

POSSIBLE CONSEQUENCES OF INTERVENTION IN LOCALITIES (FORMERLY “LOCALISED LOCKDOWNS”) FOR PUBLIC DISORDER

Commission

- What are possible wider effects and unintended consequences of local restrictions on the effected population, including trust in government, social stigmatisation, **public disorder**, and decreased travel and visits to area post-lockdown?
- In areas with clusters of vulnerable or marginalised social groups, what steps are required to ensure that measures are equitable and not discriminatory?

Background

Although the transmission of Covid-19 is currently declining in the UK, the experience of other countries that have passed through the first major wave of infection suggests that there will be many localised increases in disease transmission. If these are not controlled, it is possible that Covid-19 might again spread more widely, with potentially devastating social and economic consequences.

Localised lockdowns of the kind imposed on Leicester offer a means of dealing with what may become a chronic problem. Since the commission was received, local authorities have also been given powers to take steps short of the type of restrictions that were initially imposed on Leicester. In view of this, it is currently difficult to define exactly what a localised lockdown is. For the purposes of this briefing, we will consider only those interventions that impose significant (police-enforceable) restrictions on movement and assembly, and which have a widespread impact on retail, leisure and other business activity. Such actions have significant security and policing implications whether or not they apply to a whole or merely part of the area covered by a local/unitary authority.

Defining ‘public disorder’

The commission refers to ‘public disorder.’ It is unclear whether this refers to large-scale civil disobedience such as rioting or whether it potentially encompasses other actions causing widespread harm to life and property, or which may have lasting effects on the governance and peace of particular communities. We believe that the broader of these definitions has more utility and will examine the potential for the following to occur in the event of localised lockdowns:

- riots;
- large-scale affray short of a riot (e.g. as in the response to police dispersal of block parties in London, Liverpool, Greater Manchester);
- inter-ethnic conflict (involving violence against the person, vandalism, arson);
- assaults against police officers, PCSOs, other emergency workers, and officials seeking to monitor the lockdown.

General issues

In our previous paper on localised lifting of the national lockdown, we made some observations which are relevant to the imposition of localised lockdowns and it is worth re-stating them before considering the current situation in the UK and how the risks of intervention in particular localities may be assessed. The salient points are these:

- Selective locking off of areas within urban centres may not only fragment public support for government measures but could lead to significant public disorder.
- Policing boundaries would be highly resource intensive.
- Anger arising from communities who perceive they have been locked down unfairly would be directed at police in the majority of cases. This is particularly problematic in areas of lower socio-economic status whose populations traditionally have more difficult historical relations with police and could easily lead to escalations.
- Restrictions imposed in the UK during the epidemic have not led to conflict thus far because they have been perceived as fair (for the most part). Any sense of inequality arising from the imposition of selective measures would likely lead to civil disorder and feed the propaganda of extremist groups and hostile states. Households within local areas may also fear retaliation if cases within a neighbourhood prevent release and may conceal cases as a result.

These considerations are not meant to imply that localised intervention of the kind described is unwise; merely that it comes with risks. These risks pertain both to the locality in question and to broader public health strategy if intervention results in significant resistance. Resistance in one locality could encourage similar resistance elsewhere.

In most cases, these risks can be managed. Indeed, the example of Leicester shows that, while national intervention has resulted in significant tensions locally, no major disorder has occurred. But not all areas may be as amenable to intervention as Leicester and it is important to consider the political situation that obtains in the UK and how this may relate to the issue of “localised lockdown”.

The present situation

The volatile political situation that we described in our last briefing on protest – given at a time of frequent BLM protests and counter-protests – has calmed somewhat but worrying new trends have emerged and are almost certain to affect the ways in which localised lockdowns are perceived and received. In addition, there are signs that a new wave of protest activity is likely to become manifest over the next two weeks.

The erosion of police legitimacy

Many areas of the UK have long been challenging to police but the fallout from the BLM marches has made the situation in many towns and cities far worse. Police are now taunted (particularly in areas with large BAME populations) and attacked on a regular basis, as well as being filmed during confrontations. In non-BAME areas, police have also suffered as a result of the response to the BLM protests, being considered weak and ineffectual (e.g. perception of police as ‘failing’ to prevent statues from being damaged). This is placing enormous pressure on police, psychologically and physically. Assaults on police officers increased substantially in many urban areas during the lockdown but have recently become more serious, as the easing of restrictions has allowed more people onto the streets. In Bradford, for example, police are suffering regular attacks; sometimes during confrontations with members of the public and sometimes with youths lying in wait to throw stones and other objects at police vehicles. The situation is tense and the attempt to enforce a lockdown in such contexts is likely to result in violence. In some areas, rioting is a significant possibility.

The Far-Right

The Far and Extreme Right Wing (F/XRW) made a strong showing in response to the BLM protests in London and to a certain extent in other towns and cities. Their chief focus at that time was the protection of monuments against vandalism. Since then, their focus has switched back to Islam and a variety of concerns related to child sexual exploitation by predominantly Asian men. The latter subject is the main focus of a demonstration planned to take place in

London on 1 August, organised by Tommy Robinson among others. This demonstration is different from others in which Robinson has been involved in, in that it is organised by a broad front including current and former UKIP and Brexit Party members, Fathers for Justice, etc. They have coalesced on a platform called Hearts of Oak, established in February 2020. At the same time, Britain First have been campaigning on the same issue across the North of England, with leafleting and days of action in Bradford, Rochdale, Oldham, etc. Rochdale is likely to be the focus for a lot of FRW activity because of a campaign to deport three of the 'Rochdale grooming gang' recently released from prison. If significant restrictions are introduced in areas in which the FRW are campaigning – or which figure heavily in their campaigns – there is potential for ethnic conflict, perhaps leading to affray or rioting in some cases.

Organised criminal gangs

Drug-related OCG activity continued during the lockdown and a number of significant arrests and seizures of firearms were made across the country. Since the easing of the lockdown, OCG activity has increased markedly and has been evident, for example, in most, if not all, of the unlicensed music events (UMEs) that have been staged in London, the North and North-West and the South-West of England. Attempts to disperse UMEs have result in significant affray in some cases and could easily result in more widespread rioting. Another factor behind UMEs, which ought not to be under-estimated, is a sense of generational inequity. Young people feel that their life-chances have been disproportionately affected by the lockdown and, at the same time, feel less threatened by Covid-19 than by further lockdowns, which would impinge again on their freedom and their economic future. Many are still furloughed and face unemployment, if they are not already unemployed. Along with OCGs, they are likely to resist attempts to curtail their freedom through localised lockdowns. This could take the form of attacks on police or affray/rioting.

Recommendations

To mitigate the risks of public disorder identified in this study, we would recommend the following:

1. Intensive gathering of intelligence from areas which may be considered for national intervention in order to made good the present deficit of information on issues such as police legitimacy and community relations;
2. early identification of and action in transmission clusters in institutions/workplaces to prevent transmission into the wider community;
3. curtailing the use of the term 'lockdown', which is imprecise, stigmatising and has punitive connotations (see SPI-B paper on 'Areas of intervention (formerly "local lockdowns) measures to control outbreaks of COVID during the national release phase)');
4. providing a clear explanation of what new restrictive measures are designed to achieve and under what conditions they can be lifted;
5. early and substantial engagement with communities to explain these objectives and how they can be met;
6. provision of assistance to the most vulnerable and disadvantaged sections of the community in the event of shortages and harms arising from the lockdown (e.g. access to food, healthcare, financial support);
7. engagement with national/local media in an effort to reduce the stigmatisation of particular communities;

8. tailoring police engagement to the localised conditions (e.g. through local advisory groups) and keeping enforcement to a minimum except in the case of flagrant and large-scale violations of restrictions
9. in the case of persistent and flagrant violations a higher and more sustained police presence may be needed to prevent further erosion of public confidence and serious affray.