

Covid-19: Aiding the Socially Vulnerable & Preventing a Second Wave in the UK

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The decision to retain a senior advisor who broke lockdown rules during the Covid-19 pandemic has damaged Prime Minister Boris Johnson's government, causing distrust at a time when trust is essential. Wider policies to aid the 'socially' as well as 'clinically' vulnerable would help prevent the feared 'second wave' of infections, and help regain trust.

As many as 81 percent of the public believe that Dominic Cummings, a key aide to Johnson, broke lockdown rules through an undisclosed decision to relocate with his family and later take them on a thirty-mile outing, according to an Opinium survey for the Observer.

The issue has seen Johnson's approval rating collapsing into minus figures, while his party's lead over the Labour opposition has dropped to only four points against 26 points two months ago.

To understand his plunging approval, Johnson first needs to accept that it's more than a result of political campaigning by the press. Over the last couple of months, the pandemic and the lockdown have prompted revisions in public beliefs and values, presumably because the death of tens of thousands of people and hundreds of health and other key workers has a way of deepening perspectives.

There has been a nationwide increase in respect for the NHS, carers and key workers; greater awareness of the unfairness of social and financial inequality, more skepticism over anti-migrant rhetoric given the contribution of BAME [Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic - Ed.] and migrant workers in fighting Covid-19 and saving lives. And now: zero tolerance of government misconduct.

Albeit slowly, the government has taken some measures that show an appreciation of these new, changing circumstances. Among them, a ten-year-old 'hostile environment policy' bluntly aimed at ostracizing migrants, has had some of its most glaring aspects revised. This, however, does not go far enough.

On 21st May, the government finally scrapped the visa surcharge for migrant NHS staff, extended a bereavement scheme to the families and dependents of NHS support staff and care workers who die as a result of the Coronavirus, and has increased temporary visa extensions for migrants. But more measures are needed to amend policies still in place that are harming the most vulnerable through preventing protection from Covid-19.

Depending on wealth and living circumstances, conditions under lockdown might vary from 'inconvenienced' for some, to 'barely surviving' for others. It's the latter category that needs greater attention with regard to both the current and future outbreaks, as well as for this government's credibility.

As we ease out of lockdown, the government would do best to pay special attention to the UK councils where infection and death rates were highest - most of which were the UK's more deprived areas with poor living conditions and overcrowded housing. This is where second or third wave infections risk taking off quickly if councils are not adequately supported.

By the same token, the government could easily do more to limit Covid-19 infections and deaths if it prioritized putting an end to the hostile environment policy that continues to put lives at risk through obligatory poverty and the fear of deportation.

Asylum seekers and undocumented migrants in particular are not only likely to live in locations where adherence to social distancing rules are difficult or ultimately impossible - with the risk of Covid-19 infection much higher - but are also largely exempt from the government's financial support schemes. Asylum seekers are expected to survive on a budget of just £5.39 per day, which currently plunges many into destitution.

Increasing the financial support available to migrants - including asylum seekers and those with insecure immigration status - would not only protect their lives but those of the wider public.

Last week, Johnson was questioned by Labour MP Stephen Timms on the matter of hundreds of thousands of migrants in the UK living under the No Recourse to Public Funds Policy. Those subjected to this policy have not been granted the right to permanent settlement, and as such are not entitled to any form of public funds whatsoever, including means-tested free school meals for their children. Under the lockdown - with job losses and furlough increasingly common - it is difficult to understand quite how they are expected to survive without access to the government's financial schemes like the rest of the nation.

The Scottish National Party has warned the Home Office that the policy should be scrapped because of the risks of spreading Covid-19 - those who cannot access financial support are being deprived of the option to self-isolate; they must work or starve. Alarming, Johnson seemed unaware of this policy in an infuriating display of ignorance within the hearing.

In addition to the lack of financial support available to migrants as a result of the Hostile Environment, a change to the immigration rules in 2018 - which sees some migrants charged upfront for health care - has created significant barriers for many. Similarly, the government's implementation of data sharing between the NHS and the Home Office is not only threatening but has actually contributed to the deaths of vulnerable migrants throughout the Covid-19 crisis who are afraid to seek medical help for fear of arrest or excessive bills.

It has become clear that countries which were the quickest to respond to the Covid-19 pandemic have been the most successful in containing it. Portugal, for example, has had just under 1,400 deaths. But along with speed, the country instantly applied common-sense policies too, such as

granting all immigrants temporary citizenship rights during a state of crisis to prevent the spread of the disease.

The UK now has the world's second highest death toll, with 8,000 new infections per day as it introduced an easing of lockdown rules on 1st June. The adoption of similarly humane policies - which prioritize migrant safety as opposed to hostility - is critical in avoiding a 'second wave,' and restoring some of Johnson's now non-existent approval rating.