has been augmented by the data that the NHS Test and Trace team; the 20,000-strong set of recruits whose role it is to receive information from those who think that they have the symptoms of the virus, take the details of those with whom they have had close contact, reach out to those contacts and implore them to self-isolate, test the original individual who suspected that they were sick and to police the whole system.

NHS Test and Trace was very much a Plan C for containing the virus after mass antibody testing at scale by oneself at home (which was never accurate enough to roll out) and the short-lived aspiration that an all-singing, all-dancing app would come to the rescue (it turned out to have a screech of a voice and two left feet). It is a somewhat clunky substitute, but it works best when dealing with so-called ‘complex cases’ where there is the risk of clusters of new infections occurring rather than one-off individual infection. It is exactly those clusters that one would want to stamp out with the greatest urgency. It was the NHS Team that deciphered the early signs of the issue in Leicester. It had a similar role in flashing a warning light in both Blackburn and Bradford. It triggered a tougher regime around Manchester. An article in *The Lancet* this week conceded that – while the arrangement might look very analogue in a digital age – in practice it is one of the most plausible efforts in Europe.

It has allowed ministers and officials to devise an informal league table as to where a second spike of cases might materialise. There is still a huge distinction between an indoor and an outdoor setting. The most probable reason for a person to contract the virus is someone else in their household leaving the home and bringing the virus into the household. The next most probable reason is for that person to leave the home to visit another household (or vice versa). After that comes work conducted in an illegal or illicit setting in which the regulations for COVID-safe employment are not applied at all. After that are places of work that are legal, and might even try to comply with the rules, but

where practical constraints mean that it is challenging to avoid people being too close to one another – these tend to be factories which need to be kept running by virtue of the thing they are manufacturing (meat-packing factories seem to be a special dilemma: you can close some, but not all of them). The final category is where social centres are allowing too many of their customers to congregate indoors instead of spacing them out and driving most of their traffic into an outdoor setting (the pub in Aberdeen that has been the catalyst for the trouble there looks as if it falls squarely into this category). A long way back from this pack are infections arising from people drinking outside or in crowded external places.

This is, obviously, incredibly valuable information to be able to acquire at relative speed. It means that while there will doubtless be further local scares (I am setting my watch for popular resort spots in Cornwall to hit the radar screen), there is an ability to foresee a potential issue and move to close it down (albeit in an imperfect form). If the objective is to keep the overall R number as low as practical in the context of it being summer without the lockdown regime of April-May in place, it is probably good enough.

It is also assisted by a transformation in the UK's capacity for testing. Ministers enter August with the assurance that they can conduct tests on a scale that would have been beyond their wildest dreams back in April, that the accuracy of those tests is impressive (very, very few 'false positives', which are far more undesirable than 'false negatives' in terms of their effect on virus suppression) and that the detail that NHS Test and Trace can now provide (to postcode level) and the speed at which results can now be obtained (comfortably within 24 hours usually, with the real prospect of slicing that to two hours if testing needs to be targeted at what might be a local virus hot-spots) make mobilising to meet the demands of even an exceptionally large surge less disturbing.

The few people catching the virus outdoors in the community are the young and fit.

The pictures which tend to prompt the most outrage in the media are those of larger numbers of young people drinking outside of bars and pubs seemingly without a care as to social distancing and the sight of thousands of people crowded on British beaches. This is actually much less of a menace than an underground sweat shop or a badly run

factory. The chance of transmission by these means is extremely modest. This is why ministers have not made police patrols outside pubs or restricting access to beaches a priority. It would be a massive misuse of resources to do so just to satisfy the newspapers.

Furthermore, the small number of people who might catch the virus at a sufficiently high level of exposure that it would have a noticeable impact on them are overwhelmingly the young and the fit. As long as they largely socialise with other young and fit people, and have limited exposure to those who are more vulnerable (and ideally none at all to the sections of the population that are considered to be seriously clinically vulnerable) then the effect on the rate of those who require a hospital bed, an ICU unit, oxygen or worse still a ventilator is likely to be minor and manageable.

We also have to be careful about making big assumptions based on rather small statistical fluctuations. As a report on the BBC News website on Wednesday rightly reported that while it is correct that the surveillance programme run by the Office for National Statistics did suggest a possible increase in the infection rate, this was based on just 24 positive cases among almost 30,000 people over the course of two weeks. These are not the sort of figures that should lead a person to barricade themselves at home.

Recent evidence indicates that the identified infection rate is not rising in any meaningful sense, despite a much more intensive level of testing (which one might have thought would nudge the rate of confirmed infections upwards). The raw total of infections on an average day is higher than in mid-July, but it remains less than one per cent of what it was in early April. The proportion of those who do contract the virus and end up dying from it is collapsing. We are essentially back to where we were in the earliest stages of the crisis, when almost everyone who died had pre-existing medical conditions of one form or another. That was before real shielding. There is not much to suggest that those who have been shielded for several months are charging out to multiple households, to work in a meat factory or attend a pub lock-in.

Conclusion

Nothing in life is certain. There is a rogue element in the attempt to control the virus that ministers and officials have less command over, namely that which flows from business and leisure travel internationally. What the British do abroad is not covered for in any official document. That is why the debate over quarantine has been so fierce and why ministers acted with almost brutal speed to reimpose quarantine on those returning from Spain (as explored and explained in last week's issue of FTI UK Political Analysis), even though they were entirely aware that this would make them few friends either among their own citizens who had been seriously inconvenienced or an administration in Madrid with whom the UK Government would customarily want to be allies.

International travel is unquestionably a weak link in the chain. If matters were to get out of hand in the UK in August, it would probably be due to a spike in imported infections. For that reason quarantine will not be disappearing as a weapon in the policy arsenal.

If that does not happen, and most of the popular holiday locations for UK tourists are making a similar division between indoor and outdoor activities, then the chances of emerging from August with UK containment policy in the right shape are rather solid. September would see the schools reopen in England (this occurs earlier in Scotland and Northern Ireland), but would also see a marked slowdown in international leisure travel. That trade-off alone should be a sufficient one without other restrictions being needed. With luck, August 2020 will not be like the Augusts of 1914, 1945, 1974, 1990 and 1991.

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