

UK embarks on major reopening despite fears over COVID variant



A ban on international travel has been lifted as part of the easing of COVID measures in England [John Sibley/Reuters]

London, May 18 (RHC)-- The United Kingdom has taken its biggest step yet out of lockdown, with rules easing in England, Scotland and Wales despite mounting concern over the spread of a highly contagious coronavirus variant.

Beginning Monday, for the first time in months, people in England are able to eat a restaurant meal indoors, drink in a pub, go to a museum, hug friends and visit one another's homes.

Venues such as cinemas, concert halls and sports stadiums are reopening, and a ban on overseas holidays has been lifted, with travel made possible to a small number of countries with low infection rates.

Devolved administrations in Scotland and Wales also loosened rules on indoor socialising and allowed hospitality and entertainment businesses to welcome customers again. Restrictions will be relaxed slightly later in Northern Ireland. It was not immediately clear why, but each country within the union sets its own timeline.

The moves come amid rising anxiety that the coronavirus virus variant first found in India, B.1.617.2, is spreading fast in the UK. British Prime Minister Boris Johnson has set a June 21 deadline for lifting all lockdown measures in England, but this could yet be pushed back.

British scientific advisers say B.1.617.2 may be up to 50 percent more transmissible than B.1.1.7, the strain which was first identified in Kent, England, late last year. The so-called “UK variant” fuelled a spike in infection rates which saw Johnson enforce another lockdown in England, on January 6.

Johnson urged people to proceed with “a heavy dose of caution” as measures were eased this week in a bid to “keep the virus at bay.” “We are keeping the spread of the variant first identified in India under close observation and taking swift action where infection rates are rising,” he said. “I urge everyone to be cautious and take responsibility when enjoying new freedoms today.”

Cases of the B.1.617.2 variant have more than doubled in a week in the UK, from 520 to 1,313, defying a sharp nationwide downward trend in infections and deaths won by the lockdown restrictions and a rapid mass vaccination campaign.

Surge testing has been rolled out in Bolton and Blackburn, in northwest England, where cases of the strain are rising. Pop-up vaccination sites have also been set up to speed the inoculation drive.

Across the UK, meanwhile, the government is shortening the gap between vaccine doses for people over the age of 50 from 12 to eight weeks in a bid to give them faster protection.

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