

UK eases local lockdown as top scientist warns of winter virus spike

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The British government on Thursday said it will partially ease a two-week-old local lockdown imposed on the central English city Leicester, after the number of new coronavirus cases had fallen.

However, Health Secretary Matt Hancock told lawmakers that indicators of COVID-19 in the city remained well above the average seen across England and in surrounding areas.

The mixed picture meant restrictions on schools, early years childcare and non-essential retail stores will be relaxed from July 24, he added.

But other measures impacting travel, social gatherings and the hospitality sector would remain.

"We're now in a position to relax some, but not all of the restrictions that were in place," Hancock said in a statement to parliament.

"Some say that the local lockdown is unnecessary. I wish this were true, but sadly it remains vital for the health of everyone," he added, vowing to review them again in two weeks.

The government ordered schools and non-essential shops to be closed and postponed the planned reopening of pubs in Leicester on June 29 after an alarming spike in virus cases.

It was the first big test of Prime Minister Boris Johnson's "whack-a-mole" strategy to control the disease while trying to get the economy moving again by easing the nationwide lockdown.

Britain has suffered the deadliest outbreak of the virus in Europe, with the government registering more than 45,000 deaths of people testing positive for COVID-19.

More comprehensive counts by the Office for National Statistics show the [death toll](#) could be higher than 65,000 when all so-called excess

fatalities during recent months are included.

Virus 'waves'

The government's chief scientific adviser Patrick Vallance told a parliamentary committee on Thursday that "it's clear that the outcome has not been good in the UK".

He also warned there is "a very high likelihood" that winter will bring an increase in COVID-19 cases and "quite probable that we will see this virus coming back in different waves over a number of years."

Johnson, who has faced criticism that he responded too slowly to the pandemic in its early stages, is reportedly set to make a keynote speech Friday in which he will urge workers to return to offices.

Britain's economy has contracted by more than 25 percent during the lockdown and, with figures showing it is now struggling to rebound, ending large-scale working from home is seen as crucial to boosting some sectors.

Bank of England Governor Andrew Bailey told a meeting of ruling Conservative MPs this week that people's "fear" of commuting was "holding back the recovery", according to the Daily Telegraph.

However, Vallance told lawmakers he saw "no reason" to reverse the policy of advising people to work at home if possible.

"We're still at a time when distancing measures are important and of the various distancing measures working from home for many companies remains a perfectly good option," he said.

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