

'Freedom Day' – what are the implications of lifting lockdown restrictions in England?

Last week Prime Minister Johnson set out his plans to move England into step four of his unlocking roadmap. July 19th will mark the first day of this plan, now being called 'Freedom Day'. The work and pensions minister, Thérèse Coffey, also confirmed that the universal credit uplift of £20 a week will be withdrawn at the end of September. This briefing explores some of the gendered and other equalities impacts of these decisions.

Schools

[Education Secretary Gavin Williamson has confirmed that on July 19 school isolation bubbles will be scrapped](#). Although the bubble system has created difficulties for parents, the average number of daily confirmed Covid cases has been rising sharply in recent weeks. Without a system of isolating student bubbles, there is the potential for cases in schools to surge. Although children are at lower risk of serious illness and death as a result of Covid, they are not immune, and can still suffer from long Covid. In addition, uncontrolled spread in schools will lead to increased infection in the wider community.

There will only be a few days left of term in England when the rules change so the impacts are not likely to be felt until the autumn term.

When children need looking after, we know that this burden of care falls disproportionately on mothers;

- A third of working mothers and 44% of Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) mothers reported having lost work or hours due to a lack of childcare during the pandemic¹.
- 46% of mothers being made redundant during the pandemic said that lack of childcare was a factor in their selection for redundancy².

The End of Working From Home Recommendation.

The recommendation that those who can work from home should, will also be lifted on 19 July. This will increase the risk of transmission both at work and on public transport for those who are returning to the workplace. Relaxing the work from home recommendation will see households face increased risk of infection at a time when school-age children, who have not been vaccinated, are at home for the summer holiday.

¹ BBC (November 2020) ([Covid has 'devastating' impact on gender equality - BBC News](#))

² Pregnant Then Screwed (2020) Covid, Childcare and Career (<https://bit.ly/3iUKu5p>)

Cut to Universal Credit Payment

Even prior to Covid 19, women, especially low-paid, disabled and BAME women were most likely to be living in both in-work and out of work poverty in the UK.³ This means women on average rely on social security for larger parts of their income than men.

At the start of the pandemic the Government brought in a temporary increase of £20 a week to Universal Credit. Even with this increase working age benefits in the UK are among some of the lowest in the OECD as a result of a decade of cuts and benefit freezes.⁴ There was no equivalent increase to legacy benefits, a decision which hit disabled people in particular.

Despite wide-spread calls from anti-poverty campaigners, opposition parties as well as six former Conservative Secretaries of State for Work and Pensions, the Government has decided to remove this uplift. Boris Johnson told MPs that he wants a pandemic recovery based on creating jobs not extending welfare⁵.

37% of universal credit claimants are in paid employment⁶. In addition, the creation of high quality and well-paid jobs cannot be guaranteed at a time when the UK faces continued economic uncertainty due to the unprecedented scale of the recession caused by the pandemic. What is certain however, is the impact of not maintaining this lifeline.

- Research suggests that 500,000 people, including 200,000 more children, will be pulled into poverty⁷.
- The cut will put further pressure on working-age incomes over the coming years due to ongoing cuts like the roll-out of the 'two child limit', the abolition of the family element in UC and other means-tested support⁸.
- In 2021-2022 the fall in living standards will be considerably worse for low-income households than it was during the financial crisis, as it is driven by the reversal of the benefits boost and the forecasted increase in unemployment⁹.

The Government cannot claim to be serious about "levelling up", about improving lives and living standards, whilst it also oversees one of the biggest overnight cuts whose impact will be most felt in some of the "Red Wall" seats.

A third of all working-age households in Red Wall constituencies across the north of England, West Midlands and Wales will be affected by the cut, rising to two-thirds in Blackpool South, and more than

³ WBG (2019) DWP data confirms: women and children continue to be worse affected by poverty (<https://bit.ly/2xHdxHj>)

⁴ IFS (2020) The temporary benefit increases beyond 2020-21, (<https://ifs.org.uk/publications/15067>)

⁵ Sky News (July 2021) ([Universal Credit: Boris Johnson ignores pleas of former Conservative ministers and will end £20 a week benefits uplift | Politics News | Sky News](#))

⁶ Data from LG Inform - Proportion of Universal Credit claimants in employment (from Nov 2020 to Apr 2021) for England ([Proportion of Universal Credit claimants in employment in England | LG Inform \(local.gov.uk\)](#))

⁷ Joseph Rowntree Foundation (November 2020) ([Coalition warns it would be a terrible mistake to cut the £20 uplift to Universal Credit | JRF](#))

⁸ Brewer M, Corlett A, Handscomb K & Tomlinson D (2021) The Living Standards Outlook 2021 ([Living-standards-outlook-2021.pdf \(resolutionfoundation.org\)](#))

⁹ Ibid

two-fifths in Great Grimsby, Bolton North-East, West Bromwich West and Dudley North¹⁰. By comparison, just a quarter of families in southeast England will lose out¹¹.

Face Masks and Social Distancing to be Scrapped.

'Freedom Day', and the relaxation of Covid restrictions it brings with it, rings particularly hollow for the 3.7 million people in England clinically extremely vulnerable and the estimated 500,000 in the UK for whom- due to a range of medical conditions –the vaccine is unlikely to work¹². For these people, July 19 will not mark a feeling of freedom. Instead, it will bring a feeling of fear and anxiety and mean many will be forced to choose between being trapped at home to stay safe or going out and risking infection.

No economic argument has been made to support the Government's plan to lift laws around wearing face masks or social distancing, despite the impact it will have. The scrapping of these rules exposes working-class women in particular to the risk of infection, as they are those most likely to;

- Have to use Public Transport¹³.
- Working in customer-facing roles¹⁴.
- Be less likely to be able to work from home¹⁵.

Research done last year showed that;

- There are over 3 million people in jobs at high risk of exposure to Covid 19 in the UK – 77% of them are women¹⁶.
- Over a million of these workers are low paid – 98% of them are women¹⁷.

Statutory Sick Pay – Not Adequate and Many Still Not Eligible

The UK's weekly rate for statutory sick pay (SSP) is £94.25 for up to 28 weeks. On average, that is just 20 per cent of a worker's income. Many are still do not earn enough to qualify, putting too much of a financial imperative to carry on working. The UK is also one of only four countries where self-employed people are not eligible for any sick pay¹⁸.

- WBG calculations find that 15.5% of women and 10.6% of men do not earn enough to qualify for SSP.

¹⁰ The Independent (October 2020) (['Red wall' seats to take brunt of welfare cuts, as 6 million families set to lose £1,000 | The Independent](#))

¹¹ Ibid

¹² BBC News (July 2021) ([Covid-19: 'For us it's not freedom day, is it?' - BBC News](#))

¹³ WBG (2020) Public Transport and Gender ([2020 WBG Briefing: Public transport and gender - Womens Budget Group](#))

¹⁴ WBG (2021) Women and Employment During Covid-19 ([Women-and-employment-during-Covid-19-1.pdf \(wbg.org.uk\)](#))

¹⁵ Warren T, Lyonette C & UK WBG (2021) Carrying the work burden of the Covid-19 pandemic: working class women in the UK ([final-report-working-class-women-and-covid.pdf \(nottingham.ac.uk\)](#))

¹⁶ Autonomy (March 2020) The Jobs at Risk Index ([COVID-19: Jobs At Risk Index \(JARI\). Which occupations are most at risk? - Autonomy](#))

¹⁷ Ibid

¹⁸ Publications Office of the EU ([Sick pay and sickness benefit schemes in the European Union - Publications Office of the EU \(europa.eu\)](#))

- For those who do qualify, over 4 in 10 workers told the TUC that they would be pushed into debt or not be able to pay bills if their income dropped down to £96 per week for just two weeks¹⁹.
- Adult social care workers only entitled to SSP could see their weekly income reduced by two-thirds if they have to self-isolate²⁰.

Conclusion

Emerging from the lockdown was always going to involve striking a balance between the need for more reopening and the need to protect those who continue to be at risk of infection. In a rush for ‘freedom’, the Government is forgetting that health is our economy.

In the same week that the Government announce withdrawal of protection for the most vulnerable in our society as well as our key workers;

- Covid cases have reached 30,000 for the first time since 24 January²¹. The Government projects there will be 100,000 cases a day as restrictions are lifted²².
- Based on current projections, infections that lead to hospital admissions are expected to reach 2,000 daily admission . That figure is twice what the NHS would normally see in the depths of winter for all types of respiratory illness²³.
- Nobody under the age of 18 has received a vaccine, despite being able to contract the virus and with the impact of long Covid unknown.
- As of 2 July, there are five strains considered to be ‘of concern’ by Public Health England, including the Delta and Alpha variants²⁴. There are warnings that the newest ‘Lambda’ strain, brought to the UK by overseas travel, is more transmissible than the Delta variant²⁵.

When the pandemic hit last year, it revealed to everyone that care is the backbone of our society. It also exposed and exacerbated, what many people knew about child and adult social care – that there were crises in these sectors due to chronic underinvestment. Although the lessons could not be clearer, we are still waiting on the Government for a settlement on social care – two years after Boris Johnson’s announcement to the nation in 2019 that he would ‘fix’ the sector with ‘a clear plan we have prepared’.

No plans have been announced either to address the pre-existing crisis of affordability and inaccessibility in the childcare sector. Ofsted’s latest data shows that in the six months up to March

¹⁹TUC (2021) ([Covid-19 and Insecure Work | TUC](#))

²⁰ Institute for Employment Studies (September 2020) Potential impact of Covid-19 government policy on the adult social care workforce (<https://bit.ly/2XER7QK>)

²¹ BBC News (July 2021) ([Covid: Cases in UK rise above 30,000 for first time since January - BBC News](#))

²² Ibid

²³ Ibid

²⁴ BBC Science Focus Magazine (July 2021) ([Lambda COVID variant UK: All you should know about the new strain - BBC Science Focus Magazine](#))

²⁵ Ibid

2021, there were 14,385 fewer childcare places and 3,292 fewer providers in England²⁶. This is a worrying consequence of the pandemic and will reduce capacity for when parents are expected to go back to the office.

Recommendations:

Stronger safety net: This pandemic has highlighted the importance of social security for alleviating and preventing poverty. The holes in the safety net have been put into stark relief. The Child benefit, a crucial source of women's and children's income, should be increased and support for low-income families and unemployed people should be improved to provide better living standards. The £20 Universal Credit payment needs to be made permanent and legacy benefits (including Job Seeker's Allowance and Employment and Support Allowance) should be increased in line with this payment.

Investment in care: Urgent funding is required for the early years sector to avoid widespread closures that would have a huge impact on women's employment. Sustainable funding and longer-term major reform is sorely needed by both the early years and social care sectors.

Some Covid restrictions kept in place: In order to keep safe the most vulnerable in our society, and the workers upon whom we most rely, the Government needs to keep face masking wearing in place until the risk of Covid infection is minimal.

Increase SSP levels: to ensure there is adequate income protection for people who are ill and for those who may not be ill but need to self-isolate for public health reasons.

Working from home recommendation kept in place: In order to reduce risk of transmission, the Government should continue to ask those who can work from home to do so, until all adults have received both their vaccinations.

²⁶ WBG (2021) Access to Childcare in Great Britain ([Briefing-Childcare-FINAL-version.pdf \(wbg.org.uk\)](https://www.wbg.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Briefing-Childcare-FINAL-version.pdf))