

'This is a big moment:' UK virus restrictions escalating

September 18 2020, by Pan Pylas



People queue up outside a coronavirus testing centre offering walk-in appointments in north London, Friday Sept. 18, 2020. British Health Secretary Matt Hancock said Friday that the country has to "come together" over the coming weeks to get on top of the spike, that he noted is leading to a doubling in the number of people being hospitalized with the virus every seven to eight days. (Kirsty O'Connor/PA via AP)

Fresh nationwide lockdown restrictions in England appear to be on the cards soon as the British government targeted more areas Friday in an attempt to suppress a sharp spike in new coronavirus infections.

With more restrictions on gatherings and other activities announced for large parts of England, there is growing speculation that the U.K. may be sliding toward a lockdown by stealth in the coming weeks, partly because the testing regime is struggling to cope with higher demand. Prime Minister Boris Johnson said it's "inevitable" a second coronavirus wave would reach the nation.

"As I've said for several weeks now, that we could expect (and) are now seeing a second wave coming in," Johnson said during a visit to a vaccine manufacturing center under construction near Oxford. "We are seeing it in France, in Spain, across Europe."

Johnson's comments came amid mounting speculation that the government will announce fresh curbs on the hospitality sector, such as pubs and restaurants, potentially involving curfews—something already in place in areas facing extra lockdown restrictions.

According to the BBC, the British government's chief scientific adviser and medical officer have warned of another serious coronavirus outbreak and many more deaths by the end of October if there were no further interventions soon. Possible measures being considered under this so-called "circuit break" are asking some hospitality businesses to close, or limiting opening hours, for a period—potentially two weeks.

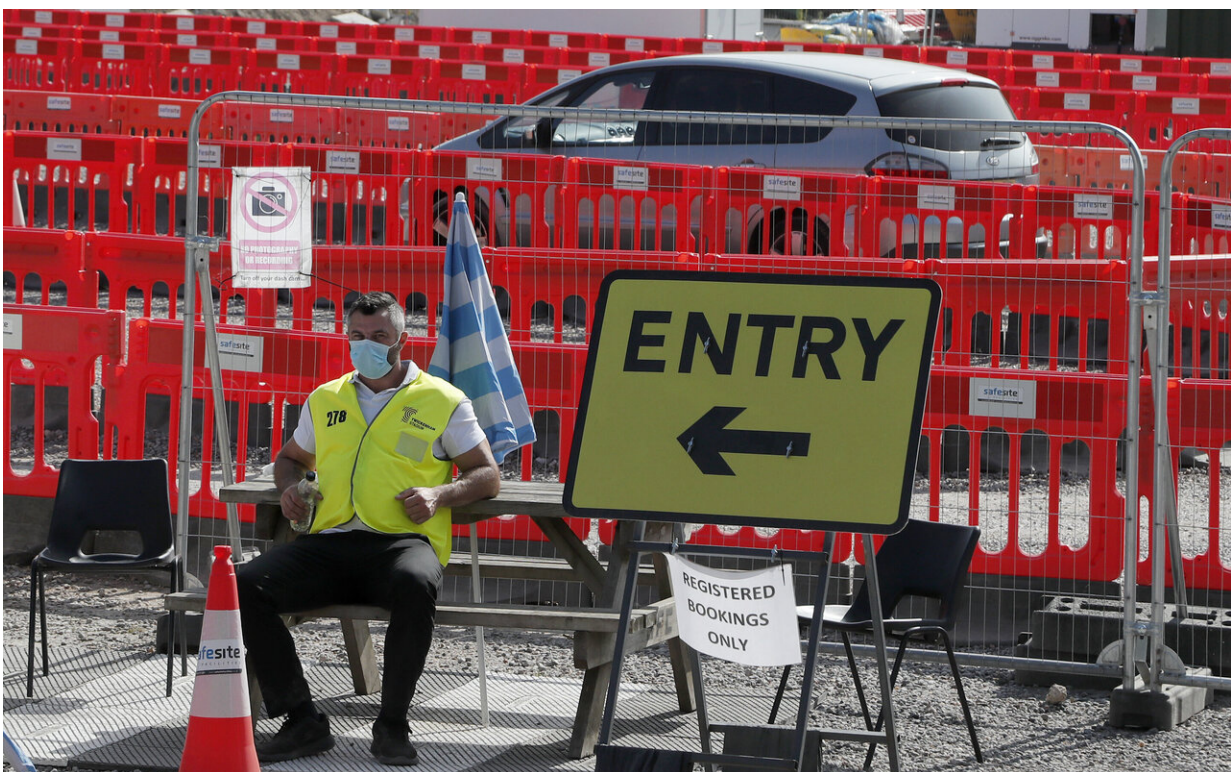


Students and staff queue up outside a mobile coronavirus testing unit for asymptomatic staff and students set up in a car park at the University of Portsmouth, Portsmouth, England, Friday Sept. 18, 2020. British Health Secretary Matt Hancock said Friday that the country has to "come together" over the coming weeks to get on top of the spike, that he noted is leading to a doubling in the number of people being hospitalized with the virus every seven to eight days. (Andrew Matthews/PA via AP)

Without going into specifics, Health Secretary Matt Hancock said the country has to "come together" over the coming weeks to get on top of the spike. He said new transmissions are largely taking place in social settings and have already led a doubling in the number of people being hospitalized with the virus every seven to eight days.

The testing data are fanning fears that the country with Europe's deadliest coronavirus outbreak may be in for a second wave during the winter. Critics say the government has lost control of the virus, partly as a result of the testing woes being reported up and down the U.K. and that's why new measures are being introduced.

A weekly survey released Friday by the Office for National Statistics revealed that an average of 6,000 people in England were estimated to have been newly infected with the virus between September 4 to 10, about double the level the previous week. In a separate gauge that is hobbled by the lack of testing, the government reported another 4,322 new confirmed cases in the U.K., the highest since early May.



A staff member waits at the entrance to nearly empty lanes of a Covid-19 drive thru testing facility at Twickenham stadium in London, Thursday, Sept. 17, 2020. Britain has imposed tougher restrictions on people and businesses in parts

of northeastern England on Thursday as the nation attempts to stem the spread of COVID-19, although some testing facilities remain under-utilised. (AP Photo/Frank Augstein)

The spike, which has been largely seen among young adults, has already led to lockdown restrictions being reimposed. Already this week, a ban on social gatherings of more than six people, including children, has come into effect for England. The other nations of the U.K.—Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland—have announced similar clampdowns on meetings. There are also more targeted restrictions across the U.K. in areas seeing acute spikes.

A variety of restrictions were tightened further Friday for huge parts of the northwest of England, the Midlands and west Yorkshire in response to "major increases" in cases. The new restrictions go into effect Tuesday.

And in a sign that the virus is here to stay through winter, Mayor of London Sadiq Khan cancelled the upcoming annual New Year's Eve fireworks display.



Staff waits in front of empty lanes of a Covid-19 drive thru testing facility at Twickenham stadium in London, Thursday, Sept. 17, 2020. Britain has imposed tougher restrictions on people and businesses in parts of northeastern England on Thursday as the nation attempts to stem the spread of COVID-19, although some testing facilities remain under-utilised. (AP Photo/Frank Augstein)

As the experience of the pandemic has shown, there's usually a lag of a week or two between a rise in cases and hospitalizations, followed by a subsequent lag for deaths. Hancock said the government's strategy is to suppress the virus while keeping schools and offices open before "the cavalry that's on the horizon of the vaccine and mass testing."

The worry is that deaths will increase markedly. Though the U.K. is

recording far fewer deaths on a daily basis than it did earlier this year, it registered another 27 on Friday, bringing the government's official tally of deaths from COVID-19 to 41,732.

"This is a big moment for the country," Hancock said. "We are seeing an acceleration in the number of cases and we are also seeing that the number of people hospitalized with coronavirus is doubling every eight days."



Staff waits beside the empty lanes of a Covid-19 drive thru testing facility at Twickenham stadium in London, Thursday, Sept. 17, 2020. Britain has imposed tougher restrictions on people and businesses in parts of northeastern England on Thursday as the nation attempts to stem the spread of COVID-19, although some testing facilities remain under-utilised. (AP Photo/Frank Augstein)



A staff member waits at empty lanes of a Covid-19 drive thru testing facility at Twickenham stadium in London, Thursday, Sept. 17, 2020. Britain has imposed tougher restrictions on people and businesses in parts of northeastern England on Thursday as the nation attempts to stem the spread of COVID-19, although some testing facilities remain under-utilised. (AP Photo/Frank Augstein)



A staff member waits at empty lanes of a Covid-19 drive thru testing facility at Twickenham stadium in London, Thursday, Sept. 17, 2020. Britain has imposed tougher restrictions on people and businesses in parts of northeastern England on Thursday as the nation attempts to stem the spread of COVID-19, although some testing facilities remain under-utilised. (AP Photo/Frank Augstein)



A staff member walks past empty lanes of a Covid-19 drive thru testing facility at Twickenham stadium in London, Thursday, Sept. 17, 2020. Britain has imposed tougher restrictions on people and businesses in parts of northeastern England on Thursday as the nation attempts to stem the spread of COVID-19, although some testing facilities remain under-utilised. (AP Photo/Frank Augstein)



Staff members direct a car to empty lanes of a Covid-19 drive thru testing facility at Twickenham stadium in London, Thursday, Sept. 17, 2020. Britain has imposed tougher restrictions on people and businesses in parts of northeastern England on Thursday as the nation attempts to stem the spread of COVID-19, although some testing facilities remain under-utilised. (AP Photo/Frank Augstein)



Staff members wait beside empty lanes of a Covid-19 drive thru testing facility at Twickenham stadium in London, Thursday, Sept. 17, 2020. Britain has imposed tougher restrictions on people and businesses in parts of northeastern England as the nation attempts to stem the spread of COVID-19, although some testing facilities remain under-utilised. (AP Photo/Frank Augstein)

The sharp spike in cases, coupled with the testing woes that have seen people around the U.K. complaining they have been unable to book appointments for tests or directed to testing centers far from their homes, has escalated talk of another national lockdown.

Julian Tang, an honorary associate professor in respiratory sciences at the University of Leicester, said the various measures in place or being

considered can act as a "firebreak" in stopping the spread of the virus to the more susceptible groups of the population.

"But these are all incremental and each on their own or in patchy combinations may not be enough, in which case a full local lockdown may be needed to stop the spread," he added.

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