



# COVID-19

## UK Political Analysis

By Tim Hames, Senior Adviser | 6<sup>th</sup> November 2020



### [Lockdown II. December 2nd may prove to be an optimistic exit date.](#)

What a week. If a return to a form of lockdown in England for four long weeks was not enough by itself, a bitter, close and disputed US presidential election is there too. With continued speculation as to what might or might not emerge in a EU-UK Brexit deal, this month may prove to be, even by recent standards, one of the most dramatic in the realm of politics ever witnessed. The bars and pubs may be shut but it is not as if there is a risk of there being a shortage of subjects for conversation to pass the time away.

The past seven days have also been a reminder of the sheer speed of events in the COVID-19 era. At about the time that this FTI Analysis was published last week, Cabinet members were still addressing the airwaves and insisting that it was the Government's firm intention to stick with the three tier system it had devised relatively recently. Wales and Northern Ireland were welcome to experiment with "fire breaks" and "circuit breaks" if they so wished but that would not be the path chosen in London for England. Within a matter of hours the position was changing and so dramatically as to render the term "U-Turn" inadequate for the extent and scale of the repositioning involved. By a little later that night, someone well informed had briefed sections of the media as to what would happen in terms of a lockdown in the week afterwards. It was all over the news like a rash on the Saturday morning. The notion of neither confirming or denying it until the House of Commons met on the Monday afternoon was clearly not credible. As a

consequence of the leak a somewhat shambolic Saturday press conference occurred. It is probably fair to conclude that this was not a 24-hour period to inspire much confidence.

So where next in this extraordinary saga and will Lockdown II end on December 2nd?

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- The critical factor in triggering the reversal of policy in England was the evidence that the daily figure for new infection cases was substantially underestimating the actual number of individuals with the virus and hence previous assumptions about what levels of hospital admissions and deaths would take place when also did not reflect the real situation. Bar “let it rip”, lockdown was the only option.
- It would be a surprise if the measures introduced from yesterday did not have a significant impact on the reproduction number over the course of November.
- For a host of reasons to be set out here, the notion that the lockdown will end on December 2nd as intended, while not impossible, is at the optimistic end of the spectrum. It would take considerable fortune to be able to achieve this.
- A delay of at least one week and quite possibly up to a fortnight is plausible.
- It would be politically and practically disastrous if Lockdown II in England were to extend beyond mid-December as that would imperil the Christmas season.
- What ministers have less idea of now is what sort of regionally tiered system they would seek to implement after a short interlude in the second half of December. If the virus has not been brought under control it is conceivable that much of England would leave Lockdown II only to find themselves either in the old Tier Three or even a new Tier Four which would differ little to a lockdown. In the very worst case scenario, a full-blown Lockdown III could still be required.
- The ultimate decisions as to what comes after Lockdown II when it does end will be strongly influenced by the efforts at mass community testing about to have their initial trial in Liverpool, the effectiveness of new treatments in shortening the time of hospital admission and death rates and the exact arrival of a vaccine. It would take considerable progress in this regard to be witnessed very quickly for an instant switch from a lockdown to a notably more permissive regime by December 2nd to be a viable outcome for ministers to be confident of taking.

## Why policy shifted.

To observe that many senior members of the Government and most Conservative MPs have little enthusiasm for the direction that they have been compelled to adopt would be a very considerable understatement indeed. Ministers are well aware that public faith in their handling of the virus crisis has eroded considerably since September and many are convinced that they have handed Sir Keir Starmer and Labour a major political victory. This outcome has severe consequences for the Treasury which is why the Chancellor fought to the last to avoid it and the inevitable extension of the furlough scheme that he has set out. Far more Conservative MPs fundamentally disagree with the strategy that their own leadership has adopted than the 34 who openly rebelled against it in the vote held in the House of Commons. This is reinforced by the fact that many of these MPs represent constituencies in the East, South East and South West of England that have moved straight from the fairly mild Tier One status into a new lockdown.

Why then did policy shift so abruptly? Not for the first time in this whole episode it was due to the sudden arrival of radically different data. Even ten days ago, ministers were taking some comfort from the fact that although the numbers of new cases was high, it appeared to have stabilised at about 20,000-25,000 on the basis of the figures that have been released on a daily basis. That was a tally which was just about compatible with the regional tiered approach, albeit one that was likely to see London move into Tier Three in short order. It thus had some strong implications for the hospitality sector but it did not appear that a much wider swathe of non-essential retail would have to shut up shop. It was also the case that the R number of England had nudged down from the edge of 1.5 to 1.1 to 1.3 over the previous two weeks which could be taken as proof of progress.

At the end of last week, however, a series of studies which involve the random testing of the population indicated that the daily numbers were a major misestimate of the actual situation. The Office of National Statistics (ONS) survey suggested the real figure was about double the normal daily number as of late October and the Imperial College, London's research suggested there could well be up to four times as many people who were becoming infected on a daily basis. In both cases, the explanation of what looks like a very substantial discrepancy indeed was due to the very large proportion of people who had contracted the virus but were asymptomatic and hence were not in a state of

self-isolation but operating conventionally in the community and spreading the virus. If these were the real daily case numbers, then moving the R number down by 0.1 on a weekly basis until the range eventually fell entirely below 1 was far too slow a rate of change. The sheer overall numbers would work their way through into a steep rise in the total of hospital admissions and in every instance of every model the number of deaths anticipated would exceed that of the first wave and this was unacceptable. The only policy question outstanding was not lockdown itself but choosing a date to exit it.

## **Will Lockdown II end on December 2nd as currently scheduled?**

It would be very surprising indeed if the latest lockdown did not have a significant impact on the R number during the course of November. The number of 'contact points' that the typical individual or household will have will fall sharply given the extreme limitation on other people that they are legally obliged to meet (and only in a public space) and the absence of the opportunity either to engage in shopping for non-essential items or in more social circumstances. Although compliance will be more challenging than it was in March and April, there is initial opinion polling evidence to indicate that there is strong public support for the new restrictions (even if the same surveys suggest a diminished confidence in the capacity of ministers to handle the crisis competently). All in all, it is reasonable to assume that lockdown will achieve its primary purpose, namely to reduce the R number at a faster rate than the previous localised tier system would have done.

Whether it can do it by December 2nd as targeted is a far more nuanced question to ask.

It is not impossible, but it would need the least pessimistic of the various models that were put in front of the Prime Minister last Friday afternoon to be right, a very high level of compliance with the lockdown akin to that seen back in March/April and some luck.

There are host of reasons to be sceptical as whether December 2nd will be exit day.

The first is experience from the first lockdown. This was to be reviewed after an even shorter three week period. It was extended for an additional three weeks without any softening of the restrictions. The two situations are not completely comparable. Back in

March there was less information available about the virus or the numbers who had it. It took time, nevertheless, for the lockdown to make a serious impact on the R number.

The second is that in the very short term, the awareness that lockdown was about to come in (which for anyone alert to the news was a full five days from the morning of last Saturday to the close of business on Wednesday) may well have had an adverse effect of infection case numbers and transmission as households headed out to acquire supplies or went out for a final restaurant meal or drink in the local pub before lockdown came in. It was to shorten that surge in activity while allowing the public enough time to prepare that the original scheme had been to keep the switch in policy secret until the Monday afternoon and then allow a little over 48 hours before the proposals were imposed. Matters may thus have got somewhat worse before lockdown can make them better. The pictures of vast traffic jams on Wednesday as thousands of people appeared to be leaving London for alternative locations in which to sit out lockdown will not have been welcomed by the Chief Scientific Adviser or the Chief Medical Officer for England.

The third is that this time schools are to stay open and universities switch to on-line education. There are noble reasons for both courses of action but they will push back against reducing the R number in that some teaching staff will catch the virus from the children who they are seeking to educate and there will be plenty of students who will have returned home to endure lockdown in more spacious domestic circumstances with the strong chance that they will be bringing the virus with them as they opt to return.

The fourth is that it is not enough simply to get the R number below one as a national average. There has to be some space to allow for it to rise again as lockdown is lifted. This means that ideally for every region in England, the R number needs to be securely estimated at around 0.7 or so if lockdown is to be as productive a weapon as it should be. Managing that in about a month, when allowing for the previous factors cited, is not impossible admittedly, but it would be a very sizable reduction in quite a short time.

Finally, the timing of when reliable data arrives for ministers and officials is crucial. The daily estimates for the number of new infections now have to be considered with some suspicion. Even the daily estimates for hospital admissions and deaths are not perfect. The variables that will matter the most are the ONS data based on their sampling, the

weekly assessment of the R number made by a sub-section of SAGE and the likes of the Imperial College, London study and they all appear to become available on a Friday. So to be confident of lifting the lockdown on Wednesday December 2nd as is the official target, one would have to be confident that a sufficient reduction in the R number had taken place by Friday November 27th, namely three weeks today. That looks very tight.

There will be a strong case for caution unless the R number moves with unexpected force in the right direction over the next two weeks. To lift the lockdown at the very start of December and then face an adverse movement in the R number and scientific advice that tougher measures need to be reintroduced would be a political catastrophe. The chance of what would doubtless be portrayed as one last push to allow for a Christmas season that had some semblance of orthodoxy to it by deferring the end of lockdown by 7-14 days or, to preserve the illusion of maintaining the original timetable, moving the country out of lockdown but into a Tier Four that looked a lot like lockdown is sizeable. In either scenario, the Government would need to go back to the House of Commons for legislative approval for, as the law stands, lockdown ends on December 2nd. This is not, in practice, a huge obstacle for ministers. Labour is likely to continue to prioritise public health over short-term economic considerations. There would be a larger revolt among Conservative MPs but not enough to threaten the Government's new set of proposals. Business would certainly be wise to allow for an additional stretch in their planning.

## **And then what next?**

There are a variety of possibilities and many will stay in play right up to December 2nd.

The absolute best case outcome for ministers is that they are able to exit lockdown on the existing timetable and move back to a regional tiered structure that was identical to the one which they have been forced to suspend this week. That would return to being the new normal. This would allow non-essential retail to re-open and for the hospitality sector to function albeit under constrained conditions. There would then be a short-term liberalisation of the rules for a four to seven day period around Christmas Day itself with the "Rule of Six" being temporarily replaced by a larger number which would allow for a degree of interaction across households, but that would end before New Year's Day with specific rules to prevent New Year's Eve becoming a mass-superspreader occasion. The

local tiered system would then be resumed in January with the ambition that it would be wound down steadily over the next three months and largely disappear by mid-March.

As outlined above, this may well prove too optimistic. Either lockdown would continue in its current manifestation for an additional week or two, or it would be downgraded only slightly to a de facto new Tier Four which most if not all England would have to follow. Only after that (mid-December) might measures be eased in advance of a short respite for Christmas. Whether this was followed by a resumption of Tier Four (implying that most of the hospitality sector was effectively out of action again) or a full return to the previous three tier system would very much depend on events and the state of the NHS.

The worse case scenario is very bleak. It would suggest that a Lockdown II or Tier Four continued right up to the very beginning of the Christmas break, that the easing of restrictions was very modest indeed (for instance, some household interaction but no overnight stays) and that what was in effect a Lockdown III came in before New Year. This is not the most probable outcome, but it certainly cannot be dismissed as of now.

Where we will end up will depend on a set of factors that are directly related to the virus itself and others which are more independent in character. The core factors central to the virus itself are familiar ones. They include whether testing can be increased in both scale and speed of results to a transformational degree. The experiment which has been announced for the city of Liverpool is hence of considerable importance in this regard. The success of similar efforts in China is being studied closely for its applications here. A further area of investigation is the extent to which innovations in the treatment of the virus mean that average time spent in hospital decreases and the death rate declines.

The final and most important element, as it has been throughout the crisis, is the timing of the arrival of a vaccine and the extent to which the character of that vaccine makes a mass vaccination campaign more or less complicated in practice. There is plainly some optimism at the top of the NHS, expressed publicly by the head of the NHS in England, Sir Simon Stevens, that there might be scope for vaccinating key health workers in 2020. This would be followed by vaccinating the most vulnerable in society after that with a full mass vaccination campaign to follow through the first three months of the next year. If so, the restrictions associated with the local tiered approach could be steadily eased.

Then there are more independent elements. The first is how intense the winter influenza season is this time round and whether the attempt to encourage more flu vaccination is effective. The NHS desperately wants to avoid fighting a war on two fronts especially as the symptoms of COVID-19 and influenza can be so similar. The second is how cold and wet the next four months prove to be and what effect that has on virus transmission. The third is whether yet more new academic research challenges the new orthodoxy and if so in what direction. There are many such studies and models now being undertaken.

As far as November is concerned, the die is cast. It will be lost to lockdown in England. Ministers and officials privately appreciate that the first fortnight in December might have to be conceded as well. The real focus is on what January 2021 might look like.

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