

# Fears of outbreaks in 'sweatshops' for migrant workers

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## FULL TEXT

The cramped living conditions of workers in Leicester have led to plans for pop-up isolation centres in hotels to contain the coronavirus, with the city's textile industry also causing concern.

However, the government conceded that the source of the outbreak had still not been found, as it emerged that flareups of the virus are hidden from local residents because published data does not include most cases.

While the city council says that there have been 944 cases confirmed in Leicester in the past two weeks, data published by the government shows 79. It emerged yesterday that the public data includes only hospital cases and excludes tests carried out by four mobile testing units sent to the city.

Ministers are now under pressure to publish detailed local statistics. Matt Hancock, the health secretary, has promised to release "all the data on test results, in order to ensure that the wider public, as well as directors of public health, are able to access that data" but no date has been set.

Sir Peter Soulsby, the mayor of Leicester, asked Boris Johnson yesterday to provide data on the ethnicity and employment of those tested in order to better trace outbreaks, saying that he finally had street-level data on where cases were happening. "We're still trying to work through the mountain of stuff that's now come through and try to map it and to see where in the community the virus is still active and where it might be spreading," he said.

Jonathan Ashworth, the shadow health secretary and Leicester South MP, said: "Detailed data must flow to local authorities regularly and rapidly because taking on this virus we must always act with speed. We need transparency. Local people need to be able to see all the data, not just a snapshot so people can understand the situation in their local authority.

"A lockdown should be effective but it is a blunt tool. Gathering intelligence is crucial to breaking chains of transmission."

In the two weeks since alarm bells first rang about Leicester, factories and schools have been shut and intensive testing introduced but Mr Hancock told the BBC: "These sorts of much more targeted measures have worked in other outbreaks. So we've been taking this highly localised approach but unfortunately that targeted action wasn't working in Leicester."

He said "we are still doing the work to understand exactly why the outbreak has been so bad in Leicester", adding that factors such as poverty, ethnic diversity with many generations under one roof and language problems were "familiar" to him.

The city's large textile industry is also being considered, and Andrew Bridgen, the Conservative MP for North West Leicestershire, condemned some factories as "sweatshops". He told the BBC that the city had "a very large garment industry which should have locked down, which my sources are telling me have worked for internet retailers who have been very busy during lockdown and they've carried on working as well".

Public health officials suspect that large numbers of migrant workers sharing accommodation and workplaces could be a factor and are looking at reserving hotel rooms so that people can self-isolate away from colleagues.

Professor Linda Bauld, a behavioural scientist at the University of Edinburgh, said: "The restrictions being reintroduced are not the fault of the local population. We need to ask real questions about the adequacy of the UK government's response to this whole crisis and whether it has, most immediately, failed the people of Leicester."

## DETAILS

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