



London

Cite this as: *BMJ* 2020;370:m3695<http://dx.doi.org/10.1136/bmj.m3695>

Published: 21 September 2020

Covid-19: Act now to avoid second lockdown, says Independent SAGE

Jacqui Wise

The Independent Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies has published an emergency 10 point plan to avoid a national lockdown,¹ while criticising the government for abdicating its responsibility to provide such a plan.

Many areas of the UK are currently in some form of local lockdown, and the government is considering further national measures as numbers of covid-19 cases continue to rise.

Launching the plan, Stephen Reicher, professor of social psychology at the University of St Andrews, said, “We are in a crisis. Infections are spiking and our testing system is broken. The one thing that is absolutely clear is if we do nothing the pandemic will soon run out of control and a national lockdown will become inevitable.”

He added, “If we dither and waste a week, as we did in March, then we will slither into a national lockdown.”

The plan calls for immediate measures that should be reviewed when a functional testing system is in place and infections are back under control. It says that pubs and restaurants should be limited to outdoor service only. It also calls for people to work at home where possible, with no return to workplaces until they are certified covid safe. In the meantime the government should give financial support to employees.

Reicher said it was wrong for the government to blame the rise in infections on people breaking the rules. “The problem is not the public doing the wrong thing but being encouraged to do things that expose us more,” he said.

He pointed out that now 60% of people were going to work and the number of people working from home has declined from 40% to 20%. He said a recent poll found that 46% of workplaces weren’t socially distanced and that 38% of vulnerable workers were going to places without mitigations. “We are pushing people into places where they can get infected.”

The plan also says that schools should be funded to allow smaller, socially distanced classes, with digital resources provided for students and teachers to work at home. In addition, colleges and universities should have no teaching in person.

Indoor social interaction should be limited to a bubble of three households, the plan says. Reicher said this would be far better than the current “rule of six,” which allows six people from different households to get together, with a different six allowed to meet the next day.

Reicher said it was vital that the government creates an emergency fund to provide wrap-around support for all people who need to shield or self-isolate, including those waiting for tests.

The plan also calls for the testing system to be rebuilt according to existing local authority, NHS, and public health structures, with locally recruited contact tracers. There should be clear, consistent messaging about testing, and there should be a clear strategy and set of priorities for testing of people with or without symptoms.

¹ Independent SAGE. Measures to avoid a national lockdown: an emergency ten point plan. 20 Sep 2020. www.independentsage.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Emergency-Plan-PUBLISHED.pdf.

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