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Coronavirus hotel quarantine

Key questions for the government

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The UK government is finalising arrangements for a partial hotel quarantine system to begin on 15 February 2021. This follows the announcement on 27 January that UK citizens and residents arriving from high-risk countries (currently numbering around 30) will be required to quarantine in designated hotels for 10 days,[1] and subsequent confirmation that arrivals will be charged £1,750 for their stay.

The government has said the purpose of this policy is to "reduce the risk of a new variant of the virus being transmitted from someone coming into the UK"[2] and to "protect the public and our world-class vaccination programme" from variants against which existing vaccines might prove to be ineffective.[3] However, it has not been clear about whether it wants merely to *reduce* the number of infected travellers mixing in the community – and if so, by how much – or if its goal is to stop variants of concern entering the country altogether.

It is difficult to see how a selective quarantine system could achieve the latter. As SAGE has pointed out, there would be a time lag between a new variant arising and the government detecting it and shutting down travel from the relevant country.[4]

But even assuming the government's goal is to reduce rather than stop the inflow of dangerous variants, there are big gaps in its proposed quarantine policy that will undermine its effectiveness. And it must also tackle the numerous, inherent challenges of setting up any kind of hotel quarantine system.

This paper outlines those gaps and challenges, posing a series of questions the government must answer if it wants its quarantine system to be a success. It draws on past Institute for Government research on outsourcing, the government's handling of testing and contact tracing, and pandemic co-ordination across the UK and devolved administrations – as well as the use of hotel quarantine schemes overseas (particularly in Australia). If the government cannot find good answers to these questions, soon, then its partial quarantine policy is likely to prove a costly failure – little more than expensive window dressing.

A selective hotel quarantine system presents unique difficulties

The countries that have used hotel quarantine to keep their populations largely Covid-free have applied it to all, or nearly all, overseas arrivals. Applying quarantine only to travellers from selected 'high risk' countries creates additional challenges – the need to be able to quickly detect new variants and to distinguish between travellers who need to quarantine in hotels and those who do not. The potential for differing approaches in the devolved nations and the Republic of Ireland, from where travellers can enter the UK without having to self-isolate, adds another layer of complexity to the UK government's proposed policy.

Does the government know where new variants of concern are coming from?

The government's selective approach means it will need perfect, or near perfect, information about the emergence of new variants of concern overseas. Only with this can it add relevant countries to its 'banned list' before those variants take hold in the UK.

SAGE has reportedly concluded (in as yet unpublished minutes) that 'reactive, geographically targeted [travel bans] cannot be relied upon to stop importation of new variants' because of the time lag between variants developing and being recognised.[5] While the UK is a world leader in genomic sequencing of the virus, not all countries share this capability, taking much of the necessary early detection out of its hands.[6] However, SAGE members did also conclude there could be a 'rationale for attempting to reduce importation of even small numbers of infectious cases'.[7]

Is there a consistent policy across all four nations of the UK?

If the four nations of the UK (and the Republic of Ireland) set up quarantine schemes with differing rules and scope, their administrations will need to work together to find ways to ensure that travellers are clear about the policies that apply to them and do not side-step the rules of their final destination. Although air transport and foreign policy are reserved matters (that is, the competence of London not the devolved capitals), quarantine policy must be implemented through public health legislation in each part of the UK, which is devolved.[8]

Current signals suggest divergence is likely. The Scottish government has said it wants to implement a blanket hotel quarantine policy. This means that travellers to Scotland from countries only subject to self-isolation requirements in England, should the two differ, could fly into the latter then travel to Scotland via rail or road and thus avoid hotel quarantine.

A similar trick – the 'Dublin dodge'[9] – is already being observed in Ireland: with direct travel from the United Arab Emirates (UAE) to the UK banned, passengers are reportedly travelling via Ireland, which does not have the UAE on its banned list, with the potential to skip UK self-isolation after their home leg because arrivals from Ireland are not subject to self-isolation requirements.[10] Further, Ireland does not currently require people travelling on to Northern Ireland to provide the address at which they will self-isolate, leaving the Northern Ireland authorities hamstrung, although the Irish government does plan to change this.[11]

There are ways – albeit burdensome – to reduce this risk. The Scottish government could ask land arrivals to declare they had not recently arrived from overseas (and conduct checks of these declarations), and Border Force could share passenger arrival information with authorities in the devolved nations – as Ireland has said it is planning to do with the Northern Ireland executive.[12] But these would be difficult to implement – normally, thousands of cars would cross the border every day[13] – and easily evaded, for example, by supplying a false address in England.

And while the UK government has said it is working "closely" with the devolved administrations,[14] the "shambolic" process through which it sought agreement to the original 'travel corridor' policy shows the difficulty of collaboration.[15] In Scotland's case, short of making any arrival from England undergo hotel quarantine, it is difficult to see how it could enforce its proposed rules while they differ from other nations of the UK.

What checks are in place to stop people evading quarantine requirements?

Even if there were consistent rules across the UK and Ireland, the government's proposed quarantine policy would be open to being side-stepped. It will need to develop procedures and gather the right information to minimise this risk.

The government has banned direct flights from countries on its 'high risk' list, but UK citizens and residents who have been in those countries can still travel via third countries that are only subject to self-isolation requirements. The government will need to be able to distinguish between people who need to go into hotel quarantine and those who need only self-isolate at home.

Border Force officers could inspect the passports of all travellers for stamps from 'red list' countries, and the government could seek information from airlines about the origins of its passengers, but neither would be a perfect solution. Not all countries stamp passports (particularly on exit) and travellers arriving from banned countries may not have travelled on a single ticket.

The government has indicated it will rely on people declaring their travel history, in person or through the existing passenger locator form, backed up with possible prison sentences for providing false information.* But the cost, time and loss of liberty involved in undertaking hotel quarantine still provide a significant disincentive for compliance. Currently, incoming passengers can be fined £500 for failing to complete the passenger locator form and show it to border officials,[16] but they cannot be detained or arrested if they have right of entry to the UK.[17] The government will need to fix this loophole. Survey evidence showing relatively poor compliance with self-isolation requirements casts further doubt on the effectiveness of a system reliant on honesty.**

The government's selective quarantine policy – and the mixing in ports, railway stations and airports of passengers subject to hotel quarantine with those who are not – also creates a risk that people coming from lower-risk countries catch dangerous variants in transit and then pass these on once they arrive in the UK, if they do not strictly comply with home quarantine requirements. Anecdotal evidence suggests compliance with these existing requirements is far from perfect[18] and the government conducts relatively few checks.***

The government must tackle the challenges inherent to any hotel quarantine

As well as the difficulties created by its specific policy choices outlined above, the government must also work through the steps that have faced all countries seeking to implement hotel quarantine: clarifying lines of responsibility, staffing its operation with appropriately qualified people, getting its contracts right and supporting people during their stay in hotel quarantine.

Who is in charge?

The government's failure to be clear about policy responsibility has been a recurring theme of this crisis. For instance, in the early stages of the testing programme senior officials gave conflicting advice about whether Public Health England or the Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC) was in charge of the programme, making it difficult to pinpoint accountability.[19]

*   Grant Shapps and Priti Patel wrote to the House of Commons Home Affairs Committee on 3 February 2021 saying the government will aim to check all passenger locator forms. Lucy Moreton of the ISU, which represents Home Office immigration officers, previously told the committee that border officials aim to check the forms of around 10% of arrivals and that there is no facility to check the veracity of the information provided: House of Commons Home Affairs Committee, *Home Office preparedness for Covid-19 (coronavirus),* HC232, 13 January 2021, retrieved 9 February 2021, https://committees.parliament.uk/oralevidence/1487/pdf/, Q868-9
**   Baronness Dido Harding told a parliamentary committee that surveys showed that fewer than 60% of people reported fully complying with instructions to self-isolate: Hunt J, tweet, https://twitter.com/Jeremy_Hunt/status/1356928563501543426, 3 February 2021, retrieved 9 February 2021.
***   Public Health England has been contacting 1,500 people per day by phone to confirm they are self-isolating: Patel P and Shapps G, letter to the chair of the House of Commons Home Affairs Committee, 3 February 2021, retrieved 9 Feburary 2021, https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/4557/documents/46106/default, p. 6. This compares to around 10,000 people arriving in the UK every day in late January: Shields B, 'Britain's 'Australian-style' hotel quarantine regime in disarray a week before it starts', *Sydney Morning Herald,* 9 February 2021, retrieved 9 February 2021, www.smh.com.au/world/europe/britain-s-australian-style-hotel-quarantine-regime-in-disarray-a-week-before-it-starts-20210209-p570pu.html

The government must learn from these mistakes. Hotel quarantine will be a programme that cuts across departmental boundaries, with roles for the Home Office, Department for Transport, DHSC, the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, and other departments, as well as outsourcing companies.

Early signs were not promising. Asked by journalists on 4 February 2021 who was in charge, the prime minister's spokesperson could only offer that "departments are working closely together", though this was followed up by a government press release the following day announcing that the health secretary would take the lead, supported by a new cabinet sub-committee.[20]

The government must be clear – both internally and with the public and parliament – about which departments and ministers are responsible for what elements of the programme, how they will be co-ordinated and who has ultimate responsibility. This will help ensure important tasks are not duplicated or overlooked, and make clear where responsibility lies for rectifying any mistakes or improving procedures. Any contractors involved in the programme also need to know where they should seek advice and to whom they should flag any problems.

Will an appropriately skilled workforce run hotel quarantine?

The point of any hotel quarantine programme is to keep the virus contained within hotel facilities, and not allow it to leak out into the broader community. This means that staff need adequate knowledge of infection-control procedures, with supervision and guidance from health professionals, to avoid being a conduit of infection (and indeed to keep them safe from the virus as well).

Early reports have indicated the government is looking to contract private security guards to ensure travellers remain in their rooms.[21] This may not be the most appropriate choice: inadequate expertise and poor training of contracted security guards in Melbourne's hotel quarantine system were blamed for that city's 'second wave', where the virus was re-seeded in the community via infected security guards.[22]

Inadequate expertise is not the only problem with using private security guards. They are often on relatively low wages with precarious conditions of employment. Some may be working multiple jobs.[23] Economic necessity works against such a workforce self-isolating, or even getting tested, in the event of developing symptoms, and if they do contract the virus, they could spread it to colleagues and customers in other workplaces.

While some quarantine systems do continue to use private security guards (such as the states of Western Australia and New South Wales),[24] others like that in Victoria use police, military, prison and parole officers; New Zealand uses security guards directly employed by the government.[25] These workers have secure terms and conditions of employment, and should also have a stronger grounding in workplace safety procedures and dealing with vulnerable people than contractors.

Where private security guards are used, they should have continuous, tailored training and close supervision from health professionals – as should any person working in a hotel quarantine setting. The difficulty for the UK is that the NHS is already grappling with a staff shortage – the Royal College of Nursing reports 38,000 vacant positions in England[26] – a shortage exacerbated by demand from Covid patients and significant levels of staff self-isolating. One survey reported that 94% of nurses had worked short-staffed shifts in the second half of January 2021 due to colleagues being sick or self-isolating.[27]

Will the government contract well with security providers and hotels?

Past Institute for Government research on outsourcing has shown that the UK's approach to outsourcing has often prioritised cost minimisation above the importance of allocating risk to the party best placed to bear it, and above ensuring that contractors provide a high-quality service. The latter creates heightened dangers where vulnerable people are involved.[28] During the pandemic, the government has shown a worrying tendency to contract generalist companies to deliver contract tracing operations, neglecting the importance of specialist expertise.[29] Instances of contracting at speed and without competition – skipping the usual checks and balances – have also opened the government to accusations of cronyism.[30]

Officials negotiating contracts for the hotel quarantine programme must have access to advice from experts in infection prevention and control, and other public health officials. The government should not attempt to shift onto hotels and commercial cleaners responsibility for worker safety, providing PPE and managing infection prevention and control.[31] These are all critical responsibilities these parties would not be expected to assume in the course of their ordinary business.

Even if the government relies on private security companies to supply workers, it should not rely on them to deliver training in infection control. This should be provided by health professionals and specifically tailored to the role the government wants them to play (and therefore the level of contact they have with guests) in hotel settings. In the initial phases of Melbourne's hotel quarantine programme, this responsibility was assigned to the security companies, which resulted in inconsistent and sometimes inadequate standards across the hotel network.[32]

If the government does outsource aspects of the hotel quarantine programme, it should consider how it can use its contracts with those companies to minimise the risk of infection being spread by outsourced staff working multiple jobs, for instance, by stipulating minimum rates of pay or prohibiting outside employment.

In relation to hotels, contracting is about more than securing enough rooms. The government must ensure flexibility in its contracts to grow and shrink hotel capacity as the scope of the programme changes, and also be clear about how it will work with hotels to ensure cleanliness and hygiene for both staff and guests. It will also need to source hotels with appropriate ventilation: there have been suspected cases of

transmission between guests in adjacent rooms in Australian hotels. It also needs the flexibility to terminate contracts if hotels turn out to be unsuitable or unable to provide a safe environment.[*]

How will the government support the physical and mental health needs of people in quarantine?

Being confined to a hotel room can be difficult even for those with good mental health, and there have been cases of self-harm and even suicide in quarantine programmes overseas where guests had pre-existing mental health conditions.[33] The government will need to offer access to dedicated counselling and regular welfare checks, as well as clear and consistent routes through which people in quarantine can seek assistance in case of non-Covid illness and escalate concerns or complaints about the programme.

This should extend to a process for granting quarantine exemptions on compassionate grounds. Some travellers will be returning to the UK to attend, for example, funerals or to visit terminally ill friends and family. A consistent and transparent process will reduce stress for people seeking exemptions and help avoid special cases being litigated via media coverage.

Does the government have a plan for citizens and residents stuck overseas?

With only a limited number of 'red list' countries, UK citizens and residents abroad do not yet face the difficulties of many Australians and New Zealanders trying to return home. This may change should the banned list grow significantly. The government should have a plan for how it will manage demand from people wanting to enter or return to the UK should it exceed the supply of hotel quarantine places – for instance through numerical caps – and how it will support those people unable to return.[**]

A key question for the government if it wished to impose caps would be how it implemented them. In the Australian system, state and federal governments decide on state-by-state weekly caps, with airlines deciding who they carry within those limits. In practice, this has meant that seats on planes, and therefore access to the country, are granted to those willing to pay the most for tickets, leading to last minute cancellations particularly for economy passengers.

A better approach is that pursued by New Zealand, where returning citizens and residents book places in the hotel quarantine system before booking flights. While New Zealand is suffering similar problems with demand outstripping supply, its system offers more certainty for travellers – and a more egalitarian approach.

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[*]   In one case in Australia, a hotel was evacuated late at night due to safety concerns: Nguyen K and Kennedy J, 'Complaints lodged against 'filthy' Sydney Travelodge Hotel before it was scrapped from coronavirus quarantine program', ABC News, 25 August 2020, retrieved 9 February 2021, www.abc.net.au/news/2020-08-26/guests-complaints-preceded-coronavirus-sydney-hotel-evacuation/12595198
[**] The Australian government has organised repatriation flights and offered loans to Australians in financial distress who are stranded overseas.

Can the government contain the spread of new variants if they do escape hotel quarantine?

Sooner or later, any UK hotel quarantine system will probably see cases escape into the community, as five (of six) Australian states and New Zealand have experienced. This means quarantine needs to be supplemented with a strong testing and contact tracing system that can spot and halt the spread of dangerous variants by identifying exposure sites, tracing contacts and isolating them, and conducting genomic sequencing of cases.

This will require rapid testing capability targeted at these variants, dedicated contact tracers, record keeping requirements at businesses and other public venues, and monitoring of close contacts' compliance with isolation requirements.

These capabilities are all part of the general infrastructure that is needed to stay on top of the virus within the UK's borders, along with possible further lockdowns if case numbers grow beyond the reach of test, trace and isolate operations. To avoid hotel quarantine being a futile exercise, the government will need to continue to suppress community transmission within the UK, and with it, the potential for new, homegrown variants.[34]

Conclusion

If the government's policy on hotel quarantine offers satisfactory answers to all the questions set out in this paper, then a partial system should reduce the number of new variant cases making their way through the arrivals lounge and into the UK.

But such a system will not, and cannot, eliminate the possibility of new variants spreading and potentially undermining the vaccine rollout. And while transmission of the virus within the UK remains high, so too does the potential for homegrown variants, such as that seen in Kent and the southeast, to arise.

The government says it is taking a tough line on borders. But what it is poised to deliver is characteristic of much of its pandemic response: an uneasy compromise between ministers prioritising health outcomes and others concerned about the impact on the economy, but which risks achieving the objectives of neither. Ultimately, the government must decide whether it actually wants to keep variants of concern out of the UK or just give the impression it is trying to do so.

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