

UK braces for holiday COVID-19 surge, tighter restrictions

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Britain's Prime Minister Boris Johnson, meets apprentice Talha Batan, right and instructor Colin Wilkinson, centre, giving a demonstration of cable splicing, during a visit to the Openreach L and D Training Centre in Bolton, England, Friday, Dec. 18, 2020. (Peter Byrne/Pool Photo via AP, Pool)

The U.K. entered the final week before Christmas with the country bracing for post-celebration coronavirus fallout and Prime Minister Boris Johnson refusing Friday to rule out a fresh national lockdown after the holiday.

And when classes resume in the new year, schools are expected to roll out mass testing for students and staff, a plan that drew criticism because the government announced it at the last minute.

The government plans to relax restrictions on socializing and travel for five days before and after Christmas. With infections rising in the U.K., which has Europe's second-highest coronavirus death toll, there are concerns about a possible fresh surge of cases and deaths after the holidays.

Officials moved this week to tighten up the existing restrictions for much of the population by putting

large parts of southern England into the highest virus alert level, Tier 3, from Saturday.

Asked whether England would follow Northern Ireland in imposing a six-week lockdown starting Dec. 26, Johnson signaled he was prepared to take more drastic action.

"We're hoping very much that we will be able to avoid anything like that," Johnson said during a visit to Manchester. "But the reality is that the rates of infection have increased very much in the last few weeks."

Northern Ireland, Wales and Scotland have their own devolved governments and throughout the pandemic have often set rules that are different to the ones the British government ordered and took effect in England.

Northern Ireland will see a six-week lockdown introduced from December 26 to curb rising cases - with the closure of non-essential retail and contact services, as well as restricting the hospitality sector to takeaway only.



Britain's Prime Minister Boris Johnson tries his hand at cable splicing, during a visit to the Openreach L and D Training Centre in Bolton, England, Friday, Dec. 18, 2020. (Peter Byrne/Pool Photo via AP, Pool)

Wales will go into its third full lockdown from December 28 amid a "sustained rise in coronavirus." In Scotland, Health Secretary Jeane Freeman said the option for a post-Christmas lockdown "remains on the table."

The latest official figures showed infections climbing across the U.K., with a sharp increase in London. The percentage of people testing positive for the coronavirus over the past week rose in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, according to data released Friday by the Office of National Statistics.

One expert was skeptical about the effectiveness of the U.K. government's three-tiered system of restrictions.

"At the moment it doesn't look like the tier system is holding the epidemic wave back, unfortunately," John Edmunds, a member of the government's Sage scientific advisory panel, told Sky News. "So I think we are going to have to look at these measures and perhaps tighten them up" after Christmas, said Edmunds, a professor at the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine.

Meanwhile, Education Secretary Gavin Williamson came under fire after announcing Thursday that high school and junior college students would do their first week of classes online in January to give schools enough time to set up mass testing programs.

The tests will be administered by volunteers and agency staff, not teachers. Further details are due to be released next week—when most schools are closed for Christmas.

Teaching unions were furious about the last-minute notice that left them scrambling to prepare over the holidays. They said it would be impossible to recruit and train all the volunteers needed to carry out the tests.

The testing plans "are undeliverable in that timescale," said Geoff Barton, general secretary of the Association of School and College Leaders. "It is extremely regrettable that the government has given the public an expectation that this will happen."

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