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Covid-19: Leicester mayor accuses government and PHE of withholding key testing data

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The mayor of Leicester has accused the government and Public Health England (PHE) of withholding data that could help reduce the spread of covid-19 in the city.

In a detailed paper¹ published on 7 July, Peter Soulsby also criticised what he termed “misleading claims from government sources about what data and information has been provided to us in Leicester and when.”

Leicester was placed into lockdown on 29 June² after the health secretary Matt Hancock said the number of cases in the city had reached 135 per 100 000 people, three times higher than in the next highest city in England.

The government claimed that the mayor and local authority had failed to control the local outbreak and suggested that employment practices at garment factories in the city could have caused the spike in cases, including among Leicester’s large black, Asian, and minority ethnic community.

The government is to review Leicester’s lockdown status this week.

Ahead of this, Soulsby said that the city had been doing its best to map death rates and hospital admissions to try to understand what was happening at neighbourhood level. But he was critical of the response from the government.

“What we have not had is any useful data from testing in the community,” he wrote.

“Since the launch of the test and trace system at the beginning May 2020 our director of public health repeatedly asked PHE to allow us access to results data, preferably at postcode or lower layer super output area level, so that we could monitor our local picture. These data were not forthcoming to us or other councils.

“The reason given was that they weren’t in a fit state to publish because they hadn’t been cleaned. This was the data feed from the test and trace system that the prime minister had launched as ‘world beating’.”

While Soulsby acknowledged that Leicester is now receiving additional data, he said key information such as ethnicity, workplace, and postcode information, which were all vital to pinpointing the spread of the virus, were largely missing.

Soulsby said, “The data give no clue as to whether the speculation about workplace, schools, or ethnicity have any part in the prevalence of the virus. It has been convenient to blame these factors but the truth is that none of us—the government, PHE, or the council—know because they haven’t got the data.”

He said household level contact tracing data were “essential,” and called for access to negative test results to provide context for positive results. PHE should also “state definitively what level of results constitute an acceptable level of infection,” he wrote.

The Department of Health and Social Care said that PHE began continuously sharing detailed data and analysis with the local director of public health as soon as a spike in cases was identified and began providing postcode data on 24 June.

A department spokesperson said, “At no point did the department or PHE seek to downplay the situation in Leicester. In fact, our close monitoring of the outbreak allowed us to take early action, including through extra testing capacity and providing additional data analysis.”

1 Soulsby P. Covid-19 in Leicester. 7 July 2020. www.leicester.gov.uk/media/186760/leicester-in-lockdown-july-2020.pdf.

2 Mahase E. Covid-19: Leicester placed under lockdown after spike in cases and hospital admissions. *BMJ* 2020;369:m2635. doi: 10.1136/bmj.m2635 pmid: 32605928