



Co-ordination and divergence

Devolution and coronavirus

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Summary

The coronavirus crisis has required an unprecedented government response. Many of the powers used to respond to this UK-wide emergency are devolved to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. In these areas, the UK government is responsible only for England. The emergence of significant differences in lockdown rules in each of the four parts of the UK has brought the practical implications of devolution into sharp focus.

There are many reasons why divergence is not only acceptable but also necessary to allow each part of the UK to respond to local circumstances. And democratically elected governments have a duty to take the course of action they think is right, and not feel compelled to follow the judgment of others. However, divergence must be weighed against the problems it can create, and its consequences need to be carefully managed.

In the UK-wide fight against coronavirus, co-ordination between the four governments of the UK is not an end unto itself; it is only desirable to the extent that it leads to better outcomes in suppressing the virus and saving lives. Co-ordination does not mean there should be uniformity across the UK, but that the four governments must work together, sharing information, considering the implications of their decisions for one another and, where they consider necessary, agreeing common elements of their approach.

Over the past six months, it appears as if the four governments have been developing policy largely independently. At times, this has created unnecessary differences in each part of the UK, generating confusion for citizens who must live their lives by increasingly complex rules and businesses that are struggling amid the economic disruption that the Covid-19 pandemic is causing.

As the whole of the UK faces a second wave of coronavirus, with cases rising in each of the four nations, the four governments have begun to take markedly different approaches. Better co-ordination may be necessary to replicate the successful suppression of the virus seen in the early stages of the response, and to avoid public confusion and secure public consent. Agreement on measures to prevent the spread of Covid-19 across the UK is required to avoid divisive restrictions on intra-UK movement, and appropriate thresholds for imposing lockdown conditions should be agreed to ensure an equitable distribution of financial support for those businesses most severely affected by the pandemic.

This will require all four governments to change their approach. All must remain responsive to local factors and different epidemiological evidence in their part of the UK; and continued close co-ordination of scientific advice may help facilitate consistency between them. But fundamentally, political decision making – in terms of the difficult trade-offs between public health, the economy and wider societal factors – has driven much of the divergence we have seen so far. As the crisis has gone on, meetings between the four governments have become increasingly sporadic. This has meant fewer opportunities for information sharing and joint decision making, leading to unmanaged, or even unintentional, divergence.

As Covid-19 cases continue to rise, a return to UK-wide co-ordination is needed. Such an approach should accommodate local factors and even political preferences, but where there is the need for agreement, there is the need for compromise. This may not always be easy to achieve – independent decision making may offer the path of least resistance – but for the reasons set out in this paper, it is necessary. As a start, the UK government must reinstate fora for intergovernmental discussion, information sharing and decision making. Coronavirus must unite, not divide, the UK.

Introduction

This year, 2020, the UK has been hit with an unprecedented public health crisis that has required an unprecedented response. A wide range of measures to curb transmission of Covid-19, support the economy and enable health services to cope with a high volume of patients in need of care have been put in place across the UK. The UK government is responsible for some key aspects of the response, including most economic support measures, but in many key policy areas, including health and education, power lies with the devolved governments in Edinburgh, Cardiff and Belfast.

Like many other countries across the world, the UK has imposed social distancing restrictions and lockdown measures to tackle the spread of the virus. At the time of writing, these have been in place in some form for more than six months and have come to shape the lives of all those living in the UK.

Decision making power over the extent and severity of these extraordinary measures does not lie in Westminster alone. While the UK government determines the lockdown rules in England, the Scottish government, the Welsh government and the Northern Ireland executive are responsible for the rules in their respective area. Devolution in its current form is now more than 20 years old, yet its consequences for the governance of the UK have never been more visible.

The UK has four governments, but it has a highly integrated economy, society, transport system and business supply chains, among other matters, so decisions taken in one part of the UK have implications for the others. On top of this, the virus does not spread only within borders, so a successful strategy for managing coronavirus requires success across all parts of the UK.

Responding to the crisis has presented new challenges for intergovernmental working. The level of co-ordination and joint decision making between the governments of the UK has varied significantly throughout the course of the crisis.

This paper looks at intergovernmental working on the coronavirus response. It seeks to examine how and why the four governments of the UK have diverged in their approach to lockdown restrictions in their respective part of the UK, to learn lessons about how divergence can be better managed in the future. It identifies three reasons why greater UK-wide co-ordination is needed. Finally, it sets out four recommendations for what the four governments should do as they face the second wave of coronavirus.

Intergovernmental working on coronavirus: three phases

Phase one: lockdown (March to May 2020)

The early phase of the crisis was characterised by close co-ordination between the four governments of the UK. Existing intergovernmental machinery, such as the Joint Ministerial Committee (Plenary) through which the leaders of all four nations meet, was not mobilised. Instead, the first ministers of Scotland and Wales and the first minister and deputy first minister of Northern Ireland attended meetings of the Civil Contingencies Committee (COBR). Ministers from the devolved administrations also attended meetings of five new ministerial implementation groups (MIGs), which were established to look at specific aspects of the coronavirus response.

On 3 March 2020, the four governments published a jointly badged Coronavirus Action Plan, which outlined the response to the virus outbreak across the UK.¹ On 12 March, they took the joint decision to move from the 'contain phase' to the 'delay phase'.² And on 16 March, people were asked to limit unnecessary social contact, with those considered vulnerable asked to shield.³

Initial guidance on social distancing was published on a UK-wide basis⁴ and the decisions to close pubs and restaurants, and schools days later, were tightly co-ordinated. The decision on 23 March to impose lockdown was also made on a UK-wide basis, with the prime minister making the announcement, and the leaders of the devolved administrations making similar statements soon afterwards.

In this phase, there were small differences between the four governments, often to reflect specific local circumstances. For example, the Scottish government introduced a financial support scheme for fisheries a month before any other part of the UK did so, due to its economic importance to certain Scottish communities. Small differences also arose as a result of each government translating high-level policy into detailed guidance. For instance, initially when lockdown was imposed, off-licences were classified as essential shops and allowed to remain open in all parts of the UK with the exception of Northern Ireland, where they were later reclassified.⁵ But differences were mostly short-lived and a matter of timing rather than of substance, with changes often made shortly afterwards restoring consistency.

Leaders in all three devolved administrations stated their intention to engage in a 'four-nation approach' to the virus. However, they did not rule out taking geographically differentiated approaches if justified by the scientific evidence.⁶

Phase two: exit strategy (May to August 2020)

As the UK began to look towards its 'exit strategy' from lockdown, signs that collective decision making was fraying became apparent. All three devolved administrations announced an extension to the social distancing regulations – due for renewal on the same day – ahead of the UK government; the Scottish government just hours before but the Welsh government doing so a whole week ahead.

In early May, the UK government appeared to entertain the possibility of divergence for the first time. After a call with the devolved leaders, the prime minister reiterated his commitment to a “UK-wide approach... even if different parts of the UK begin to move at slightly different speeds”.⁷

But the real turning point came on 10 May, when the prime minister announced a minor easing of restrictions in England, alongside a shift of messaging from ‘stay at home’ to ‘stay alert’;⁸ the latter change made without consulting or informing the devolved administrations.⁹ The leaders of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland were quick to clarify that the change in messaging did not apply in their respective nations,¹⁰ and in the following weeks each government published its own separate plan for the future easing of lockdown restrictions.

The UK government’s exit strategy set out three phases for easing lockdown restrictions, while Scotland had four, Northern Ireland had five (similar to the Republic of Ireland’s plan) and Wales had a traffic light system.¹¹ With significant variation in the level of detail provided, the plans were difficult to compare but appeared to signal different approaches to lifting restrictions.

Figure 1, overleaf, demonstrates the increasingly independent decision making of the four UK governments between April and May, leading up to the publication of their different exit strategies.

The four governments continued to co-ordinate their response in some devolved areas, including in terms of scientific advice, the procurement of medical equipment such as personal protective equipment (PPE), and testing operations. However, from May onwards, each administration took decisions on the easing of lockdown restrictions independently, leading to different rules emerging in different parts of the UK (see Figure 2 for differences in terms of the closure and reopening of non-essential retail outlets).

Figure 1 **Timeline of UK and devolved governments' key coronavirus decision points and processes, April and May 2020**

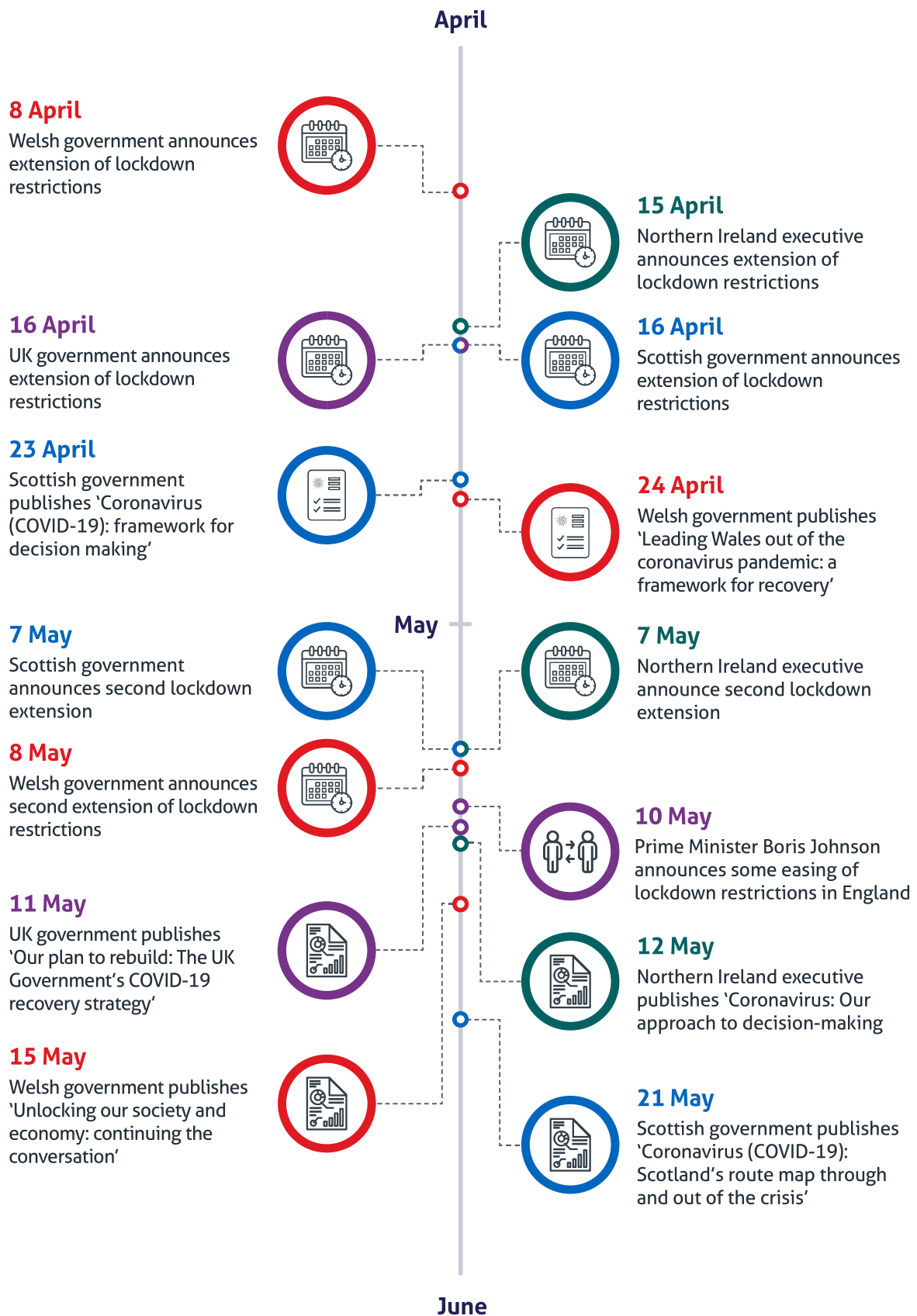
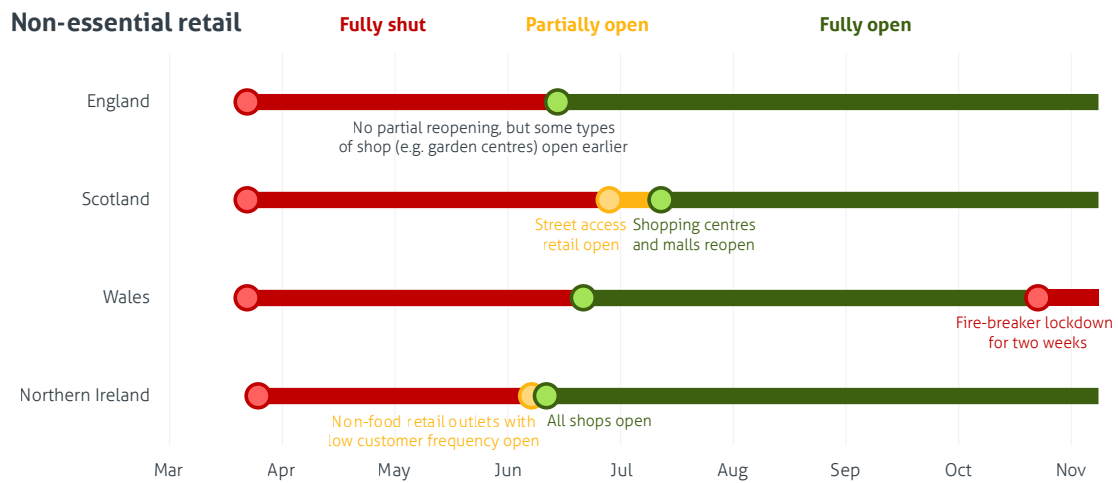


Figure 2 Non-essential retail closures and reopening in each part of the UK, March to October 2020

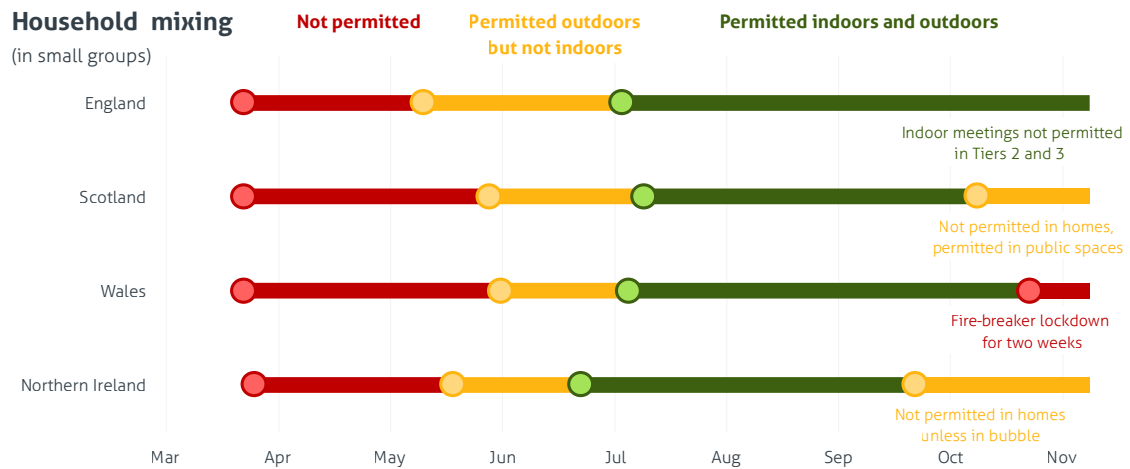


Source: Institute for Government analysis of policy announcements by the UK and devolved governments.

Some of these differences have been a matter of timing. For example, garden centres – the first non-essential retail outlets to be permitted to reopen – were allowed to do so from 12 May in Wales, 13 May in England, 28 May in Northern Ireland and 29 May in Scotland.

However, there have also been more substantive differences in the way lockdown restrictions have been eased. For example, although each part of the UK permitted households to mix again at around the same point in time (see Figure 3), the rules on how many people could meet and from how many households varied notably. From 13 May, two people from different households were permitted to meet outdoors in England; a week later the Northern Ireland executive permitted up to six people to meet outdoors. The Scottish and Welsh governments did not allow meetings between two households until 29 May and 1 June respectively; the Scottish government imposed an eight-person limit, while in Wales there was no maximum.

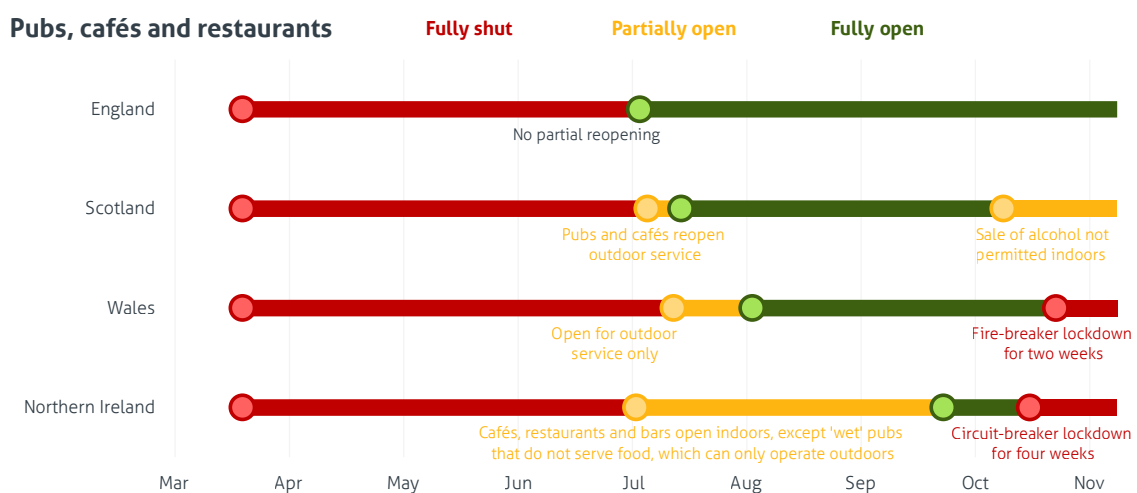
Figure 3 **Timeline for rules on meeting friends and family in each part of the UK, March to October 2020**



Source: Institute for Government analysis of policy announcements by the UK and devolved governments. Additional local restrictions were in place during this period in some areas.

Differences in both the manner and the timing of the reopening of pubs, cafés and restaurants were apparent across the four nations of the UK (see Figure 4). Pubs in Northern Ireland were the first to reopen, on 3 July – although pubs not selling food were prevented from opening indoors – followed by hospitality in England on 4 July, with the exception of areas under local restrictions. Scotland and Wales took a more staged approach – opening outdoor areas first on 6 and 13 July respectively, followed by indoor areas on 15 July and 3 August respectively.

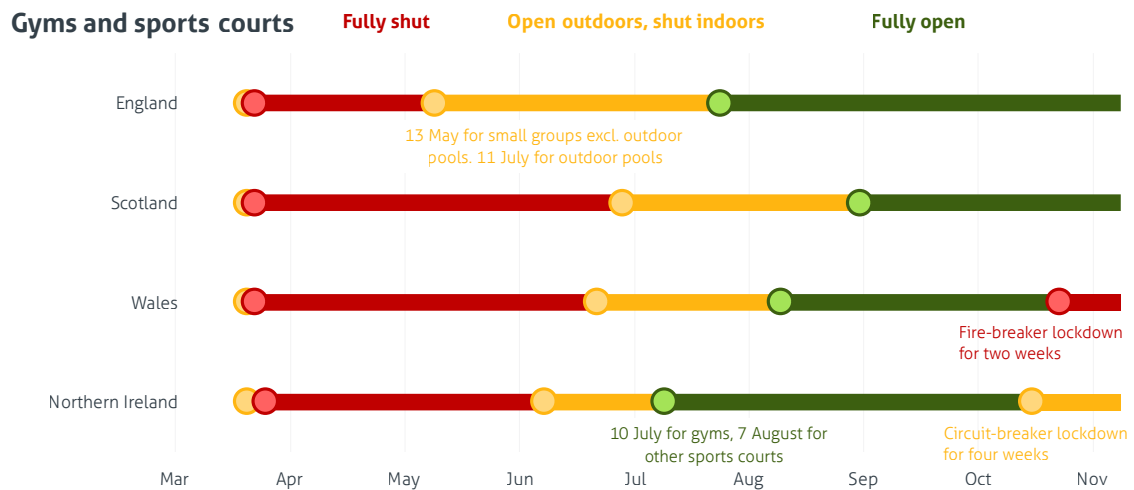
Figure 4 **Pub, café and restaurant closures and reopening in each part of the UK, March to October 2020**



Source: Institute for Government analysis of policy announcements by the UK and devolved governments. Additional local restrictions were in place during this period in some areas.

All parts of the UK took a phased approach to reopening sports facilities, permitting outdoor sports before indoor sports. Indoor gyms reopened in Northern Ireland and England a month before those in Wales and Scotland, with those in Scotland not reopening until the end of August (see Figure 5).

Figure 5 **Gym and sports facility closures and reopening in each part of the UK, March to October 2020**

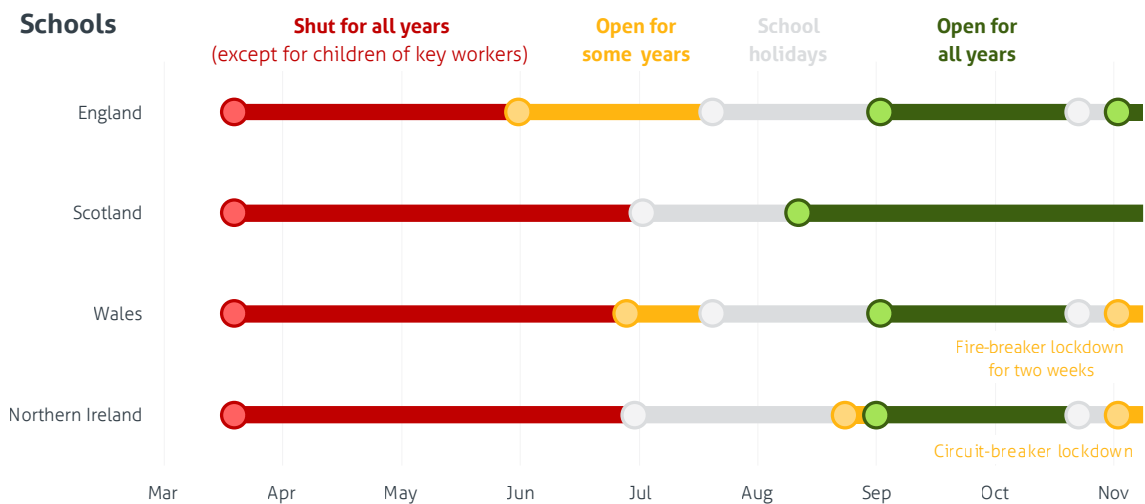


Source: Institute for Government analysis. Note: Additional local restrictions were in place during this period in some areas. Additional local restrictions were in place during this period in some areas.

The general pattern was that England and Northern Ireland eased restrictions and reopened the economy first and then Scotland and Wales did so.

However, this pattern was not applicable across all areas. In education, while Wales reopened schools in late June with limited capacity, schools in Northern Ireland did not return until late August (see Figure 6). However, schools in Scotland and Northern Ireland break up for the summer holiday at the beginning of July, rather than the end of July like those in England and Wales, which may best explain this difference.

Figure 6 **School closures and reopening in each part of the UK, March to October 2020**



Source: Institute for Government analysis of policy announcements by the UK and devolved governments. Additional local restrictions were in place during this period in some areas.

Divergence has created difficulties for the public and businesses

At the start of phase two of the coronavirus response, all four governments acknowledged the possibility of divergence in their exit strategies, for a number of evidence-based reasons, but committed to maintaining a 'four-nation approach'. The UK government's strategy for Covid-19 recovery that was published in May had committed to working closely "with the devolved administrations in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland to make this a UK-wide response: coherent, co-ordinated and comprehensive".¹² However, throughout phase two, this commitment was not always realised.

In terms of coherence, differences in the lockdown rules in each part of the UK resulted in confusion among the public about which rules applied where, undermining compliance.¹³ The chief constable of Gwent Police, who is responsible for policing the Welsh border, said that they had to take on the role of informing people entering Wales of the differences between the lockdown restrictions in England and Wales.¹⁴

The failure of politicians – particularly in the UK government – and the media to make clear which rules applied where exacerbated this confusion. For example, the prime minister's 'address to the nation' on 10 May failed to make clear that changes to the lockdown restrictions and the move to 'stay alert' messaging applied to England only.¹⁵ Research from the Cardiff School of Journalism, Media and Culture, in which participants were asked to keep news diaries, found that "only 11 in 20 respondents correctly identified the guidance as applying to England only, and almost a third thought it was UK-wide government guidance".¹⁶

Ministers in all four governments have failed to explain clearly why they have chosen to ease lockdown restrictions in slightly different ways – for example, why rules on meeting outdoors were based on the number of individuals in England and Northern Ireland and on the number of households in Scotland and Wales.

In terms of co-ordination, the implications of having different restrictions in different parts of the UK for people living and working across borders do not always appear to have been fully considered. For example, in May, the UK government encouraged people in England to return to work where possible. This posed a dilemma for people who commuted to work in England from another part of the UK, who were unsure which government's advice to follow, particularly those living in Wales where a five-mile travel limit was still in place at that point.¹⁷

The UK government's decision to make face coverings on public transport mandatory in England before other parts of the UK also created problems for cross-border travel, particularly on some routes that weaved in and out of England and Wales. When asked how this would work in practice, the first minister of Wales, Mark Drakeford, said that he wished he had "had a chance to explore this with the UK government before they made the announcements".¹⁸

Businesses that operate across the UK have also faced challenges in understanding and complying with different rules and guidance. For example, in Wales, throughout most of August, a range of customer-facing businesses, such as pubs, restaurants, hairdressers,

cinemas and gyms, were under a legal obligation to collect customer data for contact tracing. By contrast, in Scotland, this legal requirement was only imposed on hospitality businesses, while in England, collecting customer details was only made mandatory in mid-September, before which it had been only recommended in guidance.

The different timing and guidance for reopening non-essential retail also created additional complications for businesses operating on a UK-wide basis. In June, the Scottish Retail Consortium said:

Retailers have found the lack of consistency in approaching reopening to be very challenging, with retail sector specific guidance published for England, and then later for Scotland, and then last week for Wales, whilst generic business advice remains in Northern Ireland. That affects both the timescale and approach to re-opening in the different nations.¹⁹

The need to comply with different rules in each part of the UK has likely introduced additional costs to businesses as logistics, training resources and business planning have all needed to be tailored to each individual part of the UK. Divergence has also had implications for UK supply chains, as explained by the Scottish Retail Consortium: "A Scottish business whose distribution sites were in Scotland would face different rules from a competitor based in England. That matters when shops in England can open but not warehouses in Scotland."²⁰

Phase three: facing a second wave (September 2020 onwards)

In September, the UK entered a new phase in the coronavirus response. With coronavirus cases on the rise again, all four governments took action to tighten restrictions. In a reversal of the general trend of easing lockdown, the Northern Ireland executive was the first to announce a tightening of restrictions on people meeting those from outside their household, followed closely by the Scottish government and then the UK government acting for England.*

Initially, there were signs of the four governments' greater efforts to co-ordinate their response to coronavirus than in phase two, including consistency on restrictions on hospitality in England, Scotland and Wales, such as a 10pm curfew imposed on all pubs and restaurants. Northern Ireland opted for an 11pm curfew, closer to the Republic of Ireland's 11.30pm curfew. And in a joint statement made on 25 September, the four governments committed to "coordinating and cooperating as much as possible across these islands while respecting differences of approach and clarifying where measures apply".²¹

* On 21 August, the Northern Ireland executive reduced the maximum number of people who could meet outdoors from 30 to 15 (Executive Office, 'Executive statement on coronavirus health regulations', 20 August, retrieved 25 October 2020, www.executiveoffice-ni.gov.uk/news/executive-statement-coronavirus-health-regulations). On 10 September, the Scottish government announced that up to six people from two households could meet, down from 15 people from five households (Scottish government, 'Maximum gathering set at six people from two households', 10 September 2020, retrieved 22 October 2020, www.gov.scot/news/maximum-gathering-set-at-six-people-from-two-households/#:-:text=Measures%20announced%20today%20are%3A,law%20from%20Monday%2014%20September). And on 14 September, the UK government introduced a 'rule of six' for England, reducing the legal maximum number of people who could gather from 30 (Home Office, 'Rule of six comes into effect to tackle coronavirus', 14 September 2020, retrieved 25 October 2020, www.gov.uk/government/news/rule-of-six-comes-into-effect-to-tackle-coronavirus).

However, this burst of co-ordination was short-lived, with further divergence emerging at the start of October. Soon after, the Scottish government announced a temporary tightening of restrictions, including preventing the sale of alcohol indoors in pubs, and complete pub closures in central Scotland. The UK government introduced a three-tiered system for England on 12 October, with different restrictions in place in different parts of the country depending on the Covid-19 'alert level' – 'medium', 'high' or 'very high', representing Tiers 1, 2 and 3 respectively.²² The Scottish government subsequently announced a new strategic framework with five protection levels and varying restrictions between Level 0 and Level 4.²³

Meanwhile, Northern Ireland and Wales have taken more drastic measures. Northern Ireland went into a four-week partial lockdown, including two weeks of school closures, on 16 October. The Welsh government announced a 'fire-break' lockdown from 23 October to 9 November, during which time people are required to stay at home, businesses including non-essential retail must close and schools are required to use online learning when not on half term.²⁴

Overall, throughout phase two, each government of the UK appeared to be taking decisions independently without clear reference to or consideration of the impact of their decisions on other parts of the UK. In phase three, despite a renewed commitment to co-ordination in early September, by mid-October the four governments had taken fundamentally different approaches to suppressing the second wave of coronavirus cases.

While there are legitimate reasons for the four governments to diverge in their exit strategies, this divergence needs to be weighed against the practical difficulties it creates for individuals and businesses and it needs to be carefully managed so that these difficulties are minimised and to avoid confusion. This has not always appeared to have been the case.

The drivers of divergence

To understand how best to manage divergence and its impacts, we must first understand what drove it in the first place. Our research has found that epidemiological evidence, scientific advice and political judgments are all factors that have been considered in decision making in Westminster, Holyrood, Cardiff and Stormont, but the last of these has been the primary driver of divergence.

Increased divergence has been accompanied by a decline in the use of intergovernmental fora and this has prevented systematic intergovernmental information sharing and hindered co-ordination.

Epidemiological evidence

Epidemiological evidence about the prevalence and spread of Covid-19 has been a key factor in decision making by all four governments of the UK. At the beginning of the crisis, differences in the pattern of the virus were given as a key reason why the four governments might diverge in their approaches. For example, the UK government's

Covid-19 strategy published in May said that “part of that UK-wide approach will be acknowledging that the virus may be spreading at different speeds in different parts of the UK. Measures may need to change in different ways and at different times”.²⁵

International and subnational comparisons of epidemiological evidence can be difficult to make due to different levels of testing and different methods of counting Covid-19 deaths. The most reliable measure is ‘excess deaths’, which expresses the number of overall deaths above the number of expected deaths in a given period.

In our paper [A Four-Nation Exit Strategy](#), we gave examples of a number of other countries, including Australia, Italy and Spain, which adopted territorially differentiated strategies at the start of the pandemic due to localised outbreaks of the virus.²⁶ However, analysis by The Health Foundation found that the virus spread more widely across the nations and regions of the UK than in other countries. Comparison of excess deaths between March and May 2020 found that all regions and countries of the UK had excess death rates close to or exceeding 30%, “whereas this is the case in only 7 out of 20 regions in Italy, 9 out of 15 regions in Spain and 2 out of 13 regions in France”.²⁷ Therefore, the scientific imperative behind territorially differentiated approaches was weaker in the UK than in other countries.

Within the UK, The Health Foundation’s analysis of excess deaths over the 10-week period between 20 March and 22 May 2020 found that “the chance of dying in England was 57% higher than in the same period in previous years; in Scotland it was 43%, 34% in Wales and 28% in Northern Ireland”.²⁸ It also found greater variation within England than between the four nations of the UK, with excess deaths ranging from 104% in London to 47% in the East Midlands.

This evidence may explain why the Northern Ireland executive chose to lift lockdown restrictions before other parts of the UK did, as it had the lowest death rates and reported infection rates in comparison with other parts of the UK. The chair of the Northern Ireland Assembly Health Committee, Colm Gildernew MLA, suggested that this was a key factor in decision making at the Northern Ireland executive.²⁹ However, it does not appear to explain why Scotland and Wales moved at a slower pace than England when easing lockdown restrictions, despite having apparently fewer deaths. In fact, if we predicted the pace at which lockdown was eased based on excess deaths alone, we might have expected the opposite to be true.

On 23 October, the first Office for National Statistics Coronavirus Infection Survey to compare all four nations of the UK was released. The survey gives a more accurate picture of the prevalence of the virus in the community than testing data, which relies on test availability and individual behaviour in seeking tests. It found that in the previous two weeks, Scotland and Wales had the lowest number of infections, both around 1 in 180 people, followed by England, which had 1 in 130 people – although with significant regional variation – and Northern Ireland, which had the highest number at 1 in 100 people.³⁰ Although the high prevalence of the virus in Northern Ireland would explain its four-week circuit-breaker lockdown measures imposed on 16 October,

at the point this data was published, Wales had the strictest measures in place despite having the lowest prevalence of the virus, suggesting that factors other than relative rates of infection are responsible for divergence.

Ministers have cited other epidemiological evidence, such as the rate of spread of the virus, to explain differences in their approach. For example, on 10 May, the prime minister announced minor easings of the lockdown restrictions in England, but Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland decided not to make any changes at that point.³¹ In explaining their decisions, the first ministers of Scotland and Northern Ireland both pointed to evidence of a higher reproduction rate – the R rate – within their respective nations than in England, which suggested that Scotland and Northern Ireland were at a different stage of the virus’s progression.* However, although this may explain differences in the *pace* at which governments lifted restrictions, it is less able to explain the different *manner* in which restrictions were lifted.

Epidemiological evidence best explains the local lockdown approach each government has taken to regional variation *within* its own territory. The UK government acting for England was the first to impose a local lockdown – in the city of Leicester on 30 June. Announcing the measure, the secretary of state for health and social care, Matt Hancock, said that the “seven-day infection rate in Leicester is 135 cases per 100,000 people, which is three times higher than the next highest city” and accounted for “around 10% of all positive cases in the country” over the preceding week.³² The devolved administrations too have imposed local lockdown restrictions in areas under their control, based on evidence of a local spike in new cases.

As testing operations have become more widespread, governments have been better able to identify areas with a high prevalence of Covid-19 and target restrictions in these localities. At times this has put central government at odds with local leaders, who have complained about the lack of consultation or engagement ahead of new restrictions in their areas and there have been disagreements over financial support. In October, the UK government imposed Tier 3 restrictions on Greater Manchester after a stand-off with its mayor, Andy Burnham.³³

Decisions on local lockdowns involve one government making decisions about different areas of their nation, therefore epidemiological evidence is the main variable. Divergence between the four parts of the UK arises because of decisions that the four governments make. But epidemiological evidence is not the only, or even the most significant, factor in these decisions.

* On 7 May 2020, the first minister of Northern Ireland, Arlene Foster, said that the R rate was 0.8 – “higher than parts of England where the virus emerged earlier than it did here and is more in keeping with the situation in Scotland and Wales” (The Executive Office, ‘Covid-19 press conference – 7 May 2020’, 7 May 2020, retrieved 22 October 2020, www.executiveoffice-ni.gov.uk/news/covid-19-press-conference-7-may-2020). Meanwhile, the first minister of Scotland, Nicola Sturgeon, said that the R rate was higher in Scotland than in other parts of the UK and that Scotland “may be at a different – and slightly later – stage of the infection curve” (Scottish government, ‘Coronavirus (Covid-19) update: first minister’s speech, 7 May 2020’, 7 May 2020, retrieved 22 October 2020, www.gov.scot/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-update-first-minister-speech-7-may-2020).

Scientific advice

Throughout the coronavirus crisis, scientific advice has been prominent in decision making, with advisers becoming a regular feature of government communications and announcements. If the four governments of the UK were receiving significantly different advice, this could explain why they chose to take different actions and create different rules to manage the spread of the virus.

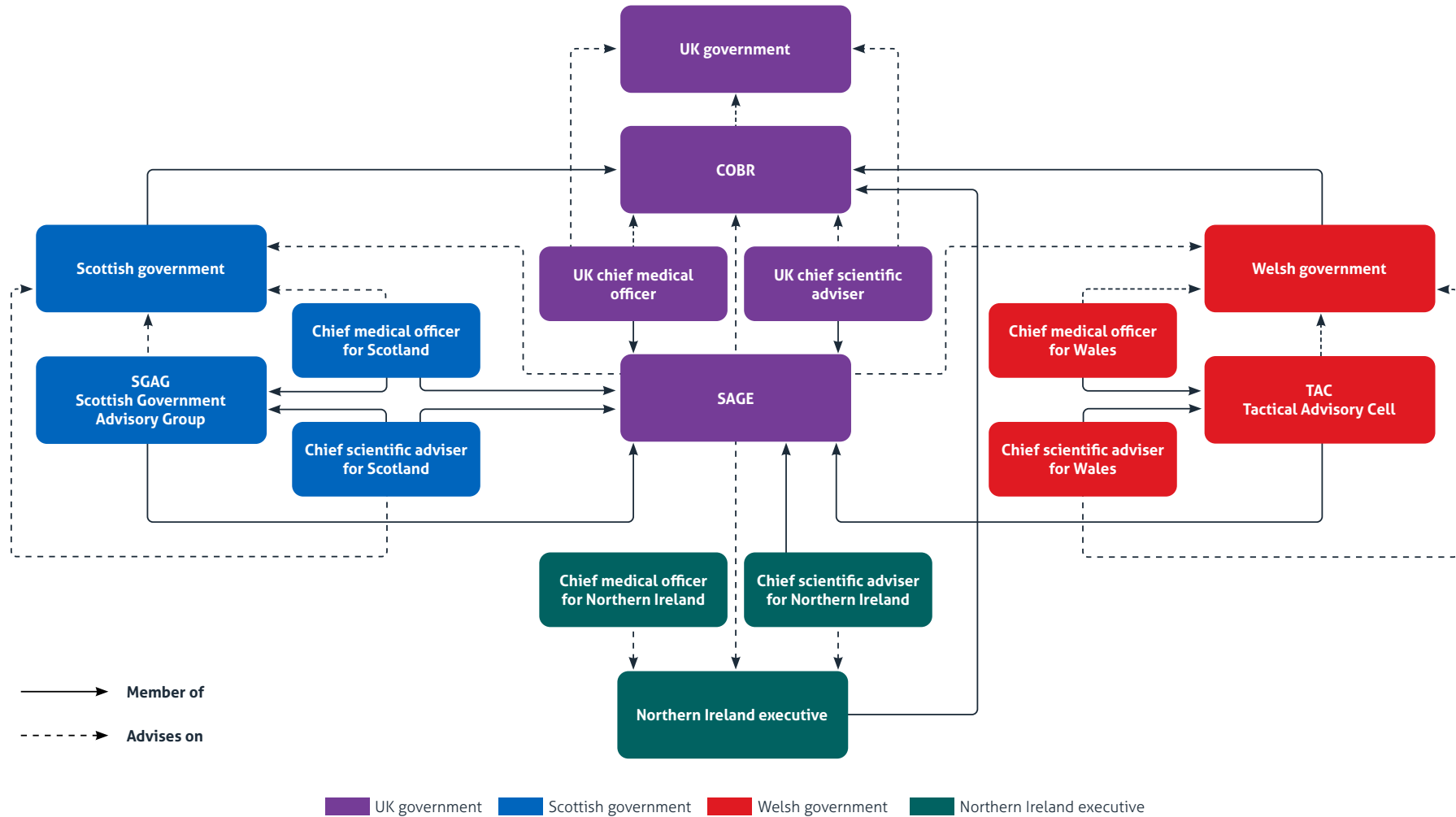
Scientific advice is closely co-ordinated between the four governments. Each government has a chief medical officer (CMO) and a chief scientific adviser (CSA), who meet regularly and share information. In April, the CMOs of the four governments told the House of Commons Science and Technology Committee that they ensured that discussions were taking place at least three times a week.³⁴ Decisions, such as to add anosmia – the loss or change of the sense of smell – to the list of official coronavirus symptoms, and to extend the self-isolation period for those with symptoms from seven to ten days, were made jointly by all four CMOs of the UK.³⁵

Expert scientific advice groups are also convened at a UK level through the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE) structure; these provide advice to COBR – in which the devolved ministers take part – and directly to the devolved administrations themselves.³⁶ Although initially some representatives from the devolved administrations were only given observer status on SAGE, scientific advisers from all three devolved administrations have been official participants in SAGE since May.³⁷

The Scottish and Welsh governments have established their own advisory groups – the Scottish Government Advisory Group (SGAG) and the Technical Advisory Cell (TAC) respectively – a key purpose of which is to interpret SAGE outputs in the specific Scottish and Welsh contexts.³⁸ The chairs of both groups are also participants in SAGE, which means there is a significant level of information interchange between the groups. As a result, the scientific advice about coronavirus and the types of intervention that might prevent its spread has been broadly consistent.

Figure 7, overleaf, sets out Covid-19 emergency scientific structures in the UK.

Figure 7 Scientific advisory structures in the UK and devolved governments



Source: Institute for Government analysis. The Welsh government's CSA for health is a participant in SAGE.

Advice to the devolved administrations will, however, have taken account of local factors such as population demographics, health and density, NHS capacity in each part of the UK, as well as different evidence about the prevalence and spread of the virus. The Scottish health minister, Jeane Freeman, has said that SGAG “allows the evidence to be applied to the particular situation in Scotland”,³⁹ while the Welsh first minister, Mark Drakeford, has said that TAC has helped “mobilise advice that is closer to the ground and more familiar with Welsh demography and challenges faced in Wales”.⁴⁰

In Northern Ireland, there is also close co-ordination of scientific advice with the Republic of Ireland. In April, the two governments signed a Memorandum of Understanding, which committed to co-operation on Covid-19 modelling and research.⁴¹ The Northern Ireland health minister, Robin Swann, has said that access to both UK and Republic of Ireland scientific advice has meant that the Northern Ireland executive was “able to produce a fuller report”.⁴²

Overall, the close co-ordination of scientific advice has been a factor limiting divergence between the four parts of the UK and has meant that the types of interventions have been variations on the same theme. But advice has also been tailored to the unique circumstances in each part of the UK, which may in some cases have led to different recommendations about the appropriate course of action to take. This is particularly likely to have been the case in Northern Ireland where the island of Ireland is considered a single epidemiological unit. Nonetheless, ultimately advisers advise; it is ministers who make decisions, weighing up scientific evidence with wider factors, including the consequences of divergence between different parts of the UK.

Different political judgments

Despite a tendency of politicians in all parts of the UK and internationally to claim they are ‘following the science’, scientists themselves have pushed back against the idea that there is an objective ‘right’ answer on how to approach coronavirus.⁴³

Even where advice is consistent, counsel general for the Welsh government, Jeremy Miles, has said that “there are a range of choices to be made in that context that come from the same scientific base. It is the task of Ministers to make those judgements and to be accountable for them”.⁴⁴

Decisions about the easing of lockdown involved difficult trade-offs between public health, the economy and wider social factors. These are inherently political decisions, and where they are the responsibility of ministers in each part of the UK – who are accountable to both their own legislature and voters – it is legitimate if they come to different conclusions about the appropriate course of action to take.

In explaining the decisions of the Northern Ireland executive to lift lockdown at a faster pace than in other parts of the UK, junior executive office minister, Gordon Lyons, talked about the need to balance the risk associated with the virus with the impact of lockdown restrictions:

We have to remember that these regulations have had a huge impact on the lives of people right across the United Kingdom. Because of these regulations we have not just a Covid crisis but a non-Covid health crisis, a social crisis and an economic crisis as well. We have said repeatedly that we will not keep these restrictions and regulations in place any longer than they have to be, which is why we have removed them as soon as we have been able. We should continue to have the right to do that. Where we can do things together, we should, but we do have a responsibility to terminate these restrictions as soon as possible.⁴⁵

There are a great number of risks associated with any course of action, but political attitudes towards the public health risks that the virus poses were cited as a key driver of the different responses in England, Scotland and Wales. Dr Dai Lloyd MS, chair of the Health, Social Care and Sport Committee in Senedd Cymru, told us that the Welsh government had taken a “general cautious approach which is reflective of Welsh society”.⁴⁶ The convener of the equivalent committee in the Scottish parliament, Lewis Macdonald MSP, said that the Scottish government too was “more cautious” than the UK government in its approach to lifting lockdown.⁴⁷

Although the coronavirus response should not be characterised as a straightforward trade-off between public health and the economy, it appears that the UK government had prioritised the latter more than the other governments of the UK. For example, while the three devolved governments asked those who could work from home to do so throughout the lockdown, in August the UK government began encouraging people to return to their offices, in the hope of stimulating increased spending in city centres and other commercial districts.⁴⁸

The UK’s funding arrangements also mean that economic considerations loom larger in the UK government than in the devolved administrations. Despite the devolution of some revenue streams, especially to Scotland, the devolved administrations are still primarily funded by block grants from the UK government.⁴⁹ These are determined by changes to the level of spending by the UK government, not taxation income, and so arguably the devolved administrations are more removed from the direct economic consequences of Covid. The UK government, by contrast, has had to be more mindful of debt incurred by the ongoing UK-wide furlough scheme and other economic measures, which will continue to rise the longer lockdown restrictions hinder the full reopening of the economy.

Convener of the Scottish parliament’s Covid-19 Committee, Murdo Fraser MSP, has argued that this means that the “Scottish Government has had more freedom to take political choices with less worry about the economics than the UK government”.⁵⁰ The structure of the UK government, where the Treasury is a powerful player, may also mean that economic considerations carry more weight than in the devolved administrations where health is the single biggest spending obligation. However, it should be noted that, in the absence of their own borrowing capacity, decisions of the devolved administrations have been constrained by the UK government’s decisions on economic support.

As well as trade-offs between different risks, each government also needs to make decisions as to which areas to prioritise. As the number of Covid-19 cases fell towards the end of the first wave of coronavirus, ministers had a certain amount of 'headroom' to ease restrictions, and different governments decided to prioritise different easements based on their own political objectives, community needs or population demographics. In the foreword to the Welsh government's plan for lifting lockdown in Wales, the Welsh first minister spoke of:

The responsibilities of each Government to determine the speed at which it is safe to move and the balance to be struck between different forms of 'easement' – how to prioritise between allowing people to meet up with close family, to go shopping or to the hairdresser, to get back to work or visit the seaside.⁵¹

For example, the Welsh government was the first to reopen some public library services, on 1 June, more than a month before the other governments of the UK, despite being the last to reopen other services such as non-essential retail. One of the first easements in Northern Ireland was to open places of worship for drive-in services and private prayer, on 20 May, reflecting the priorities for the Northern Ireland executive.

The coronavirus crisis has required governments to impose unprecedented constraints on economic activity and personal freedom in order to contain the spread of the virus. It is right that the democratically elected government in each part of the UK is able to make decisions about the appropriate balance of restrictions in place in its part of the UK. However, if a more consistent approach to suppressing the transmission of coronavirus is desirable, this will require agreement on key issues at a political level – and compromise.

All four governments of the UK hold the same powers over public health, so a UK-wide approach will require consensus among all four governments. The UK government cannot simply make decisions and expect the devolved administrations to follow. Experience of the coronavirus crisis so far shows that they will not do so.

Weakening of intergovernmental working

Increasing divergence between the four nations of the UK in phase two of the crisis was also accompanied by a decline in the frequency of intergovernmental meetings. The loss of these fora, which facilitated information sharing and joint decision making, has led to a rise in unmanaged, and even unintentional, divergence.

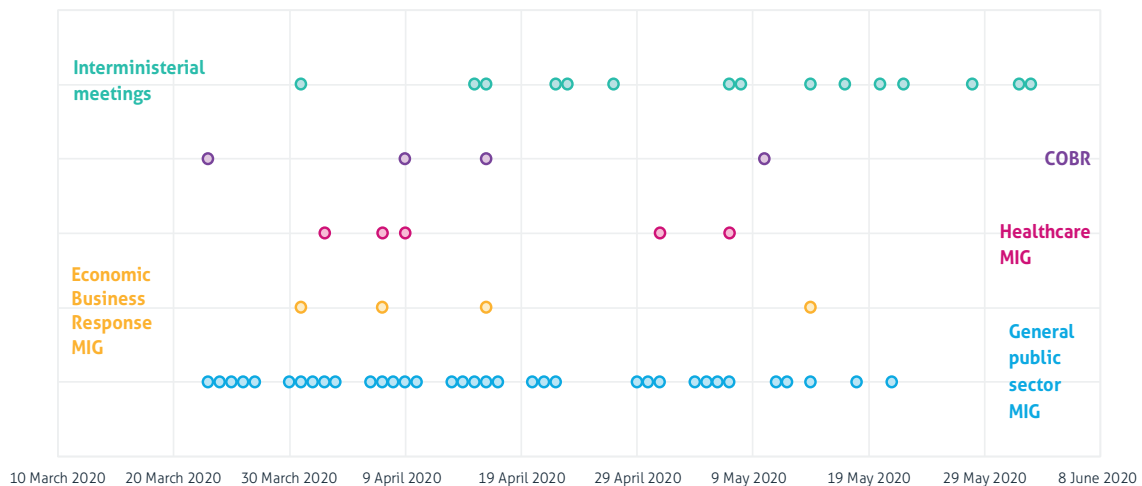
As noted in the section 'Intergovernmental working on coronavirus: three phases', close co-ordination in the early phase of the crisis was accompanied by regular meetings between the four nations through COBR and MIGs. Major decisions, such as to impose stay-at-home requirements on a UK-wide basis, were made after COBR meetings.

Ministers from Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland said that MIGs were useful for sharing information, and were "a good opportunity to work together".⁵² UK government ministers agreed. The secretary of state for Scotland said they were "very effective"⁵³

and paymaster general, Penny Mordaunt, said that they were a “very collegiate, consultative and non-political way of working together”.⁵⁴

Between late March and early May, ministers from the devolved administrations were attending MIGs on almost a daily basis, in particular the General Public Sector MIG, chaired by the chancellor of the duchy of Lancaster, Michael Gove (see Figure 8).

Figure 8 Intergovernmental meetings attended by UK government ministers and Welsh government ministers between 23 March and 2 June 2020



Source: Office of the Secretary of State for Wales, Schedule of Contact with the Welsh Government.

However, in late May, the UK government moved away from the MIG structure, reportedly without consultation with the devolved administrations, and established two new cabinet committees to replace them: one on Covid-19 strategy and the other on Covid-19 operations.⁵⁵ The structures broadly replicate the model used for Brexit no-deal preparations in late 2019. However, unlike the EU Exit Operations (XO) Committee, ministers from the devolved administrations have not been invited to attend.⁵⁶

UK government officials have said that the change in structure reflected a desire to “streamline the process”⁵⁷ and move into a new stage of the crisis response that is more focused on long-term recovery. Nonetheless, officials we spoke to in the Welsh government felt that this reconfiguration represented the UK government’s intentional move away from the four-nation approach.

Officials in the UK government told us that there was unease in some parts of government about having devolved ministers present at meetings where the UK cabinet position was still being decided. Convener of the Scottish parliament’s Covid-19 Committee, Murdo Fraser MSP, told us that examples of the Scottish first minister sharing details of COBR discussions ahead of official press conferences may have created an “element of distrust about the sharing of information”, which ultimately may have also influenced the decision to exclude devolved ministers from the new cabinet committee structure.⁵⁸

Although ad-hoc meetings between UK and devolved ministers continued throughout phase two of the crisis, no mechanisms were put in place to ensure regular and systematic contact between the four governments of the UK. Counsel general in the Welsh government, Jeremy Miles, said that “there is not a forum that operates frequently and regularly”.⁵⁹ COBR, the primary forum through which the prime minister and first ministers engaged in the early phase of the crisis, did not meet at all between 10 May and 22 September.⁶⁰ The Welsh first minister said that during this period he had only one brief phone call with the prime minister.⁶¹

As the use of these intergovernmental fora declined, so too did the four governments’ joint decision making. The first signs that the four-nation approach might be loosening came on 8 April, when, ahead of the Easter bank holiday weekend, the Welsh government announced it would extend the lockdown restrictions in Wales for a further three weeks.⁶² In response to criticism that the Welsh government had gone ahead with this, Welsh health minister, Vaughn Gething, said that the Welsh government was not in “a position to have a four-nation conversation in a sensible way about it beforehand, because COBRA [or COBR] wasn’t meeting on a regular enough timetable”.⁶³

In its report on intergovernmental working on coronavirus, the House of Commons Scottish Affairs Committee noted that “divergence coincided with the main mechanisms for cooperation, COBRA and the MIGs, ceasing to operate”.⁶⁴ Although it is difficult to say whether the change in structure was the cause or the effect of a move away from a closely co-ordinated four-nation approach, there is a clear link between the two.

With fewer opportunities to systematically share information, intergovernmental communication also suffered. Disagreement in July over the list of countries exempt from quarantine restrictions most clearly showed this. Despite air transport and foreign policy being non-devolved matters, any policy required implementation through public health legislation in each part of the UK. The UK transport secretary, Grant Shapps, claimed that UK-wide agreement over the list was sought, but Scottish ministers argued that they were only given 30 minutes’ notice, and that the list was frequently changed.⁶⁵ The Welsh first minister expressed similar frustrations, calling engagement with the UK government on this issue “shambolic”.⁶⁶

It resulted in England announcing the introduction of ‘travel corridors’ days before the devolved administrations. Since then, further differences in the countries listed as exempt from the 14-day self-isolation restrictions in each part of the UK have arisen, creating confusion among the public.⁶⁷

In order to facilitate a more co-ordinated approach in the next phase of the coronavirus response, mechanisms for intergovernmental working must be strengthened. All four governments of the UK agreed that MIGs facilitated effective intergovernmental working, but as UK government structures they were vulnerable to changes without consultation with the devolved administrations. Ad-hoc meetings between ministers in the four governments continue, but they are no replacement for regular patterns of the exchange of information. As the Covid-19 situation in the UK reaches crisis point, intergovernmental communication should be ramped up.

The four governments should jointly agree a regular schedule of meetings to co-ordinate their plans for the next phase of the coronavirus response. These structures should be jointly owned, allowing the four governments to discuss issues related to devolved matters on an equal basis. Structures should include high-level cross-governmental meetings, providing the opportunity for the prime minister, the first ministers of Scotland and Wales and the first minister and deputy first minister of Northern Ireland to discuss their overall strategy and approach. Fora for co-ordination and co-operation at an operational level should also be established, with a regular timetable. At a minimum, after the precedent set by no-deal Brexit preparations in the lead-up to October 2019, devolved ministers should be invited to attend the Covid-19 Operations Committee as required.

The case for co-ordination

Divergence between the four governments' lockdown strategies has arisen primarily as a result of political decision making, and the lack of effective intergovernmental working that has hampered the ability of the governments to co-ordinate their responses to the coronavirus crisis.

Faced with rising cases across the UK, we have seen further evidence of the four governments moving apart rather than together. But in this next phase of the crisis, greater co-ordination is needed, and there are three key reasons for this:

- Independent attempts by each government to break the chains of transmission through short 'circuit-breaker' lockdowns may be less effective than a UK-wide approach.
- Closing the internal borders between the four nations of the UK is not a practically or politically sustainable solution to managing the spread of the virus.
- Changes to UK-wide economic support measures mean that greater agreement on the appropriate thresholds for imposing local lockdowns is needed.

A UK-wide approach may be needed to replicate the success of the phase-one lockdown

As coronavirus cases have risen again, scientific advisers in all four parts of the UK have recommended 'circuit-breaker' lockdowns, where tighter restrictions are put in place for a short period of time. Evidence presented to SAGE on 21 September noted the effectiveness of the strict coronavirus regulations put in place in March across the UK in lowering rates of transmission:

The lockdown imposed in late March (and the changes in behaviour that preceded this) had a high level of uptake and resulted in a rapid reduction in the reproduction number (R), from about 2.5-3.0 to about 0.5-0.7.⁶⁸

SAGE have stated that a two- to three-week circuit-breaker lockdown could put the epidemic back by 28 days "if this were as strict and well-adhered to as the restrictions in late May".⁶⁹

The strict lockdown in phase one of the coronavirus response was imposed on a UK-wide basis. However, this time, each part of the UK has imposed different restrictions for different periods of the time. The Welsh government and the Northern Ireland executive have opted for strict social distancing regulations across their territories; the Scottish government has tightened the rules nationwide, with additional closures in some high-prevalence areas; while the UK government acting for England has not yet imposed a 'circuit-breaker' lockdown, continuing to take a regional approach.

The effectiveness of these approaches will only become apparent in time, but there is a risk that the absence of a consistent approach across the UK could reduce the potency of such measures. The lack of a clear UK-wide message could make it harder for people to understand and therefore comply with the rules in each part of the UK. Differences in restrictions between each part of the UK, without a clear explanation, could also mean the public are less likely to accept their necessity, and therefore less likely to adhere to them. When assessing the implementation issues associated with reducing or banning household mixing, the September SAGE paper stated that: "Differences between nations (number of households, inclusion of children) risk confusion and undermining the logic of the measure."⁷⁰

There are risks, too, that a lack of co-ordination of periods of tighter restrictions could lead to one part of the UK successfully suppressing transmission of the virus, only to face cross-border transmission from another part of the UK that has not imposed restrictions. This risk is greatest on the island of Great Britain where there is significant cross-border movement, especially between Wales and England. Different considerations apply in Northern Ireland, where its shared geography with the Republic of Ireland means that greater co-ordination with the Republic of Ireland is needed for similar reasons.

Ultimately, if there is a strong scientific case for blanket rather than local restrictions within each of the four nations, then the same case would argue for UK-wide restrictions. The four governments should commission scientific advice on the effectiveness of national compared with UK-wide restrictions. If the evidence suggests that a UK-wide approach would be more effective, the four governments should seek to reach agreement on the way forward.

Closing the UK's internal borders is not the answer

In the absence of an agreed UK-wide strategy to contain the spread of the virus, talk has turned to restricting the movement of people between the different parts of the UK.

On 16 October, the Welsh government introduced new regulations preventing people living in areas with a high prevalence of coronavirus – 'high' and 'very high' tiers in England, the central belt in Scotland and the whole of Northern Ireland – from being able to travel to Wales.⁷¹ The move came after calls from the Welsh first minister for tighter travel restrictions on people from high Covid-19 areas in England.⁷²

At that point in time, people living in local lockdown areas in Wales were prevented from leaving those areas without 'reasonable excuse' by law, while those living under the 'high' Covid-19 alert level in England were advised to "reduce the number of journeys they make where possible", and those in 'very high' level areas were advised to "try and avoid travelling" in and out of these areas.⁷³ The first minister for Wales argued that efforts to reduce infection rates within Wales were "being undermined by travellers from high-prevalence areas in other parts of the UK travelling to Wales".⁷⁴

However, closing borders is not a sustainable solution. The Police Federation of England and Wales has said that plans to do this were "unenforceable because of the difficulty of identifying where people are coming from and where they are going to".⁷⁵ SAGE also considered restricting travel between different parts of the UK but concluded that such measures would be low impact and that "exemptions and enforcement [are] likely to be very complicated".⁷⁶

Alongside the practical challenges, there are also political sensitivities. The secretary of state for Wales, Simon Hart, has said that the Welsh government's border closures risk "stirring division and confusion".⁷⁷ There are bigger political risks in Scotland, where border closures risk entangling the coronavirus response with constitutional debates about independence. The number of people who regularly cross the Anglo-Scottish border is far lower than the number of people travelling between England and Wales, so the risk of cross-border transmission is lower. The first minister, Nicola Sturgeon, has said she is considering measures similar to those adopted in Wales.⁷⁸

UK-wide agreement on appropriate travel restrictions for people in high Covid-19 prevalence areas could avoid the need for any discussion of borders, with the practical and political challenges it brings.

Greater agreement on appropriate thresholds for lockdown is needed

So far in the coronavirus response, the UK-wide [Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme](#), also known as the furlough scheme, has been available to businesses and individuals no matter what lockdown restrictions are in place. However, this scheme will come to an end at the end of October.

In light of continuing restrictions, the chancellor has announced an extension of wage subsidies through the new Job Support Scheme (JSS).⁷⁹ The JSS offers two types of support. JSS (Open) is available to all businesses with fewer than 250 employees and to larger businesses who can show that their turnover has remained the same or fallen as result of coronavirus. Under this scheme, employees working a minimum of 20% of their normal hours will receive a subsidy from the UK government worth 61.67% of their pay for the hours they do not work (or up to 49.3% of their usual wages). JSS (Closed) is targeted at businesses required to close due to local lockdown restrictions.⁸⁰ The UK government has said that it will pay two thirds of employees' salaries up to £2,100 a month to eligible businesses that "as a direct result of coronavirus restrictions set by one or more of the four governments of the UK, are legally required to close their

premises”.⁸¹ Therefore, unlike the original furlough scheme, the level of entitlement under the new scheme will be based on the severity of the lockdown restrictions imposed by each government.

The governments in each part of the UK may have different thresholds for closing businesses, which may create distortions in the extent to which each part of the UK benefits from the scheme. For example, if a region in Scotland and a region in England have the same level of Covid-19 prevalence but Scotland decides to close businesses and England does not, Scotland may receive more money through the scheme in proportion to its population than England. This could lead to perceptions of unfairness among the public.

Further, while the UK government will weigh any business closures against the costs the Treasury will incur as a result of the JSS, the same considerations will not be replicated in devolved decision making. The devolved administrations may, therefore, be more willing to impose stricter lockdown measures safe in the knowledge that the UK government will bear the costs of employee support. To counter these risks, it would be in the UK government’s interests to agree appropriate thresholds for lockdown restrictions.

The devolved administrations also have a financial incentive to agree lockdown thresholds. Other economic support measures – such as business grants and business-rate holidays – are allocated on an England-only rather than a UK-wide basis. But the decisions the UK government takes on these measures will have implications for the money available for the devolved administrations to spend. In accordance with the Barnett formula – the mechanism used to adjust funding to the devolved administrations – increased spending in England will result in more money for Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.*

But if the UK government, acting for England, adopts less strict restrictions than those imposed by some of the devolved governments, it is likely to spend less money on financial support, leaving the devolved administrations with a financial shortfall.

Greater co-ordination on decisions to impose local lockdown restrictions and in particular to close businesses is required. However, for this to be achieved, the four governments of the UK will need to change their ways of working.

* Issues around the Barnett formula and coronavirus support will be explored in detail in an upcoming Institute for Government paper.

Conclusion and recommendations

The effectiveness of intergovernmental working in the UK has varied over the course of the coronavirus response. Joint decision making at the start of the crisis was replaced by increasing divergence as the four governments opted to ease lockdown restrictions at different speeds and in different ways. In September, as Covid-19 cases rose, ministers in each part of the UK began to tighten restrictions, and there was a brief period of increased consistency. However, more fundamental differences in approach between the four parts of the UK began to emerge again in October, with Wales and Northern Ireland opting for strict, short 'circuit-breaker' lockdowns, the UK government maintaining a softer regional approach in England and Scotland falling somewhere in the middle.

Rather than epidemiological evidence or scientific advice, this paper has found that different political judgments that the four governments have made over the appropriate balance between different risks have been the primary driver of divergence between the four nations. This suggests that there may be room for greater co-ordination between the four governments if agreement can be reached at a political level.

The use of intergovernmental fora has declined since May, reducing opportunities for the four governments to co-ordinate their approaches and manage the consequences of divergence.

As the UK faces a second wave of coronavirus, a more co-ordinated approach is needed. The four governments should:

- Establish a regular schedule of intergovernmental meetings, including high-level cross-government meetings between leaders, and more frequent operational-level meetings.
- Commission scientific advice on the effectiveness of a UK-wide 'circuit-breaker' lockdown as opposed to separate approaches in each of the devolved administrations.
- Agree restrictions on travel to limit the spread of coronavirus from areas of high prevalence of coronavirus to areas of lower prevalence to prevent further restrictions at the UK's internal borders. Alongside this, the four governments should also agree thresholds for countries to be added to or removed from the list of 'travel corridors', from which returning travellers are not required to self-isolate.
- Agree thresholds for imposing lockdown conditions that will trigger economic support measures to ensure an equitable distribution of these measures across the UK.

All four governments of the UK must reach any agreement jointly. The UK government cannot simply determine its own strategy and expect the devolved administrations to follow. This may, at times, act as a constraint on each part of the UK's decision making. But politicians in all parts of the UK need to be absolutely sure they are not forgoing the potential benefits of making efforts to achieve greater co-ordination – in terms of lives saved – because they are unwilling to put in the effort to reach consensus on the best way forward for the whole of the UK.

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Acknowledgements

I am incredibly grateful to those who have spoken to me in the process of my research for this paper. Thanks to Alex Nice, Aron Cheung and Melissa Ittoo for their work on the figures and graphics in this report. I would also like to thank Akash Paun, Hannah White and Emma Norris for their helpful comments on early drafts of the paper. And Rowena Mayhew, Will Driscoll and Sam Macrory for their work in preparing this paper for publication.

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October 2020

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