

Boris Johnson Under Pressure to Be More Open on Virus Strategy

(Bloomberg) — Pressure mounted on Boris Johnson to be more open about his coronavirus strategy as a panel of lawmakers called on his government to publish the scientific advice behind Britain's response to the pandemic.

The prime minister also faced calls for transparency from thousands of teachers who joined an online meeting to demand clarity over plans to reopen schools in England next month.

Greater openness will help maintain public support as the U.K. eases its lockdown, the House of Commons science committee said in a letter to the prime minister Tuesday. So far only 28 of 120 papers consulted by the U.K.'s Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies has been published, they said.

"The strength of British science and the prominent role that scientific advice has played during the pandemic can be an important source of public confidence," Greg Clark, chairman of the committee and a member of Johnson's Conservative Party, wrote in the letter. "Without visibility of the scientific advice, it will be difficult to corroborate the Government's assertion that it always follows scientific advice."

Confused Messages

Polls show support slipping for Johnson's response to the virus, which has seen the U.K. record the second-highest number of deaths in the world, after a week of confused messages over the relaxation of the lockdown. Alongside other easing measures, the government wants schools to reopen to some pupils June 1, but teaching unions say they have yet to be shown evidence such a move would be safe.

The National Education Union said 20,000 members joined a zoom call with its general secretaries Mary Bousted and Kevin Courtney on Monday evening during which they answered questions about the union's demands for more details on safety provision and scientific evidence before they will back plans to restart classes.

The government argues reopening schools is vital to supporting the poorest children and protecting vulnerable pupils who are locked down in unsafe homes. Ministers say the risk of transmission from children to adults is low, but Paul Whiteman, general secretary of the National Association of Head Teachers, said his 31,000 members want to see the evidence.

‘Route Map’

“It’s been asserted by the Government publicly over the weekend that there isn’t the level of risk that we fear,” Whiteman told BBC Radio on Monday. “However, we haven’t yet seen the scientific underpinning of that.”

The devolved administrations in Scotland, Northern Ireland, and Wales have been slower to lift restrictions on their populations as divisions grow between the strategies of London and regional capitals. Scotland’s First Minister Nicola Sturgeon said she will publish a “route map” Thursday, while Northern Ireland said it will allow small socially-distanced gatherings outside and the reopening of places of worship for individual prayer. Schools will stay closed.

The science committee also criticized Johnson’s government for failing to learn from the experience of other countries as it attempted to increase testing capacity in the early stages of the outbreak in the U.K.

“Capacity was not increased early enough or boldly enough,” Clark wrote. “Capacity drove strategy, rather than strategy driving capacity.”

Health Secretary Matt Hancock said Monday that testing will be extended to anyone over 5 years old showing symptoms and told Parliament the U.K. is ready to start a national tracing program to control the disease.

But while 21,000 contact tracers have been recruited, including 7,500 health-care professionals who will give clinical advice to call handlers, the national launch of a contact-tracing mobile phone app has been delayed, in a setback to the tracing effort.

‘Get a Grip’

A major expansion of the U.K.’s testing and tracing program is a key feature of its strategy to relax the virus lockdown, as the government seeks to emulate countries like South Korea and Germany in identifying where the virus is

spreading so it can impose targeted restrictions. Virus tests were previously only available to certain groups of people, such as workers deemed 'essential' and the over-65s.

A mobile phone app, which would form a crucial part of the tracing program, was supposed to be ready in mid-May. It is now planned to be released nationally within "weeks," Johnson's spokesman James Slack told reporters on Monday.

The app, which is still being tested on the Isle of Wight, informs users when they've come into close contact with someone who may have had the virus. Ministers previously said it would be a key component of the U.K.'s strategy to relax lockdown measures.

"We are learning all the way as we go through this pandemic, not just on the scientific side but on the innovation that we need to get a grip on it," First Secretary of State Dominic Raab said at the daily Coronavirus briefing on Monday. "We are making good progress on the testing and on the tracing and on the pilot in the Isle of Wight."

Source:

<https://www.bnnbloomberg.ca/boris-johnson-under-pressure-to-be-more-open-on-virus-strategy-1.1438032>

[Disclaimer]