

Prime Minister's Questions: 3 June

DISCLAIMER: This document contains a scientific fact check of the statements made at the opening of the Prime Minister's Questions Session of 3 June. This summary was compiled in near real-time (before the Hansard transcript) was publicly available so may contain mistakes or other inaccuracies resulting from misunderstanding. Our usual detail of fact-checking has not been performed due to the short turnaround time. Volunteers from Scientists for Labour have undertaken to ensure that the commentary provided in this report is accurate, but it should be taken 'as-is'. Readers are encouraged to check both the original statement made and the actual text of the source below before using this information.

Links are **orange** for news articles

Links are **green** for papers in academic journals.

Links are in **purple** for governmental statistics or advice

Question 1 - Who is in control?

Statements

- This week the PM stated that he had decided to ‘take charge’ of the government’s response to the virus.
- Expresses concern at events in the US.

WHO HAS BEEN IN CONTROL UNTIL THIS POINT?

Relevant links:

Telegraph: Boris Johnson Takes Back Control...	The Telegraph article LOTO referenced directly: “Boris Johnson takes back control of coronavirus”.
Going viral: Boris Johnson grapples to control coronavirus message	Article from before lockdown about messaging on the topic of the virus.
Boris Johnson is ‘taking charge’ of the coronavirus response and people are baffled	News article noting the PM’s statement about ‘taking charge’ of the Coronavirus response.

Summative commentary:

The PM did indeed say that he was taking charge of the effort. The confusing messaging by the government is detrimental to public health efforts.

This question was accurate in its statements.

Answer 1

I TAKE FULL RESPONSIBILITY FOR TACKLING THIS VIRUS AND AM PROUD OF OUR RECORD.

Statements:

- PM associates with what LOTO had to say about George Floyd comments
- What happened in US was appalling, inexcusable, and understand people’s right to protest
- I take full responsibility for everything this Government has been doing in tackling Coronavirus and very proud of our record
- What we have achieved so far: protected NHS, driven down death rate, now seeing far fewer hospital admissions

Relevant links:

<p>Statistics » COVID-19 Daily Deaths</p>	<p>NHS England figures that does show that the number of COVID-19 deaths has declined</p>
<p>COVID-19: Admissions to Hospital</p>	<p>There has been a decline in hospital admissions due to COVID-19 in England</p>
<p>Perception of government handling of COVID-19</p>	<p>YouGov polling showing that there has been a significant decline in the public’s opinion of the government’s handling of the crisis</p>
<p>Covid-19 spreading too fast to lift lockdown in England – Sage advisers</p>	<p>SAGE advisors have suggested that the opening of lockdown at this timetable will likely lead to a second spike in COVID-19 cases.</p>
<p>COVID-19 testing delays and pathology services in the UK</p>	<p>“10 years of austerity have left the UK National Health Service inadequately resourced and ill prepared”.</p> <p>Details on how NHS policy has impeded NHS response to pandemic, e.g. closure of testing labs within hospitals, failure to stockpile reagents, lack of swabs meaning we rely on imports.</p>
<p>Dataset Coronavirus (COVID-19) related deaths by occupation, England and Wales</p>	<p>Mortality data of healthcare workers and social care workers has not been available to the public for nearly a month. Last updated 11 May.</p>
<p>Millions in UK miss cancer screenings, tests and treatments due to Covid-19</p>	<p>Huge backlog of cancer screening that is only starting to be addressed now. Estimated 24,000 cases of cancer have gone undiagnosed (Cancer Research UK)</p>

Summative Commentary:

The Prime Minister said that there has been a decline in COVID-19 deaths and hospital admissions of COVID-19. This is the case, but there is a risk that this trend will be reversed with easing of lockdown restrictions. As for the public having confidence in the Government’s handling of the crisis, according to YouGov polling, this is not the case.

This answer was partially accurate in its statements, with significant caveats.

Question 2 - Trust in the government

Statements

- LOTO wrote to the PM in confidence to offer his support to the government, but did not get a response.
- The concept of lockdown and “stay at home” were easy messages.
- This week, public trust has to be highest as lockdown is eased, and confusion should be at a minimum.
- Reuters has conducted a recent YouGov poll around trust in the government and noted a sharp decline in trust.

HOW WORRIED IS THE PM BY A LOSS OF TRUST IN THE GOVERNMENT?

Relevant links:

Keir Starmer warns PM: get a grip or risk second coronavirus wave	LOTO referenced a letter he wrote in confidence, which is mentioned here
Public trust in UK government over coronavirus falls sharply	Quote LOTO referenced about loss in public trust: “I have never in 10 years of research in this area seen a drop in trust like what we have seen for the UK government in the course of six weeks”
Trust in UK government and news media COVID-19 information down, concerns over misinformation from government and politicians up	Reuters Institute (University of Oxford) report on public trust in government - “In April, a majority of the public rated the UK government a relatively trustworthy source of information about coronavirus, and most people said that the UK government was doing a good job responding to the pandemic (Fletcher et al 2020). Just six weeks later, that is no longer so.” <i>Note there is a decrease in trust across the political spectrum.</i>
Coronavirus latest news: A fifth of Britons breaking lockdown as Dominic Cummings effect takes it toll	Data from YouGov shows that 21% of Britons are breaking lockdown rules more than they were before, a third of them blaming Cummings’ for their rule breaking.

Summative commentary:

The recent YouGov poll cited in the questions supports the statements made by KS regarding a decrease in trust (from a majority trusting to a minority) of the government, and the quotes made during the question were accurate. We also note that the same YouGov poll shows that a significant number of people are breaking lockdown rules, a third of whom blame Dominic Cummings’ actions for their breaching the rules.

This question was accurate in its statements.

Answer 2

THE PUBLIC ARE STILL PAYING ATTENTION TO GOVERNMENT GUIDANCE.

Statements:

- PM asserts he called LOTO in response to letter and briefed on all steps being taken, LOTO didn't offer any dissent at that stage and endorsed our approach.
- British people understand the difficult circumstances we are in and want clarity from across political spectrum
- Everyone understands we need to observe basic rules as that is how the incidence of this disease is coming down
- LOTO attempting to distract the public from this has not been successful because they continue to pay attention to Government guidance

Relevant links:

Perception of government handling of COVID-19	Polling suggests that there has been a sharp decline in confidence of how the government is handling COVID-19.
Dominic Cummings' actions damage public trust Letters Opinion	26 senior academics and health administrators suggest trust [in the Government] has been badly damaged by reported actions of Dominic Cummings.

Summative Commentary:

The PM suggests the public are still listening to and following Government guidance on protecting against the virus, however recent polling suggests there has been a sharp decline in confidence in how the Government is handling COVID-19. This was further confirmed in a letter published in the Observer written by 26 senior academics and health administrators, suggesting trust in the Government has fallen in recent weeks.

This answer asserted that the public are following government guidance. This is less true than at any point in the pandemic.

Question 3 - Test, track and trace

Statements

- Two weeks ago, the PM promised a world beating test, track and trace (TTT) system, implemented by 1 June.
- The TTT system is not yet in place.
- Anecdotal evidence from councillors that local authorities are weeks away from being able to implement TTT.
- Dido Harding (TTT chair) has said that the system will not be ready until the end of June.

WHY DID PM MAKE A PROMISE TO GET TEST TRACK AND TRACE UP AND RUNNING TWO WEEKS AGO THAT HAS BEEN BROKEN?

Relevant links:

<p>PMQs: Boris Johnson claims UK will have 'world-beating' system to trace 10,000 coronavirus cases per day ready by 1 June</p>	<p>Boris Johnson promised to have a world-beating contact tracing system in place by the 1st of June. Plans to trace contacts of up to 10,000 cases per day having already recruited 24,000 trackers.</p>
<p>Coronavirus test and trace system 'creating false sense of security'</p>	<p>"The UK doesn't have a world-beating covid test and trace system in place," said Chris Hopson, the chief executive of NHS Providers. "A series of concerns have been raised over the gaps in the system launched last week, with local health chiefs warning that they have not been given the time, powers or data to prepare for outbreaks in their area"</p>
<p>Coronavirus: Test and trace programme 'hit by more problems' on day two</p>	<p>Councillor Abtisam Mohamed, cabinet member for education and skills, said: "We have been advised by the Sheffield director of public health, Greg Fell, who has reviewed the local position and he does not feel assured that the recently announced 'test and trace' programme will be sufficiently well established and robust enough to be in place for 1 June."</p>
<p>Coronavirus test and trace system 'won't be fully operational until end of June', MPs told</p>	<p>Source for Dido Harding quote</p>

Summative commentary:

The PM did indeed make the statement during PMQs two weeks ago that LOTO alluded to. We were able to find published quotes from councillors supporting statements made by LOTO regarding the difficulties faced by local councils in implementing a test, track and trace system. Dido Harding also did indeed make comments about the TTT system not being ready until the end of June.

This question was accurate in its statements.

Answer 3

[THE PROMISE WAS TRUE - THE TEST, TRACK AND TRACE SYSTEM IS UP AND RUNNING.](#)

Statements:

- LOTO is casting aspersions on the efforts of tens of thousands of people who have set up test, track and trace (TTT) system
- We now have: 40,000 people engaged in this [TTT], thousands tested every day, every person who tests positive in TTT system is contacted, then thousands of their contacts are contacted
- Right now, as a result of TTT system, which was up and running on 1 June, thousands of people are now following guidance and the law and self-isolating

Relevant links:

Comment from Senior Government figures on Track and Trace numbers	Senior Government figures have said that the statistics used by the Government to analyse their track and trace figures are meaningless
England's contact tracers are unprepared, confused and bored	Many of those hired to do contact tracing are untrained and do not know what they are doing
Germany and Korea expose flaws in the NHS track and trace plan	The contact tracing method being used by the government is not following the best practice laid out in South Korea
'Something to hide': UK government accused over Covid-19 tests	UK government hasn't disclosed how many people have been tested for COVID-19 for a week
Data on testing	Testing data provided from Government site. Note Pillar 3 and Pillar 4 testing is not used for test, trace, isolate as these are serology/surveillance testing.

Summative Commentary:

The figures presented by the Government are of questionable quality, and there has been a lot of anecdotal evidence published around poor training provided to the Government's test, track and trace employees.

Much of this answer was based on statistics for which no citation is available, so verification or refutation is not possible in the timeframe we have.

Question 4 - Misreporting statistics

Statements

- The number of people testing positive every day represents a fraction of the total number of infected people.
- The ONS has said that 7,000 to 9,000 people are infected on any one day.
- There is a requirement for 5 contacts traced per infected person and so the system needs to reach 45,000 traces/day.
- The Statistics Authority has concerns with the government’s reporting, noting that the presentation of statistics regularly falls well below expectations.
- Data presented on testing has been particularly criticised and hence mistrust in government communication is increasing.

CAN THE PM SEE HOW DAMAGING MISREPORTING OF STATISTICS IS TO PUBLIC TRUST IN THE GOVERNMENT?

Relevant links:

Statistics Authority criticises Covid-19 testing figures News	Chair of UKSA said the testing statistics still “fall well short” of the expectations of the Code of Practice for Statistics. He wrote: “It is not surprising that given their inadequacy data on testing are so widely criticised and often mistrusted.””
Coronavirus (COVID-19) in the UK	Number of new cases
Governments and WHO changed Covid-19 policy based on suspect data from tiny US company	The WHO and National Governments have changed their COVID-19 policies and treatments based on flawed data from Surgisphere, a small US healthcare analytics company (calling into question some key findings published in well-respected journals). The Guardian’s investigation found that Surgisphere’s employees had little or no data/scientific background despite their claims to run some of the world’s largest hospital databases.
Covid-19 spreading too fast to lift lockdown in England – Sage advisers	“There are still 8,000 new infections every day in England without counting those in hospitals and care homes” (On 29/5, the day this was published, official government stats indeed showed only a fraction of this number as confirmed new cases)
Dataset Coronavirus (COVID-19) Infection Survey	ONS COVID-19 infection survey - estimates the number of people newly infected per week at 54,000 (as of 24th May)
Comment on incorrect estimating of R and infection rate	“Azra Ghani, professor in infectious disease epidemiology at Imperial College London, said, “At present we are estimating both R and the infection rate from data on hospitalisations. These form only a small fraction of all infections and represent an estimate of transmission that occurred 1-2 weeks earlier—and are therefore a blunt monitoring tool.”

Summative commentary:

It is reasonable to assume that the number of confirmed COVID-19 cases represent a fraction of the total number of current cases, and the ONS estimates the number of new infections per week is around 54,000, which supports the figures put forward by LOTO for the number of new infections per day. The derived number of traces/day of 45,000 is then a simple multiplication of the upper bound of the number of new infections by the number of traces per person. Statements quoting the Chair of UKSA are also accurate and have been widely reported in the news.

This question was accurate in its statements.

Answer 4

[THE GOVERNMENT REACHED THEIR TARGETS OF 100,000 TESTS PER DAY BY THE END OF MAY AND 200,000 BY THE BEGINNING OF JUNE.](#)

Statements:

- Endless attacks by the LOTO are aiming to undermine trust, when the public want clear messages about how to defeat this virus
- Test and trace is a vital tool
- Contrary to what LOTO has said, by start of May we got up to 100,000 tests per day and up to 200,000 by the beginning of this month

Relevant links:

Hancock says UK hit 100,000 tests amid claims tally is artificially boosted	“a third of the 122,347 tests included in the final 24-hour period before the [end of April] deadline were counted before they had been carried out.”
Government counts mailouts to hit 100,000 testing target	“the government changed the way it counts the number of COVID-19 tests in order to hit its target of 100,000 tests per day by the end of April”
Statistics watchdog: ministers still misleading public on coronavirus tests	Head of the UK Statistics Authority accuses government of continuing to mislead the public over the numbers of tests carried out for COVID-19 - conflating tests submitted with tests completed, lack of data on people being tested twice, etc.

[Number of coronavirus \(COVID-19\) cases and risk in the UK](#)

Daily test statistics (not clear what day) show total of 135,643. Removing tests that do not contribute to test, trace, and isolate (pillar 3 and 4 tests) brings this total down to 99,603 tests. Lab capacity as of June 2 is 220,213 tests (179,213 of possible tests are pillar 1 and 2 that can be used for tracing and isolating)

Summative Commentary:

There are significant numbers of reports that the Government's published figures of '100,000 tests by the start of May' are, at best, an example of somewhat creative accounting, with many tests being counted before they had actually been conducted and comments being made by reputable bodies about the misleading nature of the Government's presentation of statistics. Laboratory testing capacity has indeed apparently reached 200,000, but the number of tests being conducted on any one day has not yet reached the total capacity.

This answer was based on questionable reporting of statistics, which have been widely reported as flawed by reputable bodies.

Question 5 - Alert level and R

Statements

- Transparency on decisions - on 10 May, the PM said if alert level won't allow, we should wait before lifting lockdown.
- On 10th May, the alert level was 4, and R was noted as being between 0.5 and 0.9
- Some restrictions have been lifted now - what is the alert level and R now?

WHAT IS THE ALERT LEVEL NOW AND WHAT IS THE R RATE [sic]?

Relevant links:

<p>UK's chief medical officers dashed PM's 'hopes' to lower Covid alert</p>	<p>"Sir Patrick Vallance made a point of saying that the number of cases "remain high - it's not a low number" and that in some places the transmission rate, or R-value, remained "close to 1"."</p>
<p>All UK chief medical officers rejected lower virus threat level, source says</p>	<p>"All four of the UK's chief medical officers rejected suggestions from No 10 that the coronavirus threat level could be reduced because it contradicted evidence that showed the virus was still widespread"</p>
<p>Coronavirus (COVID-19): Real-time tracking of the virus - Public health matters</p>	<p>Government blog from 15 May claiming the R-value to be 0.75</p>
<p>Scientists for Labour on Twitter: "We're very confused by this slide... the LHS is a discrete integer between 1 and 5, the RHS has two terms: one is dimensionless (<1.0?) and the other is a number (~10,000). How does this work??... https://t.co/fsEGoC72qt"</p>	<p>The government's slide showing how the COVID alert level would be calculated, based on the R-number and the number of infections daily</p>
<p>ADPH Presidential Blog: A time for steady leadership, careful preparation and measured steps - ADPH</p>	<p>The Association of Directors of Public Health (ADPH) is calling for full implementation of all Phase 2 measures to be delayed until further consideration of the ongoing trends in infection rates and the R level gives more confidence about what the impact of these will be.</p>
<p>Covid-19: What is the R number?</p>	<p>BMJ article on R number - can refer to different approaches, and shouldn't be used as a replacement for actual testing data: "Models or model based estimates (such as R) can be helpful in interpreting data trends but should never be viewed as a surrogate for good data. Only with extensive surveillance and rapid testing of suspect cases in the wider community, in hospitals, and in care homes, and other places at high risk, can</p>

	we be truly confident that the epidemic is in decline and that it is safe to relax measures.”
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Summative commentary:

The government did indeed emphasise the need to not lift the lockdown if the alert level wouldn't allow it, and set out guidelines for how that alert level would be calculated. Now that the government is trying to ease the lockdown, it is reasonable to ask what those two factors (i.e. R and the prevalence) are right now. The CMO has made it clear that the alert level should not be reduced, so it is reasonable to ask why it has been reduced in all but name

This question was accurate in its statement but LOTO note that R is rarely considered as a rate, as it does not have units of inverse time.

Answer 5

THE ALERT LEVEL REMAINS AT 4, BUT WE HAVE FULFILLED THE FIVE TESTS

Statements:

- LOTO knows perfectly well that the alert level does allow for [the lifting of lockdown], he did not raise that issue with me on the phone
- The reason we have been able to make the progress we have is that the five tests have been fulfilled
- The alert level remains at 4, but SAGE will confirm we managed to protect the NHS, we got the rate of deaths down, we got the rate of infection down, the PPE crisis, the difficulties in care homes, the question of R has been addressed
- Does LOTO support the progress we are making? At the weekend he was backing it, now he is doing a U turn

Relevant links:

UK's chief medical officers dashed PM's 'hopes' to lower Covid alert	The Chief Medical Officer refused to lower the alert level in the UK, so changes are being done ahead of medical advice.
Coronavirus lockdown: Are the five tests being met?	5 tests can often be vague (what does manageable levels mean precisely?). Unclear how success on these five levels are measured.
UK contact tracing plans criticised as lockdown begins to lift	Public health experts suggest that easing lockdown would probably lead to a second peak, which contravenes test 5. There are signs that the public is no longer following the rules set out

	by the government as strictly as before. This will result in R increasing.
Coronavirus (COVID-19) Infection Survey pilot	<p>Based on surveillance studies in late May (11-24th) there was a stable transmission rate in England: estimated 54,000 new COVID-19 infections per week in England (95% confidence interval: 34,000 to 86,000), similar to previous estimates indicating the number of new infections is stable - not declining. (This was during a strict lockdown period.)</p> <p>Individuals working outside the home show higher rates than those working from home. Patient-facing healthcare workers and resident-facing social care workers show higher rates of positive tests than people not working in these roles.</p>

Summative Commentary:

The Government's 5 tests are vague and it is currently unclear how some of them are measured. Changes to the lockdown restrictions appear to be being made by the Government in advance of the guidance provided by the Chief Medical Officer, who has not yet to the best of our knowledge authorised lowering the alert level (which in theory determines the restrictions in place). Actions taken by the Government are potentially in contravention of their own 5 tests, as evidence shows that current actions may lead to a second peak in COVID-19 cases.

This answer was probably untrue - evidence exists to suggest the Government is ignoring its own 5-tests method for determining actions and going against the advice of the Chief Medical Officer. Without greater clarity on metrics we cannot say for sure.

Question 6 - Virtual parliament and online voting

Statements

- MPs queueing to vote and some members being unable to vote was shameful - this is unnecessary and unacceptable.
- An employer behaving as the government has in the past few days would be an obvious breach of the Equality Act 2010.

WILL THE PM ALLOW ONLINE VOTING AND FOR THE VIRTUAL PARLIAMENT TO RESUME?

Relevant links:

MPs join 90-minute-long queue to vote to end virtual voting	<p>““Government should be wholly embarrassed”</p>
Forcing MPs to work from Westminster harms us all	<p>There is an arguably discriminatory policy against older, ill or disabled MPs who cannot both adhere to the health advice during the pandemic and continue their jobs. Legal advice obtained by Labour’s Ellie Reeves, the shadow Solicitor General, has indicated that if MPs were classed as “employees”, the changes would likely amount to discrimination on grounds of disability, age, sex and/or pregnancy under the Equality Act.</p>
Scrapping 'virtual' Parliament during pandemic would be tantamount to discrimination in another workplace, lawyers suggest	<p>Ellie Reeves says legal advice claims it would be a violation of the 2010 Equality Act.</p>
Equality Act 2010	<p>Equality Act 2010</p>
Full article: Pandemic democracy: elections and COVID-19	<p>Academic paper on elections during COVID-19 arguing that virtual voting is important - note that the recommendations for in-person voting aren’t being followed: “a mixed system of voting may include, for example, (1) postal voting for out-of-country people and those who are over 65, (2) online voting for people with certificate electronic signature, and (3) standard voting in polling stations under strict safety measures for the rest of people (i.e. polling stations disinfection, social distancing, compulsory masks for voters and temperature checking upon arrival).” Similar considerations may apply to parliamentary voting.</p>

Summative commentary:

There is indeed legal advice to the effect that this could constitute a breach of the 2010 Equality Act for an employer if they behaved this way towards their employees. There are many quotes from MPs from every party describing how problematic the new voting system is, especially compared to the perfectly fine online voting system we had until now.

This question was accurate in its statements.

Answer 6

[NO, THE PM WILL NOT ALLOW ONLINE VOTING AND FOR THE VIRTUAL PARLIAMENT TO RESUME.](#)

Statements:

- Consider what is really going on throughout the country
- Ordinary people getting used to queuing
- Not reasonable to ask parliamentarians to come back and do their job
- Apologise to those shielding and elderly, they should be able to vote by proxy
- LOTO policy: Agree, U turn, criticize

Relevant links:

Unsafe and discriminatory queuing	Queuing up is dangerous, unsafe and discriminatory against those with disabilities and caring duties according to MPs.
MPs angry over scrapping virtual voting	Ian Byrne, a Labour MP, said “The utter madness of this charade is that as well as putting lives at risk, it may result in a democratic process which excludes 100s of MPs shielding having the ability to participate. I hope parliament brings Mogg to his senses.”

Summative Commentary:

The answer was mainly subjective, and there is nothing to fact check here as no claims or figures were used to advance the argument. However, more consideration should be shown to ill, elderly and those with caring duties. A party with a higher proportion of BAME MPs might suffer reduced turnout in votes due to these new rules.

This answer was subjective.

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