

The final lockdown

The welcome and considerable achievement of vaccinating the 15 million people in the first four COVID priority groups by the target date of Monday has been accompanied by political pressure to ease off the lockdown, with the Prime Minister due to announce his road map out of the pandemic restrictions next Monday (22 February).

There is pressure from the Department for Education to make the reopening of schools the top priority, although there is a push back from the Government's scientific advisers who recognise that any easing off of current restrictions will increase the transmission of the coronavirus within society. The arguments for bringing schools back for all children as an early priority are well known, but Ministers also need to consider the public health facts first.

The development of vaccines has been a potential game changer, but the battle against COVID is not yet won. While all the metrics are going in the right direction, hospitalisations and deaths are still far too high and need to come down substantially before there will be headroom to start even the most cautious easing. And the virus is not standing still. It is the very nature of viruses that they mutate. As we report in another blog published at the same time as this, and taken from the research section of *Education Journal*, a clutch of documents published over the last week shows both the scale of the problem and identifies where the greatest danger comes from. There are over 4,000 variants discovered so far. Fortunately, as of last week only four of them are causing real concern. Yet that number is increasing. This week a new variant was identified in California that merged the B.1.1.7 VOC first identified in the UK with an otherwise less harmful strain from America. This Anglo-American variant is even more infectious than B.1.1.7 and is resistant to existing vaccines.

The emergence of new variants was well known right at the start of the pandemic and was inevitable. The scale of this problem is not. What determines the number of new variants, and therefore potentially the development of a VOC that will not be countered by existing vaccines and will put us back to square one, is the level of infection in the population. The more people who are getting COVID-19, the more variants there will be and the higher the risk to us all. Equally, the longer the pandemic lasts the more difficult it will be to end it, which is why it is in everyone's interest to close it down as quickly as possible. It isn't enough to simply vaccinate the most vulnerable. Vaccination is a vital tool, but it's not enough on its own.

This is why the scientists are so concerned about opening up the economy, for that will inevitably lead to increasing the spread of the virus

again and the number of people with COVID-19. Time and again the Government has made this mistake. The Prime Minister has been too slow to clamp down and too quick to ease off. The Eat Out to Help Out campaign of last summer could also have been named the Eat Out to Spread the Virus campaign. Johnson's determination to ignore the SAGE advice to lock down again last September, until forced to a couple of months later, cost the lives of some 20,000 people who would not have died if SAGE had been listened to. And this present wave was caused entirely by the actions taken earlier last year.

It therefore beggars belief that anyone is still calling for the premature easing of restrictions. Yet this is what the COVID Research Group of Conservative right wing MPs is calling for. There seems to be a trend for MPs to form Research Groups as pressure groups that do no research and are largely ignorant of the subject they are seeking to influence. They should be resisted.

The Prime Minister, whose instincts are said to be with the CRG, has his instincts tempered by the experience of the last year and is being more cautious. Plans to open up hospitality in May have been floated, and other easements phased in every four weeks to see what the effect is on spreading the virus.

The need to get children back to school is still real, and countries all over the world are struggling with this issue. For example, the international section of the current issue of *Education Journal* (No. 442, 17 February 2021) reports on plans from the Biden Administration and the CDC (the Centres for Disease Control and Prevention, part of the US federal Department of Health and Human Resources) to bring American schools back. Yet if we are to reopen schools to all pupils then other sections of society, which means the economy, will have to be restricted for longer. The alternative will be a third wave and another lockdown. What surely everyone must agree is that this cannot be allowed to happen. The present restrictions must be the final lockdown, which means that they must remain in place for as long as necessary on health grounds.

Demitri Coryton
Editor, *Education Journal*
17 February 2021