

UK's official virus-related death toll surpasses 40,000

5 June 2020, by Pan Pylas



Passengers wait at a bus stop with a sign advising travellers to wear a face covering whilst travelling, in London, Friday, June 5, 2020. It will become compulsory to wear face coverings whilst using public transport in England from Monday June 15. (AP Photo/Kirsty Wigglesworth)

The U.K. became the second country to officially record more than 40,000 coronavirus-related deaths as more than 100 scientists wrote to the British government on Friday to urge it to reconsider lifting virus lockdown restrictions.

The government said another 357 people who had tested positive for the virus have died in the U.K. across all settings, including hospitals and care homes. That takes the total to 40,261, the world's second-highest pandemic death toll behind the United States.

"I think that the day that the number of deaths from coronavirus has gone over 40,000 is a time of sorrow for us all," Health Secretary Matt Hancock said at the government's daily press briefing.

The U.K.'s actual COVID-19 death toll is widely considered to be higher as the total only includes

those who have tested positive for the virus.

In an open letter, the scientists urged the government to postpone further easing of the lockdown given the still-high level of daily virus-related deaths and new infections.

"Despite a two-month lockdown, we are still experiencing unacceptable daily numbers of deaths, still in the hundreds, and an estimated 8,000 new infections a day in England alone," they said.

Overall, Hancock said the transmission rate was heading down but that there were a couple of areas causing concern. He said the transmission rate is highest in the northwest of England, which includes the cities of Liverpool and Manchester, followed by the less densely populated southwest.



A sign advises travellers to wear face coverings at Westminster Station in London, Friday, June 5, 2020. It will become compulsory to wear face coverings whilst using public transport in England from Monday June 15. (AP Photo/Kirsty Wigglesworth)

Hancock said the government wants to

"increasingly have an approach in tackling local lockdowns where we spot a flare-up." Such an approach could potentially see the government re-imposing restrictions locally.

The scientists, many of whom work in infectious disease, biology and immunology, are particularly vexed by the level of community transmission of the virus. They voiced worries that there could again be "exponential growth" in the number of cases and death.

Signatories include Professor Stuart Neil, the head of the department of infectious diseases at King's College London; Professor Adrian Hayday of the Francis Crick Institute; and Professor Neil Fairweather of Imperial College London.

"There is a very high probability that relaxation of lockdown, coupled with a potential breakdown in public trust, will bring us back into a situation where the outbreak is once again out of control," the scientists wrote. "This would inevitably lead to a second lockdown, which could be more damaging and harder to implement."

The British government says its easing of the lockdown has been limited and careful and is backed by the science. The government has taken advice from the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies, or SAGE, through the crisis, many of whose members are some of the country's leading scientists.

A bus passenger wears a mask as she travels in London, Friday, June 5, 2020. It will become compulsory to wear face coverings whilst using public transport in England from Monday June 15. (AP Photo/Kirsty Wigglesworth)

Steps to ease the lockdown conditions in England over the past couple of weeks included the reopening of schools to some younger children and allowing groups of six people from different households in outdoor spaces, including in private gardens.

The other nations of the U.K.—Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland—have also relaxed some elements of the lockdown but not at the same rate as in England.

There are concerns that the planned reopening of all nonessential stores on June 15 could act as a catalyst for another escalation of the outbreak, especially if it leads to more use of public transportation.

"The level of community transmission is still far too high for lockdown to be released, and should not be attempted before we have a substantial and sustained further drop in community transmission," the scientists said.

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