

We cannot stay in this coronavirus lockdown limbo until a vaccine is found

People will not put up with the restrictions for months on end, and the risk to the economy is immense. No 10 must plot the route back to normal life

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The British people have settled into the rigours of the coronavirus lockdown with remarkable ease. Opinion polls record overwhelming support for the emergency measures and, apart from a few martinets in Derbyshire police, the authorities have acted with restraint and the public with responsibility. Boris Johnson deserves credit for avoiding the most draconian steps, such as stopping people going out to exercise or requiring them to fill out a form every time they leave the house.

But these are early days. How long can it all last? How long will people accept the constraints on their freedom? How long will businesses and charities survive the loss of revenue? How long can the Treasury and the Bank of England finance the incomes of tens of millions of working people? How long will it take the National Health Service to increase its intensive care capacity and secure the ventilators, protective equipment and skilled staff it needs to cope with thousands of critically ill patients?

Some experts argue that the strategy of suppressing the coronavirus will have to be maintained for 18 months while a vaccine is being developed, tested and mass-produced.

Professor Neil Ferguson of Imperial College London has suggested that, after an initial lockdown of three or four months, some restrictions could be lifted but might then need to be switched on and off every few weeks to keep admissions to intensive care units below a manageable level. This would mean keeping the country in a state of limbo until a vaccine rides to the rescue.

We cannot proceed this way. Most people will accept the restrictions for a couple of months if that will save the lives of hundreds of thousands of their compatriots. But they will not comply with controls being relaxed and then reapplied on a six-weekly cycle until the middle of next year. Businesses cannot be expected to stop and start productive operations whenever the epidemiologists tell them. Nor can the Treasury or the Bank of England finance the wages of most working people for 18 months without bankrupting the country or imposing a crippling burden of debt on future generations.

We need a strategy for ending the lockdown. And we need to debate it fully so that everyone knows what they will be asked to do and why. A leading US think tank, the American Enterprise Institute, has just published a "[roadmap](#) to reopening" that contains much that should be applied to the UK.

Ending the lockdown should be a gradual process. It should begin when there has been a sustained reduction in hospital admissions and daily deaths, when the NHS is able to treat all patients requiring intensive care, when everyone who develops symptoms of Covid-19 can be tested and quarantined and when everyone who has been in contact with confirmed cases can be traced, tested and monitored.

After the first wave of infection has been brought under control, we need to be able to do what South Korea and Singapore did from the start.

Once these conditions have been fulfilled, the tightest restrictions on social contact should continue to apply only to those most vulnerable to the disease — those with serious health conditions and pensioners. Everyone else should start to resume normal life. Schools and universities, restaurants, shops and garden centres, charities and government offices should reopen. Public transport and air travel should be gradually restored. As far as possible, all new coronavirus patients needing hospital care should be sent to the new Nightingale hospitals so that the rest of the NHS can go back to treating people with other conditions.

But we should not go straight back to living life as we did before. Those who can work from home should still be encouraged to do so. Large social gatherings should still be banned, at least until the summer. People should be told to wear face masks in public places, shops and offices — not because it will stop them getting infected but because it will make them less likely to infect others if they have Covid-19 but don't know it.

The end of the lockdown should be co-ordinated between the British government and the governments of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. In England the rate of new infections varies widely between areas. The government may need to work with mayors and council leaders to agree different timetables for lifting social restrictions. And there will need to be a clear public understanding that some measures may need to be reintroduced on a local basis if infection rates in an area resume an uncontrolled rise and local health services risk being overwhelmed.

For this strategy to work, we will need 30,000 to 40,000 ventilators and urgent care beds and enough antigen tests (tests for a live infection) to check everyone who works in health and social care, every patient in hospital and everyone who might have come into contact with a recently infected individual. The government's failure to plan for a massive increase in testing capacity back in February has put NHS staff at risk. It is crucial that the health secretary's five-point plan delivers what is required by the end of the month.

It must include enough antibody tests to check the immunity of all those care workers and volunteers who have regular contact with members of the public. Until there is a vaccine, we must ensure that only those who have had the disease and are no longer infectious come into close contact with those who are most vulnerable to it. A biometric certificate or passport will be required to record the individual's infection and immunity status on their mobile phone.

Boris Johnson likes to compare the coronavirus crisis to a war and Covid-19 to a hidden enemy. It certainly poses an equivalent threat to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. Until now, his government has been focusing on halting the enemy's advances. Soon he must tell us how he plans to regain the territory we've lost and give the British people back their freedom.

Nick Boles is a former Conservative MP