



COVID-19

UK Political Analysis

By Tim Hames, Senior Adviser | 15th January 2021



Tougher Times? Options if Ministers feel the lockdown must tighten.

About ten days into Lockdown III and the debate within the scientific community at least is less about the date at which restrictions might be eased but instead whether and to what extent they should be tightened in the weeks ahead. Scotland has announced steps in this direction. The numbers of new cases, hospital admissions and deaths are now considerably higher than was believed to be true for March/April last year and are still rising in some places. By next week, the political and public debate about whether the lockdown in England needs to be tougher might intensify. The Home Secretary appeared to concede that possibility in an interview (although she may not have meant to do so).

The level of public compliance this time when compared with the first lockdown has clearly disturbed ministers and officials. All of the available measures, such as the Google and Apple mobility statistics and the numbers on public transport, show more activity now than then. In fairness to the population, the rules as they stand today, while more restrictive than those of last November, are different and softer to those of March 2020 and the psychology of fear that existed when the virus first surfaced is not the same now that our society has spent the better part of a year having to adapt to the outbreak. The question for those who set policy is, therefore, whether simply urging people to be more cautious within the rules is enough, or whether the restrictions have to be changed.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Ministers are attempting to deal with three distinct but interlinked challenges at the same time. The first is how to limit the damage of the surge in pre-lockdown infection rates, driven by the new strain of the virus, and avoid a constriction in the capacity of the NHS that leads to avoidable deaths from non-COVID sources. The second is to drive the post-lockdown reproduction number firmly down. The third is to conduct a vaccination campaign of unprecedented speed focused on those who would be most at risk of death if they were to contract the virus. There is an element of competition for resources between these objectives.
- There are a number of factors which complicate making an assessment of whether existing measures are enough by themselves to make a sufficient impact on the reproduction number, or would be if compliance with these current rules were stronger, or if it is unavoidable that tougher restrictions will soon come in. By next week, the trend in the data should make matters somewhat clearer.
- There are an array of options available if restrictions were to be strengthened. The difficulty is that the possibilities which would probably have the most forceful impact on the R number are also those which involve the highest level of disruption on society and especially on the economy. The extent to which ministers believe that their ambitious targets for vaccination can be met will be the decisive element in determining what new restrictions, if any, are adopted.

The policy challenges.

What might look like one or two different health policy challenges at the moment are, in fact, much closer to three distinct but interlinked challenges being faced simultaneously.

The first is how to deal with a major surge in new infections which emerged in December largely due to the new variation of the virus and which are now still powering their way through the system as admissions into hospitals and ultimately deaths. The imposition of lockdown cannot stop this wave. We may be close to what will prove the overall peak for hospital admissions nationally, but could still be up to two weeks short of that point. It is unlikely that the peak will be reached for deaths until next month. The policy need is

to manage the supply of provision within the NHS during this immensely difficult period and to minimise the number of virus fatalities via new drug treatments for patients.

The second, and the focus of this FTI Analysis, is how to force the reproduction number down during this lockdown. The success or failure of that enterprise will determine how many people who are at most risk of mortal danger from the virus if they acquire it die either before they can be vaccinated or after vaccination but before immunity begins. As 88% of those in the top four priority groups for vaccination are in the “very highest risk” camp, and 99% of those in the top nine priority group are in this category, the extent to which the reproduction number can be suppressed over the next six to eight weeks will in all probability be fundamental in determining the overall tally of deaths in this crisis.

Finally, there is the vaccination drive itself where not only the speed at which injections occur but the participation rate amongst the key four priority groups, and then the five groups that follow thereafter, and other currently unknown factors (notably the degree to which the vaccine bars transmission to others as well as provides personal protection) will eventually be the most important factor in when UK society and its economy reopen.

While the ends here (fewer pre-lockdown deaths, fewer post-lockdown infections and then deaths and establishing the conditions for an earlier rather than later return to near-normality) are manifestly not in conflict with one another but complementary, the means can have an element of resource competition to them. To take one example, is the best use of military drivers in supplementing the ambulance service right now, or in reinforcing the police in terms of lockdown compliance, or moving people to vaccines? The current situation is so difficult because these three challenges are confronting the country at the same time and at the worst possible part of the year in terms of the crisis. The first of them (the pre-lockdown spike in cases) should not be a factor by March. All then depends on how the other two elements (the R number and vaccination) then play out.

The complications in assessing the R number across England (and the whole UK).

Deciding whether the existing restrictions imposed for Lockdown III either are robust enough to exercise a sufficient influence on the reproduction number, or would be if compliance were somewhat stronger, is far from a straightforward exercise. This is especially true at the moment when we are less than two weeks into Lockdown III. These complexities explain why ministers have been cautious about how best to proceed.

There are multiple considerations at work here but three are of notable significance.

The first is the legacy of the regional tiering system. Different parts of the country either stayed in tier two for longer, moved to tier three earlier, or were moved to tier four just before or just after Christmas Day, before being aligned in a single set of lockdown rules. This means, at least in the short-term, that regional reproduction numbers may be prone to more variation in the national snapshot figure released weekly than would have been the case otherwise and deciding what the national picture really is may be rather harder. These legacy differences should iron themselves out after a few weeks of Lockdown III.

The second is that the new variant of the virus started out with a very distinct regional bias – located overwhelmingly in London, the South East and Eastern England – but has since shifted out, to a varying rather than a consistent extent, to the rest of the country. Working out what part of the movement in the R number is due to an upwards pressure thanks to the new variant or downwards pressure due to lockdown compliance is tricky.

The third is continued scientific debate and uncertainty as to the extent to which the new strain of the virus is more transmissible than the conventional version. There are some experts who now think that it is at the lower end of the widely cited 30%-70% more transmissible range, while others continue to put this figure at the higher end. If it is less transmissible than the consensus view of two weeks ago, is that because the first estimate was an exaggeration or because human bodies have become better at spotting and resisting the new strain as it has become the dominant form of the virus? Deciding how much extra transmission is out there is vital to determining lockdown measures.

There is a wide range of options for tightening the rules with different side-effects.

There is a wide range of options for tightening the rules if England were to follow after Scotland in doing so (although some of the new rules north of the border will act to align policy with London, rather than blaze a far tougher trail). The more incremental of these measures would be aimed at ensuring that those who are already based at home and/or working from home remain indoors for longer. The more fundamental of them would aspire to oblige substantial numbers of people who are still travelling out to work to abandon that activity and relocate themselves at home for the duration of lockdown.

The most narrowly targeted measures, even if at one level they might sound draconian, would involve putting a fixed limit on the amount of time spent outside of the home, and/or reducing the number of days per week this could be undertaken from seven, and/or being more specific about the definition of acceptable non-essential local travel, and/or ending the present arrangement where it is permissible to meet a single other individual while undertaking exercise. This could be combined with more intensive use of facemasks outdoors, moving social distancing beyond two metres, and eliminating some incentives to venture out by, for instance, banning the provision of take-away coffees. A more hardline extension of this approach would involve compelling all shops, including supermarkets, to close earlier than they do today and thus imposing a de facto curfew.

It is entirely possible that the list above will be cherry-picked but it comes with problems. Many of the propositions (limits on time outside and enhanced social distancing) are very hard to police in practice. Many would be resented and increase resistance to the rules. Others could be counter-productive (the same number of people in supermarkets in a smaller number of hours might assist the spread of the virus, not act to reduce it).

Even without these objections, the downside is that all these measures combined would not have a dramatic impact on the R number. They do not increase the number of people who are staying home, they just keep them at home, perhaps just a little longer. On their own, they would only be worth doing if the R number was thought to be very close to 1 and that a package of adjustments of this sort would serve to push it below that line.

Otherwise, different sorts of measures would be needed which all but compelled some of those currently leaving the home during the day to no longer do so. Closing nurseries would achieve that. So would changing the criteria for children allowed at primary school as the offspring of key workers so that pupil numbers approached the lows of last March.

Similarly strong initiatives could occur in the economic sphere. The definition of essential retail could be revisited. The rules around click-and-collect could well be more restrictive. A new distinction, perhaps only for two or three weeks until vaccination levels are much higher, could be made between essential and non-essential manufacturing, production and construction. Everything in this set would increase the numbers at home full-time.

They would also be highly disruptive socially (in the case of nurseries and schools), have a pronounced impact on the economy and involve another hit for Her Majesty's Treasury as employees and employers alike sought compensation for lost wages and lost business. Yet the "danger zone" of a coming few weeks of too many new cases in the community before the effect of vaccination and immunisation of the vulnerable enters the equation is such that it would be a brave figure who discounted the chances of tougher measures. Not for the first time, ministers and officials find themselves a prisoner of the R number.

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