



# COVID-19

## UK Political Analysis

By Tim Hames, Senior Adviser | 20<sup>th</sup> November 2020



### What next? Some very hard choices when regional tiers return.

We have reached what is supposed to be the half-way point in the lockdown in England. Minds in Whitehall are deeply engaged in what might happen next. The Prime Minister finds himself part of that process self-isolating in Downing Street. This has the advantage that the opportunity for the media to ask him directly “what next?” is somewhat limited.

If he were somehow compelled to respond, the candid reply would be along the lines of “ask me in about ten days from now”. He and his colleagues have a sense of the range of options that they are likely to be presented with, but at this stage do not know whether the data on new cases and hospital admissions will simply force their hands irrespective of their policy preferences. The arrival of new information and models has compelled many a “refinement” (often a polite term for “reversal”) of policy in this saga so far, not least the one announced on October 31st which saw a system of regional tiers based on a “Medium”, “High” and “Very High” assessment of the local coronavirus threat suddenly suspended in favour of the new version of a lockdown in England that has now run for just over a fortnight. Yet by Monday November 30th at the latest, a decision will need to be made as to how society and the economy will operate once December 2nd is over. There will also need to be considerably more thought as to how what has been decided will be communicated than the leak-driven approach that had to be adopted last time.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Ministers and officials find themselves having to take decisions on the basis of data that is imperfect, that frequently comes with a time lag to it and where the evidence from other parts of the UK is not yet of much assistance either.
- The three broad policy options that confront Whitehall are between returning to essentially the same system of tiers that existed before the latest lockdown, adopting a new version of that system or extending the lockdown for longer.
- If the balance of evidence is that the reproduction number in England at the end of November is below 1, even if it is in a range of, for example, 0.7 to 0.9, then the instinct and inclinations of ministers on the whole would be to stick to their stated timetable and shift back towards a regional tiered structure.
- It appears unlikely that the R number will fall so far and so fast that the previous system could be restored without any amendment, although the latest weekly SAGE assessment that is due to be released this morning could, if it revealed a sharp downward shift in the number, open up that option once again.
- It is reasonable to assume that the more likely scenario is that if regional tiers are restored on December 3rd then they will be different to their predecessors.
- If so, there will have to be some very hard decisions taken to maintain a strong degree of suppression on the R number and avoid a situation where it returns to a level clearly above 1 by the end of January with the spectre of yet another de facto lockdown to buy time and space for mass vaccination to occur.

These are very difficult times for those who have to take decisions about how to deal with the second wave of the coronavirus crisis. This is as true for almost all European nations and will soon dominate the in-tray of the Biden Administration as well.

The decision as to what to do in the case of England which will have to be taken in the next seven to ten days is exceptionally complicated and challenging. In theory, the range of options is relatively narrow. Ministers could decide to return to the structure of local and regional tiers that existed before the lockdown, could opt for a revised system based on similar principles or could determine that four weeks was too short a stretch of time

to have a sufficiently robust impact on the second wave of the virus and that an extension of the lockdown in England would be needed to make that progress.

Coming to that assessment will, though, be incredibly problematic.

### **The data dilemma**

Ministers and officials will be making this decision on the basis of data much of which is imperfect, almost all of which comes with some sort of time lag and with key aspects of it based on modelling which might indicate a direction of travel but not a precise result.

This applies to the statistics that are released every afternoon to the media. The figure that is published for daily cases has been reasonably stable at a range around 20,000-25,000 for most of the past month, although individual days have sometimes seen a surge that is difficult to explain. Yet the weekly analysis from the Office of National Statistics that is released every Friday has consistently suggested that the overall number of new cases is considerably higher and the work of Imperial College, London puts it higher still. If by the time that a decision is made all of these figures are clearly moving in the same direction then that affords some comfort to those who have to reach a determination on the extent to which the second lockdown in England has succeeded in pushing back the virus. It may well be the case, however, that the numbers are not as straightforward as that and a choice has to be made as to which figure is deemed to be most significant. On the basis of what occurred to prompt the sudden switch back to lockdown three weeks ago, it looks as if the ONS data will be awarded the most weight. The last opportunity to receive it before December 2nd will be a week today, yet it is not “real time” information but comes from a few days earlier so an extrapolation from it will have to be made.

The figures for hospital admissions are better and closer to “real time” and will be a substantial element in the equation. They have the difficulty, nonetheless, that in large part they are a reflection of infections that took place 7-14 days previously that have come through as serious illness demanding a hospital bed. If next week, there starts to be a regular decline in new hospital admissions then that would be taken as a strong

indicator that the lockdown was effective in its early stages and that admissions would be likely to continue to fall for at least the two weeks after the lockdown ceased.

Hospital admissions are, though, the product of two factors. They are shaped both by the total number of new cases occurring in the community and the sorts of people who are becoming infected, with the oldest and most medically vulnerable the most likely to enter hospital in the first place, then require an intensive care bed and then risk death. So unless the numbers move downwards very distinctly and there seems to be a pattern of fewer older and more vulnerable individuals requiring hospital care, then, once again, at the time that the decision has to be taken on the lockdown, a judgement call based on extrapolation of the numbers available would have to be taken. This would not only be a major factor in deciding whether the lockdown could be discontinued but also on what sort of structure for regional tiers should be selected. The NHS is severely stretched at present. The wrong call that saw virus admissions quickly rise again would be a disaster.

Then there is the fabled reproduction number. This is the result of some immensely impressive modelling for which various UK scientists and institutions are rightly applauded and recognised internationally. Yet it is still an estimate. When applied at the regional level, the element of uncertainty increases. The number released last Friday was of a range from 1.0 to 1.2 but it was based on evidence from a week earlier. Efforts are being made to bring it closer to the present time but some time lag is unavoidable. The estimates published today and, particularly, next Friday are thus fundamental. It would be very difficult to lift the lockdown if the mid-point of the range was one or above but a much more comfortable choice if it were 0.7-0.9 or lower. If it were between these points, such as 0.8-1.0, then a judgement call based on a trend would need to occur.

All of the above would be less daunting if the evidence from the “fire break” that took place in Wales and the “circuit break” that has been imposed in Northern Ireland painted a clear picture for ministers and officials in London. It does not seem to assist much. The breaks were shorter than the one that is now on in England and different in key features. The most that can be said with confidence is that they slowed the spread of the virus but they do not seem to have been the powerful blow against the virus that the national lockdown earlier this year proved to be. That Northern Ireland is to start its own two week lockdown from next Friday, more stringent than its current restrictions, does not

suggest the circuit break there was a huge success. More data as the effects of the last stages of these exercises will be available by the end of next week and may be more helpful.

So, unless they are very fortunate because the information in front of them is extremely clear, ministers, officials and advisers will have to come to a conclusion over the long weekend of November 27-30 on the basis of data that is less certain than desirable.

### **What sort of regional tier structure might be selected?**

It already seems unlikely that England would return to exactly the same regional tiers that it witnessed before the return to lockdown. Cabinet members have spoken openly of looking for a system that is more “consistent” in its application, avoiding the sort of confusing curiosities of October when gyms were ordered to close in some Tier Three areas but allowed to remain open in others. “Consistent” in this instance is something of a coded reference to more restrictive. Unless the lockdown has been a stellar success, the balance of probability is that the rules will be tougher in at least some parts of the country, perhaps all of the country, than the formula which was deployed previously.

There are a number of different ways in which this could be implemented.

For the sake of continuity if nothing else it could be decided to stick with three tiers but make the third one different and more draconian. What had been the essence of the “Medium” category – the Rule of Six if meeting indoors or outdoors and an obligation on pubs and restaurants to shut at 10pm – could be changed to the provisions of what had been the “High” category, the most significant of which were the barrier to households mixing inside and hence the Rule of Six applying outdoors only. In the same spirit, the new version of “High” would incorporate what had been the rules for “Very High”, with no household mixing indoors or outdoors or in hospitality venues or private gardens, the Rule of Six operating in outdoor public spaces, only pubs and bars that can serve alcohol to seated customers as part of a main meal to remain open and official guidance against travelling in and out of the area. New rules could then be devised for the “Very High” top tier of the overall structure rather than having a patchwork quilt of local initiatives.

Alternatively, if this all seems a pointless act of reshuffling rules, ministers could decide instead to keep the previous system as it was and bolt another tier (“Extremely High”?) on top of it.

What might tougher restrictions at the very top look like if it were introduced? The options would include keeping pubs and restaurants closed in the areas concerned, banning household interaction anywhere indoors or outdoors or turning what is currently “guidance” against travelling in and out of a very top tier area into something closer to outright prohibition of such movement by both private and public transport.

Whatever structure was chosen would then trigger a decision as to whether to place the whole country into one structure or allow some variation and put different places into different systems. The advantage of the former would be simplicity but it would make a mockery of the notion that this was a set of rules based on local or regional conditions. The merit of the latter is that it would more accurately reflect the fact – assuming that it was still deemed to be true by the end of this month and convergence of infection rates had not occurred – that the level of cases does differ significantly across England.

A possible compromise would be to put the whole country into one category at first but pledge regular reviews with the objective of more regional variation as time went on. If so, it is manifest that the chosen category is unlikely to be “Medium”. At the Downing Street Press Conference on Monday, Dr Susan Hopkins of Public Health England openly expressed the view that these less stringent restrictions had made little impact on the virus during the three weeks or so that they had been in place. The old “High” looks like the best that could be hoped for if the lockdown has taken significant strides towards reducing new cases. In less encouraging circumstances, it could be that the previous “Very High” is the new normal with the threat of “Extremely High” if the R number were to be deemed to have climbed above one in certain locations. Policy in practise in England would thus become closer post-lockdown to the system which Nicola Sturgeon has installed in Scotland and where she has elevated much of the population into the toughest category this week.

In the most extreme situation, where all or much of England moved from lockdown into an explicit or de facto “Extremely High” set of restrictions on December 3rd, ministers

would be open to the charge that the lifting of the lockdown was largely illusory and that sections of the economy were continuing to be sacrificed at the behest of the medical scientist lobby. A sizeable revolt by Conservative MPs in the House of Commons could easily follow, compounding the multiple political difficulties of the Prime Minister.

### **After that?**

There has, understandably, been a very intense focus on what arrangements might be in place at Christmas. Ministers are desperate to be in a position to offer something that approaches normal interaction. This is not merely out of noble charitable sentiment. There would be a serious risk of high levels of non-compliance with a strict lockdown Yuletide. This would be the worst of all worlds in many respects as it would be extremely difficult to police a severely restricted Christmas and could be the trigger for resentment that lasted well beyond December 25th. If humanly possible, a relaxation will happen. There is also a determination that the rules should be common across the UK as it would be an immensely awkward spectacle if the different components of the UK appeared to be having divergent Christmas experiences from one another. Discontent would be rife.

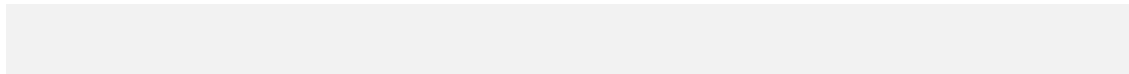
How it should be done is a more perplexing question. It would probably only last for four or five days. It would probably involve a set number of households forming a “bubble” during that time (in reality, ensuring that the number of households gathering together did not exceed the approved figure marginally would be incredibly hard to do). There would be tight restrictions on what the bubble could do other than meet with itself in a chosen household. This may well involve all contact with other bubbles being banned both inside and outside. The hospitality and leisure sectors, if they open again after December 2nd, might find themselves shuttered once more to prevent socialisation. Christmas around the table as dinner is served might feel reasonably conventional but beyond the front door of the home it would be a very strange experience indeed. There would be strong encouragement to travel by private car where possible and not on public transport. The roads could be atypically busy on December 23/24 and 27/28. Only a spectacular dive in the reproduction number over the next few weeks could spare this.

Even this unprecedented version of Christmas would come at the probable price of at least some increase in new infections and the reproduction number. It is impossible to

anticipate how large that rise would be as it would depend in part on whether families to some extent adopt “internal shielding” to allow for social distancing inside the home in order to make virus transmission to the most elderly and vulnerable people less likely. Awareness of the probability of a spike in cases due this relative liberalisation means that ministers will have to consider short-term tougher measures before or after Christmas (possibly both sides of it). The phrase “Happy New Year” might have a very ironic edge to it as December 31 turns to January 1 in conditions not that far off an outright curfew.

There is one further policy consideration that will probably have to be encountered before anyone reaches for the crackers. It concerns students. The movement of university students from their homes to their place of education and residence in September was clearly one considerable factor in the sudden surge of new cases and a second wave of a scale that appears to have taken many experts by surprise. The preparations and the testing that will need to be undertaken to allow students to return home between December 3rd and 9th will be intense and expensive. It will not work in every instance, so the return of the student population comes with the danger that it will push up the reproduction number just as it has been (presumably) lowered by lockdown. Matters would be eased if students then self-isolated in their bedrooms but is that really going to happen? The big question thereafter is whether to take all the risks that would come from sending students back again in January or whether it would be much wiser to instruct universities to resume on-line teaching only quite possibly for the entire time between the start of next term and what would have been the Easter vacation.

For those who have to take decisions such as these, who are well aware of what the effects will be on millions of lives in the UK, a vaccine roll-out cannot come too soon.





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**Tim Hames**

Senior Adviser

Strategic Communications

Tim.Hames@FTIConsulting.com

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