

**Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) (No. 3) and (All Tiers) (England)
(Amendment) Regulations 2021 ([SI 2021/8](#))**

Submission from Dr Caroline Kamau, Birkbeck, University of London

Dear Chair, Lords' Secondary Legislation Scrutiny Committee,

Re: Submission of evidence about SI 2021/8: lockdown laws must be based on scientific evidence

I am urgently requesting that the committee please scrutinise Parliament's current legislation with respect to wedding services during the 2021 covid-19 lockdown with. Ordinary church services (and other services in places of worship) are currently legal during lockdown therefore please ask Parliament to accord the same rights to religious services convened for the purpose of marriage under the same terms as which they were previously legal during tier-2 restrictions for the following reasons:

(1) Legislative precedent: Current legislation set by Parliament allows churches and other places of worship to remain open and conduct services during lockdown (including allowing christenings) yet the legislation illogically bans religious services comprising of wedding vows. The latter are not different from ordinary worship services in their religious significance – many religious people believe that marriage is sacred and their religions prohibit cohabitation or premarital sex. Therefore, a wedding is an inherent (not optional) expression of religious beliefs therefore please ensure that Parliament is aware that it cannot legally ban church or other religious services comprising of wedding vows on one hand but allow any other type of church service (including christenings).

(2) Scientific evidence: I am a scientist who was is aware of current evidence about causes of covid-19 infections e.g. schools, illegal gatherings and lack of face mask use. I would not be asking for an amendment in legislation if I thought it would increase the public health risk of covid-19. I was named in the Daily Mail as among those who called for a national lockdown in March 2020, and I was a proponent of evidence-based laws such as making face masks mandatory (I signed that parliamentary petition). There is no scientific evidence that weddings pose a public health risk. Wedding services in which everyone wears a face mask are no more risky than ordinary church services in which everyone wears a face mask. They are no more risky than any other legally-permitted indoor context such as a supermarket or bank. There is no scientific reason why it is legal or safer for 15 people to sit in a workplace canteen eating their lunch but illegal and dangerous for 15 people to eat a meal during a wedding reception. Dancing and other aspects of wedding receptions were already banned therefore all that couples are asking for is the same rights as those accorded to other people in society (e.g. workers in canteens, workers having business lunches, people on an aeroplane eating a meal, sportspeople allowed to continue practising in groups or film-makers allowed to continue filming scenes of people in a gathering eating – these are all accurate but tragic examples of Parliament's lack of logic within its lockdown legislation banning weddings). Please scrutinise Parliament's scientific basis for banning weddings and ask it to amend the new legislation about lockdown accordingly.

(3) Business case: England's Parliament has banned weddings for most of the past calendar year and, during the short periods in which weddings were allowed, the short notice it gave to the public made it impossible for couples to arrange their weddings (e.g. banns, securing venues, bookings, etc.). In many cases couples rearranged their weddings and then Parliament made a last-minute change in legislation, making weddings illegal, and therefore stopping the plans of couples,

wedding venues, churches, and self-employed people such as bakers and photographers. The constant disruption and stopping/starting of wedding organising is pointless, illogical and immoral because Parliament has no scientific evidence to back its ban on weddings. Parliament's ban on weddings has caused severe loss and disruption to many business owners and is creating an unnecessary and preventable burden to the economy. It is also damaging to religious organisations. For example, churches are facing constant disruption and uncertainty about planned weddings, banns read, and other administrative aspects of weddings.

Please ask Parliament to amend the legislation so that wedding services are permitted during lockdown as they were under the same terms of the strict tier-2 system (that is, 15 attendees wearing face masks and a covid-secure wedding reception). You may, at your discretion, request that Parliament introduce the added protective measure of asking all attendees to supply documentary proof of a negative covid-19 test result taken within the preceding 5 days to the wedding organiser (e.g. the vicar or reception manager).

This is an urgent matter for religious couples, families, businesses, churches and other religious places of worship that have suffered enough disruption in the past year and want current/future certainty because no one knows how long the pandemic will last. The on-off cycle of lockdowns might continue for the next year or two therefore people who want to get married as an inherent part of their religious beliefs (and in order to start living together and have a baby) should not face any more uncertainty that is needless, illogical and unsupported by scientific evidence.

I look forward to your reply and thank you very much in advance for your time. I have attached report [see below] that I have prepared for your benefit, outlining the latest evidence about where people are most likely to catch coronavirus (schools, colleges, universities and supermarkets). Please include it in your evidence bundle.

Report

Some lockdown laws are effective whereas some laws have little or no effect on coronavirus infection rates and should be repealed. Evidence shows that closing schools and improving face mask use in supermarkets will likely reduce infection rates but harassing people for exercising outdoors is a pointless erosion of their civil liberties that will not reduce coronavirus infection rates. I was among the scientists who called for the first lockdown in March 2020 therefore I am not opposed to them in principle. But, at this stage in the pandemic, a draconian lockdown is no longer the answer and it risks damaging the morale of law-abiding citizens. Nuanced, evidence-based lockdown laws are possible based on these facts:

- Evidence shows that coronavirus cases were highest among children or people in school, college and university.
- Cases dramatically increased after these institutions re-opened in autumn.
- Coronavirus cases increased in December at the time that university students happened to have returned home for Christmas and people mingled with relatives with school children.

Therefore, the closure of schools, colleges and universities will reduce coronavirus cases and there is no need for further draconian laws.

High coronavirus cases among school, college and university goers

There were many reported coronavirus cases and outbreaks in schools, colleges and universities after they re-opened in autumn and recent Office for National Statistics data [1] show that the demographics with above-average rates of coronavirus are children and youths up to age 24. The most recent ONS modelling estimates that 2.95% of school children in years 7-11 and 3.16% of

youths in year 12 up to age 24 years have coronavirus. Public Health England's analysis of NHS Test and Trace data in November [2] suggested that 28.4% of people who tested positive for coronavirus had been to a primary or secondary school, university, college or nursery (with the majority of attributable to primary or secondary school). The proportion of people with coronavirus potentially attributable to a school, college or university in December was also high and totalled 32.4% [3]. Although a correlation is not causation, it is plausible that one in three people most probably caught coronavirus from school, college, university or their child.

Coronavirus cases rose when schools, colleges and universities re-opened

Closing schools, colleges and universities during the current lockdown makes sense and is evidence-based. If the government wants to keep infection rates as low as they were in July, evidence suggests that they should keep educational institutions online for the rest of the academic year. Their re-opening in autumn led to a dramatic increase in coronavirus cases, going from around less than 0.1% in July among all age groups¹ to marked spikes that were highest among school children and young people likely to be in university or college. For example, 16-24 year olds had an infection rate of 2.84% in mid-October after schools, colleges and universities re-opened whereas those aged 25 or older had much lower infection rates of 1.14% or less. If the government desires the very low infection rates observed in July, evidence suggests that they should keep schools as online-only for the rest of the academic year. That might sound controversial but the current and future health of children, families and societies is at stake. Even among those who survive coronavirus, there is a risk of "long covid" – debilitating fatigue and health problems that might last for years.

Coronavirus cases rose when university students went home for Christmas

The ONS data [1] show that infection rates started rising in December after university students returned home for the Christmas holidays. Since December, infection rates have been rising among people aged under 24 years old – but, in the same period, infection rates have fallen among people aged 35-49 and risen only slightly among people aged 50 years or older. To date, people aged 35 years or older have a below-average coronavirus infection rate (1.06-1.97%). Therefore, the government should not impose draconian lockdown laws that limit freedoms such as outdoor exercise because there is no evidence that this has any impact on coronavirus infection rates. Evidence suggests that a lockdown measure that could be beneficial is requiring all universities and colleges to make the rest of their academic year online-only.

Hospitality and retail unfairly closed

In contrast to schools, colleges and universities as sources of coronavirus, Public Health England's analysis of NHS Test and Trace data [2],[3] shows that very few people testing positive for coronavirus had been to a pub, bar, restaurant, gym or clothes shop before catching coronavirus either in November or December. For example, only 3.9% of people who tested positive for coronavirus in December had been to a pub, bar or restaurant. Only 2.2% had been to a gym and 1.4% a clothes shop. This suggests that closing pubs, bars, restaurants and gyms is unlikely to significantly reduce coronavirus infection rates and is needlessly damaging to people's jobs, businesses and the economy. The current plans to close takeaways and click-and-collect are likewise not based on any published evidence.

Weddings unfairly banned

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<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/healthandsocialcare/conditionsanddiseases/datasets/coronaviruscovid19infectionsurveydata>

Likewise, there is no evidence that that weddings or place of worship are significant sources of coronavirus infections therefore it is illogical to ban them and illogical that England is the only country in the United Kingdom to ban weddings. It is paradoxical and makes no scientific sense that workers, air travellers and business people can eat a meal together but people are banned from having meals or any kind of wedding reception. Closing the hospitality sector has a severe impact on businesses and the livelihoods of self-employed people who work as bakers, photographers and tailors. The illogical and poor evidence-base of the government's decision-making risks eroding the public's trust and might explain opinion polls suggesting that Labour would win a general election.

Tackling supermarkets is urgently needed in lockdown

Tackling coronavirus infections from supermarkets should be a government priority because the analysis by Public Health England of NHS Test and Trace data,²³ suggested that supermarkets could be responsible for many infections e.g. 18.3% in November and 15.6% in December. Supermarkets, schools, colleges and universities are the biggest potential sources of infection therefore tackling them will lead to significant reductions in infection rates. Given that face masks are already mandatory in supermarkets, the police can save lives by redirecting misguided efforts (e.g. fining people exercising outdoors) into fining people not wearing a face mask or wearing them incorrectly such as under their nose. The government also needs to issue guidance to reduce hand-to-face transmission of coronavirus from supermarket shopping trolleys, baskets and products touched by infected people using simple but clear guidance:

- Don't touch your face before washing your hands.
- Disinfect supermarket products because of the risk of cross-contamination.
- Wash your hands or use ample hand gel before and after shopping.
- Wash your hands thoroughly before eating, cooking or handling food.

A nuanced approach to lockdown is needed

Nearly half (48%) of people who caught coronavirus most likely caught it from their school, college or university-going child, a fellow pupil/student or someone in a supermarket [2]. Only 1.5% are likely to have caught coronavirus while working in hospitality, supporting the re-opening of this sector. There is no evidence that significant (or any) numbers of people have caught coronavirus outdoors while exercising therefore it does not make sense for the government to focus on that. There is also no evidence to back the government's banning of weddings or media discussions about closing places of worship, click-and-collect and other freedoms left. The vast majority of people are law-abiding citizens who have done everything the government has asked them to do therefore it is time that the government and its scientific advisors used evidence – not ideology or hysteria – to determine which lockdown laws actually work and which should be repealed.

The pandemic might continue for the next year or two therefore it is time for the government to think about nuanced lockdown laws that keep the country's morale up in the long haul.

Yours sincerely,

Dr. Caroline Kamau

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https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/936672/Weekly_COVID-19_and_Influenza_Surveillance_Graphs_w47.pdf

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