



Lifting lockdown in 2021

The next phase of the government's coronavirus strategy

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Summary

With 15 million people vaccinated in the UK in two months, and the latest data suggesting that the remaining priority groups will be reached by late March, the prime minister is due to set out plans for how the UK government will ease lockdown restrictions in England.

This will be the third time that the UK government has lifted a national lockdown since the start of the pandemic. The two previous relaxations were followed by a rise in Covid-19 cases and deaths, and a return to restrictions on people's lives. There are signs that Boris Johnson's government has learned from some of the mistakes it made in lifting the first lockdown, between May and June 2020, and the second one, briefly, in December. But despite the recent fall in cases, and the major progress made so far in the vaccine roll-out, implementing a successful exit strategy will not be easy.

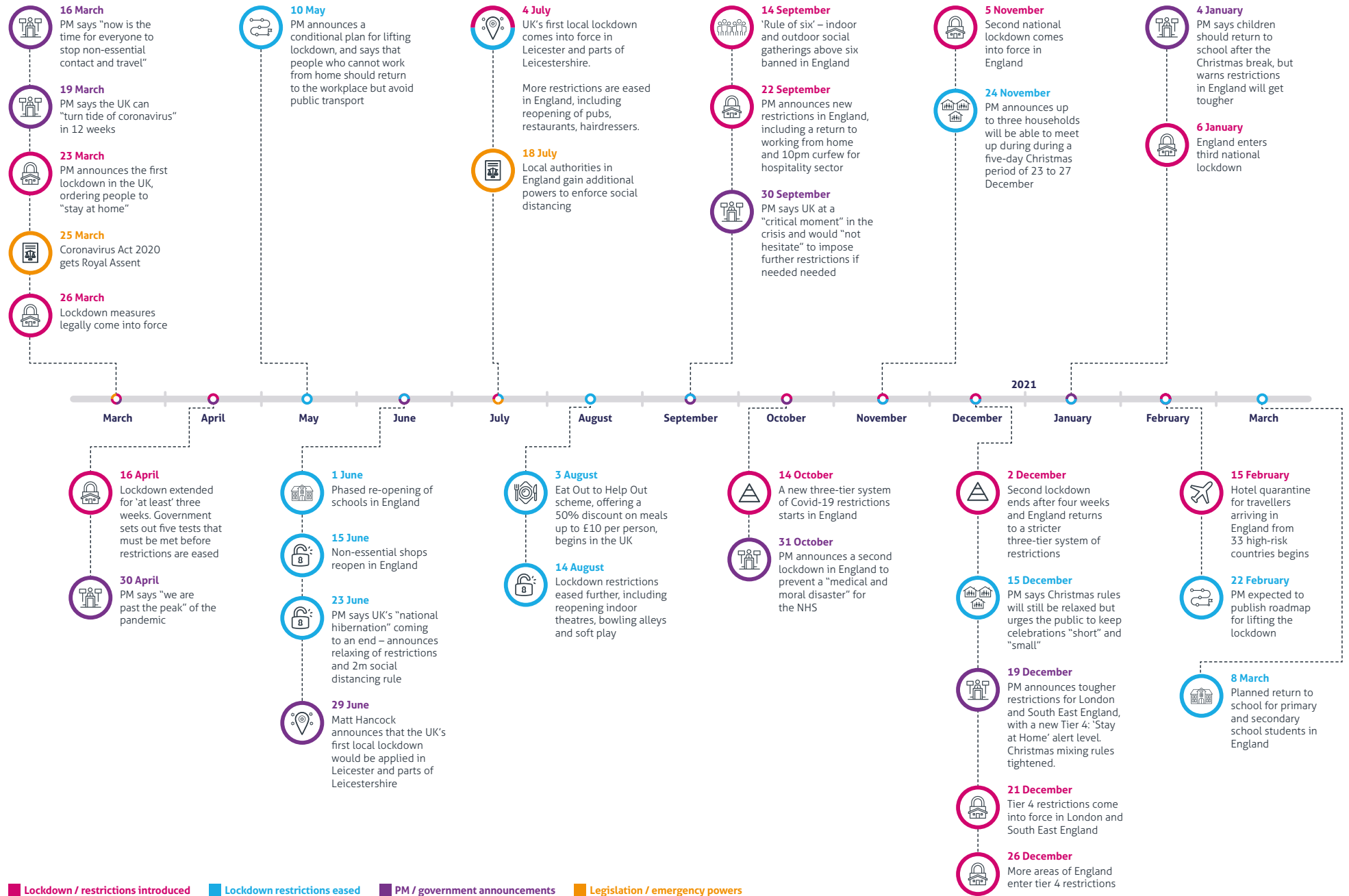
The UK's vaccination success offers light at the end of the tunnel. But navigating a path out of the crisis remains fraught with dangers. The prime minister has admitted that he cannot provide a "cast-iron guarantee" that he will not have to impose a further lockdown – the threat from unknown variants alone would make such a pledge unwise.

But if England enters a fourth lockdown as a result of a mismanaged exit from the third, it will represent a serious failure of governance. This paper offers our advice on what the government needs to do now to avoid such an eventuality.

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- **The government's new 'roadmap' should set out how its objectives have changed – and how these will guide its overarching approach.** Its May 2020 roadmap for lifting lockdown restrictions set out multiple objectives, tests and conditions but failed to adequately explain how these would be assessed or reconciled. It remained unclear to scientific advisers what the government's priorities were. Following a large second wave, the government seems to favour a slower relaxation this time, with the aim of preventing deaths, driving down cases and minimising the risk of variants emerging. In this it is supported by many scientists wary of a third wave, but is challenged by critics – principally from the Conservative backbenches – who favour a quicker return of economic activity. The government needs to be upfront about how it will balance its objectives and make a clear case for its approach to the public and parliament.
 - **The roadmap must be agreed by the whole cabinet.** After publication of the May 2020 roadmap, departments still had conflicting views of the threat facing the country and the approach needed to tackle it. This led to policy incoherence, exacerbated by problems in making sure departments were fully incorporated into decision making. The government needs to avoid rehashing the same arguments that the roadmap was meant to decide every time it faces a new policy choice.
 - **Economic policies made in the Treasury need to be aligned with the government roadmap.** Any new plan will be undermined if the Treasury is not on board. At other key moments in the crisis the department has pursued policies that have been mistimed or inconsistent with other government initiatives, and it has been slow to adapt. The chancellor's imminent budget will be an early indicator of how well in step the chancellor and prime minister are.
 - **The government must set out what metrics and data it will use to make decisions.** The prime minister has so far refused calls to offer firm dates, beyond the plan for reopening schools on 8 March. This is sensible: he has been repeatedly caught out by making optimistic promises he cannot keep. The government should instead peg the easing of restrictions to clear metrics – on vaccinations, cases, hospital admissions and the R number – and say that any indicative dates will be contingent on these.
 - **The government must explain how it will monitor and adapt its approach.** The government has often adapted too slowly. This year, with uncertainty about variants – but also rapid developments in vaccines and testing capability – it could easily find its approach is too ambitious, or too cautious. It should be clear about how it will change tack, if required, and make sure departments and local authorities are prepared if it does so, including for quickly controlling local flare-ups.

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- **The government should be realistic about what is required of hotel quarantine, contact tracing and self-isolation.** The vaccination programme alone will not get the UK out of the crisis – the government will need to be able to prevent importations and control transmission. But its hotel quarantine appears “leaky” and its contact tracing system still suffers from high levels of non-compliance. The government should set out the level of performance required of these components, and the changes it will make to achieve that.
 - **The government’s communications strategy must not return to the mistakes of last year.** Clarity about what the public needed to do was undermined by inconsistent communication throughout 2020. To maintain public (and political) support, the government needs to be much clearer about the riskiness of different behaviours and the evidence that lies behind the rules with which it is asking people to comply. Above all ministers need to be consistent – whether that is over the prospect of summer holidays or the long-term need for social distancing and mask-wearing. Otherwise they will create confusion and undermine public support.

Figure 1 **Timeline of UK government coronavirus lockdowns, March 2020 to March 2021**



Source: Institute for Government analysis

The government objectives have changed: it must face that head on

A battle has already emerged over what the government's objectives behind lockdown easing should be. Some Conservative MPs argue that restrictions should be released once the most vulnerable are protected. After this has been achieved, they would prioritise reducing the harm caused by lockdowns, including to people's livelihoods and mental health – in other words, open up. They have expressed concern about 'mission creep' and argue that in shifting away from its original objectives – of preventing hospitalisations and deaths – the government has 'moved the goalposts'.

Others have called for a 'zero-Covid' approach of eliminating the virus as adopted by some other countries. But this would require far stricter restrictions that would need to be in place for a very long time, including on international travel. In the nearer term, some emphasise the desirability of getting levels of transmission low enough that the virus can be kept under control through an effective test, trace and isolate system.

The government has needed to change its approach in response to changing circumstances. The situation it faces has changed in two significant ways since last year. The first is the arrival of vaccines. The second is greater knowledge about the virus – we now know more about the potential for further mutation (though still not enough to remove this as a threat).

The current roll-out of vaccines buys the government more room to manoeuvre, but it does not negate all the risks that coronavirus brings, including the impact of 'long Covid' for those experiencing moderate symptoms. Deaths, along with cases of hospitalisation, are decreasing, but the government is right to urge caution until it is clear how far this is down to the vaccines taking effect, rather than the current lockdown.

Meanwhile, the Kent, South African and Brazilian variants show how quickly the Covid threat can change. While there is currently reasonable confidence that these variants have not undermined vaccine efficacy, that possibility cannot be ruled out.* New or booster vaccines can be developed, but the possibility of new, more severe or vaccine-resistant strains is a risk the government feels it cannot ignore.

The government needs to say how this changed picture has altered its objectives. Its short-term aim seems to be making sure that restrictions are in place long enough for the vaccines to take effect across more of the population, particularly as it gathers more evidence about what level of safety current vaccines provide. But its longer-term overarching strategy now appears to be to avoid the conditions that could lead to a fourth lockdown by reducing the risk of new variants and maintaining vaccine efficacy.

* Some studies have suggested the Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine is less effective against the South African variant, but this research is so far uncertain and it is likely that it offers some protection, <https://unherd.com/2021/02/how-worrying-is-the-south-africa-variant>

To explain how its objectives have guided the strategy, the government needs to talk about how it is assessing risk and what that means for the levels of infection it is willing to tolerate. Government scientific advisers have been caught out in the past by projecting death rates that could be interpreted as being 'acceptable' to No.10. But that should not preclude the government helping the public understand how it is currently judging the situation. It can do this by going back to basics in assessing the risk of higher infections before more people are vaccinated, or the possibility of severe virus mutation: what does it consider the risks of long Covid, what has it concluded is the possibility of severe virus mutation happening, how severe an impact would it be if it did, and what the level of overall risk is that it therefore considers acceptable? Just because there is not yet definitive scientific evidence on these issues does not mean the government should avoid talking about how it is judging the available evidence. Others will disagree on the government's assessment, but it should not avoid the argument.

The government's new roadmap also needs to align its objectives with other, equally important considerations. Last year the government too often switched between different concerns that proved hard to reconcile. In May 2020 it set out five tests for justifying the easing of restrictions, including NHS capacity, adequate personal protective equipment (PPE), reliable falls in deaths and infection rates, and signs that the risk of a second peak could be avoided. But it was also concerned with other pressures outside these 'tests', including reducing further damage to the economy and to people's livelihoods, the impact on wellbeing, mental health and children's education – all met with an overarching desire to find a path to pre-pandemic normality.

Attempting to balance all of these objectives at once, rather than maintaining a clear strategy, meant the government swung back and forth between different approaches. It sometimes tended towards an optimisation strategy (aiming for the best outcome but risking the worst) rather than a precautionary or risk-avoidance strategy (that never gets the best but avoids the worst). In drawing up, and publishing, its new roadmap the hope is that the government learns from this and lands on an approach it can stick to more consistently.

The whole of government needs to sign up to the roadmap

The UK government needs to ensure that this time around it has a more consistent approach to how decisions are made. If its overarching strategy is to be a success all its members must be signed up to it – and continue to use it to guide subsequent decisions.

By the summer after the first lockdown, the government's strategy started to lose a sense of cohesion, partly because departments began to prioritise different objectives. As we wrote before the first lockdown, the government should have expected to face problems in how to manage trade-offs "in particular between minimising deaths from coronavirus, minimising deaths from other causes or improving economic wellbeing".¹ Health and economic objectives were not inherently in conflict; as many economists have since pointed out, failing to control the virus led to further lockdowns that have only damaged the economy more. But the government's policies were sometimes presented as if this was a binary choice and tensions between those who wanted a more cautious or a less restrictive approach were laid bare in many media stories of cabinet disputes.

Different views about the right level of caution will continue. The health secretary, Matt Hancock, and chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, Michael Gove, are reported to have consistently pushed for tighter restrictions; the chancellor, Rishi Sunak, has often been reported as resisting them. There should be healthy challenge within government: decisions need to be constantly re-examined in light of changing circumstances and there should be debate in cabinet when decisions require a compromise between the latest evidence, scientific or otherwise, and other concerns. But every decision becoming a battleground makes for less coherent policy and confuses the public.

Though largely a communications failure, the recent inability to present a clear line on whether people should book summer holidays was a reminder of how easily confusion is created when members of the government are pulling in different directions. If the government decides to change its approach, that should also be a collective decision.

Announcing and publishing the strategy itself will only go so far to achieving a collective approach. Like any government document, it is likely to be the result of the usual drafting compromises within Whitehall. But, like last May's effort, it will soon become defunct if it does not guide how government goes about making subsequent decisions and ensure that decision making is more joined up than it was last year.

The government went through several decision-making models during the early months of the pandemic, eventually settling on the Covid Strategy and Covid Operations sub-committees feeding into cabinet. But some of its major problems last year occurred when policies were developed in isolation, such as the failure to allow schools and universities adequate time to prepare for reopening (and closing again). At other times science advice was not brought together with other evidence and concerns, particularly when the Treasury was pushing for greater openness without factoring in the possible impact of its policies on transmission rates.

Economic policies made in the Treasury need to be aligned with the government roadmap

The need for cabinet agreement on the roadmap is especially true of the Treasury, which faces the task of managing the UK's economic recovery as it emerges from lockdown, while ensuring economic policies do not undermine the government's ability to control the virus. Considerable uncertainty remains about the exit from lockdown. But it is critical that the Treasury's approach is aligned with that set out by the prime minister – as well as with the devolved nations who are considering their own approach to lockdown lifting – and that its economic policy decisions are clearly tied to changes in the level of restrictions and prevalence of the virus rather than a rigid timetable. The chancellor cannot expect to embark on an unwavering journey to economic recovery. If there is one lesson he should learn from 2020, it is that he needs to be willing to adapt as circumstances change.

So far in the crisis, the Treasury has often pursued policies that have been mistimed or inconsistent with other government initiatives, and it has been slow to respond to evidence that changes were needed to manage rising prevalence of the virus. The roadmap will be swiftly undermined if the chancellor's budget does not back it up.

As we described last April, there needs to be broadly three types of economic policy in response to coronavirus, which may run concurrently at times.

- **Acute rescue measures** to help businesses and households to keep going through the crisis, including the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme (CJRS, or 'furlough') and government-backed loans to businesses.
- **Temporary fiscal stimulus measures** aimed at bolstering the economic recovery once the virus can be held at bay and social and economic restrictions can start to be lifted.
- Policies aimed at helping the economy to **adjust to any permanent effects** of Covid and minimising the negative long-term impact of the pandemic.

In charting the course of policy over the next few months, Sunak must learn from what went wrong on the previous two occasions that he tried to set the country on to a path of economic recovery, in the summer and the autumn of last year.

At the end of the summer the chancellor launched an effort to reinvigorate the leisure and hospitality sectors. The VAT cut for hospitality, leisure and tourism businesses and – in particular – the Eat Out to Help Out scheme were designed to encourage people to get out, socialise and spend their money with hard-hit businesses. With the benefit of hindsight it is clear that these policies were not appropriate at a time when there was still a significant risk that greater social interaction, coupled with the planned reopening of schools and universities, increased the risk of a second wave. Even at the time, the Treasury's policies seemed inconsistent with the actions of other departments that were planning on the basis that a second wave was a real possibility.

The government's leading epidemiologists were not consulted on the policies and one subsequently called it "epidemiologically illiterate" to subsidise indoor gatherings, where the risk of transmission was highest. The Treasury's recent attempt to repair the reputation of Eat Out to Help Out, on the basis of dubious evidence, suggested it has not learned from its mistake.

In the autumn, the chancellor was again caught out by assuming that further public health restrictions would not be required over the winter and Sunak tried to start winding down support for businesses and households, focusing support only on 'viable' jobs and encouraging other sectors of the economy to start adjusting. Even when he first announced (in late September) that the CJRS would be replaced by a new – less generous – Job Support Scheme from the beginning of November, this seemed to many, including the Institute for Government,² a somewhat risky strategy. Sunak was too slow to adapt his plans, continuing to hope a second lockdown would be avoided even as evidence mounted that the country was not on the path back to normality.

The financial support that the government offers to individuals also has an important bearing on their behaviour and therefore transmission of the virus. There have been concerns raised about this in relation to low compliance with NHS Test and Trace: many, including former health secretary Jeremy Hunt, have concluded that the current financial support is inadequate. The government has established a scheme, administered by councils, but take up has been low, with reports of problems with applications.³

The mandatory sick pay to which employees are entitled in the UK is also low relative to what is on offer in other countries. On average across the OECD, mandatory sick pay replaces 70% of employees' earnings for the first four weeks of absence due to Covid, but this figure is only around 10% in the UK.⁴ If the government intends to rely on compliance for a cautious approach to lockdown easing, it needs to address these problems or risk missing out on important tools at its disposal.

The government should continue to focus on metrics and data – not dates

In its exit strategy for the current lockdown, it would be sensible for the government to offer an indicative timeline that it aspires to when releasing certain restrictions. But it should emphasise that these dates are not fixed and are contingent on the impact of easing restrictions and certain metrics being met. It then needs to make sure that it follows through and maintains this approach or it risks undermining trust in how it is taking decisions.

The prime minister has previously shown a preference for making ambitious pledges – the UK would “send the virus packing in 12 weeks” or have a “significant return to normality by Christmas” – which have been overtaken by events. These public commitments made it harder for the government to respond to new information. On opening up by Christmas, the government found itself boxed in as data on transmission grew worse throughout December, until it eventually caved and made a last-minute U-turn.

The Covid Recovery Group, made up of Conservative MPs who favour a faster releasing of lockdown restrictions, has again put pressure on the government to offer firm dates, linked to the vaccination programme. It has argued for some schools to return in February, pubs and restaurants to open by Easter and the remainder of restrictions to be removed by the end of April, when the vaccination campaign will have reached the most vulnerable groups. So far, the government has indicated that it will plan on a return of both primary and secondary schools on 8 March but otherwise refused to be drawn on more speculative dates. This shows that it has learned from over-promising in the past. But the pressure for greater certainty will increase, particularly as infection levels continue to fall and vaccination numbers continue to rise.

More important than the indicative timeline that many will be looking for, the roadmap should set out the metrics that will guide the government’s decision making – for example, around progress with vaccinations, infection levels, hospitalisations and the R number.

In England, as of 16 February, the daily number of people testing positive remains just under 9,000, while the latest Office for National Statistics infection survey (which covers up to the first week of February) estimated just under 700,000 in the community had Covid-19.⁵ SAGE members have suggested these numbers need to fall to below 1,000 and 50,000 respectively before there is a significant release of measures.⁶ While the latest Imperial REACT study shows infections falling sharply (by two thirds between January and February), NHS leaders have highlighted that with 17,000 people in hospital, capacity could easily be stretched by a bounce in infections.⁷

Even once the vulnerable are protected (by the end of March on the current trajectory), there is a risk that if the government releases measures too quickly it will once again lose control of transmission within the unprotected population. This is a particular

threat with a more transmissible variant, as data from Israel (another country progressing at speed with vaccinations) suggests.⁸ This is what happened when the first lockdown was released in the summer, with a spike of infections in the north of England. The government's roadmap therefore heavily depends on how the government will go about adapting its response if the data suggests it must.

The government needs to be prepared for how it will monitor and adapt its strategy

The purpose of monitoring key metrics is to allow the government to adapt its approach. We made this point back in April 2020, arguing that the first lockdown exit strategy should “phase in changes, and be willing to adapt its approach over time... responding as new evidence comes to light”.⁹

This advice was not followed. In early summer, the government said it would assess the impact of lockdown easing measures against five tests, related to limiting the spread of and minimising deaths from Covid-19. But these tests set vague criteria, and the government did not explain how it would assess whether measures had led to them being met.¹⁰ Even as the R rate went above 1 from July, the government did not take strong action to bring transmission back under control.

The government's ability to analyse the effect of lockdown easing measures in the summer was also undermined by its decision to make multiple changes – including the return to schools and reopening workplaces – at a similar time. John Edmunds, a SAGE member and an epidemiologist at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, explained that scientists had little data on the effect these measures would have and doing them all at once (which they advised against) made it difficult to monitor.

This time around, there are indications that the government has learned from these problems. The government is already saying it will be led by data and it has briefed that it will sequence the lifting of lockdown, staggering the return to schools, greater outdoor mixing, the reopening of pubs and restaurants, and so on. But if so, it needs to learn another lesson from 2020 and make sure that it maintains this approach as it goes about implementing its plan.

There are still significant uncertainties that may require a change to which restrictions can be eased, and when. The Kent variant, which has become the dominant variant in the UK, is more transmissible (and there is some, as yet uncertain, evidence suggesting it causes more severe disease).¹¹ This adds to the uncertainty that SAGE and other scientists face in modelling the impact of different lockdown easing measures, such as the return to schools. Edmunds has, for example, said reopening schools alone could boost the R rate over 1, which would have implications for the timing of other measures in the government's plan. Prioritisation will become particularly sensitive if the easing of one set of measures (associated with one department) directly affect, or even postpone, another – and add a layer of complexity in any planning among cabinet.

The extra transmissibility of new variants may also require the government to take a different approach to specific measures, for example reviewing again the 'one metre plus' social distancing rule and looking again at guidance for workplaces and hospitality, especially given the greater understanding now about aerosol transmission.

The UK also faces the threat of other variants, emerging in the UK or being imported from abroad, which could prove resistant to current vaccines (there are concerns over the South African variant, for example). There are ongoing efforts by manufacturers to modify vaccines to tackle the variants that have been discovered so far, with reports these could be ready for deployment in the autumn. Politicians will ultimately have to make judgements while the balance between the impact of vaccines and that of variants remains hugely uncertain – and they will need to explain how their assessment of these risks will adapt in response to research being conducted worldwide about the efficacy of vaccines against different variants.

Ultimately, the government needs to agree on an approach that allows it to respond to changing circumstances, whether that means speeding up the easing of restrictions if case numbers reduce faster than expected, or slowing down or altering its approach if evidence suggests cases are increasing.

The exit strategy will require more than an effective vaccine campaign

Vaccines alone will not provide an end to the crisis – the success of the government's exit strategy will depend on its ability to test, trace and isolate to drive down transmission and prevent new variants being imported from abroad or emerging at home.

The government has more tools in its box this time around. Its testing capacity, at close to half a million tests a day, is far beyond what it had when it began easing the first lockdown; on 17 February this year it trailed plans for a "mass testing blitz", with 400,000 lateral flow tests sent to people's homes and workplaces every day as lockdown restrictions are eased.¹² Testing on a much larger scale will be critical to the government's ability to open up specific sectors. But the problems in instituting a lateral flow testing regime in secondary schools should sound warning bells.

The performance of NHS Test and Trace in tracing contacts of those who test positive has also improved since earlier in the crisis – it now regularly hits its target of tracing the 80%+ of close contacts experts say is needed to make the system viable. Sustaining this will be critical to containing inevitable local outbreaks as restrictions are relaxed. With a more transmissible variant, there will be a premium on the speed of contact tracing.

The UK also is fortunate to have very strong genome sequencing capability. Combined with the work the Vaccine Task Force is undertaking to develop a library of future vaccines, this puts the government in a good position to identify and respond to variants as they emerge.

The big gap, however, is that the government is still struggling to get people who test positive, or have been reported as contacts of those who have, to self-isolate. Giving evidence to the Health Select Committee in early February, Baroness Harding, chair of NHS Test and Trace, admitted that an estimated 20,000 people a day who are asked to isolate were not doing so fully. The health department has said it is monitoring the effectiveness of the various financial support measures described above, but it and the Treasury urgently need to find a solution that increases compliance. Unless this is resolved it will continue to undermine the government's ability to control transmission, and increase the risk that new variants will spread even if they are identified. The cost of losing control – particularly of a variant against which vaccines are less effective – will be very large.

Nor does the government's current hotel quarantine policy appear sufficient to prevent new variants from being imported from abroad.¹³ It has opted for a selective approach, with travellers from around 30 countries on a "red list" subject to hotel isolation but those from elsewhere allowed to self-isolate at home, a requirement that is only weakly enforced. Travellers from red-listed countries also appear able to bypass strict quarantine if they give false information on their incoming passenger forms. Government ministers have suggested that the sanction for this misdemeanour could be a 10-year jail term, but Border Force has little capacity to verify passengers' travel histories. The government also cannot stop the mixing of passengers from low and high-risk countries – they are still sitting next to each other on planes. While a stricter system would hurt certain sectors – like aviation – and make life more difficult for people needing to travel, the government should not pretend its policy will stop variants coming into the country.

There has also been some confusion over the government's position on vaccine passports, or, to use a more helpful term, certificates.* There have been reports that the government will back their use in certain cases, like international travel, but ministers have refused to confirm their position on private companies in other sectors requiring them. There are complex ethical, legal and technical issues involved. There may be real benefits in certain situations – such as care homes – but the government should be careful not to offer the impression that anyone who has been vaccinated can feel completely safe or protected, or that certain people will be given substantial freedoms ahead of others. Ministers might prefer to allow the private sector to trial certificates' use in different areas first, but they ought to explain what the government sees as the risks and benefits, and what role the NHS (which holds verifiable data) will be expected to play.

* "Passport" implies an association with a name, a National Insurance number and a nationality, which for various reasons may not be necessary or desirable for the uses being discussed. A certificate could be a pseudonymised credential that simply proves someone has been vaccinated.

The government should continue to under-promise and over-deliver, but also needs to think about fairness

The informal briefing ahead of the prime minister's planned announcement on the lockdown easing, and the way in which the government approached vaccine roll-out, shows the government has reflected on previous mistakes and shifted to an under-promise-and-over-deliver message. There has been an overhaul in No.10, with the departures of advisers Dominic Cummings and Lee Cain, and the arrival of a new press secretary in Allegra Stratton and the recently appointed chief of staff, Dan Rosenfield. What is not clear is whether the new communications approach is purely down to the change in personnel holding Johnson back, or whether the prime minister accepts the need to change the tone of his message and can maintain that over time.

Over the next few weeks Johnson will face pressure to promise a better Easter for families across the UK; not long after that, questions over summer holidays will grow louder. While the government will want to deliver good news if the situation continues to improve, it should stick to building confidence on the basis of the progress it is making, and not return to raising hopes it is uncertain whether it can deliver. The fiasco over the Christmas holiday lockdown easing and late U-turn should be warning enough against rash promises – no matter how inclined to optimism the prime minister may be personally, or even how positive the picture may look in the weeks ahead.

The government should also learn another lesson from 2020 about how it explains the fairness of its approach. In April 2020 one concern we set out was that public support could be lost “if people perceive that they are being treated unfairly, for example if there is major differentiation between groups or if the differentiation is not grounded in solid evidence”. In the summer, the move to ease restrictions was soon followed by local lockdowns and a ‘tiers’ system with different rules applied across the country. This led to vociferous complaints from local politicians and businesses about whether the trigger for harsher measures or the economic support measures was being applied consistently across the country.

If the government are opting for a slow and steady approach this time round, that means a long period in which the public will still be subject to a huge range of restrictions. Even with delivery against the timetable already being better than promised, the government will continue to face complaints about how quickly different groups are vaccinated. We are already seeing this in the debate over what priority should be given to teachers. As soon as it publishes its roadmap, the government will start to face complaints and lobbying over what activities it prioritises for lockdown easing. The more complex the picture the greater the likelihood of fears about being left behind. The roadmap alone will not be enough to assuage these concerns. Given the time it has had to prepare for this lockdown easing it must have better answers than in 2020 about why it considers some activities riskier, or a higher priority for restrictions to be lifted, than others.

Conclusion

The UK's vaccine roll-out is progressing at impressive speed and case numbers are falling consistently. The global pandemic will, tragically, have a long way to run, but just over a year after the first cases of Covid-19 were recorded in the UK, there is reason to be optimistic that a corner has been turned and the public can start again to consider life without lockdowns. But this is a promise the prime minister has made more than once – and twice his plan for lifting a lockdown has ended with its reinstatement. He cannot afford a third strike due to another mismanaged exit.

By setting out its roadmap, the government is showing the country how it hopes to lift restrictions and, ultimately, plot a path for the UK out of the crisis. If it is to avoid the missteps of the last plan, the government must set out how its objectives have changed – and be much clearer this time about how it will reconcile those objectives to guide its decisions. It must explain how it assesses the risks the UK faces – particularly from unknown variants – and the steps it will take to mitigate those risks, including shoring up its approach to hotel quarantine and test, trace and isolate. It must settle on a clear communications strategy that offers the public the right level of optimism, not false hope, about the path ahead.

When the roadmap is published, the prime minister will only be setting out a plan – it is the government's implementation of that plan that will define its success. Crucially, the whole cabinet must be on board: over the coming months departments cannot repeat the contradictory approaches we saw last year. People are understandably desperate for lockdown to end, but they will be despairing if the Covid death toll begins to rise once again.

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Catherine is the Institute's resident historian and leads our work on changes of government, ministers and the workings of the constitution. Before joining the Institute in November 2008, Catherine was a lecturer on security and intelligence history; taught contemporary British history; and worked as a historian and researcher, contributing to various publications for the Cabinet War Rooms' Churchill Museum and for media outlets.

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