

# Who do you believe?

“It is my strong and sincere hope that we will be able to review the outstanding restrictions and allow a more significant return to normality from November at the earliest – possibly in time for Christmas ... By November at the earliest ... it may conceivably be possible to move away from the social distancing measures, from the 1m rule.”

*Rt Hon Boris Johnson MP, Prime Minister, speaking at the No. 10 Downing Street press conference, Friday 17 July, 2020.*

“Modelling of our reasonable worst case scenario ... suggests a peak in hospital admissions and deaths in January/February 2021 of a similar magnitude to that of the first wave in Spring 2020, coinciding with a period of peak demand in the NHS.”

*The Academy of Medical Sciences, statement issued on Friday 17 July, 2020.*

**O**ptimism is a wonderful thing, and has its place in the armoury of a leader. As we all know, Boris Johnson is an optimist. He also has good reason to want to see the economy recover and in fairness, his statement in Downing Street on Friday 17 July also contained caveats and the warning that if necessary, and reluctantly, the Government would reimpose lockdown if circumstances demanded it. Yet it was the optimism that made the headlines.

I am sure that it is everyone’s strong and sincere hope that we can return to normal in time for Christmas. But how realistic is this? Those who have responsibility for leading the education service, for running schools, colleges and universities, can’t plan on the basis of optimism. They need a realistic assessment of what may happen over the next few months, indeed the next year or two.

Within hours of Mr Johnson’s statement in Downing Street the Government’s Chief Scientific Adviser, Sir Patrick Vallance, and Chief Medical Officer, Professor Chris Whitty, were giving evidence to the House of Lords Science and Technology Select Committee inquiry into COVID-19. Their message was starkly different to the Prime Minister’s. Professor Whitty said: “The reality is distancing remains an important part of this mix ... It [the virus] has not gone away. [They] need to continue for a long period of time.” Sir Patrick Vallance told the peers that “social distancing and hygiene measures will be necessary” given it was “highly likely” the virus would return. He made the same point that many scientists, including those on the Government’s Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE) have. Vallance stressed it was just a matter of when, not if, COVID “comes back in force” in several waves.

Globally, COVID-19 has not yet reached its peak, with cases still surging forward in the USA, Brazil, India and elsewhere. Far from this dreadful virus being over by Christmas all the evidence we have is that it will remain with us until a vaccine is discovered. This may never happen, although the teams at both Oxford University and Imperial College, London, are getting encouraging results from their research into a vaccine. Even if they, or someone else, succeeds it will be well into next year at the earliest before it becomes widely available.

Until then, education leaders must plan for the possibility of multiple school closures, for blended learning with more help for the most disadvantaged, and continuing to stress hand hygiene and social distancing, whatever the Prime Minister may say.

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