

Covid-19 in the UK: Assessing the Government's Post- Lockdown Preparedness

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Introduction

The UK has been one of the worst-hit countries by the novel Coronavirus (Covid-19). The UK currently has the highest official death toll in Europe. There are now more than 200,000 confirmed Covid-19 cases in the UK and more than 35,000 people have died.

The number of new cases in several European countries has dropped and countries such as Germany, Italy and Spain have all announced that they are beginning to ease some restrictions. The number of registered deaths in hospitals, care homes and the community has also been on a downward trend in the UK. Although, the numbers of Covid-19 deaths are in the UK decline, the death toll is still much higher than in Germany, France, Italy and Spain (Giles, 2020).

As the UK economy is heading for the biggest economic contraction in more than three centuries (Riley, 2020), there are growing concerns about the economic impact of lockdown within the government and calls for easing the lockdown continue to grow. Prime Minister Boris Johnson has been under pressure by some of the members of the Conservative party as well as from some Cabinet members to ease the lockdown.

In a televised address to the nation, Johnson announced a modest easing of the country's lockdown on 10 May. The Prime Minister said that as a result of the decline in Coronavirus-related deaths alongside reduced numbers of hospital admissions, his government is now able to make some changes to country's lockdown measures. He encouraged those in England who are una-

ble to work from home, including factory and construction workers, to return to work. The Prime Minister also outlined his government's road map for further lifting restrictions in the coming months.

This paper analyses whether the UK is ready for post-lockdown and argues that there are several challenges to both lifting as well as easing the lockdown. These challenges include a lack of testing, lack of PPEs and the possibility of a second wave.

The UK does not currently possess enough testing capacity to test those who might be infected and trace anyone with whom they have come into contact. With the ease of lockdown, people will require PPEs at places where social distancing is not possible. In the absence of adequate PPEs, people will increase their likelihood of being exposed to the virus.

This paper argues that easing lockdown without proper implementation of testing, contact tracing and adequate PPEs may trigger the expected second wave of the Coronavirus outbreak and may lead to the death of thousands of more people and the collapse of the NHS.

The first section summarises the range of measures the government has put in place to support the lockdown. The second section assesses the government's lockdown strategy. The third section discusses the challenges that the government is facing; lack of testing, lack of PPEs and the possibility of a second wave. Finally, it suggests possible strategies the government may pursue in the post-lockdown period.

The UK's Lockdown Timeline

Unlike other European countries that took more strict measures and imposed lockdowns soon after their first cases, the UK announced its lockdown relatively late. Following the first confirmed cases of Covid-19 in the UK on 29 January, the government's top scientists believed that it was too soon to impose severe restrictions (BBC News, 2020).

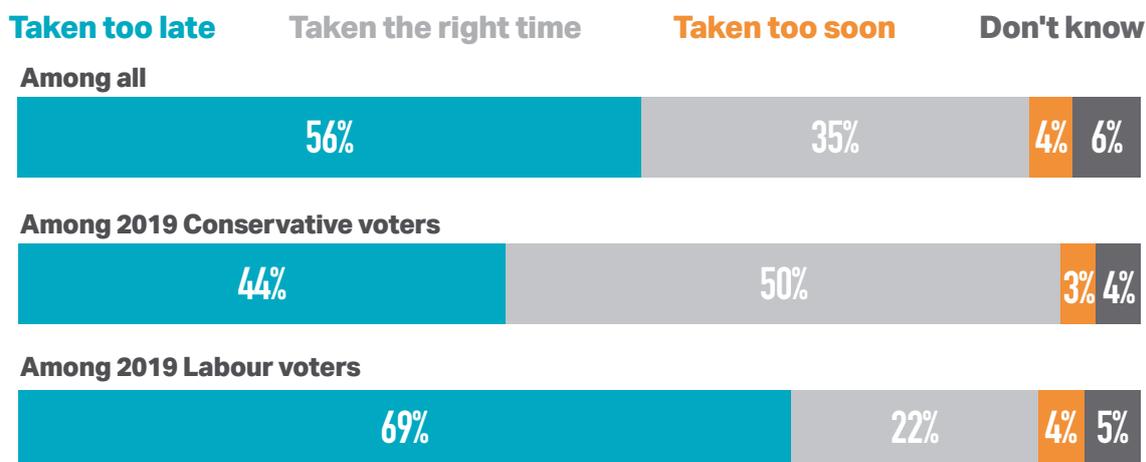
Although, the UK government disputes that herd immunity was ever an official policy, the UK's chief scientific adviser, Sir Patrick Vallance, initially spoke of how the government's approach was aimed at broadening the peak of the pandemic and allowing immunity to build up among the population. Nevertheless, the government gave up on that approach after expert advisers warned that a more relaxed course of action could bring about 250,000 deaths (Smith, 2020). Although, the UK's first confirmed case of Coronavirus came in late January 2020, the early measures the government adopted to limit the spread of the virus were based on merely advising people to stay home and self-isolate if they develop any Covid-19 symptoms.

In the face of the rapid and uncontrolled spread of the Coronavirus, the government had little choice but to impose a lockdown on 23 March. The resulting lockdown include stay-at-home orders, with the exception of the acquisition of basic necessities. Originally scheduled to end on 16 April, the lockdown was subsequently extended for another 3 weeks.

The government's late response to the threat has been the point of criticism by many. Over half of the UK public think the government acted too late. The majority of the public believe that the UK's response appeared to be lagging behind that of other European countries, which had imposed tighter restrictions. An Ipsos MORI poll, carried out online among 18-75-year-olds between 27-30 March, has shown that 56% of people believe that the Government enforcement of social distancing measures were taken too late, while only 4% of people felt that they were taken too soon (Beaver, 2020).

Government measures in response to Coronavirus

On Monday, 23 March the government announced stricter measures, including requiring individuals to stay at home and closing shops selling non-essential items in order to contain the outbreak of the coronavirus. Do you think these measures by the government were taken too soon, too late, or at the right time?



Base: 1,072 Online British adults 18+, 2019 Labour voters (302), Conservative voters (314), 27-30 March 2020.

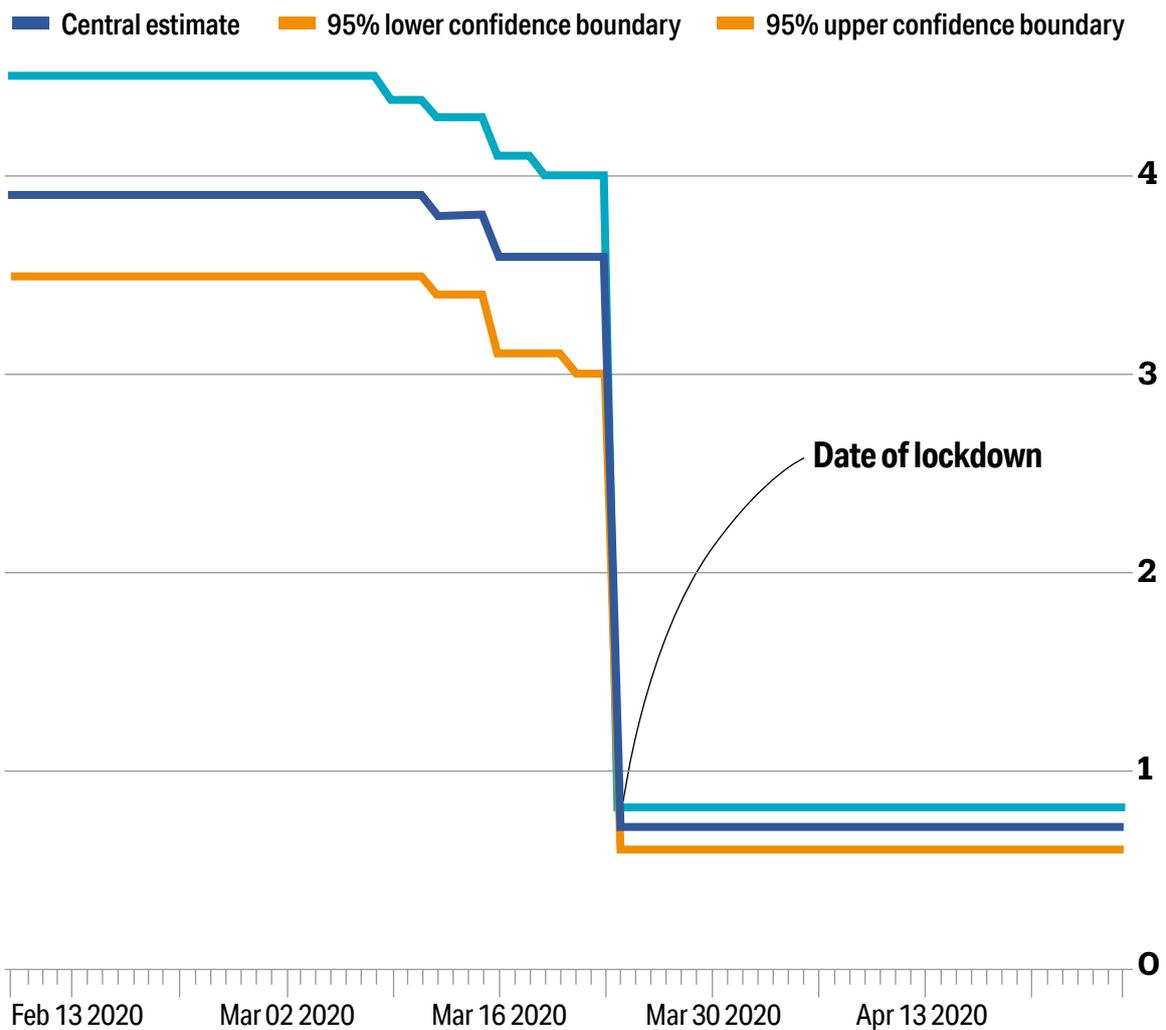
Source: Ipsos - Coronavirus polling - March 2020

- On 16 March, the Prime Minister first advised against mass gatherings, non-essential travel and going to pubs and restaurants, and encouraged everyone to work from home where possible.
- On 20 March, governments across the UK closed schools and ordered restaurants, pubs and other businesses to shut their doors.

- On 23 March, the prime minister announced a full lockdown, enforceable by law. The powers to enforce it were introduced three days later.
- On 16 April, the government announced that the lockdown would be extended for at least another three weeks.

The lockdown was decisive in limiting the spread of coronavirus

Reproductive rate of the virus in the UK



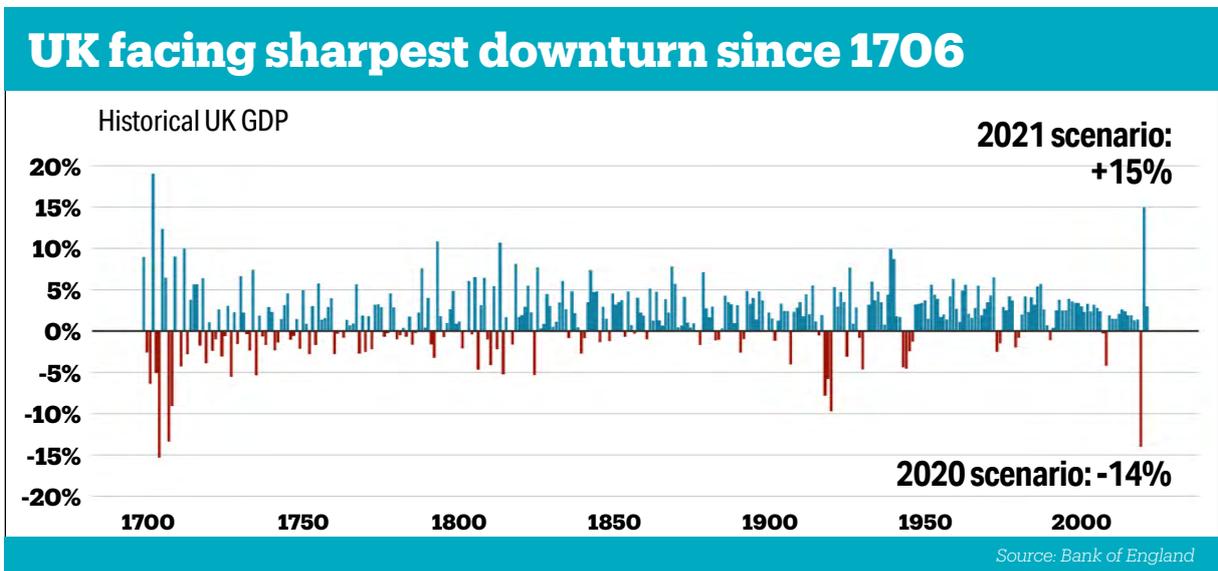
Source: Imperial College - FT



The Government's Lockdown Strategy

Boris Johnson's cabinet seems to be split between those who favour ending the lockdown early and those who want to take a more cautious approach. While Chancellor Rishi Sunak, Cabinet Office minister Michael Gove and trade secretary Liz Truss have all raised concern about the impact of an extended lockdown on the economy, Health Secretary Matt Hancock supports a lockdown extension. The government has also been under pressure by some business circles and Conservative Party aides to ease the lockdown.

The Bank of England said if the lockdown extended to June or July, the economic cost will be extremely high. The governor of Bank of England, Andrew Bailey, has said the economy could shrink by as much as 35% in the second quarter if the lockdown measures continue (Fidler, 2020). According to the Office for Budget Responsibility (OBR), every extra month of lockdown will mean an extra £35bn to £45bn in borrowing (Fidler, 2020).



Easing the economic and social restrictions may indeed produce economic benefits but it also poses risks for a potential increase in the number of deaths from Coronavirus. The government earlier has set out five 'tests' for starting to lift the lockdown, these are;

To make sure the NHS can cope by providing sufficient critical care across the UK,

To see a sustained and consistent fall in daily death rates with confidence the UK is beyond the peak

Reliable data to show the infection rate is falling to manageable levels

There is enough testing and personal protective equipment (PPE) to meet future demand

Any changes in restrictions would not lead to a second peak

The government has said it can only consider easing the lockdown once the country has passed all five tests.

However, according to Professor Jonathan Van-Tam, the deputy chief medical officer for England, the UK has only passed two of the government's five key tests before the lockdown can be eased. Professor Van-Tam has also added that "there remained challenges to be overcome before the tick list could be completed" (Tapsfield & Wilcock, 2020). According to experts in health and economics, the UK has not yet met the five tests set out for easing Coronavirus lockdown, suggesting ministers will have to take a cautious approach to any relaxation in the coming weeks (Giles, 2020).

The lockdown has also received overwhelming public support. According to a YouGov poll of 3,430 people: 91% of Britons said they support the three-week extension (Mayes, 2020). After seven weeks of lockdown, Prime Minister Boris Johnson has announced that the government is planning to implement its lockdown exit plan in three phases. The first phase of the country's response to the pandemic includes a new set of rules for UK's lockdown exit strategy. These are as follows:

■ **Work:** Public encouraged to return to work if they cannot work from home.

■ **Exercise:** "Unlimited amounts" are permitted - not just once a day.

■ **Possible to meet with a friend:** Sitting in the park, including sunbathing

■ Driving to places such as parks or beaches is also allowed for outdoor activity.

■ Playing outdoor sport is permitted with members of the same household. Tennis courts and golf clubs can reopen, so long as social distancing measures are enforced. Other permitted activities include water sports and angling.

The second phase could see some shops and primary schools reopen from 1 June.

The third phase could see some cafes, restaurants and public spaces reopen from the beginning of July.

Opposition politicians and labour unions accused the government of causing confusion with mixed messaging and putting the health of workers at risk. Labour Party leader Keir Starmer said the Prime Minister's statement was confusing. "What the nation was looking for this evening was clarity and consensus. The truth is, the Prime Minister's statement raises more questions than it answers" (Reynolds, Picheta, Nada, & Siad, 2020).

Many analysts argue that easing the lockdown in this situation poses risks and threats to the UK. If the UK decides to ease some of the lockdown rules too soon, it risks a second wave of Coronavirus infections and a possible return to lockdown. The group of researchers from the London School of Tropical Hygiene, Imperial College London and other research groups have warned that if the UK relaxes the lockdown too soon, it could suffer more than 100,000 deaths by the end of the year (Leake, Shipman, Wright, & Lay, 2020).



(Haluk Satir- Anadolu Agency)

Lack of Testing Capacity

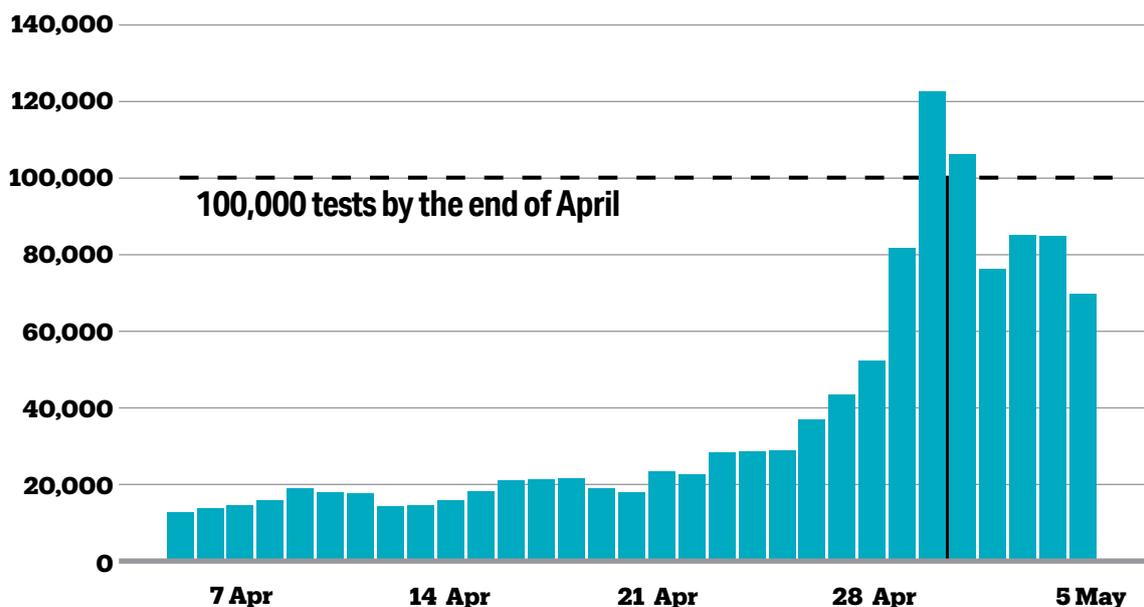
When the outbreak was first seen in the UK, the UK did not possess the resources to do mass testing. Initially, the priority for the testing was the sickest patients in hospitals, followed by emergency services staff, then other essential workers and their families. Only recently was nationwide testing made available for everyone. The lack of testing has become one of the main criticisms directed at the government in its handling of the pandemic crisis.

James Brokenshire, a Home Office minister, accepted the criticisms and acknowledged that more testing early on would have helped to better contain the virus (Mckie, Helm, & Harrison, 2020). The UK is well behind countries like Germany and South Korea in its rates of testing and compared to other smaller European countries.

Health Secretary Matt Hancock announced that the government will conduct 100,000 tests by the end of April. Although, the government has achieved its target by conducting more than 122,000 tests on 30 April, it is thought to include test kits sent to individuals or testing locations but not yet analysed or fully processed through the relevant UK labs. The government came under some criticism for including in this figure home test kits counted when they were dispatched, which might not ever be returned. Moreover, in the following days after hitting the target, the number of tests has remained below 100,000 ever since (Rowena & Campbell, 2020).

Daily Covid-19 tests in the UK

Includes tests processed in labs and kits sent to homes and test centres but not yet analysed



Date is the day tests were provided

Source: Department of Health and Social Care.

Despite government conducting nearly 100,000 tests per day, healthcare experts still consider this number as insufficient since many healthcare staff and patients with Covid-19 symptoms cannot get access to rapid tests. It also takes too long to get test results back - several days in some cases - and those most in need of regular testing, such as care home-staff are still reporting they cannot always access tests.

Dr Chaand Nagpaul, Chair of the British Medical Association Council, said the current levels of testing were not enough and there is still a long way to deliver widespread community testing (Rowena & Campbell, 2020).

Chris Hopson, the Chief Executive of NHS Providers, which represents hospital leaders, blamed the laboratory capacity constraints or testing facilities not being local enough. He said patients with Covid-19 now have to wait five days for test results to come back, which was not quick enough (Rowena & Campbell, 2020).

Dr Nagpaul also said that reaching 100,000 tests a day does not mean anything, arguing that the government should not distract itself with the use of arbitrary targets. Instead, the government should aim for effective testing with a focus on testing those who need it the most alongside contact tracing. Dr Nagpaul said "Only in this way will we have any chance of getting a grip on this pandemic and having some surety in easing the lockdown" (Rowena & Campbell, 2020).

Health Secretary Hancock has previously said that reaching the 100,000-a-day testing target would allow the implementation of the next phase of the government's strategy to "test, track and trace" potential coronavirus cases. Jill Rutter, a government expert at the UK in a Changing Europe, argued that the testing must be conducted with tracing and tracking. However, she added that "there is scepticism that such a comprehensive programme can be introduced quickly. We are talking weeks not days to get it up and running" (Giles, 2020).

Contact Tracing

Contact tracing is used to trace everyone that a Covid-19 positive individual has been in contact with. This way, it will be able to slow down the spread of infectious outbreaks. Contact tracing is done through either calling and emailing the friends and family of Coronavirus patients, or it can be implemented with a location-tracking mobile app, to pick up others they have been in contact with. Health Secretary Hancock has said that the UK will start large-scale contact tracing via a contact tracing app within weeks. On 4 May, the government announced further details of the app, which will be tested on the Isle of Wight and then launched to the rest of the UK, if it proves successful (Chowdhury, Field, & Murphy, 2020). The app is designed to inform people if they have been in close contact with someone who later reports positive for coronavirus.

However, it is much easier to implement contact tracing with fewer cases. Once the number of cases has fallen below the number that exists currently, then the chances of tracking down the Coronavirus cases will be higher. Contact tracing is only feasible with the number of lesser cases as there would be far fewer cases to deal with. The first week of May has seen around 5,000 new confirmed cases of Covid-19, far too high to allow tracing of newly infected individuals.

There is also the issue of data accuracy, which is one of the conditions for the government to lift the lockdown. The actual number of cases is estimated to be higher because testing was limited to hospital patients. According to an Institute of Government report, there is a considerable underreporting of deaths from Covid-19 outside hospitals. Deaths outside hospitals may have taken place a week or earlier in care homes, and in the community; however, they are reported much later than hospitals. Coronavirus cases outside the hospital rely on self-reporting. Therefore, there is a question as to whether the data can be trusted, as people may have incentives to both over- and under-report (Institute for Government, 2020).

Professor Martin McKee, a Professor of European Public Health, said that "we are not picking up the number of deaths in nursing homes and some studies in other countries show about a third of all deaths may be occurring there. Nor are we picking up the deaths occurring at home without testing. Professor Martin McKee said that the UK is not ready to lift lockdown yet" (Leading Britain's Conversation (LBC), 2020).

Personal Protection Equipment (PPE)

Since the crisis began in the UK, the lack of PPEs has been an important challenge for the UK to tackle the Covid-19. The government has struggled to provide frontline workers with personal protection equipment. Several reports have revealed that nurses and doctors have had to treat Covid-19 patients without protective equipment. More than 150 frontline NHS and care workers have died during the Coronavirus pandemic. PPEs are very important for frontline healthcare workers because they are more likely to be exposed to the Coronavirus patients who may have a higher viral load than an ordinary person. The UK has only

one mask manufacturer and therefore is dependent imports from an international marketplace where there is huge demand. Furthermore, there is a global shortage of PPEs, and a scramble for existing stocks and several countries have placed export bans on it.

Health Secretary Matt Hancock has said that there are around 1.6 million NHS staff across the UK in hospitals and the community. All of them need varying amounts of PPEs, depending on the type of work they do. The amount of PPEs they need each month is vast, yet this issue is far from resolved (Roberts, 2020).



(Şebnem Coşkun- Anadolu Agency)

According to the Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC), more than one billion items of PPE have been delivered across the UK (Roberts, 2020). After the Prime Minister eased the lockdown, the government urged the public to use masks in shops and on public transport to help stop the spread of the disease. However, at the moment, there are not even sufficient masks for the NHS workers; therefore, the public may find it challenging to access masks. Martin Green, Chief Executive of Care England, said the problems had not been resolved as there were still shortages of masks and gowns. He said, "We have not by any means cracked it, and it is not clear we have got a consistent PPE supply chain" (Giles, 2020).

One factor likely to delay the widespread lifting of restrictions will be the exposure of healthcare workers to the Coronavirus due to the lack of PPEs. Although, the Prime Minister said that it is vital to ensure nurses and essential workers have the protective equipment and this has to be a priority, the issue is still far from resolved.

Dame Kinnair, Royal College of Nursing Chief executive and general secretary, said that "until our members report that they are getting all they need, it is hard to see the lockdown could be relaxed further" (Mitchell, 2020).

The Possibility of Second Wave

The decline in Covid-19 cases in various countries around the world has led to the easing of lockdown measures. However, the possibility of the second wave of Coronavirus has made many European governments wary about lifting their lockdowns entirely. Unless a large proportion of the society is infected or builds herd immunity, the Covid-19 cases could easily surge.

According to some scientists, the majority of the population could develop immunity to the virus if the first wave of the outbreak spreads to a large segment of society (Lawier, 2020). However, with only less

than 5% of the UK population estimated to have been infected, that leaves more than 63 million people vulnerable to contracting the virus. Restarting life after a strict lockdown when such a small percentage of the population are immune poses risks for a rebound in transmission (Gallagher, 2020).

According to one set of modelling, only opening schools would be enough to trigger the so-called second wave (Gallagher, 2020). Because the virus remains extremely infectious, one infected person can pass it onto at least three others on average (the so-called R-number).

What is the R-Number?

The reproduction number (or R-value) describes how many people a person with Covid-19 will infect on average before any widespread immunity or attempts at immunisation are made.

According to the Centre for Evidence-Based Medicine (CEBM) at Oxford University, if the R number is greater than 1, the infection will spread exponentially. If it is lower than 1 then the infection speed will be slower and will eventually die out (ITV Report, 2020). An Imperial College London study predicted around 490,000 deaths in the UK with a model using an RO of 2.4 (ITV Report, 2020). According to the committee that channels scientific advice to the government - the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE) - the R number is currently somewhere between 0.5-0.9 (Moore, 2020). However, the R number may rise following the government's decision to ease the lockdown as there will be more people moving around, which may increase the transmission of the virus.

On 27 April, the World Health Organisation (WHO) said that governments relaxing lockdowns now face a new challenge which is to prevent a rebound in transmission. Michael Ryan, Chief Executive Director of the WHO Health Emergency Management Program, said that "I think it makes a lot of sense that if you raise this pressure too quickly, the virus can back off" (FR24 News, 2020). A new study from the University of Hong Kong focusing on social distancing restrictions and lockdown measures in China has warned that when the control measures are relaxed a second wave could begin to spread (Martin, 2020).

Professor Chris Whitty, England's Chief Medical Officer, said: "It is entirely plausible for a second wave to be more severe than the first if it is not mitigated" (ITV Report, 2020). Professor Whitty has warned the only way to ensure a return to normal would be the widespread availability of a vaccine or drug. Considering an effective vaccine is likely a year or more away from being available, the majority of the UK population will be vulnerable to infection when the lockdown is lifted and a second wave hits the country (Weiss, 2020).

Conclusion

This paper has shown that the UK is not in a position to ease the lockdown. Despite declaring that it will only ease the lockdown once the country passes the above-mentioned 'five tests', - including signs that the NHS can cope and that it has sufficient protective personal equipment (PPE); a sustained and consistent reduction in the daily death rate, and reliable data on decreasing infection rates; signs that the risk of a second peak that would overwhelm the NHS can be avoided, - which the government has proposed as a condition to ease the lockdown, the biggest obstacles seem to be the two issues the government is receiving most criticism for - testing and PPE. The government's decision to ease the lockdown restrictions could increase the risk of the virus spreading more rapidly, and killing more people. To ensure that the virus can be mitigated even as restrictions are lifted, the UK needs to ensure that there are enough PPEs for everyone, proper implementation of testing alongside robust contact tracing to avoid the risk of a 'second wave' of cases. At present, it is still far from meeting its target for processing 100,000 tests a day and is struggling to ensure health workers and the general public to have adequate supplies of PPEs.

The UK could only effectively ease the lockdown once it provides sufficient PPEs, and conducts far greater testing than it has at the moment so that new infections can be identified and isolated. Moreover, the testing has to be implemented alongside a 'test and trace' strategy so that it can identify all infected people and can trace their contacts. Lifting or relaxing the lockdown should depend on whether the virus transmission rate — known as the R-value — is reduced to a controllable level. Even so, it seems impossible to have complete assurance that there will be no risk of a resurgence of a second wave following the easing of restrictions without a vaccine or effective cure. As Devi Sridhar, Chair of Global Public Health at the University of Edinburgh, argues "Now, the main challenge facing the government is to replace this lockdown with a package of public health interventions involving mass testing, surveillance and real-time data to identify clusters of the virus and quarantine those who are infected. This will mean providing adequate PPE to those who need it, enforcing border controls and instigating a phased relaxation of social-distancing measures" (Sridhar, 2020).

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