

How Leicester made to top the league for jump virus

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FULL TEXT

THE English city of Leicester woke up yesterday morning to discover it is the first place in Britain that must rewind the clock to the dark days of April following a localised second wave of the coronavirus.

A multicultural city that accounts for just 0.006% of the British population, it now accounts for a whopping 10% of all cases of Covid-19 across the whole of England.

So any return to normality has been postponed for at least a fortnight - by order of British prime minister Boris Johnson.

While the rest of Britain will see pubs, hotels and campsites reopening this weekend, Leicester has been told to go the other way. Schools must close, along with non-essential shops and people are being told to stay at home.

Worse still, perhaps, is the fact that the residents now finds themselves branded as outcasts.

'We're like the Leicester lepers,' sighs local child-protection worker, Tracy Jebbet, calling in to Radio Leicester to complain that her upcoming holiday to Cornwall has just been cancelled. The management of her St Austell campsite have just announced a ban on all bookings from Leicester and have told her she cannot go.

Social media, meanwhile, is buzzing with stories of Leicester youngsters planning to escape to neighbouring Derby or Nottingham for a night on the tiles this weekend. Anyone stupid or brave enough to head out of town in a Leicester City or Leicester Tigers replica shirt can certainly expect ostracism - or worse.

The local authorities have said they will 'enforce' restrictions but no one believes that for one moment. Of more immediate concern to the authorities is why this particular city should be suffering such an explosion of Covid cases right now when it has previously had a below-average rate of infection during this pandemic. The locals have plenty of theories...

'Parts of the city are very overcrowded and some people have been negligent because we were sailing along near the bottom of the infection league,' says Manzoor Moghal, chairman of the Muslim Forum think tank, businessman and former chairman of the county council race relations committee.

'We have a lot of factories and a lot of people living in small houses. Leicester is mostly Asian and a lot of families have been visiting each other, thinking they were Covidfree. That has been found out.' Despite publicity about the disproportionate impact of the virus on members of ethnic minorities, and the number of multi-generational households, he says the message has been lost on many.

'That should have made people take more precautions. Older people, especially those with underlying issues, have done that, but the young take a different attitude.' Talk of minorities is somewhat ambiguous. Leicester prides itself on being the most diverse city in Britain. The 2011 census showed that the white population (50.6%) would soon be a minority, and subsequent polls suggest that this is now the case.

However, some of the areas with the highest infection rates are those with predominantly Asianorigin populations on the eastern side of the city.

'You just want to look at the local park at night,' says Amit Patel, 26, boss of Milan Sweets. 'There are 500 people in there watching or playing cricket at night.' He only recently reopened his shop and adjacent catering business after 12 weeks of closure, and has just brought all his staff back from furlough. Initially, business was soon back to 80% of pre-pandemic turnover but, as of this week, it has slumped.

'We can't afford to shut down again, especially if there is going to be no government support.' So does he expect Leicester to observe the renewed lockdown? 'Some will. But others will go straight to the pub in Market Harborough.' You need only venture off the main streets to see some of the places where, according to the locals, fresh cases of the virus are rife. There are numerous small factories, many of them in the textile trade, which have recently gone back to work. The lights are on in cluttered workshops, the machinery is grinding away and staff are working at close quarters with no apparent sign of extra ventilation beyond the odd open window.

Come the next heatwave, these really will be sweatshops.

Meanwhile, the gutters outside are littered with piles of empty nitrous oxide (or laughing gas) cannisters, a sure sign of backstreet partying.

'Indians like to sit together and share food,' says Ali Siddiq, 56, offering me a piece of naan bread as he sits on a bench in Spinney Hill Park. 'You've got houses with shift workers living 12 to a house.

That's why this virus is here.' 'Go out on the streets in the morning and you'll see all these workers heading for the factories,' says retired council officer Masoom Jeraj, 69, whom I meet in Spinney Hill Park with his wife, Naznin. The couple have come here to get a coronavirus test at the walk-in testing centre run by a friendly and efficient team from the local British army regiment.

I am offered a nose-and-throat swab test, which is quick and painless, with a result promised in 24 hours. I would have expected a long queue here but there is none.

After a while, Kalpesh, 44, turns up with his mother and five-year-old daughter. Kalpesh has been off work for several days with a headache. His doctor told him to see an optician - which he has already done - but he has now lost his sense of smell, too. His mother, he adds, has developed a cough.

I ask where he works. 'Samworth Brothers,' he says. Instant alarm bells. The giant food factory has already confirmed a number of cases on its production lines. Kalpesh says he was planning to go back to work in the morning. So is he going? 'I will wait for the results,' he says. I wish him the best of luck.

The centre of Leicester is eerily empty, save for the market place where a restricted number of stalls are selling fruit and veg on the same spot where Vicki Chapple has long since been running a stall. She has remained open all through this pandemic - and has sent plenty of fresh fruit to her sister, an intensive care nurse who has been 'very poorly' with the virus.

'It really saddens me because it makes this city look bad,' she tells me. 'We are a strong city and we will bounce back. But I don't like this idea of segregating the city. If you're going to have a lockdown, it should be the whole county or it won't work.' news@dailymail.ie CITY SHOWS HOW EASY IT IS TO FALL BACK TO CRISIS...

A FURIOUS row broke out yesterday over the UK government's decision to put Leicester back in lockdown - starkly illustrating to businesses and officials here what may happen if Ireland is hit by a fresh wave of coronavirus cases. Leicester mayor Peter Soulsby demanded a new bailout for struggling businesses, while the local policing commissioner criticised the 'drip-feeding' of information to agencies on the ground. There was anger that a map showing which parts of the city and surrounding areas were subject to the lockdown only emerged 'well after' it had been announced.

Niall Dickson, head of the NHS Confederation, said the lockdown had been 'clouded in confusion', warning: 'What has happened in Leicester could well be repeated elsewhere and we need a transparent approach for any future local lockdowns.' Non-essential shops that reopened a fortnight ago were told to close yesterday and schools must also shut. Residents were advised to stay at home as much as possible and warned against all but essential travel. The lockdown zone also takes in 239 restaurants, 196 hair salons or barbers and 182 pubs, most of which had been preparing to open on Saturday.

The percentage of people aged 18 and under being diagnosed with the virus in Leicester has trebled from 5% to 15% over the last six weeks, health officials said.

Willy Bach, police and crime commissioner for Leicester, Leicestershire and Rutland, criticised the lockdown process. 'We were not even provided with a map of the [lockdown] area until well after the announcement. I have a great deal of sympathy with the agencies charged with delivery. They needed clarity from the start, and I am

astonished that it is being drip-fed as the day progresses,' he said.

'It makes the city look bad'

'Parts of the city are overcrowded'

CAPTION: Slump: Shop owner Amit Patel and his wife, Shabeta; Saddened: Vicki Chapple on her market stall in Leicester's city centre

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