

Millions more face English virus restrictions as cases spiral

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Millions more people in northern England face stricter coronavirus rules next week, officials said Friday, as reports suggested the government is considering a nationwide lockdown.

From Monday, nearly 2.4 million residents in five districts of West

Yorkshire, including in the city of Leeds, will be barred from socialising with other households indoors.

Pubs and bars not serving "substantial meals" must close, alongside casinos and betting shops, while people have also been told to avoid unnecessary travel.

The Department of Health said the measures were needed as infection rates in West Yorkshire were among the highest in the country and rising rapidly.

The Times reported Friday that Prime Minister Boris Johnson was considering a return to a national lockdown to battle the surge.

Johnson was expected to hold a press conference on Monday to announce new restrictions, which would close everything except "essential shops", schools and universities, the paper said, quoting a government source.

In its weekly study of COVID-19 prevalence, the Office for National Statistics (ONS) said the number of people with the virus had increased to around one in 100 nationwide.

"There has been growth in all age groups over the past two weeks; older teenagers and young adults continue to have the highest current rates while rates appear to be steeply increasing among secondary school children," it said.

The country's official science advisory panel warned in a report published Friday that the virus was spreading "significantly" faster and that hospitalisations were rising at a higher rate through England than its predicted "worst-case" scenario drawn up in July.

The report said that in mid-October, shortly before new local rules were introduced, around four times as many people were catching COVID than anticipated in the July report.

That study warned that 85,000 more people could die during the winter wave.

West Yorkshire's imminent restrictions are the latest step in the UK government's localised response to the surging transmission, which has come under increasing scrutiny in recent weeks.

More than 11 million people—about a fifth of England's population—will be under the tightest measures from next week.

Most of the areas in the "very high" category of the government's three-tier COVID alert system are in northern and central parts of the country.

Nottingham became the latest city to enter the highest tier Friday.

On Thursday night, young people took to the streets in fancy dress and drank in large groups before a ban on alcohol sales in shops came into force at 2100 GMT.

'Targeted'

The pandemic has hit Britain harder than any other country in Europe, with more than 45,000 people having died within 28 days of testing positive.

Case rates are spiralling again after a lull, tracking the situation elsewhere on the continent.

England is seeing nearly 52,000 new cases daily, a 47 percent weekly

rise, according to the ONS, which conducts its analysis of households with the help of several universities and health bodies, and excludes people in hospitals and care homes.

Britain's European neighbours and the devolved governments in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland have reimposed partial lockdowns to try to cut infection rates.

Foreign Secretary Dominic Raab said Friday the government would continue its "targeted and focused" strategy of local restrictions in virus hotspots.

"The arbitrariness of a blanket approach would be far worse than the effects of trying to be as targeted as possible," he said.

Meanwhile, a new study reported Friday that a COVID-19 variant originating in Spanish farm workers has spread rapidly throughout Europe in recent months and now accounts for most cases in Britain.

The variant—called 20A.EU1—is thought to have been spread from northeastern Spain by people returning from holidays there, according to the study, which is awaiting peer review in a medical journal.

There is currently no evidence that the strain spreads faster or impacts illness severity and immunity.

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