

UK sees COVID 'light ahead' as Liverpool gets city-wide tests

3 November 2020



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Prime Minister Boris Johnson on Tuesday promised "light ahead" for weary Britons ahead of a second coronavirus lockdown, pinning his hopes partly on the UK's first city-wide testing plan in Liverpool.

The ambitious pilot scheme in the northwestern city, one of the areas worst-hit by the pandemic in Britain, will start on Friday, a day after all of England is to go into a revised version of the first lockdown instituted in March.

Britain, already grappling with the worst death toll in Europe, is tracking its neighbours in ramping up restrictions as a second wave of the pandemic takes grip.

But Johnson is under pressure from fellow Conservatives over the attendant economic harm.

Addressing a cabinet meeting, the prime minister said the four-week lockdown until December 2 was vital to prevent hospitals getting overwhelmed and "fatalities running in the thousands (daily) if nothing was done".

There were grounds for hope, however, from new treatments to alleviate COVID-19 symptoms, mass and rapid testing, and the prospect of a vaccine, he said.

The kind of cheap new tests offering quick results intended for Liverpool "can be a massive and possibly decisive use to us in this country in defeating the virus", Johnson added.

"So amid the uncertain gloom of November I see light ahead, and I'm absolutely certain that we will have better days before us."

In launching the Liverpool pilot, the UK is following in the footsteps of Slovakia, which has begun testing its entire population.

But its effectiveness will depend on infected people self-isolating and their contacts being properly traced.

Trust is short

The track and trace facets of the COVID response have fallen short in Britain, Johnson has conceded, despite the government sinking a mammoth £12 billion (\$16 billion) into its national testing programme so far.

Tom Wingfield, senior clinical lecturer at the Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine, said the pilot in his city was "an important step towards regaining control of COVID-19 transmission".

But he warned: "Success will also not be possible unless there is trust in the testing system. That trust will only be achieved through engagement with our communities and clear information about the benefits of participation."

Britain has registered almost 47,000 fatalities among people testing positive for the coronavirus since the respiratory disease emerged in China late

last year.

The Office for National Statistics on Tuesday said 980 more deaths were registered in England and Wales in the week ending October 23 than the five-year average. © 2020 AFP

Earlier this year, Britain, the United States and Canada accused Russian hackers of targeting their labs to try to steal coronavirus research.

Of those, 978 mentioned coronavirus on the death certificate.

Johnson pushed reluctant members of his cabinet into agreeing the lockdown after government scientists presented worst-case projections of fatalities reaching 4,000 a day by mid-December without action now.

Opposition Labour leader Keir Starmer accused the prime minister of a "catastrophic failure of leadership", after Johnson rejected a recommendation to impose a shorter lockdown during the October school holidays.

Virus sparks new cyber threats

But restive Conservatives, warning of the spiralling economic costs of lockdown, are accusing Johnson of giving in to scientific scaremongering.

England's chief medical officer Chris Whitty and the government's chief scientific adviser, Patrick Vallance, forcefully defended their modelling projections during a grilling by MPs on Tuesday.

"I think there has been some rather overblown rhetoric on this. People can take different projections if they wish," Whitty said.

But matching the peak of deaths recorded in the first wave was "entirely realistic" without government action, he said.

Britain's National Cyber Security Centre (NCSC), which protects against online attacks, meanwhile said a quarter of the incidents it responded to over the last year were coronavirus related.

The NCSC said in its annual report that it handled 723 incidents between September 1, 2019, and August 31, 2020, with 194 related to coronavirus.

APA citation: UK sees COVID 'light ahead' as Liverpool gets city-wide tests (2020, November 3)
retrieved 11 October 2022 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2020-11-liverpool-uk-city-wide-virus-scheme.html>

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