



COVID-19

UK Political Analysis

By Tim Hames, Senior Adviser | 27th November 2020



[Between the lines. What the COVID-19 Winter Plan might imply.](#)

Even by the standards of these exceptional times, this has been an extraordinary week in the enduring coronavirus crisis. We have had the latest positive preliminary reports from another vaccine. Ministers set out their stall on how they would move back to regional tiers and published a COVID-19 Winter Plan. The identities of which localities would be allocated to which tier in the first instance has been established. A UK-wide set of arrangements for Christmas has been released. In the midst of all this, the Chancellor used his statement delivered in the House of Commons on Wednesday on a one-year comprehensive spending review to indicate how enormous the impact of the virus crisis on the public finances, national income and unemployment levels will be not simply this year, but potentially a long time to come. It has been an extremely large amount of information to attempt to make some sense of.

In the short-term, it is probably the provisions of the COVID-19 Winter Plan and what implications might legitimately be drawn from them that should be the focus for the attention of the business community. It is not merely the case that the Government has returned to the regional system of tiers which it had announced and operated for less than a month before resorting to the lockdown in England that will expire next week. There are differences – some substantial, others more subtle – to take account of.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- The COVID-19 Winter Plan is the most comprehensive attempt at a policy approach since the Government published a document on how it proposed to start lifting the original national lockdown more than six months ago.
- The objectives set out suggest that the clear majority of the population will be living under Tier Two (High) or Tier Three (Very High) until at least March.
- The new formula that it has devised both for the initial allocation of regions to tiers and future movement between tiers allows it considerable flexibility.
- Although the measures set out in the Plan are due to end just before Easter, this is not the same as suggesting that England would suddenly switch back to totally “normal” conditions at that moment. It seems more likely that there would be a transition period after that where at least some restrictions would still apply.
- Much will depend on the level of public compliance with these measures as a mass vaccination campaign is undertaken and in many of the most important respects, the capacity of ministers to impose obedience is strictly limited.

In some respects, the most significant aspect of the COVID-19 Winter Plan is that it exists at all. The last attempt at a document of this form was published in early May and set out a timetable for a cautious and phased lifting of the original lockdown that proved, in fairness, a largely accurate reflection of how policy evolved between May and July. Since that point, the emergence of a second wave of the virus, which was of an intensity throughout Europe that had not been expected, the Government has appeared to have been forced into a series of ad hoc and tactical responses to events as they evolved. It has found it hard to articulate what its objectives might be in any strategic sense, the factors which would determine how decisions about the rules constricting social and economic activity would be taken, or a notion of the timetable that might be viable.

The Winter Plan seeks to do all of the above and it was produced below the political radar and released well in advance of the latest moment when it could have been. It should thus be seen as an attempt to recapture the initiative, increase confidence that the virus will be brought back under control and then contained by vaccination, and provide a steer to the many thousands of people who will need to implement the Plan.

Objectives.

The Winter Plan sets out three central objectives. These are:

- a. Bring R below 1 and keep it there on a sustained basis.
- b. Find new and more effective ways of managing the virus and enabling life to return closer to normal.
- c. Minimise damage to the economy and society, jobs and livelihoods. Education will be safeguarded in nurseries, schools, colleges and universities.

This might seem an obvious and unsurprising set of objectives. To a degree they are, but in other ways they are more interesting than they appear. In September (when the short circuit break notion was considered but rejected) and early October (when the first set of regional tiers were established), it was manifest that the aim was to reduce the R number and move it in the direction of 1, but it was not as clear that the drive would reach further and not only seek to push the R number below 1 but keep it there “on a sustained basis”.

It is difficult to see how this could be achieved unless the bulk of the population has to live under Tier Two or Tier Three conditions for the next three months or so. The SAGE analysis of the impact of Tier One when first introduced was that it had a minimal impact on suppressing virus cases and as it has not been strengthened that much in this new scheme, it is reasonable to assume that its real utility will come at a later stage.

The one change of note that has been made to Tier One is to harden the message that even in locations where cases of new infections are comparatively low, the public are being urged to work from home wherever possible. That more forceful stance on this issue will be seen across the spectrum. The Plan refers to an assessment from SAGE that the numbers of people working exclusively from home has fallen sharply since April/May and as a result about a third of all new cases of late have been contracted while at work.

This explains the statement in the Plan that “The Government encourages employers to enable a greater degree of home working and will strengthen guidance to be very clear that anyone who can work from home should do so.” It is also declared that ministers will legislate to strengthen the sanctions that will be in the hands of local councils in

punishing businesses that are not deemed to be operating in a COVID secure way. In Tier Three, notably, it can be anticipated that the inspection of businesses will be frequent.

There is also an element of originality to the second objective in that the Winter Plan is more explicit about the use of mass testing (especially in Tier Three areas) than was true when the regional tiers were first attempted. The Plan offers this as an alternative to the need for self-isolation for people who have had close contact with someone who has had COVID-19. Self-isolation would, if testing was available on the scale that is pledged here, only follow from an actual positive result from a test. This will have to come in quickly as the community testing programme will, according to the Winter Plan, offer all the local authorities in Tier Three areas the opportunity to take part in a “six-week surge”.

The final objective, the ambition to “minimise damage” to the economy and society is by far the most subjective in interpretation. There will be many Conservative MPs who think that seeking to keep the R number below 1 on a sustained basis rather than loosening the constraints on social and economic activity and super-shielding the most vulnerable is inherently in contradiction with any meaningful effort to “minimise damage” here. Having looked to have tacked towards the “economy first” view of how to handle the second wave two months ago, ministers seem to have shifted back to “health first”.

The Rules surrounding Tiers.

The original rules surrounding the first systems of tiers contained the curiosity that while there was a numerical trigger for the shift from Tier One to Tier Two in terms of the number of new cases, there was a far more ambiguous set of words to determine when a move from Tier Two to Tier Three would occur and with at least an attempt at a negotiation with the local authority concerned as to the precise restrictions adopted.

This has now been replaced by a formula which appears to be more specific but which might in practice be extremely flexible if ministers want to fine-tune their decisions.

The basis for determining which region was placed in which tier yesterday and for all future allocations and reallocations is now to be shaped by five critical factors:

- a. Case detection rates in all age groups.

- b. Case detection rates in the over 60s.
- c. The rate at which cases are rising or falling.
- d. Positivity rate (the number of positive cases detected as a % of tests taken).
- e. Pressure of the NHS, including current and projected occupancy.

Which of this set matters the most? This is far from clear. The Plan contends that:

“The Government will need to maintain some flexibility to weigh these indicators against each other as the context demands.”

If that were not opaque enough, the relevant section then contends:

“The movement of areas up and down tiers will also be informed by broader economic and practical considerations, such as the anticipated movement of individuals between areas.”

Ministers have, in effect, taken back control over the tiering structure in England. They now have a series of indicators of a range that allows them to act in whatever way is necessary to “Bring R below 1 and keep it there on a sustained basis”. Furthermore, there is to be no more bargaining with local authorities as to the fine details of the rules which would apply in their area. The clash with Andy Burnham, the Mayor of Greater Manchester, which was witnessed a few weeks ago and where most observers thought that he had won the public relations battle, if not the policy war, will not be repeated.

There will also be the strong suspicion that the side-effect of this scheme is to allow ministers the maximum amount of choice as to what to do about London, as the vast size of the capital city makes a considerable difference between Tier Two and Tier Three and is also of the greatest concern to the Treasury as it considers the cost of this policy.

The actual allocation of regions to tiers yesterday was thus largely predictable. A Tier One which includes only Cornwall, the Isle of Wight and the Isles of Scilly is close to an act of symbolism. Tier Two is the real baseline now. Tier Three is much expanded.

Quite what a shift this represents was swiftly captured by the BBC in some stunning numbers. In the original system of tiers, an estimated 23,549,584 people lived in Tier

One, 24,053,272 in Tier Two and 8,684,105 in Tier Three. Under the new tiers as of December 3rd, a mere 713,573 people will be in Tier One, 32,226,170 in Tier Two and 23,347,218 in Tier Three. This is a huge change. It also means that if a spike in new cases were to force London upwards into Tier Three, the majority of England would be there.

A comparatively liberal aspect to this structure is that tiers are reviewed every 14 days (although there is some uncertainty as to whether weekly reviews might in some special cases be conducted after Christmas). This is unlikely to mean that large numbers of places will secure fewer restrictions soon. The Plan makes that plain as it observes:

“However, as prevalence remains high it is likely that it will be longer before many places move down tiers.”

All the indicators are that almost all of the movement which might occur in the next one to two months is more likely to involve an upward shift than a downward one. That will be especially true in January once the extent of any increase in cases in the aftermath of the comparative relaxation of the rules over the Christmas break has been assessed.

Timetable.

In another departure from the first attempt at regional tiers, which promised regular reviews but with no explicit termination date, the Winter Plan sets the end of March as its deadline. This has led to much media discussion of a return to normality “by Easter”. This is, in fact, something of an exaggeration as to what ministers are actually saying. The Prime Minister in his foreword to the Winter Plan writes that “By the Spring, these advances should reduce the need for economic and social restrictions” which is quite a long way short of suggesting a return to pre-COVID England by Easter Monday. In his testimony to a joint session of the House of Commons Health and Social Care Select Committee and its Science and Technology counterpart, Matt Hancock, the Health Secretary, was asked directly whether life would be “back to normal after Easter” and replied that “we think we will be getting back to normal”. If Rishi Sunak believed that we would really be returning to normal by Easter, why would his Comprehensive Spending Review on Wednesday include an extra £55 billion in coronavirus related expenditure for 2021/2022 on top of the astronomical sums that will end up deployed in 2020/2021?

This reflects the reality that there is still an awful lot that ministers do not yet know which will have an impact on any timetable. These include the most important practical issues which surround the time at which vaccines are approved and the speed at which they can be manufactured at scale and whether the one or more of them that are finally selected make distribution more or less complicated. They also involve more seemingly mundane elements such as the weather. To what extent is whether it is unusually harsh or mild of consequence? One of the ironies of a mass vaccination campaign is that it will require large numbers of people to venture out of their homes and so risk a degree of contact with other households, which in all other circumstances ministers would be discouraging. In the short-term, this could enhance the spread of the virus leading to more new cases before the benefits of vaccination can assert themselves. What is being planned is vastly larger than the annual flu vaccination effort and much harder to model. Ministers need a large percentage of adults to agree to be vaccinated not once but twice if it is to have the totally transformative impact that it should be capable of recording.

This is but just one domain in which the degree of compliance is fundamental. Ministers must be privately hoping that they are awarded some credit by the public for offering them a form of Christmas celebration this year, but that a substantial number of people do not choose to exercise it and stay within their own household. This would limit what will be an unavoidable increase in new cases in early January. They must also be aware that the single most important restriction in both Tier Two and Tier Three, that of no indoor meetings across households (except at Christmas), is also the one that in practical terms is the hardest to enforce. Will it be respected? Even minor violations of it will have consequences. Yet this is a really, really hard ask, particularly in the depths of Winter.

The level of self-isolation is also difficult to be confident about bar a transition to a Stasi society. There have been multiple studies conducted which attempt to estimate the proportion of people asked to self-isolate either through the Track and Trace system or the NHS App who do. One of them, from King's College, London put it at just a quarter.

The offer of regular testing as an alternative to self-isolation might not be that appealing to those who either do not feel ill, or do not want to have to take time off work or their responsibilities to others in their household. This is a net with some very wide holes in it. There is already plenty of polling evidence that the young (those aged 18 to 24) are the

most irritated with all the restrictions that have changed their lives for the worse and convincing them not to find a means of meeting up with each other in their homes might again prove a challenge. Whether in Tier Two areas moving the time at which pubs and restaurants are obliged to close from 10pm to 11pm actually means, as ministers claim, that there will be a more orderly process of departure from those establishments with less mixing in the streets subsequently is debateable. It could instead simply shift that tendency to congregate back an hour and with a set of people with an extra 60 minutes of alcohol inside them. The Police will not be looking forward to having to deal with this.

This risk of decreasing compliance centred on the young may well be amplified once vaccination begins and creates a sense that “normal” is more imminent than it really is. Keeping the R number below one on a sustained basis and also implementing a mass vaccination campaign will be astonishingly difficult. In the worse case situation, although it would amount to a massive policy reversal, neither a new super-restrictive Tier Four nor a third national lockdown in England could sensibly be discounted as possibilities.

They are not, though, anything close to inevitable and there is a more optimistic option. The best case scenario, if compliance is high and the vaccination process is fast, is that by March a very significant number of regions would see a downward shift in tiers and as the proportion of the whole public that has been vaccinated increases, the restrictions that apply within those tiers could ease. Advances in vaccination also opens the door to a revival of business and leisure travel. Mass testing appears to have had a sizeable impact in the pilot study in Liverpool with the new case rate there falling dramatically even though the numbers tested fell well short of the majority of adults in that city. This is because those whom it was the most important to test (because they were potentially vulnerable) were much more likely to come forward and volunteer to be tested. If true on a wider scale, then the impact of mass testing in Tier Three areas may be immense.

The missing chapter in the Winter Plan is the one for what comes after it is supposed to finish. There must be a high probability that the likes of social distancing, facemasks and isolation in the event of symptoms continues for a while after April 1 as society seeks to manage the transition from virus to vaccine. This would constitute a form of transition period. Truly “normal” by Easter? Probably not. By Whitsun would be an achievement.

Tim Hames

Senior Adviser

Strategic Communications

Tim.Hames@FTIConsulting.com



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