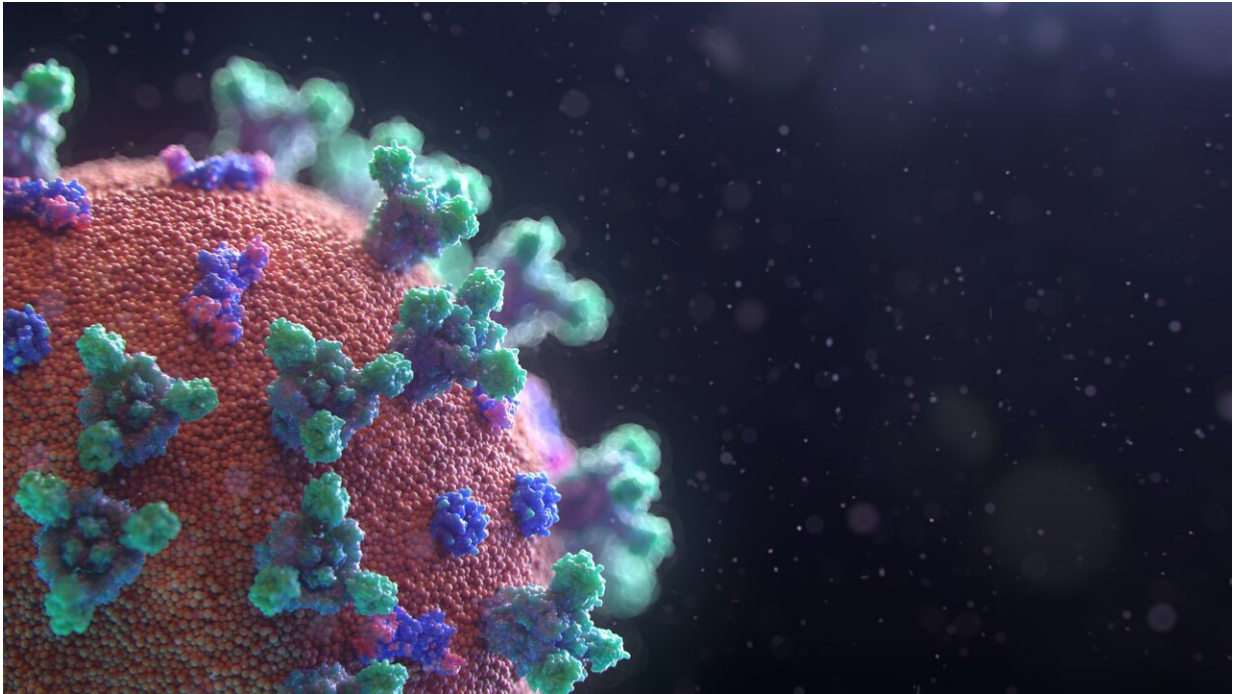


New virus curbs for northern English region

October 21 2020



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More than a million people in northern England will be banned from mixing with other households under new coronavirus rules announced Wednesday, sparking warnings of "months of agony" ahead.

The county of South Yorkshire, which includes the city of Sheffield, will enter into "very high" alert or tier three restrictions from Saturday, the UK government announced.

Many pubs, bars, casinos and other venues will be closed for at least four weeks and residents will be barred from meeting anybody outside their household indoors or in private gardens.

The decision will affect around 1.4 million people, meaning that 7.3 million people—or 13 percent of England's population—will now be living under the toughest restrictions.

Similar measures were recently announced for the northwestern cities of Liverpool and Manchester and the county of Lancashire, following a surge in Covid-19 cases there.

Dan Jarvis, mayor of the Sheffield City Region, said South Yorkshire leaders had secured £30 million (\$39 million) in government funding to help local businesses affected by the new restrictions, as well as £11 million for public health measures.

Authorities in Manchester however had bitterly opposed measures announced Tuesday for their city, complaining that the cash on offer was not enough to protect low-income workers.

The row threatened to undermine Prime Minister Boris Johnson's strategy of local lockdowns across England, which he hopes will allow him to avoid a repeat of the national stay-at-home order imposed from March through June.

In testy exchanges in the House of Commons on Wednesday, Johnson said areas already under additional restrictions were showing signs of progress.

But opposition Labour leader Keir Starmer questioned when the measures might be lifted.

"Instead of being a solution, tier three is a gateway to weeks and weeks, more likely months and months, of agony from which there's no likely exit," he told MPs.

'We cannot repeat this mistake'

Britain has suffered Europe's worst death toll from coronavirus, with more than 44,000 deaths within 28 days of a positive test result.

After a summer lull, Covid-19 is spreading again across the country, as in other parts of the continent, with more than 26,000 new cases announced on Wednesday—a record high. Deaths are also on the rise, with 191 reported.

Starmer wants a two to three-week national lockdown to coincide with school holidays next week to "break the cycle and bring the virus back under control".

"The prime minister was too slow in the first phase of this pandemic, he's being too slow again, we cannot repeat this mistake," Starmer said.

Devolved authorities in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland have all adopted a variation of the temporary "circuit break" shutdown.

Scotland's First Minister Nicola Sturgeon on Wednesday extended the closure of pubs and restaurants in the centre of the country for a third week to November 2.

Johnson, who himself was hospitalised with coronavirus, was accused of failing to take the outbreak seriously until it had swept across the country.

But he insisted a localised approach was "commonsensical" while

infection rates varied.

A nationwide shutdown would "involve closing schools, it'd involve shuttering businesses with all the psychological, emotional damage that lockdown of that kind brings", he said.

Hours after the exchanges in parliament, lawmakers rejected a Labour motion calling for "clear and fair national criteria" for financial support for businesses facing additional Covid-19 restrictions.

MPs voted against it by 261 to 340, giving the government a majority of 79 after just two Conservatives rebelled.

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