

UK lockdown was a 'monumental mistake' and must not happen again – Boris scientist says

Lucy Johnston, Sunday Express Health Editor

Local lockdowns: Johnson outlines method of controlling virus

Mark Woolhouse said lockdown was a “panic measure” but admitted it was the only option at the time because “we couldn’t think of anything better to do”.

But it is a crude measure that takes no accounts of the risk levels to different individuals, the University of Edinburgh professor said, meaning that back in March the nation was “concentrating on schools when we should have been concentrating on care homes”.

The professor of infectious disease epidemiology said that the Government must now focus on increasing testing and striving to unlock society safely rather than restricting it further.

Prof Woolhouse OBE, a member of the Scientific Pandemic Influenza Group on Behaviours that advises the Government, said: “Lockdown was a panic measure and I believe history will say trying to control Covid-19 through lockdown was a monumental mistake on a global scale, the cure was worse than the disease.

“I never want to see national lockdown again. It was always a temporary measure that simply delayed the stage of the epidemic we see now. It was never going to change anything fundamentally, however low we drove down the number of cases, and now we know more about the virus and how to track it we should not be in this position again.

“We absolutely should never return to a position where children cannot play or go to school.

“I believe the harm lockdown is doing to our education, health care access, and broader aspects of our economy and society will turn out to be at least as great as the harm done by Covid-19.”

He said that Sage, the government’s advisory board on dealing with Covid, needed to have members from a wider range of fields.



UK lockdown was a 'monumental mistake' and must not happen again – Boris scientist says (Image: Getty)



Mark Woolhouse said lockdown was a 'panic measure' but admitted it was the only option at the time (Image: Getty)

This would allow it a better understanding of how lockdown has had effects across the whole of society.

He said: "I suspect right now more people are being harmed by the collateral effects of lockdown than by Covid-19.

"This is why we need a broader range of people on the government advisory board Sage with equal input from economists to assess the damage to incomes, jobs and livelihoods,

educationalists to assess the damage to children and mental health specialists to assess levels of depression and anxiety especially among younger adults, as well as psychologists to assess the effects of not being able to go to the theatre or a football match.”

Prof Woolhouse said he had hoped the combined efforts of the world’s scientists would work out how to handle the virus during lockdown. But this hadn’t happened.

He said: “At the time I agreed with lockdown as a short term emergency response because we couldn’t think of anything better to do, but it was always clear that the moment we started to relax enough measures we were likely to see infection rates rise again either nationally or locally.

“My hope was that we would have learnt how to handle the virus better so lockdown would no longer be necessary.

“But we haven’t made much progress in finding a viable alternative to lockdown. My concern is that far too many people involved in managing this pandemic have in mind that it will somehow burn itself out. I don’t expect it to.

“I would not dignify waiting for a vaccine with the term ‘strategy’. That’s a hope not a strategy. But we do need to get on with providing an alternative to lockdown.”

He said a better understanding of who was actually at risk from the virus would allow better solutions to be presented. Any restrictions imposed should be “considered measures” and should protect those who needed it while letting everyone live more freely.

As an example he explained: “Closing schools was not an epidemiologically sensible thing to do.

“Evidence shows that children very rarely transmit to adults and there is not a single documented example of a child transmitting to a teacher in school.

“But throughout this pandemic we have been very bad at communicating the actual risk of infection to individuals.

“Instead of concentrating on schools we should have been concentrating on care homes. We were not really thinking about where the risk lies, just on suppressing the virus.



Lockdown will come to be seen as a 'monumental mistake on a global scale' (Image: Getty)

“We should open schools, monitor closely for any outbreaks and have effective plans in place to deal with them if they happen.

“The bottom line is that if we want to relax measures we have to accept there will be some outbreaks, which will be containable if we don’t open up too far, and not go into panic mode again.

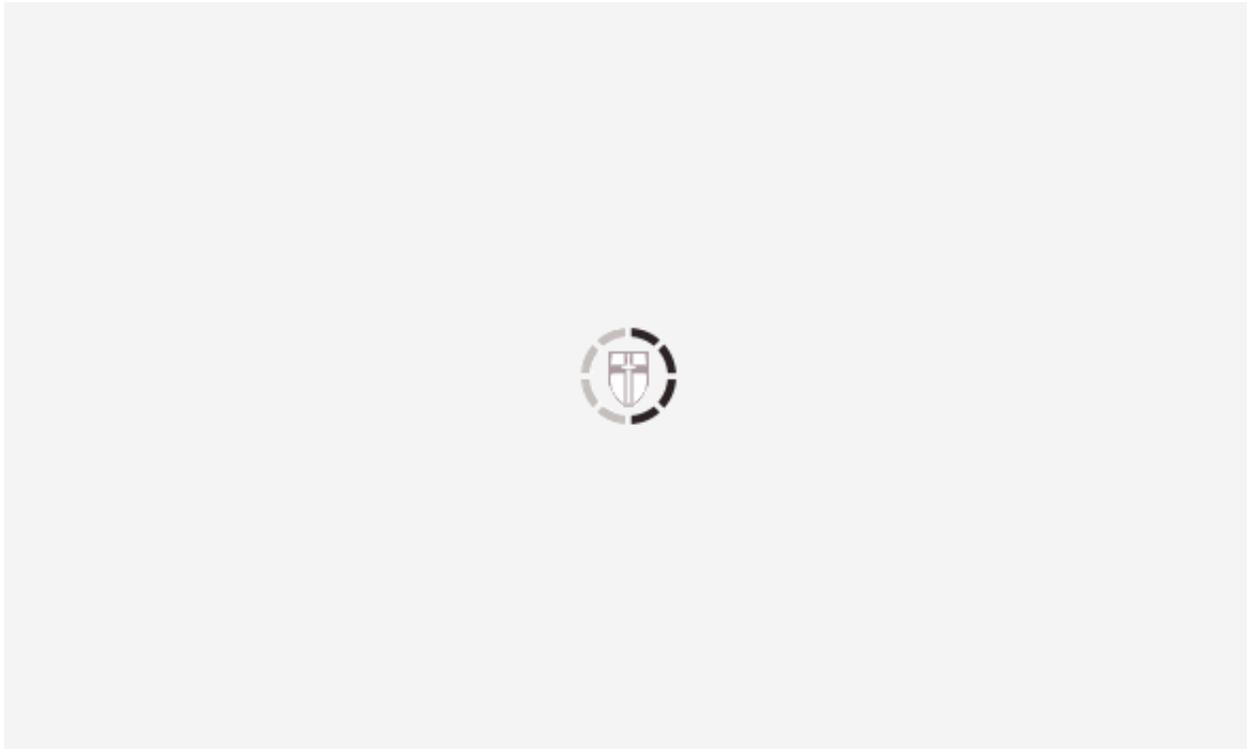
“As we lift restrictions, the most important thing is to make sure that people who need protection are protected – particularly those over 70 or with underlying health conditions. This is not a one size fits all.

“We need to protect those at greatest risk and make sure that the support they need is in place. Then we can re-evaluate the balance between controlling the virus and harms that lockdown causes to the wider economy and society.”

Ultimately he believed the only viable long term solution was testing, which had already paid dividends in the sporting world.

He pointed out that the Premier League had shown testing could allow events to take place that had been considered undeliverable just a few months ago.

Applying the same principle on a larger scale would help the country back on its feet.



The Premier League has shown testing could allow events to take place that had been considered undeliverable just a few months ago (Image: Getty)

He explained: “The challenge we have is asymptomatic transmission, particularly in younger age groups who may not get symptoms. The answer is more testing. This he said should also include schools because even though there is less risk of transmission from children or severe illness among children, testing in schools would inspire confidence about the safety of opening them.

“Healthcare workers, care home workers and social care workers. Testing of teachers in schools and universities would have to be done on the scale of the Premier League - they made it work and used testing to get their core activity up and running.

“People say cost is an issue with widespread testing but the cost of not doing it is absolutely enormous because without it we cannot unlock society.

“The Premier League carried out 40,000 tests to run its final series of matches - and it was successful. This should be a benchmark. If you can run football safely you can run businesses and schools safely with the same strict testing regime. Schools and businesses need to think like the Premier League. The costs have to be found.”