

## Annex 2

### Three comparative case studies of devolved reporting

Three stories over the sample period were chosen to examine reporting in more depth. This included the coverage of international travel rules for people across the UK agreed by the four nations (Case Study 1), the reporting of so-called 'Freedom Day' which involved the lifting of all COVID-19 restrictions in England (Case Study 2), as well as UK Government guidance to schools about COVID-19 rules in England (Case Study 3).

Overall, the case studies explored any differences in the tone, presentation and style of coverage between programmes and different media formats mediums. Across the three case studies, the qualitative findings were broadly consistent with the quantitative data, such as the use of more explicit references in online news compared to television news, and more regular labelling of devolved powers on BBC news compared to commercial media (see Table 8.0 for example).

The sample for each case study was different in size and scope. The sample was generated by identifying relevant news items over the four-week period that related to each topic. Every item examined in the main content analysis was coded/recorded including a brief description. Items were then searched by entering keywords, and relevant stories about international travel, guidance provided to schools and colleges and the lifting of COVID-19 restrictions on so-called 'Freedom Day' were identified. While this may not include every news item about these topics over the four weeks, and the analysis was not intended to be a quantitative comparison of coverage. Instead, the aim was to qualitatively compare the broad thrust of coverage, understanding the degree of clarity provided about the attribution of policy making powers across the four UK nations by television news bulletins and online news providers.

## Case study 1: Reporting international travel

Throughout June and July 2021 the rules surrounding international travel from the UK was a newsworthy topic. This involved a traffic light system of travel, with rules conveyed according to some countries being labelled “red” (requiring a period of quarantine on arrival to the UK), “amber” (requiring quarantine if not fully vaccinated) or “green” (requiring no quarantine). This was a coordinated UK approach, but importantly it involved devolved decision-making with all four Governments of the UK agreeing to the traffic light system rather than the UK Government taking a decision in a reserved area for the whole of the UK. While, in practice, all four nations broadly adopted the same approach, it remained a matter for Governments in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland to legislate while the UK Government was responsible for England only. This is because rules on quarantining when returning from international travel were made under public health legislation, which is the responsibility of the devolved governments. Our analysis explores the degree to which this context was supplied in coverage over the sample period.

### Summary of key findings

- Overall, there were few instances where it was explicitly spelt out that the rules about international travel were decided by all four nations and that the traffic light system was a co-ordinated approach.
- Most items stated the relevance to England, but often overlooked the devolved nations or made general references to the UK. Since the approach to international travel was largely similar across the UK, regularly adding a caveat about the attribution of powers across the four nations may have been viewed as editorially unnecessary. But, in doing so, it limited the opportunities to make devolution visible for audiences and may have led to them thinking it was solely a UK Government decision made independently of the three other nations.
- Some items conflated the UK generally with England, potentially leaving audiences confused about the political accountability of decisions made about international travel in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.
- Many items did not mention England or even the UK but drew on the UK Prime Minister and/or UK Government ministers to explain changes in international travel.

### There were limited references to the involvement of all four nations

Overall, there were few items where it was explicitly spelt out that the rules about international travel were decided by all four nations and that the traffic light system was a co-ordinated approach. Even when they did, most of the time this was brief and at the very end of an item. So, for example, a BBC News web item explicitly pointed this out in an update on the foreign travel traffic light system, but towards the end of the item it was stated that:

The UK Government's traffic light system applies to England, with Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland able to make their own rules. However, the rules are broadly the same and previous changes to the lists have been adopted by all four nations (BBC News Online, 24 June 2021).

Similarly, after a reporter package, a BBC News at Ten anchor told viewers that:

**Anchor:** Just to underline today's announcement applied to England. In Scotland, all areas are set to move to level zero restrictions on the 28th of June, meaning that bigger groups can gather in cafes, in pubs and restaurants. A decision on easing restrictions in Wales is expected this Friday. And limits on indoor gatherings in Northern Ireland are scheduled to be relaxed on the 21st of June (BBC News at Ten, 14 June 2021).

When a reporter explained the UK Government's deliberations over revising the traffic light system on the same programme, a reference was also made to the devolved nations in a live two-way:

**Reporter:** You referred to the other nations in the UK, and we will hear more the coming days about their plans, but I think we are still in a moment where our leaders are going to be asking all of us to be patient and still to take this seriously and take good care (BBC News at Ten, 14 June 2021).

When changes were made to England's quarantine system, following an anchor introduction to up-and-coming changes to international travel restrictions which applied to people living in England, a BBC television news reporter explicitly pointed out the different testing requirements needed across the UK when returning to either England, Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland.

**Anchor:** In 11 days' time anyone in England who is fully vaccinated against COVID-19 can travel to an amber country without needing to quarantine on return. Under 18s won't have to self-isolate either, meaning families can travel abroad this summer. The relaxation of rules is expected to result in a big boost for the travel industry as people rush to book a last-minute summer holiday. But despite no quarantine, tests are still needed on return to England, pushing up prices. A number of countries like Italy still won't allow British travellers in without a period of isolation, and some amber countries won't let British holidaymakers in at all.

**Reporter:** The empty aircraft and quiet departure halls may soon be full of noise again. Today's announcement is the most significant change to international travel seen this year. From the 19th of July, anyone fully vaccinated doesn't need to quarantine when they travel from an amber list country to England, but they will still need to take a test before they travel, and another PCR test on arrival. Under 18s won't need to quarantine at all. Under fours won't need to take any tests, five- to 11-year-olds will need to take a PCR test after they arrive, and 11- to 17-year-olds will need to take a pre departure test and a PCR test. For now, this is only open to those jabbed in the UK. Northern Ireland has said it will do the same from the 26th of July, a week later. Scotland and Wales are yet to announce whether they'll adopt the policy (BBC News at Ten, 8 July 2021).

On ITV News at Ten, a live two-way provided a caveat about the UK Government having to agree with the devolved bodies about reaching a decision on new UK foreign rules. Although political bodies in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland were not explicitly mentioned, the references to Edinburgh, Cardiff and Belfast alluded to devolved decision making across the UK:

**Reporter:** It looks pretty likely I have to say. The Government is going to hold a meeting later this week, where they're going to discuss this plan with the devolved administration. So it does have to be signed off by Edinburgh, Cardiff and Belfast, but the plan that's in front of them, should they decide to go for it, could be in place by, I'm told, July or August (ITV News at Ten, 22 June 2021).

Meanwhile, a Channel 4 News at 7 reporter clarified that the rules about international travel were not an exclusively UK Government decision by referring to “the nations” and Northern Ireland specifically:

Well, the travel agent in our piece was talking about shifting Government policy, and tonight's expected policy announcement seems to be shifting slightly. We thought it would add the countries that would be in addition to the green list hours ago, but it is still likely to come tonight, we hope, but perhaps it is stuck in a holding pattern! What I can tell you is that Northern Ireland has released an updated list. Remember, the nations imposed travel restrictions separately but clearly there is a lot of common ground. The Balearic Islands, so that is Ibiza, Mallorca, have gone green, as well as Malta and Madeira but other tourist destinations have also been included: the BVI, Cayman, in case you have got a tax deal to do, Barbados and Bermuda, 16 in total. Also, Northern Ireland has slightly stolen the margin on the passport vaccination front, announcing theirs will hopefully be live on July 19 (Channel 4 News at 7, 24 June 2021).

A few days later Channel 4 referenced Northern Ireland again at the beginning of the news item, alluding to - rather than explicitly pointing out - that UK Government's revised traffic light system may be for England only given the four nations can implement different rules.

**Reporter:** The Government's announcement has finally landed and it's very similar to what we heard from Northern Ireland. Ibiza, Majorca, Madeira, much of the Caribbean is on the green list. That means that travellers coming from there do not have to quarantine. But the more important part is the rules about double vaccination. It says that later in the summer those people who are double vaccinated, starting with UK residents but moving to all visitors from the UK who are travelling in from amber countries, will not have to quarantine. But of course, the devil is in the details and we won't get that until next month. We are told that that's coming but the difficulty that the Government has had in getting that information to us tonight and also including the detail of what it will be, shows what a challenge it is dealing with these variants (Channel 4 News at 7, 24 June 2021).

In a Sky News at Ten news item, the anchor made reference to the “four nations” rather than the UK Government *singularly* making a decision about international travel. But there was also a reference to British travel makers, which technically does not include people from Northern Ireland.

All four nations of the UK have tonight liberalised the restrictions on travel and the Prime Minister says there'll be a further loosening later in the summer. Several countries have been added to the green list, and those who've been vaccinated twice could soon be spared quarantine on return from amber list countries. While in Europe British travel makers can now not travel to Malta, Madeira and Spain's Balearic Islands, such as Ibiza without quarantining on their return. Also added to the green list are a number of overseas UK territories such as Anguilla, Bermuda and the Cayman Islands, as well as the Caribbean islands of Antigua, Barbados and Grenada. But six countries including Tunisia and Haiti are being put on the red list. The changes come into effect on Wednesday (Sky News at Ten, 24 June 2021).

This was a rare example of a journalist referencing "all four nations" at the beginning of a news item. While it referenced the political powers across the UK, it was only a fleeting mention as were many of the items examined that namechecked one or more of the devolved nations. In other words, there were few comparative packages that produced *sustained* reporting about the different policy choices made between the Governments responsibilities for decisions in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

Finally, three items – on Channel 5 News at 5, Sky News at Ten and ITV News Online –referred to a series of public protests about the traffic light system in England and some of the devolved nations, but the reporting did not explicitly connect any decision to the Governments of either Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland. While the amount of coverage differed between broadcasters and online sites, overall, we found the BBC and Channel 4 were most sensitive to communicating the differences between the UK nations.

### **Many news items in this case study namechecked the UK Government's decision being relevant to England which was, at the very least, an implicit reference to devolution**

While the reporting of the UK's rules on international travel did not regularly signal the involvement of all four nations, many news items namechecked the UK Government's decision being relevant to England. Or, put another way, there was often an implicit reference to devolution with England often singled out rather than stating the UK generally. Channel 4 News at 7, for example, began a few items by stating "England" before mentioning decisions about travel restrictions.

**Anchor:** Now, the Government has defended its decision again to delay the final lifting of England's Lockdown as new figures show more than 16,000 daily COVID cases were reported in the UK today. Around 60% of adults have now had both doses of the vaccine. And the travel industry is urging the Government to relax restrictions on international travel in time for the summer season – warning that thousands more jobs will be at risk (Channel 4 News at 7, 23 June 2021).

**Anchor:** Now, according to Boris Johnson, Britain's vaccination drive offers "the hope of travel this summer". But European countries aren't exactly rushing to let Brits in. As for England's traffic light rules on where people are allowed to travel – the expected Government announcement has yet to happen (Channel 4 News at 7, 24 June 2021).

On Sky News and ITV television news, a few items connected the UK Government's decision about international travel in England with the lifting of all restrictions on July 19:

**Anchor:** The Prime Minister has struck an optimistic tone on the prospects of July the 19th, being the day COVID restrictions in England can be lifted - saying it was 'looking good'. But Boris Johnson played down suggestions that the rules on foreign holidays could be relaxed, warning that this will be a difficult year for travel (Sky News at Ten, 21 June 2021).

**Anchor:** While we now expect COVID restrictions in England to be lifted in July, fingers crossed, one thing we're still very uncertain about is international travel (ITV News at Ten, 16 June 2021).

A Sky News online item specifically mentioned England when reporting on the implications of putting India on the red list:

It is "possible" that putting India on the red list earlier might have prevented the widely anticipated delay to easing England's coronavirus lockdown that is set to be announced later, a Minister has said (Sky News Online, 14 June 2021).

At times, it was left for external sources – rather than journalists – to state the relevance to England only. For example, an ITV News online item:

Grant Shapps said double-jabbed people who travel to these countries won't need to self-isolate for 10 days on their return back to England (ITV News Online, 8 July 2021).

Meanwhile, Sky News Online drew on a media outlet to reference the relevance of England:

The Health Secretary's comments come after The Times reported that Ministers are set to announce a change to England's travel restrictions as soon as Thursday (Sky News Online, 22 June 2021).

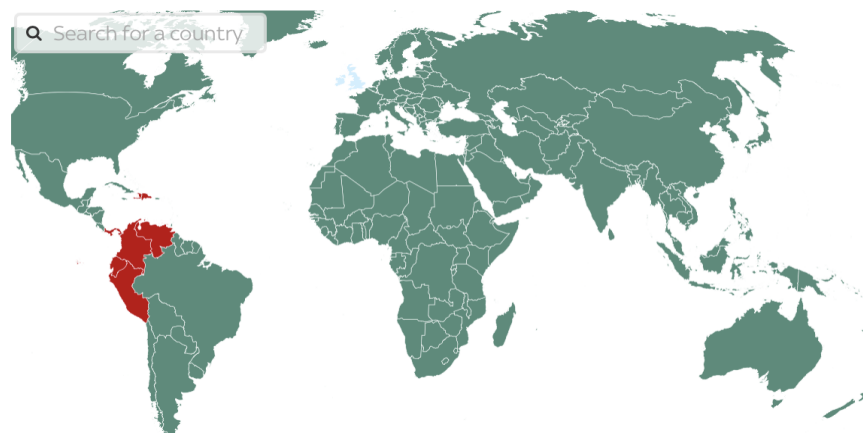
In a few items Sky News also used an infographic to alert viewers to the relevance to England rather than in the main text of an online item. For example, the graphic below COVID-19 Traffic Light: What you should do when you return to England from these countries (Sky News Online, 25 June 2021). In this example the small print under "Source" specified that "travel restrictions may differ in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland".

**Graphic: COVID-19 Traffic Light: What you should do when you return to England from these countries (Sky News Online, 25 June 2021)**

Main restrictions:

- **Red list:** Pre-departure test, hotel-quarantine for 10 days plus PCR test on day 2 and 8.
- **Rest of the world:** Day 2 test for **fully vaccinated** travellers. Pre-departure test, quarantine for 10 days, and test on day 2 and 8 for **unvaccinated people**.

You do not need to take a COVID-19 test or quarantine on arrival in England if you are travelling within the **Common Travel Area**



SOURCE: Department for Transport and Department of Health and Social Care • Countries in the Common Travel Area: the UK, Ireland, the Channel Islands and the Isle of Man. Travel restrictions may differ in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Regions in some nations may have been put into a different category than the rest of the country. Data updated at 09:01 11 October 2021

Several other Sky News online items initially centred coverage on the UK's travel rules, but at the very end of some reports England was specifically referenced. For example, a Sky News online item headlined: "*Malta, Balearic and Caribbean islands added to UK travel green list from today*". It began by framing the story about the UK, but the final sentence referred to rules in England:

Malta, the Balearic Islands and parts of the Caribbean are among the countries being moved to the UK's travel green list from today. Anyone arriving in the UK from green list destinations from 4am on Wednesday will no longer have to self-isolate for 10 days. The full list of countries moving onto the green list is as follows: Anguilla, Antarctica, Antigua and Barbuda, Balearic Islands (Formentera, Ibiza, Mallorca, Menorca), Barbados, Bermuda, BIOT, British Virgin Islands, Cayman Islands, Dominica, Grenada, Madeira, Malta, Montserrat, Pitcairn, Henderson, Ducie and Oeno Islands, Turks and Caicos Islands. All of the destinations being moved to the green list, with the exception of Malta, are also being put on the Government's 'green watchlist'.

This means that they are "at risk of moving from green to amber", the Department of Transport said, noting that "passengers are urged to take extra care when thinking about travelling to green watchlist countries". Transport Secretary Grant Shapps said green watchlist countries could be moved to amber before the next official review in three weeks' time. Jerusalem and Israel, which were already on the green list, are also being moved onto the watchlist, the department said. Eritrea, Haiti, Dominican Republic, Mongolia, Tunisia and Uganda are being moved onto the red list from 4am on Wednesday. Anyone returning from these countries will have to quarantine in a Government-sanctioned hotel for 10 days. Although Malta and the Spanish Islands are being moved to the green list, local rules mean that Britons hoping to holiday there face restrictions on arrival. Only fully vaccinated people from the UK will be allowed into Malta, while those travelling to the Balearics will have to prove vaccination status or a negative COVID test result before entering.

The next travel review will take place before the planned final easing of coronavirus restrictions in England on 19 July (Sky News Online, 30 June 2021).

The final reference in this item could be confusing for audiences because of the focus on England only when readers might have correctly understood the changes to travel rules related to the whole of the UK.

Across television and online, there were instances of reporting international travel which made references to a *singular UK Government* decision, excluding the role of the devolved nations. As outlined above, sometimes this singular reference to Government was accompanied by specific references to the devolved nations or England. But in much of the coverage we identified little signposting and general references to the UK or Britons, with the UK Government and Boris Johnson often the sole protagonists in the story.

So, for example, a Channel 5 News at 5 item focused on the Prime Minister's personal travel plans over the summer. An anchor reported that:

It came as music to the ears of anyone hoping for an overseas holiday. The Prime Minister saying he's not ruling out taking a foreign holiday himself this summer. Boris Johnson also said there is a real opportunity to ease travel restrictions for people who are fully vaccinated. And there could soon be some more destinations to choose from – the Government's expected to make an announcement in the next hour about adding places like Malta, Mallorca and Ibiza to the green travel list (Channel 5 News at 5, 24 June 2021).

A follow-up reporter later added:



The summer is beckoning, and today we had the strongest hint yet that destinations like these could be unlocked for anyone who has had two vaccinations. And it came from the top (...) But this isn't just up to the British. Chancellor Merkel of Germany wants all EU countries to quarantine arrivals from the UK (Channel 5 News at 5, 24 June 2021).

The term British in this item is used interchangeably with the UK. 'Britain' technically excludes people from Northern Ireland and it may have left audiences thinking the rules were decided by the UK Prime Minister than for all four nations of the UK. Likewise, when a Channel 5 anchor said to the reporter that were "some encouraging noises but are we going to see any changes to the travel restrictions any time soon?", the response was that "Tomorrow we are due to get an update on the Government's traffic light system for the different countries" (Channel 5 News, 23 June 2021). One Government decision is referred to in this example rather than referencing the role of devolved Governments.

Similarly, when a Sky News at Ten anchor asked a reporter if "*the Government has gone further allowing travel to some popular destinations*" (24 June 2021) it again led the discussion to exclusively focus on the Prime Minister and the UK Government. Likewise, in another Sky News online item that day, there were no references to Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland, but there were passages that focused solely on the UK Government's role and its traffic light system:

Boris Johnson has indicated that a relaxation of travel rules for those who have had two doses of a coronavirus vaccine is on the horizon. The Prime Minister said there is a "real opportunity" to "open up travel through the double jab"(...) Mr Johnson's comments come ahead of the latest update to the Government's traffic light system of travel restrictions which is due to be announced later. Transport Secretary Grant Shapps will also "outline the next steps for international travel", a hint that there may be more said about travel for those who have been fully vaccinated (...) Health Secretary Matt Hancock told Sky News on Tuesday that quarantine-free travel to amber list countries for people who have had two jabs is "absolutely something" the Government is "working on" (Sky News Online, 24 June 2021).

Another Sky News online item began by stating: "*The Government is not considering relaxing restrictions surrounding international travel for Britons who have had both doses of coronavirus vaccine 'right now', Matt Hancock has said*".

Later in the item it read: "*Asked if Britons should not write off a foreign holiday just yet, the Government Minister replied: "We are trying to move cautiously and progressively in the right direction, so I wouldn't write anything off at this point"* (Sky News Online, 17 June 2021). The connection of a singular Government with travel for "Britons" again did not reference the role played by the devolved nations signing up to any changes in international travel to their respective countries.

While the BBC more regularly signposted the involvement of the devolved nations in the UK's travel arrangements than commercial media, there were a couple of online items that centred any decision about international travel being at an exclusively UK Governmental level. Take, for example, parts of these BBC News online items:

The Government's expansion of the UK's green travel list does not go far enough, industry leaders have warned (...) Transport Secretary Grant Shapps also said the government plans to drop quarantine for fully vaccinated people returning from amber list countries "later in the summer" (...) Among the places being added to the UK's green list is Malta, which has since tightened travel rules for British holidaymakers. From 30 June, only arrivals from the UK who have been fully vaccinated - with a vaccine certificate recognised by the Maltese Health Authorities - will be allowed into Malta without having to quarantine (...) The Department for Transport said the plan to allow fully vaccinated people to arrive from amber list countries without having to quarantine will take place in phases, starting with UK residents (BBC News Online, 25 June 2021).

Malta, Madeira, and the Balearic Islands have been added to the UK's travel green list (...) The change means holidaymakers will no longer have to self-isolate on their return to the UK from these areas (...) Those travelling to an amber list country must take COVID tests before departure and after their return, along with completing a passenger locator form and quarantining for 10 days once back in the UK. Red list countries are those the UK Government says present the highest risk from COVID, and should not be visited "except in the most extreme of circumstances" (BBC News Online 30 June, 2021).

Similarly, while the BBC News at Ten was generally careful in explaining the differences across the UK nations, in one exchange between an anchor and reporter the traffic light system was interpreted as a singular Government decision:

**Anchor:** So good news for some but for most people wanting to go abroad, a lot of uncertainty this summer.

**Reporter:** Yes, well let's start with some of the good news. So this is the longest green list we've seen since the Government introduced these traffic light measures. And for some, it does mean that the industry are able to ramp up some of their operations a bit more but let's look at the bad news. This is also the red list is getting increasingly longer as well. Most of Europe is still not on the green list. And the same goes for large amounts of the rest of the world as well. Many of the key destinations still not on there. There's no set date for when people who are fully vaccinated will no longer have to quarantine. The Government knows that they've got plenty of questions to sort out with that before they're allowed to introduce it. So, potentially, a small step in the right direction for the industry, but maybe a bit of a shaky one (BBC News at Ten, 24 June 2021).

By characterising the traffic light system as being UK Government-driven and only referencing a singular Government, the powers of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland were overlooked in some BBC News items.

The framing of coverage around a singular UK Government decision was displayed by an ITV television news anchor as well. It made general references to "Brits" and the UK Health Secretary (principally with powers over England) without referencing the involvement of the devolved administrations:

We keep hearing hints from the Government about what it might finally decide we can or can't do when it comes to foreign trips this summer, or whatever will be left to be. Whether we'd like to be on holiday or to see relatives or just to stop talking about it, most of us are pretty fed up and so to our travel companies, today, TUI announced it's joining a legal action against the Government. Health Secretary Matt Hancock says Ministers are looking at allowing double-jabbed Brits to visit amber-list countries without quarantining, and we understand unvaccinated children may also be included in that (ITV News at Ten, 22 June 2021).

There were many items that had no UK geographical label about the relevance of travelling abroad. For example, in this lengthy ITV television news package involving a series of vox pops at Manchester airport there was no mention of any specific national Governmental role, although the UK's Transport Secretary (primarily with responsibility for England) was featured:

**Anchor:** The prospect that foreign holidays really might be possible for millions of people later this summer was opened up tonight. Several more key destinations were added to the green list, including places like Mallorca, Malta and some Caribbean islands. When it comes to the double vaccinated, there was some positive news, too. This evening the Government announced it is their ambition that fully vaccinated travellers visiting amber list countries would not have to quarantine themselves when they get back. The precise details, including timings, and how the changes would affect children and those who cannot be vaccinated, will be set out next month. For the travel industry and travellers alike, there are still a whole host of questions tonight.

**Reporter:** At Manchester airport today, 100,000 fewer passengers than normal. For many travellers here, expansion of the green list is just too slow.

**Vox pop:** We thought that once everybody got vaccinated, that's it. You would be able to get back to some normality. It's not happened.

**Vox pop:** Well, we've been double jabbed. Why not let us come back in and not have to quarantine?

**Vox pop:** Hopefully we don't have to quarantine for the 10 days when we are back. Then, more people will still get to travel.

**Reporter:** Added to the list where travellers don't need to quarantine on return are the Spanish Balearic Islands, including Majorca, along with Madeira, Malta and some Caribbean destinations, all from Wednesday at 4 AM. And tonight, new details of the plan allowing the fully vaccinated to return from amber countries without quarantine to be phased in later this summer, though COVID testing will be required.

**Transport Secretary:** The scientists are still working on the implications for example for children, with the joint committee on vaccines and immunisation yet to say how children should be treated through the vaccination programme. So, there are a number of different questions which still need to be answered, but what we did want to do is to let people know that this is something we are actively looking at, but it won't be until later in the summer.

**Reporter:** Malta today hoping a bookings bonanza will fill empty resorts as its tourism enters a no quarantine list. But the wider industry wants to know when greater travel freedoms for the fully vaccinated will start. Not just tonight's statement of intention. Is it now too late, frankly, to save summer for this industry?

**Ryanair Chief Executive:** No, it's not. There should be a vaccine bonus. The UK is leading Europe in terms of rolling out vaccines, but Europe is leading the UK in removing travel restrictions from the first of July. Something's not right.

**Reporter:** The Balearics including Ibiza and Mallorca are a big tourism market, but COVID experts warned that UK visitors could still be unwelcome in other destinations.

**Professor at the University of Manchester:** At the moment, the UK has got one of the highest rates of the Delta variant. It's not quite as high in parts of Europe, yet. So I think many European nations will still have nervousness about allowing us in, and that's something that we have to be aware of. We can't make all the decisions here. We don't hold all the cards.

**Reporter:** So, expect no red-carpet treatment from Germany's leader, who wants UK visitors to quarantine wherever they go in Europe. Today she said there should be greater coordination, especially when it comes to entries from areas with virus variants. Tonight, the aviation sector called the Government's plans vague and unambitious. The industry that was first to be hit by this crisis remains likely to be the last out of it (ITV News at Ten, 24 June 2021).

In the subsequent live two-way that followed, the anchor asked the reporter to talk viewers "*through some of the politics around this*", but the response did not include any of the devolved nations.

**Reporter:** As you heard from the Transport Secretary there, the plan is that later in the summer, the intention is that those who have had two jabs will be able to go to those countries on the amber list without having to quarantine. There has been a lot of pressure on the Government, some from within their own party, Tory backbenchers in particular, who have been saying that we have been in this pandemic for a while, we have been working towards these vaccinations. People are finally getting two jabs, why are they not getting the freedoms that you said they were going to have? The Government is saying they are looking at the data, as they have been saying throughout this, and that is one of the reasons why this decision is an intention. Because ultimately, as we have seen with the green list before, things can change very, very quickly. On top of that, there are still question marks over what will happen with children, whether or not they will be allowed to go to these places without having to quarantine because they of course have not been vaccinated. The Government is looking into extra testing. So, a lot of question marks, a lot of questions to still answer (ITV News at Ten, 24 June 2021).

Similarly, a live two-way discussion with a Channel 4 News at 7 reporter explored various UK Government decisions, including options about international travel, without providing the caveat of it potentially relating to England only, or that an agreement with the devolved administrations was necessary:

We have more announcements coming this week, one tomorrow on those bubbles in schools that mean that so many kids go home if there is a COVID outbreak, and it looks as though, in that announcement, we are going to be told that whole system ends July 19th. There is an announcement on quarantine arrangements for people who have been double jabbed, isolation, how that might change. Amber travel restrictions, something on that as well. But there was one particularly interesting document that came out today from the Government and that was its review of certification. There was a lot of talk not so many weeks ago about how the Government might go down the route of COVID passports. You have been jabbed, you can do this, you can do that. The Government has rejected that, but when you look into the document, you see that they have rejected it for now, and they talk about the autumn and the winter again, and how things might need to be revisited then. You got a general sense today that this was not one confident spring into freedom, but a cautious one, and the Government very aware that things, some things, could have to be reimposed in a few months' time (Channel 4 News at 7, 5 July 2021).

## Case Study 2: Reporting ‘Freedom Day’ in England

The Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, announced in February 2021 that all COVID-19 restrictions in England would be lifted on June 21, which became widely known as ‘Freedom Day’, although during our study’s sample period it was delayed until July 19. Importantly, the UK Government’s announcement was a policy plan relevant to England only, with the other devolved administrations setting out their own plans for easing restrictions at a different pace. This case study not only examined the degree to which television news bulletins and online sites explained the relevance of ‘Freedom Day’ to England, but also signalled the different exit strategies from the devolved Governments in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

### Summary of key findings

The key findings from this case study were:

In most of the coverage, on both television news and online, it was pointed out that ‘Freedom Day’ related to England only. But the clarity of geographical signposting was, at times, different across broadcasters and online sites, with contrasting ways of presenting verbal and visual information in order to convey the relevance to England only.

- Several BBC news items – and a few across the commercial news providers – stated the direct relevance to England and decided to explore the different COVID-19 plans in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. While often only brief references, they clearly communicated that the UK Government’s decision was applicable to England, while contrasting the sometimes-subtle policy different responses with the devolved administrations. In doing so, they alerted audiences to the powers of the devolved Governments and the accountability for these decisions rested with them, rather than the UK Government.
- Finally, we identified some coverage about the lifting of COVID-19 restrictions across commercial media where references were made to England in the introduction to items, but not repeated in later live coverage between reporters and anchors.

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### Clarity of geographical signposting varied across broadcasters

On television and online, the BBC provided more signposting about the Prime Minister’s easing of restrictions being relevant to England than commercial media, while also spelling out differences with Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. On June 14, for example, a BBC News anchor clearly stated England in the opening introduction and, after a reporter package, explicitly referred to the policy being specific to England and pointing out the plans of the devolved nations:

**Anchor:** The COVID restrictions in England will not be fully lifted until the 19th of July. Boris Johnson said that the four-week delay was to allow more people to be vaccinated, given the sharp rise in the number of new cases of the Delta variant. The Chief Medical Officer for England, Chris Whitty, said that the NHS would run into trouble if all the restrictions were eased on the 21st of June which was what was originally intended. Many businesses, especially in the hospitality industry are warning of serious consequences for jobs because of the delay. So, the restrictions in England will stay until July the 19th, though there will be a review in two weeks' time. But the limit of 30 people attending weddings and funerals, well that will be lifted immediately. And residents in care homes will no longer have to quarantine for 14 days when they return from a visit outside (...)

**Anchor:** Just to underline today's announcement applied to England. In Scotland, all areas are set to move to level zero restrictions on the 28th of June, meaning that bigger groups can gather in cafes, in pubs and restaurants. A decision on easing restrictions in Wales is expected this Friday. And limits on indoor gatherings in Northern Ireland are scheduled to be relaxed on the 21st of June).

In a follow up live two-way, a BBC reporter also added a caveat:

**Reporter:** You referred to the other nations in the UK, and we will hear more in the coming days about their plans, but I think we are still in a moment where our leaders are going to be asking all of us to be patient and still to take this seriously and take good care (BBC News at Ten, 14 June 2021)

On other days, too, there were specific references to the devolved nations when England was the predominant focus of the item about easing restrictions. For example:

**Anchor:** The Health Secretary Matt Hancock says that the latest pandemic figures for England look encouraging for the remaining restrictions to be lifted on July the 19th. In Scotland the First Minister Nicola Sturgeon said that that was the earliest date that restrictions would be eased and that they won't be lifted completely before early August (BBC News at Ten, 22 June 2021).

Just over a week later, another BBC item about the easing of restrictions of England clearly compared the devolved nations' policy strategies, including on-screen banners that labelled each planned changes in nation:

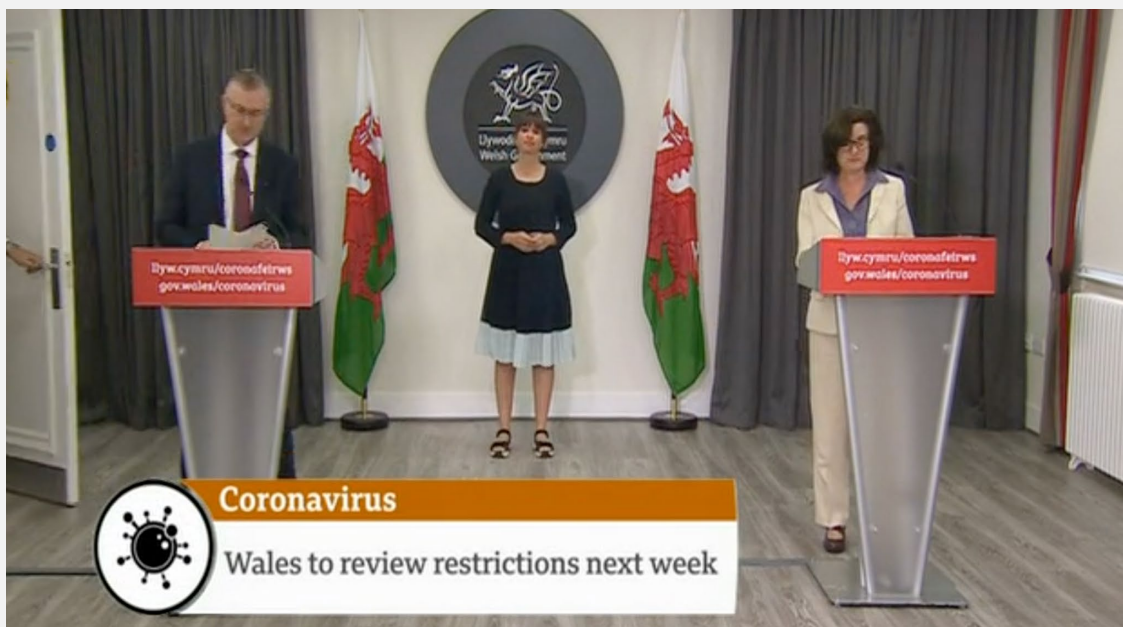
**Anchor:** Well, the Governments in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland will set out their own timetables for lifting restrictions later this month. Scotland currently has the highest COVID rates in Europe, according to the World Health Organization, and is expected to loosen some restrictions on the 19th of July.

**On-screen banner:** Coronavirus Scotland aims to lift restrictions on 9th August.



*Ministers in Edinburgh hope the last major legal limits including social distancing can be removed on the ninth of August, but no decision has yet been taken on whether masks will still be required on public transport and in shops.*

**On-screen banner:** Coronavirus Wales to review restrictions next week





*In Wales, the Government will review the restrictions and outline any further lifting next week. The country's Health Minister said today that Wales was going to have to learn to live with Coronavirus, and they were weighing up the risks of catching COVID against lockdown effects on mental health and the economy.*

**On-screen Banner:** *Coronavirus Live music resumes in Northern Ireland*



*And some restrictions are being eased in Northern Ireland today with the return of live music and an increase in the number of households able to gather in a private garden. It's understood further relaxations will be discussed by the executive this week (BBC News at Ten, 5 July 2021).*

Following a report about the lifting of England's restrictions, this item clearly signalled – both visually and verbally – the policy decisions between England and the devolved administrations. There were other items on BBC, ITV, Channel 4 and Channel 5 television news that were specifically about the lifting of restrictions in one of the devolved nations, but they were not comparative in scope.

Several BBC online items made reference to both England and the devolved nations in the context of 'Freedom Day'. For instance, in the opening part of an item entitled 'COVID-19: End of England's COVID rules still set for 19 July', it was stated that: "The final easing of lockdown measures in England is still set for 19 July, the new health secretary has said" and that "The end of England's lockdown was originally scheduled for 21 June, but was pushed back by four weeks with the promise of a review after two." While limited to the very end of a lengthy item, there was clear signposting to the devolved nations:

In Wales, meanwhile, the lifting of COVID restrictions has been paused and will be reviewed again on 15 July. In Scotland, it is hoped that the remaining rules will be lifted on 9 August, while some rules in Northern Ireland will be reviewed on 1 July (BBC News Online, 28 June 2021).

Similarly, towards the end of another item a week earlier, a BBC online story suggested that:

Ministers have repeatedly said that vaccination is the way out of lockdown, and the delay to England's lockdown ending from 21 June until 19 July was partly to allow more people to get vaccinated. Some restrictions have been eased on Monday though, the original date for lockdown ending - and what some had dubbed Freedom Day. The number of guests at a wedding is no longer limited to 30 (although there are capacity rules depending on a venue's size), visiting arrangements for care homes are changing, children can go on overnight trips in groups of 30, and pilots of large events like Euro 2020 games will continue. And in Wales, rules are also being lifted slightly, including Covid capacity restrictions for music and comedy and the limits on weddings changing in line with a venue's size. In Northern Ireland, a planned easing of restrictions has been pushed back to at least 5 July, and current rules in Scotland are expected to be extended until mid-July (BBC News Online, 21 June 2021).

Likewise, a BBC live news blog item referenced differences between the four nations:

In Scotland, the easing of restrictions is likely to be pushed back by three weeks so more people can be vaccinated against the virus, First Minister Nicola Sturgeon said on Tuesday. All of Scotland had been due to move to the lowest level zero of its five-tier system from 28 June. This new date will bring Scotland into line with England. (...) The confidence among Ministers that all remaining restrictions will lift on 19 July is understandable given the extent of the vaccine rollout (...) Plans for easing coronavirus restrictions differ in all four UK nations. Limits on indoor gatherings in Northern Ireland are scheduled to be relaxed on 21 June and the rules in Wales will be reviewed on 25 June (BBC News Online, 15 June 2021).

Across commercial media, we found just a couple of online items - on ITV and Sky News - where the restrictions of so-called 'Freedom Day' were connected to England, as well as signalling some differences with the devolved nations. One ITV News headline, for example, read that: "*Boris Johnson to confirm 'England's June 21 'Freedom Day' delay with 6pm announcement*" (ITV News, 14 June 2021). Throughout the opening paragraphs England was mentioned, alongside a link that read: "*What are the next steps in lifting lockdown in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland?*". The details about each of the four nations COVID strategies was then provided:

## **Wales**

*From June 7, gatherings outdoors with up to 10,000 people seated or up to 4,000 people standing have been allowed.*

*Extended households can be formed between three households.*

*Up to 30 people can meet in any outdoor area, including private gardens, public spaces and outdoor regulated premises such as cafes, restaurants and bars.*

*Wales has adopted the same traffic-light approach to international travel as the rest of the UK.*

*Social distancing remains in place and face coverings are required in many indoor situations.*

*Lockdown measures in Wales will be reviewed on June 21.*

## **Northern Ireland**

*In Northern Ireland, June 21 was also set to see a big step towards easing of COVID restrictions. Subject to June 17 review, from June 21, 10 people from two households can meet in private homes, or up to 15 if a household has more than six members.*

*Up to 15 people from any number households can meet outdoors in a private garden while live music will be allowed at "ambient levels" - but still no dancing.*

*If the data allows, theatres will reopen and concerts restart.*

## **Scotland**

*Most of Scotland moved into level one on June 5 which meant people were allowed to meet inside cafes, pubs and restaurants in groups of eight as restrictions eased across the country.*

*But a number of areas stayed in level two after seeing a spike in coronavirus cases.*

*Under level one rules, people can meet outdoors in groups of up to 12 adults from 12 households, the number of people allowed at weddings or funerals rose to 100.*

*But the two-metre social distancing between households remains in place, and people are being urged to work from home where possible.*

*Nightclubs and adult entertainment venues remain shut.*

*Small seated indoor events are permitted up to a maximum of 200 people.*

*Glasgow, Edinburgh, Midlothian, Dundee, East Dunbartonshire, Renfrewshire, East Renfrewshire, North, South, and East Ayrshire, North and South Lanarkshire, Clackmannanshire and Stirling remain in level two.*

*Level two restrictions means people can meet in homes in groups of no more than six, from a maximum of three households and can also travel from outside their local authority area to other parts of the country.*

*Pubs, restaurants and other hospitality venues can reopen for drinking indoors while a number of venues are allowed to reopen and outdoor adult contact sports can start again.*

*Shetland, Orkney and the Western Isles council areas will move to level 0, allowing larger groups to meet in a private residence and adult contact sport to return.*

*Pubs and other hospitality venues can shut under their local licensing laws, rather than abiding to a national curfew.*

*The maximum attendance at weddings and funerals will be 200 – rather than 100 at level one and 50 at level two. People can meet indoors in groups of up to four households.*

*First Minister Nicola Sturgeon is set to provide an update to the Scottish Parliament on Monday, June 21 where she will set out whether any further easing of restrictions can go ahead.*

*June 28 was the initially scheduled date for a country-wide move to level 0, but Sturgeon has now said that after this date the country is "likely" to maintain COVID rules for three more weeks.*

In other words – and as the hyperlinked item makes clear – at this point in time there were *significant* contrasting policy choices about lifting COVID restrictions across the UK's four nations. But this was not directly explained in the news item about England's 'Freedom Day' (where you had to click a link for additional devolved information) or in the other television and online coverage examined. However, the ITV News item at the end of the article alluded to different approaches across the nations by stating that:

Welsh Economy Minister Vaughan Gething will give an update on the latest coronavirus developments in Wales on Monday, which the most recent UK Government figures show had new 597 positive tests in the past week at a rate of 18.9 per 100,000. Numbers remain similarly low in Northern Ireland, which had 596 positive tests in the week to Sunday at a rate of 31.5 per 100,000.

Northern Ireland Health Minister Robin Swann warned against complacency as he said the situation in the country could change rapidly, with current modelling suggesting the potential for a surge in hospitalisations by late summer due to the Delta Covid variant.

UK figures showed Scotland had 6,035 positive tests at a rate of 110.5 per 100,000 as data released by the Scottish Government on Sunday said the country had recorded 1,036 new coronavirus cases in the past 24 hours.

Holyrood has said it will mail out some 17,000 lateral flow test kits to football fans heading to the Euro 2020 fan zone in Glasgow, where testing is not mandatory for access but has been strongly encouraged by health officials (ITV News Online, 14 June 2021).

A Sky News live blog of the day's news acknowledged that England's road map was different to some of the devolved nations. However, it required audiences to either click through to relevant hyperlinks or live blogs for more information about devolved differences with England and an explanation for contrasting policy choices.

Wales has joined both England and Scotland in delaying plans to ease lockdown restrictions due to fears of the impact of the variant on hospital admissions.

Scientific advisers believe a four-week delay in easing rules will be enough time to determine whether vaccinations have broken the link between getting ill and hospitalisation.

But Mr Drakeford insisted the delay will not be extended indefinitely "in search of perfection" from scientists if their findings are inconclusive. You can read more on the four-week delay in Wales here (Sky News Online, 18 June 2021).

## England regularly stated in coverage relating to 'Freedom Day'

Most news items reported in the context of 'Freedom Day' referenced England when covering the UK Government's announcement that it would lift all restrictions. Both the anchor and reporter in several BBC News at Ten items, for example, prominently stated "in England" in their contributions:

**Anchor:** There is no reason for the current COVID restrictions in England to last beyond the 19th of July, according to the new Health Secretary, Sajid Javid, who said today that people would have to learn to live with Coronavirus in the longer term (...)

**Reporter:** (...) The cases continue to rise though and switching Health Secretary in a pandemic is far from ideal. Even if it's a return to Government for a familiar face. Sajid Javid has already been the Home Secretary, and the Chancellor. Now, as Health Secretary, he's also giving heavy hints that the Ministers are on course to lift the remaining restrictions in England, in three weeks (...) Today the Government's been emphasising its optimism about being able to get rid of the remaining Covid rules in England on its planned date of July, the 19th. But it's still grappling with the fallout of the behaviour of the man who argued for those rules here in the Commons. Matt Hancock might be gone from Government, but his departure was messy, and a reminder too for Downing Street, they can't and don't control all events (...) (BBC News at Ten, 28 June 2021).

Similarly, the ITV News anchor and reporter made clear that the Prime Minister's plans to lift restrictions were relevant to England, including referencing Public Health England:

**Anchor:** Good evening. Let's not beat around the bush. We were all really, really looking forward to COVID restrictions being lifted in England, at least on the 21st of June, so called Freedom Day. Well. No more. The rapid spread of the Delta Variant first found in India means one of the Prime Minister's four tests for easing lockdown has been failed. And so, June, the 21st becomes July the 19th. What's a month between friends? But he did insist that really would be the end of all restrictions, unless of course another variant turns out. He said the four-week delay came down to a choice between potentially 1000s of deaths or giving the NHS more time to fully vaccinate those more at risk. So far, just a bit gloomy but there was some spectacularly good news too. Public Health England said that the vaccines worked extremely well against the variant when it comes to preventing serious illness.

**Reporter:** The long slog isn't over yet, the roadmap will now take a different route, as the Delta variant has persuaded the Prime Minister to delay reopening to get more vaccinations done (...) The concern is that in Northwest England infections are doubling every week and hospitalisations are ramping up. If that's repeated England wide, there is a problem (...) Although the Prime Minister is delaying the lifting of restrictions in England until the 19th of July, he's open to lifting them on the fifth, if the data suddenly improves. Events like weddings are the main exception. From June the 21st they can have more than 30 guests, if the venue capacity allows it. And the piloting of crowds or big events like the Euros will continue. But there will be no extra support for businesses during the delay (ITV News at Ten, 14 June 2021).

Both the anchor and reporter on Channel 5 also namechecked England when explaining the Prime Minister's delay to lifting all COVID-19 restrictions:

**Anchor:** While the fall-out from Matt Hancock's resignation reverberates and fresh questions were being asked by MPs today about the leak of those pictures, the new Health Secretary is keen to show he is very much in charge. He's speaking in the Commons now and is expected to announce that the remaining Coronavirus restrictions in England will be lifted on July the 19th, having been put back by four weeks. According to Boris Johnson, that means people can return to pretty much life before COVID (...)

**Reporter:** (...) He is due to tell Parliament whether the COVID restrictions could even end early in England, but his boss on a visit in West Yorkshire has already said that won't happen. That instead we need the next three weeks to push ahead with vaccination and then we should be ready (Channel 5 News at 5, 28 June 2021).

By contrast, in some Channel 4 items an anchor mentioned England, but this was not reiterated by the reporter or by any sources in the edited package. For example:

**Anchor:** Now, the Government has defended again its decision to delay the final lifting of England's lockdown as new figures show more than 16,000 daily Covid cases were reported in the UK today. Around 60% of adults have now had both doses of the vaccine. And the travel industry is urging the Government to relax restrictions on international travel in time for the summer season warning that thousands more jobs will be at risk. (Channel 4 News, 23 June 2021).

The Channel 4 item ended without reference to a nation within the UK.

**Reporter:** A year and a half of Covid restrictions also meant a suspension of the weekly meeting between the Prime Minister and the queen. Today that at least returned to normal. Now the travel sector will also look to life going some way back to what we knew (Channel 4 News at 7, 23 June 2021).

By contrast, in some Channel 4 items it was left to just the anchor to state the relevance to England. At times, however, some television news items visually displayed the relevance to England only. For example, it was left to a Sky News on-screen banner to point out that “the delay to the easing of Covid restrictions in England”. But not long after there were other on-screen banners that referenced the UK.

**Anchor:** There is real concern about tight suppliers of some vaccines, we see cases again rising today. What confidence can there be that July the 19th is set in stone?

**Reporter:** We're going to go through a really turbulent period over the next few weeks and the Prime Minister said as much and they are going to keep a very close eye on it. He has set this date, 19th of July, but that comes with lots of caveats. And the caveat being, if the infections continue exponentially what we expect, and Chris Whitty said this at the Downing Street briefing, other scientists said exactly the same, you will have hospitalisations follow, and you will have people admitted to ICU, and then suddenly you will have deaths. They won't be anywhere near the numbers we've seen in the first and second wave, and that is because of the vaccination programme. But it's absolutely essential to try and keep all of these rising infections down as low as possible, and that's why they want to get the vaccination roll out to as many of the younger cohorts between the ages of 30 and 50, as they can. I spoke to a senior scientist earlier this week and she said to me, this variant has a really nasty way of finding people who are not vaccinated. Remember there are 10 million adults in this country who haven't had a second dose and for so long for a year and a half, we've been talking about this vaccine targeting the elderly, targeting the people with underlying health issues, and people seem to have stopped thinking that other people can be affected, they can be, we've seen it. We've seen hospital rates rise cross country as well.

**On-screen banner:** MPs have voted 461 to 60 to extend regulations that delay the easing of Covid restrictions in England from 21 June to 19 July



**On-screen banner:** Official figures show the UK has recorded 9,055 positive Covid-19 cases and nine further deaths in the latest 24-hours period.





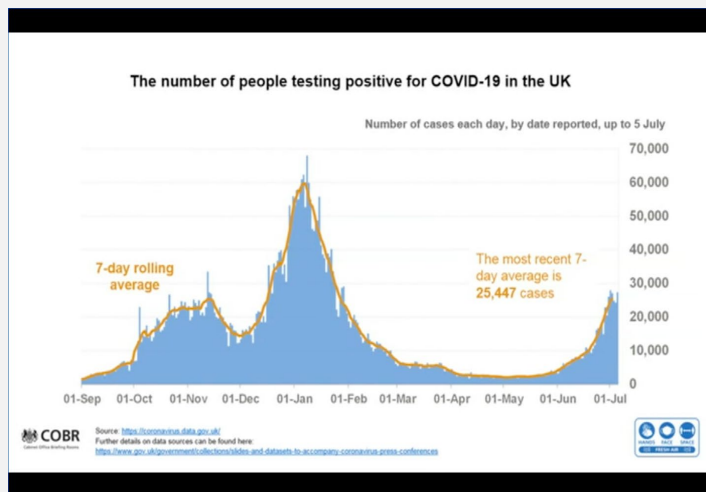
On-screen banner: Latest UK figures show the number of daily reported has risen above 9,000 for the first time since 25 February (Sky News at Ten, 16 June 2021).



In one ITV News item an anchor explained the relevance to England only, while an on-screen banner was also used to reinforce to viewers that the restrictions were relevant to England.

**Anchor:** Good evening. He had said it would be about the data and not the date. But as the Prime Minister set out how he was planning to lift almost all the COVID restrictions in England on July the 19th, he acknowledged that by then the data might be showing 50,000 cases of COVID a day and he said if we can't reopen in the next few weeks, then when? He talked about balancing the risks and put his trust in the public in finding new ways to live with the virus. It is what many people and businesses, but not all, have been desperate for. As things stand a fortnight today many of the rules that have controlled our lives for months will go: social distancing, limits on the size of get-togethers, working from home where possible. Back will come drinking at the bar, at nightclubs masks will no longer be compulsory, just advisory. Yet, Mr. Johnson's two advisors Professor Chris Whitty and Sir Patrick Vallance said they would still be wearing theirs. There'll be more details on schools tomorrow, and foreign holidays, later in the week.


**On-screen graphic:** The number of people testing positive for COVID-19 in the UK



**On-screen graphic:** What's changing in England from July 19th? (ITV News at Ten, 5 July 2021).



**WHAT'S CHANGING IN ENGLAND  
FROM JULY 19TH?**



SOURCE: UK GOVERNMENT

**MASKS NO LONGER MANDATORY**

**WHAT'S CHANGING IN ENGLAND  
FROM JULY 19TH?**



SOURCE: UK GOVERNMENT

**SCRAPPING WORK FROM HOME GUIDANCE**

**WHAT'S CHANGING IN ENGLAND  
FROM JULY 19TH?**



SOURCE: UK GOVERNMENT

**NO CAP ON NUMBERS**

In online news, some items mentioned England in the headline as well as in the opening paragraph. For example:

**Headline:** Covid: England 'set fair' for July 19 lockdown easing says Boris Johnson.

What next for easing of lockdown in England - and Sajid Javid's new job? ITV News Political Correspondent Daniel Hewitt has the details. England is "set fair" for easing lockdown restrictions on July 19, the prime minister has said, ahead of a statement by new Health Secretary Sajid Javid in the Commons on whether easing can be brought forward (ITV News Online, 28 June 2021).

**Headline:** COVID-19: No early release from restrictions in England, indicates Boris Johnson as it is 'sensible to stick' to 19 July plan

Boris Johnson has suggested that there will be no early release from COVID restrictions in England, with 19 July likely to remain the date for Freedom Day.

The prime minister's comments came following talks with new Health Secretary Sajid Javid (Sky News Online, 28 June 2021).

At times, however, England was not prominently displayed in the headline, such as in this Sky News item:

**Headline:** COVID-19: Boris Johnson set to delay lockdown easing by four weeks - as fears expressed about 'devastating' Freedom Day postponement

Boris Johnson is set to announce a delay of four weeks in lifting lockdown restrictions in England, as fears are expressed about the "devastating" impact the postponement of Freedom Day will have on businesses (...) But the delay means that despite the success of the vaccination programme so far there will only be minor adjustments to the current lockdown rules in England.

Speaking to Sky News ahead of the PM's announcement, Health Minister Edward Argar hinted that restrictions on weddings in England will be relaxed (Sky News Online, 14 June 2021).

While England featured in this online item, it was not communicated in the headline. Some items that referred to COVID-19 rules coming to an end made England a focal point, but it was not made entirely clear that the decision was relevant only to England and irrelevant to the devolved nations. For example, the opening part of a BBC item headlined "*Warning of staff shortage due to self-isolation*" read:

A decision not to ease rules on self-isolation until 16 August could lead to severe staff shortages this summer, industry groups have warned. From next month, double-jabbed people in England will not have to isolate if a close contact tests positive. But with cases rising and most COVID rules set to end on 19 July, there are fears millions of people will still have to take time off work this summer (BBC News Online, 7 July 2021).

The item was carried within a business focused story about staff shortages, but the causal reference to COVID-19 rules ending generally could potentially have been interpreted by readers in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland as being relevant to them.

## In commercial media items, there was unclear signposting about the lifting of England's COVID restrictions

Across the commercial television news bulletins, there were several items that did not acknowledge that the UK Government's decision to lift restrictions was relevant to England only. Instead, there were general references to the UK and the Prime Minister.

For example, when a Channel 4 News anchor interviewed two guests, the opening question related to whether they were likely to "rip off" their masks on July 19 in public spaces (a decision relevant to England, but not Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland).

**Anchor:** (...) will you be ripping your mask off on July the 19th?

**Guest 1:** I certainly won't be wearing one on July the 19th, except in some circumstances. If I'm travelling on the tube in London or in a busy railway carriage, I personally will choose to continue to wear masks. And that's a personal choice which I'm more than capable of making. Of course, all workplaces are public places, unless you happen to work on your own, but the vast majority are public places, and we have to trust people to make the right decision. We're all perfectly capable of looking at the data that is available, and making our own risk-based assessment. I don't need to be told by the Government or in fact anyone else when I should be wearing a mask. I'm perfectly capable of making that decision myself and I trust the British people to do likewise.

**Guest 2:** Well, I think you know, workplaces are places where we make decisions collectively, you know, the best way to make those decisions and that's much easier when we have a shared set of information. So clear guidance from the Government about what they believe to be safe will help people come to the right decision and help them to come to the right decision without conflict and in a way where, again workers and employers can make those decisions together (Channel 4 News at 7, 5 July 2021).

On the same programme on Channel 4, there was an interview, with a professor advising both the UK government and the Scottish Government and the anchor hinted at there being different powers across the UK, but the item did not explain the different approaches taken by the devolved administrations.

**Anchor:** Earlier I spoke to Professor Steve Reicher, behavioural scientist at the University of St Andrews. He's advised both the United Kingdom and Scottish Governments on their response to the coronavirus crisis. I started by asking him if he felt the 19th of July is the right moment to drop all restrictions (Channel 4 News at 7, 5 July 2021).

After the opening exchange, the anchor then asked the expert a follow up question and the focus was on singular Government, which was the UK Government rather than the Scottish Government that was also lifting restrictions – at this point in time – on July 19, but to different degrees.

**Anchor:** But then, in your view, when would the right time be to ease restrictions?

**Expert:** It has always been true that there have been two ways, in a sense, to get out of this. One is to get immunity through vaccination and the other is to get immunity through infection. What the Government seem to be saying is infections don't really matter, therefore we don't have to wait for the vaccination, and so we can let immunity by infection take over (Channel 4 News at 7, 5 July 2021).

There were also a couple of items where England was namechecked clearly by an anchor introduction earlier in a bulletin, but in later exchanges with reporters, this was not acknowledged.

Take, for example, the following ITV News anchor introductions in two items one week apart, where the 'we' and 'our' reflected audiences in England, rather than the rest of the UK.

**Anchor:** Let's put some of that to [the reporter] Look, I guess what businesses wanna know, and frankly what pretty much everyone watching this programme is gonna wanna know is, you know, whenever we get to this day in mid-July which Prime Minister didn't seem to quite be able to remember halfway through his thing, but whenever it is, is that it, are we going to be able to get back to normal? Are we going to be able to travel for example, you know, in the summer afterwards, August say or not? (ITV News at Ten, 14 June 2021).

**Anchor:** Let's move on to other news now. And today was, of course, meant to be the day when everyone was released from the shackles of the COVID restrictions. Well, we all know what happened to that and there's no sense in going over it again but the big question tonight here and now, on June the 21st is what are the chances of everyone getting their lives back in a month's time? While the Prime Minister did say that the new date of July the 19th is still looking good and to that end, there has been a huge drive to get as many people as possible fully vaccinated by then. But when it comes to travel the great perhaps, maybe, probably, can-but-shouldn't, shouldn't-but-can, maybe, possibly, who-on-earth-knows-issue of our times, it was another day of very possibly not (ITV News at Ten, 21 June 2021).

Likewise, despite a Channel 5 news anchor previously stating that restrictions related to England earlier in the bulletin, there were later exchanges with reporters that did not communicate that the Prime Minister's decision was relevant to England only.

**Anchor:** The Health Secretary is speaking to MPs now. We're expecting that confirmation very soon (...)

**Reporter:** Yes, I think it was always a very long shot that there could be any kind of early exit from restrictions on July the 5th. The Prime Minister's basically said it won't happen, that we'll have to wait till July, the 19th at the earliest. And we're expecting Sajid Javid to confirm that in his first statement as Health Secretary. But I think the other thing to bear in mind in this, the significance of Sajid Javid his appointment to that job is that within Government there's a tug of war between those who are much more on the side of saying look we have to bear down on the infections, protect the NHS and those who say yes but what about opening up the economy? Sajid Javid is perceived very much as being on the side of those who want to open up more quickly and therefore I think maybe it's shifting the centre of gravity of the argument inside the Government more towards opening up, making July the 19th or the more likely (Channel 5 News at 5, 28 June 2021).

**Anchor:** (...) a mix of good and bad news, I suppose, but some concern today about cases.

**Reporter:** The good news first is that the Prime Minister is still saying it is looking good for July the 19th, the new terminus date, as he called it. He also confirmed they are actively running pilots about what could be done to relax restrictions on people who have been jabbed twice. The bad news though is we've now had a third day in a row of more than 10,000 cases, that is back to levels last seen in mid-February, and also coming after the weekend when you normally expect a dip, that is ringing some alarm bells. And that is the background of concern to what is happening at the moment. That's why we are not expecting any big decisions on quick relaxations. Very much as the Prime Minister has said, we are in a situation where they are having a cold, hard look at the data and at the moment the data is causing them concern. They are gonna have to look at this for a bit longer before they feel confident enough to say we are pressing ahead, the decisions are all made, we are coming out of this (Channel 5 News at 5, 21 June 2021).

Without either the anchor or reporter reminding viewers of the relevance to England, it would be easy to assume that the decisions about relaxing restrictions could be applicable to everyone in the UK rather than just England.

In a similar vein, there were online items where neither the headline or main body of an article contained any specific reference to the Prime Minister's decisions being applicable to England. Take, for example, this ITV News online item, which did not have England in the opening passages, but where there were references to NHS England and Public Health England at the very end.

**Headline:** COVID lockdown restrictions will not end before July 19, Boris Johnson suggests

It is unlikely the easing of lockdown restrictions will come before the "terminus" date of July 19, the Prime Minister has suggested amid calls for an earlier reopening.

The lifting of coronavirus measures has been delayed from June 21 to July 19, was announced last week due to concerns over the spread of the Delta variant.

When asked if easing could be brought forward, Boris Johnson pointed to the rise of the Delta variant, which is causing an increase in hospitalisations and ICU admissions.

He said the vaccination programme was "going gangbusters" but added "look at the numbers of the Delta variant, it is sadly going up still... so we've got to be cautious but we'll be following the data the whole time.

Mr Johnson said July 19 was "looking good" but did not rule out future winter lockdowns amid warnings from scientists.

"You can never exclude that there will be some new disease, some new horror that we simply haven't budgeted for, or accounted for," the Prime Minister told reporters.

He added: "I think what the scientists are saying is that things like flu will come back this winter, we may have a rough winter for all sorts of reasons, and obviously there are big pressures on the NHS.

"All the more reason to reduce the number of Covid cases now, give the NHS the breathing space it needs to get on with dealing with all those other pressures, and we are certainly going to be putting in the investment to make sure that they can."

Number 10 said a two-week review on the issue was "unlikely" to result in an earlier unlocking since the delay to Stage 4 was announced last week.

However, a relaxation to the number of people that can attend weddings and funerals will take place - removing the 30-person cap for weddings, with venues instead asked to limit numbers based on space required to enforce social distancing measures.

Health Secretary Matt Hancock said the UK Government continues to look at the data, before adding: "We're being cautious."

When asked whether the remaining restrictions are likely to be lifted before the new roadmap date of July 19, Mr Hancock said: "We are looking at the data, and we've said that we'll take a specific look two weeks into the four-week delay that we had to put in place to get more people vaccinated, so we'll do that.

"But I have every confidence that the more people get vaccinated, the easier it is, the safer it is to lift restrictions. We had to have the delay in order to get more people vaccinated, especially those second vaccines to protect people, we're being careful, we're being cautious.

"But I have a high degree of confidence that this vaccine is going to get us out of this, and the more people who come forward, the easier that will be."

His comments come as more than one million COVID-19 jabs were booked in just two days after the NHS opened its vaccination programme to all remaining adults in England.

A total of 1,008,472 appointments were arranged over Friday and Saturday through the booking service, NHS England said - an average of more than 21,000 every hour, or six every second.



The full figure is likely to be higher as it does not include appointments at local GP-led vaccination services or people getting the jab at walk-in centres

The NHS has now administered around 62 million doses since Margaret Keenan became the first member of the public to get a jab on December 8.

Four in five adults have now received their first vaccination, according to NHS England figures – with three in five having both.

Public Health England's COVID-19 director Dr Susan Hopkins said on Sunday she hoped all people over 40 could get their vaccine before the full easing of lockdown restrictions planned for July 19.

NHS England chief executive Sir Simon Stevens said: "It is fantastic to see so many young people coming forward to play their part, protecting themselves, their friends and their family – nearly nine million people in their twenties and thirties have now had their first dose" (ITV News Online, 21 June 2021).

Another ITV News item online did not contain any geographical signposting – even references to NHS England – in the headline and the main body of article:

**Headline:** COVID: Why Boris Johnson's 'Freedom Day' is terrifying for millions

The projection from Sajid Javid that Covid-19 infections could surge to a record 100,000 per day in a few weeks, as all social distancing and mask-wearing regulations are removed, is especially terrifying for those whose immune systems are impaired or are clinically vulnerable in other ways.

There are millions of these frail people. For those whose immune systems are compromised or suppressed, the efficacy of vaccines is much reduced.

For others among the frail, any residual risk of becoming infected is too great, because for them it is literally a matter of life or death.

So when you hear politicians and others talking about the important freedom to choose not to wear a mask and not to keep a respectful distance from others. note that their freedom is felt as oppression by those who through no fault of their own are more at risk from this awful disease.

I often think about how my late wife, Siân Busby, would have felt about how Covid-19 has turned so many frail people into second class citizens, unable to be in the world properly. Her immune system was compromised for years by her repeated chemotherapy. That was hard enough.

How she would have felt when hearing and seeing morons bang on about what a terrible thing it is to wear a mask or keep a few feet away from strangers, I shudder to think. The Prime Minister's "Freedom Day" is "day of sheer dread" for far too many people (ITV News Online, 6 July 2021).

This commentary from an ITV reporter broadly interpreted 'Freedom Day' for "many people", but this only included residents of England, rather than those living in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland where mask wearing and COVID restrictions were not being relaxed in the same way.

## Case study 3: Reporting COVID regulations in English schools

Throughout June and July 2021 there was ongoing coverage of possible changes to COVID-19 regulations in schools across England. These were decisions made by the UK Government about educational policies in England, which were separate from decisions being made in schools across Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. In this case study we explore the degree of clarity supplied by television news bulletins and websites about the relevance of these changes for network audiences. While schools in Scotland and Northern Ireland break up at the end of June, schools in England and Wales break up for the summer in mid-late July. This meant the infection rates might have been a more topical issue in some of the UK nations.

### Summary of key findings

The key findings from this case study can be summarised in three ways:

- First, with the exception of a few BBC News items, journalists did not explicitly point out that changes to schools and colleges related to England only and not Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.
- Second, reporting often implicitly communicated the irrelevance of items by stating educational changes related to England, without mentioning the other UK nations. Sometimes this was heavily referenced by anchors, reporters and on-screen graphics and/or banners, but on other occasions it was left to an anchor with sometimes vague graphical information.
- Third, several items had no UK geographical signposting within the item, meaning the relevance to England and irrelevance to the other nations was not communicated.

In summary, across most news providers much of the coverage made reference to a specific UK nation – overwhelmingly England – without unpacking its relevance to schools and political decisions in the other three nations.

Without any geographical reference to England or English schools, audiences in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland may have assumed the changes related to their respective nations. Once again, additional audience research would be required to establish levels of understanding around devolved policy issues in the nations, and to explore how much signposting is needed to ensure clear communication of these issues within news items.

### Explicit signposting of devolved nations

There were two BBC items that spelt out both implicitly and explicitly that any changes announced by the UK Government related to England only and that different policy judgements were being made across the devolved nations. So, for example, one BBC News web item began by stating:

England's schools will find out later how the Government plans to relax rules that have led to large numbers of pupils being sent home if a single child has a positive Covid test (BBC News Online, 6 July 2021).

It then went on to explain more broadly the UK Government's approach to COVID-19 rules in England:

At a Downing Street press conference on Monday, Boris Johnson confirmed he intended to scrap the laws on mask wearing and social distancing in the final stage of England's Covid lockdown roadmap on 19 July. The date will be confirmed on 12 July after a review of the latest data (BBC News Online, 6 July 2021).

The item concluded by clearly pointing out each of the devolved nations have responsibility for setting COVID-19 rules.

Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland are in charge of their own coronavirus rules. The Scottish Government has said it may continue to require masks in certain settings even after 9 August, when it is hoped the final curbs will end. Ahead of a review on 15 July in Wales, Ministers said people would need to learn to live with Covid . Rules in Northern Ireland have just eased, with another review due on 8 July (BBC News Online, 6 July 2021).

In a BBC television news package, the anchor first pointed out the changes to schools would apply to England:

**Anchor:** Meanwhile COVID rules are also to be relaxed in England's schools with the present system of sending home whole bubbles after a positive case is set to be scrapped at the end of term. After that, children will only have to isolate if they test positive. New figures show that pupil absence in England due to COVID has hit a new high since all students returned to school in March of this year. More than 640,000 pupils in England were not in school due to COVID last week, although under 10% of those, 62,000, had confirmed or suspected COVID (BBC News at Ten, 6 July 2021).

In the follow-up reporter package, the reporter then clarified the relevance of devolution at the end of the item:

**Reporter:** Changes to the COVID rules in Scottish and Welsh schools are under review. In Northern Ireland, secondary pupils will continue to be offered two lateral flow tests a week. The Government hopes in September, schools in England will return to normality, but the dilemma of keeping schools safe whilst minimising disruption, means there are no easy answers (BBC News at Ten, 6 July 2021).

With the exception of BBC coverage, in general most reporting of COVID-19 rules in English schools did not explicitly signal to audiences that it was not relevant to decisions being made in Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland.

### **Implicit signposting of devolution by stating 'in England'**

Most coverage examined across all television news bulletins and news websites about changes to schools in England included an implicit reference to devolution by namechecking England.

In a couple of items, Channel 5 News clearly signposted England in the anchor introduction and the follow-up reporter package.

**Anchor:** One of the biggest areas left unaddressed yesterday was education. Today, the Education Secretary announced exactly what would be changing for schools in England, probably from the 19th of July ...

**Reporter:** The mood music is changing for schools in England after so much COVID disruption. There are 426 pupils here at Hartford Manor primary, but recently 89 of them were all having to isolate at the same time. Asked those who know, like the head boy and girl, it's no fun being stuck at home (Channel 5 News at 5, 6 July 2021).

The item reinforced the signposting of devolution with an on-screen graphic during the anchor introduction stating “COVID RULES IN ENGLAND’S SCHOOLS”. “Last week 623,000 pupils missed schools. Source: Department for Education”.



In another Channel 5 News item, England was again referenced by both the anchor and reporter:

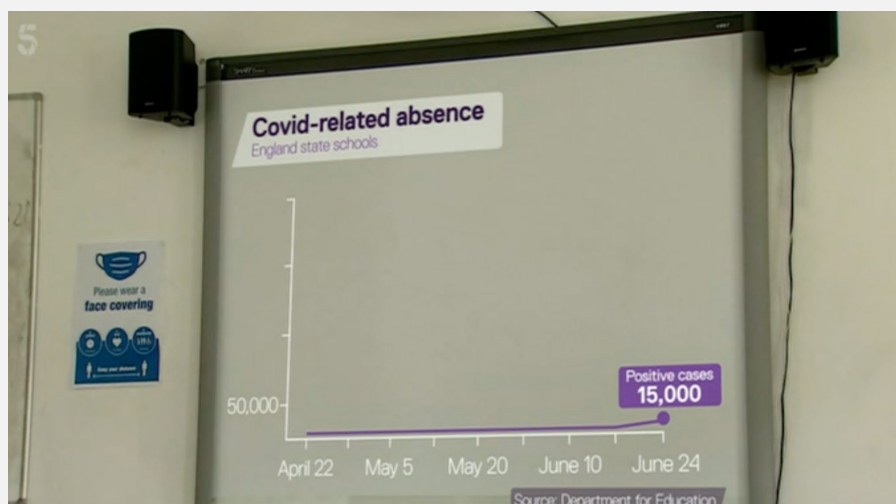
**Anchor:** There's been a sharp rise in pupils sent home from school in England because of COVID. The latest figures show that more than a third of a million pupils, that's about one in 20, had to stay at home last week mostly down to a suspected case in class. That is quadruple the figure a month before. The Government has now signalled a shift away from its controversial isolation policy to more school testing.

**Reporter:** This looks and sounds like normality, but this is the reality in 1000s of schools right now. Pupil absences due to COVID are at their highest since schools went back in March. Whole classes are being sent home because of one positive case. [Name of pupil] is just back at school after her third period of isolation.

**Vox pop:** I was stopped at the gate, and I was told I had to self-isolate, because I had been in contact with someone who had COVID (...)

[**Reporter:** How did you react?] I was quite upset about it because it was like another few weeks of lost learning. And I knew I had to miss my exams.

**On-screen graphic:** Covid-related absence – England state schools



**Reporter:** She's now sitting six exams a week late, just one example of the disruption. Figures released today show the number of children off school in England after testing positive for COVID has risen in recent weeks to an estimated 15,000 on June 24th (...) (Channel 5 News at 5, 29 June 2021).

Similarly, another Channel 5 anchor description made reference to England when discussing new policy strategies.

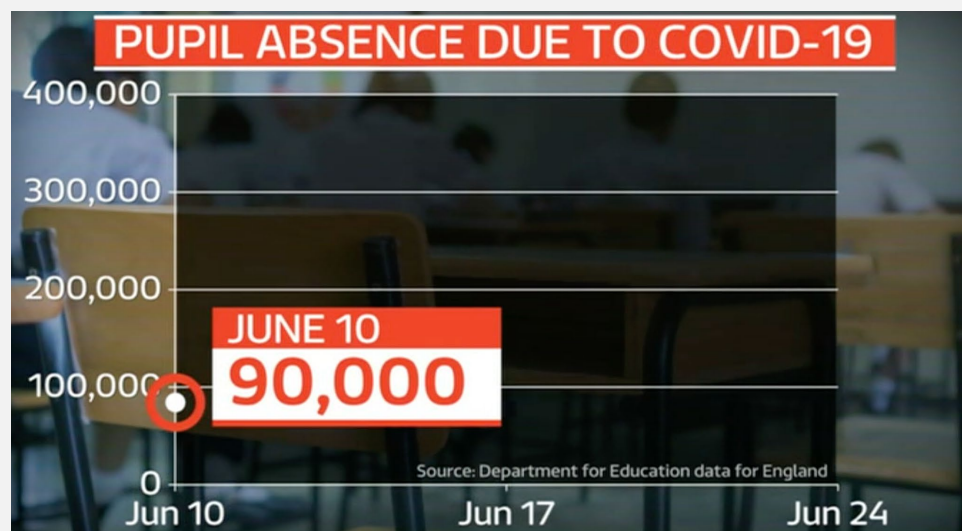
**Anchor:** The school bubble system could be scrapped in England on the 19th of July, when COVID restrictions are expected to be lifted. Rising numbers of pupils are being sent home to isolate, and the Education Secretary Gavin Williamson says he wants changes "as soon as possible". Official figures showed 375,000 children did not attend class for COVID-related reasons in England last week (Channel 5 News at 5, 30 June 2021).

Likewise, both the ITV News at Ten anchor and reporter referenced England at the beginning of their coverage:

**Anchor:** With so many school children self-isolating at home the Education Secretary Gavin Williamson promised them and their parents that the system of school bubbles in England will end as soon as possible, probably on the 19th of July when all restrictions are due to end. Mr Williamson told MPs, children should get the same freedoms as older generations, especially when they had put up with so much to protect them (...)

**Reporter:** In recent weeks, the number of children out of school because of COVID has been on the rise. On June the 10th, 90,000 pupils did not attend state schools in England because of COVID-related reasons. That number more than doubled the following week to close to a quarter of a million. By June the 24th, 375,000 students are at home because of COVID. Today the Education Secretary said this was unacceptable and said he wants to see the end of the bubble system (ITV News at Ten, 30 June 2021).

**On-screen graphic:** Pupil absence due to Covid-19



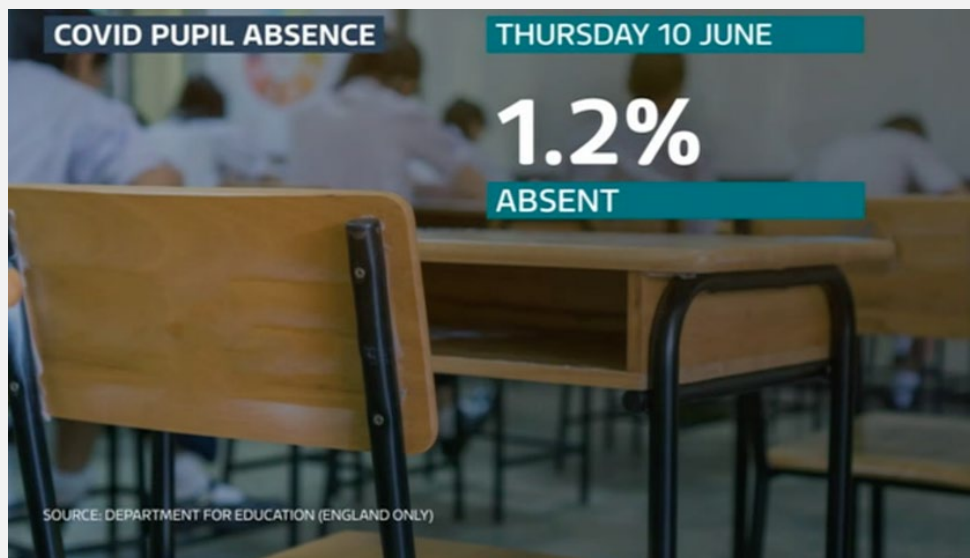
An on-screen graphic also specified that the data referred to England.

On another day, however, ITV News at Ten's anchor mentioned England, while the reporter did not, but there again was an infographic that indicated data was from England.

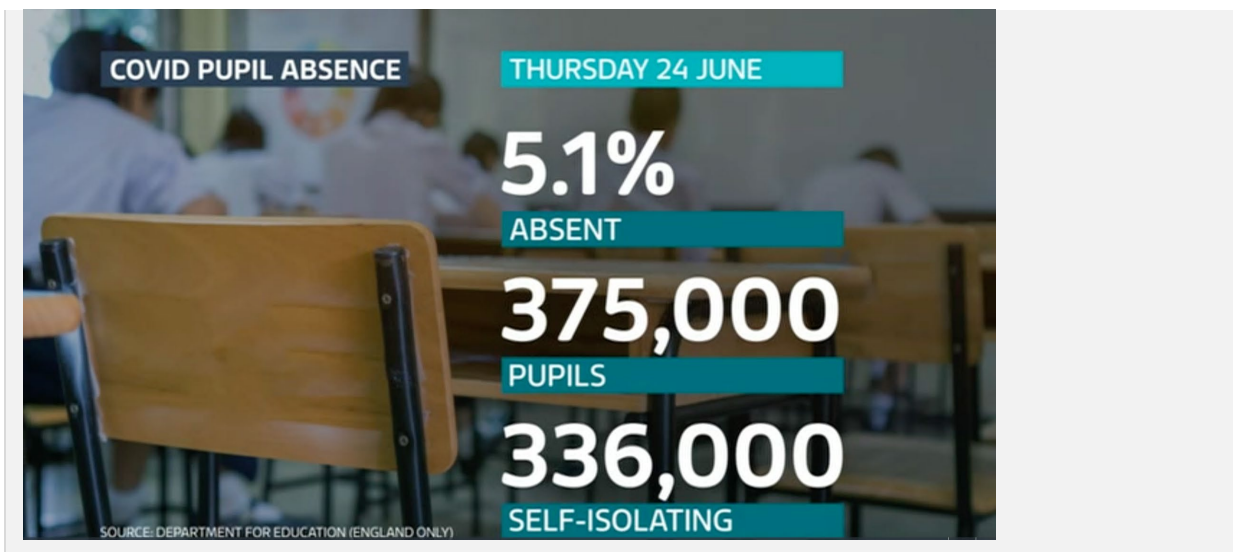
**Anchor:** As tens of thousands of parents will testify there are more schoolchildren in England self-isolating at home than at any time since classrooms reopened in March. One in 20 last week. Some of those parents blame the system of school bubbles. Happily for them the Government says it is thinking of replacing them with regular testing in schools, but not in time for what's left of this term (...)

**Reporter:** They're learning to calculate, but right now there's only one number that matters in every school, how many children are missing (...) A third of the school was off yesterday because of just 16 cases. For its head teacher, it feels like yet another lockdown (...) Across the country pupil absence due to COVID has risen from 1.2% a fortnight ago to 5.1% last Thursday. That's 375,000 pupils out of class, the vast majority self-isolating after potential contact with a positive case. But there is a solution. There's a school just a couple of miles from here, where they're piloting direct contact tracing, which means that if a child is ill, they're sent home, but others around them are simply tested in school every morning. With so many pupils currently off that's what this school and many others want to be brought in now, not in September. But the school's Minister still won't commit to extending it (...) many schools in the hardest hit areas have been saying for weeks now, they need more flexibility, they can't wait. Why not roll this trial out now across the country and keep more children in schools (...) There is a delicate equation between protecting public health and maintaining education, but for too many children, the Government's calculations don't seem to add up.

**On-screen graphic:** COVID pupil absence: Thursday 10 June Source: Department for Education (England only)



**On-screen graphic:** COVID pupil absence. Thursday 24 June Source: Department for Education (England only) (ITV News at Ten, 29 June 2021)



So while the anchor introduced the piece as being relevant, the package only reinforced this signposting by on-screen graphics with a subtle reference to England. There were references to a school’s minister, the Government and the country but not specifically to English schools or a reference to any of the devolved nations. This was also evident in another ITV News television news item the following day.

In an ITV online news item a week later, a link to England’s new lockdown rules was mentioned after four paragraphs of text, but before that, there were general references to school bubbles and educational settings:

Contact tracing by NHS Test and Trace will replace the requirement for entire school bubbles to isolate after a positive COVID contact, the Education Secretary has announced.

Following the announcement that the Government plans to scrap legal COVID restrictions from July 19, Gavin Williamson set out his strategy for easing measures in educational settings.

The announcement was made on Tuesday, amid record numbers of pupil absences.

Mr Williamson told the Commons: “We recognise that the system of bubbles and isolation is causing disruption to many children’s education. That is why we’ll be ending bubbles and transferring contact tracing to the NHS Test and Trace system for early years settings, schools and colleges.”

These are the lockdown rules that are set to go from July 19 in England.

Warnings issued over Johnson’s plan to scrap nearly all COVID restrictions (ITV News Online, 6 July 2021).

As discussed in the main report, online news articles often included more signposting than television news. Towards the end of the online item there was a drop-down section with several questions entitled “*Lockdown rules in England: What’s changing from July 19*”, which then specifically mentioned English rules again. There was also a link that asked the question “*what’s happening in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland*”, without it being clear in the item:



What has happened to social distancing and the rule of six? The 'one metre plus' rule has been scrapped entirely, as of July 19 in England. However, some guidance to maintain social distancing in certain situations will remain in place of the legal restrictions. Social distancing guidance will continue if someone is Covid positive and self-isolating, or in airports, or other ports of entry, to avoid travellers arriving from amber or red-list countries mixing with those from green list areas. Limits on social contact in England have disappeared, meaning the end of the rule of six indoors and the limit of 30 people for outdoor gatherings.

Do I still need to wear a face mask?

Has the working from home guidance changed?

What about weddings and funerals?

What's happening in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland? (ITV News Online, 6 July 2021)

When the question relating to Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland was clicked it revealed a new text box that provided explicit signposting to devolved powers:

The changes to COVID rules announced by Boris Johnson, only impact England and will not change regulations in Northern Ireland, Wales or Scotland.

The Welsh Government “would like to move together” with other parts of the UK in lifting coronavirus restrictions but will only do so if it is “right for Wales”, health minister Eluned Morgan said on Monday 5 July.

As of July 19, restrictions in Scotland have eased, with all areas of the country moving to level 0. The Government is aiming to lift all major restrictions in Scotland by August 9.

In Northern Ireland, some significant restrictions have already been eased including allowing the resumption of live music and the lifting of caps on organised outdoor gatherings (ITV News Online, 6 July 2021).

Meanwhile, in one item a Sky News reporter did not specifically connect the changes related to the UK Government’s decision about English schools but did mention England in the package when explaining the amount of school children who were absent due to COVID-19 rules.

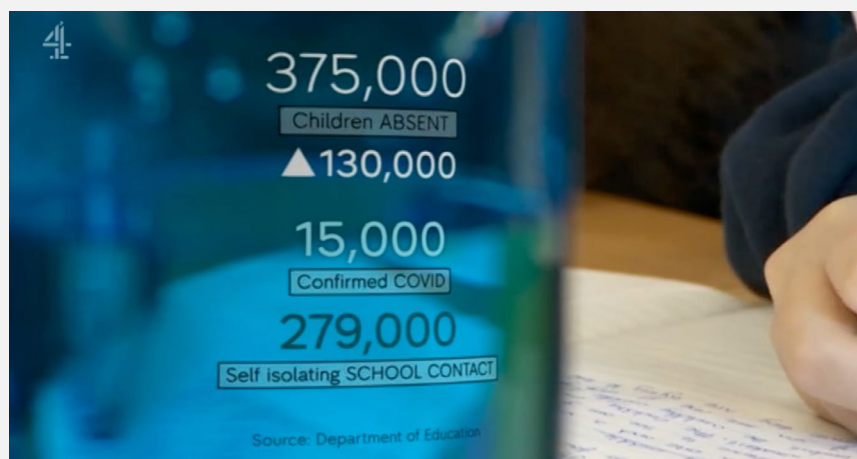
**Reporter:** Quiet corridors and unused lockers. Our children continue to count the cost of this pandemic. This week, Alcester grammar school in the West Midlands told a third of pupils, over 300 in total, not to come in after a handful tested positive (...) Teachers say at least in lockdown they could plan online lessons. In some ways, this is more disruptive. This empty classroom would normally be hosting a year nine biology lesson, but the teacher is self- isolating, as is the whole year of 155 students because of a mini outbreak of seven cases. Across England, 375,000 children are not in classrooms like this because of COVID-19, and only a fraction of them actually have the virus (...) The Government says it will decide in the next few weeks whether to roll out this programme for the autumn term (Sky News at Ten, 29 June 2021).

Similarly, a Channel 4 item mentioned England in the opening introduction and package but did not spell out that the politicians featured in it primarily have responsibility for decisions in England:

**Anchor:** Now, as if education hadn't been disrupted enough during the pandemic, there's been another sharp increase in the number of pupils in England being sent home from school because of COVID. Ministers have suggested that the current rules, which mean whole bubbles of pupils have to self-isolate if there is one case, might be changed by the autumn. But, in the meantime, families are having to cope with yet more disruption, as our North of England correspondent [name of reporter] reports.

**Reporter:** More pings, more bubbles sent home. More children off school, now one in 20 in England, not in class because of COVID. More questions about how to solve the problems of schools, space and self-isolation. And more of the calls parents dread. But first, at this school in Bradford they are chasing up COVID test results. It feels strangely tense. But they don't hold their breath for the answer anymore. It's now just normal. (...)

**On-screen graphic:**



**Reporter:** Figures released today show 375,000 children were off school in England for COVID-related reasons as of Thursday last week, that's an increase of more than 130,000 on the week before. But only a small fraction of those children had actually tested positive for COVID, just 4% while the vast majority were self-isolating because of a contact at school. But the suggestion now that from September children would be able to keep on coming to school after a contact, self-isolation replaced with a rapid COVID test every morning, something around 200 schools have already been piloting.

**MP:** We have make sure that this daily testing trial is effective in controlling the virus, and that is a matter for the scientists to advise us on, having looked at the data from the trial which finishes tomorrow.

**Reporter:** But this programme understands that pilot has been ended early in at least one area in the North of England because of concerns about the high Delta case rate and how fast the variant spreads. But at this school in Bradford, it isn't just self-isolation that is keeping children away. How much time have some of the children missed? (Channel 4 News at 7, 29 June 2021).

While the reporter explained that 375,000 were off school in the last week in England, the on-screen graphic did not and referenced the Department of Education.

In an interview that Channel 4 News conducted with a health expert, the introduction made specific reference to the Scottish Government, because the guest was an advisor to that specific administration.

**Anchor:** I'm joined now by Professor Devi Sridhar, one of the public health experts who's had a prominent public profile since the start of the pandemic and an adviser to the Scottish Government. When you look at those pictures of Chris Whitty and the demonstrations, does it chime with your experience (Channel 4 News at 7, 29 June 2021).

Despite this, the interview did not compare and contrast the approach in Scotland with England, or other devolved nations. At one point, Scottish schools were specifically mentioned by the expert, but the interview then ended without any follow up about comparative Governmental decisions between the four nations.

**Expert:** It is completely tragic. And we have to get it right. In Scotland schools are closed, we are looking at reopening end of August and we can't have a repeat of the disruption we've seen. I think we have two ways to go. For secondary schools we need to vaccinate. We've already seen this happening in the States, look at the figures in the States: four million kids infected with COVID, 300 deaths of children to COVID. Seven million children have been vaccinated and there has not been one death to a child to the vaccine. There have been side-effects but they have been treated. So I think vaccination is the way to go for secondary schools to get a normal return where kids can mix and have a normal educational experience. Primary schools, we still don't have a vaccine so we'll have to look at other measures like repeat testing, good advice to parents, having kids stay off if they are symptomatic. But I think the whole idea of sending bubbles home, is just we need to move away from that, especially in the younger age groups. It is just too disruptive (Channel 4 News at 7, 29 June).

Overall, across many news providers much of the coverage made reference to a specific UK nation – overwhelmingly England – without unpacking its relevance to schools and political decisions in the other three nations. In doing so, audiences might implicitly associate the problem as being unique to England. While schools in Scotland and Northern Ireland break up at the end of June, the infection rate may be less of a problem for them at this point.

## No geographical signposting

Finally, several items identified within this case study contained no geographical references or devolution signposting, with examples across all the broadcasters.

For example, while the follow-up report to this introduction briefly referenced England when talking about pupil absence in schools, this anchor did not mention that the UK Government's announcement about COVID measures related to schools in England only, including several charts that made reference to the Department of Education, but not to England, or any other nations.

**Anchor:** The Education Secretary says he's planning to relax COVID measures in schools, after it was revealed that one in 20 pupils are currently isolating. Under the existing rules students must quarantine if just one of their classmates tests positive, but that has led to a dramatic rise in classes and year groups being sent home. Figures released by the Department of Education show the number of children missing school because of COVID is rising dramatically. They show that more than 375,000 pupils, about one in 20, were out of school for COVID-related reasons, up by more than 130,000 in a week. But only 15,000 were pupils with confirmed COVID. 279,000 of these absences were from children self-isolating due to potentially coming into contact with someone in school with COVID. The numbers of COVID-related absences has risen consistently since schools went back in March, but there was a huge spike this month, the numbers quadrupling in June alone (Sky News at Ten, 29 June 2021).

On-screen data from the Department for Education was referred to by the anchor, but it did not make any reference to England, while a rolling banner appeared without any geographical signposting either.

**On-screen data:**

Pupil absences 375,000 pupils off school last week. Source: Dept. for Education

Pupil absences: Potential COVID contact indoors 15,000 confirmed cases Source: Dept. for Education

Pupil absences: Potential COVID contact indoors 279,000 potential contacts Source: Dept. for Education

Pupil absences: week ending 12th March 104,500 absences. Source: Dept. for Education



**Rolling banner:**

Official figures suggest COVID-related pupil absence in state-funded schools is increasing and is currently at its highest since schools reopened in March with 5.1% of pupils absent on 24 June up from 3.3% on 17 June and 1.2.% on 10 June.

Schools Minister Nick Gibb has told Sky News the Government is conducting trials of daily testing and contact tracing in schools to minimise the risk of COVID transmission in the classroom (Sky News at Ten, 29 June 2021).

Similarly, a Sky News at Ten anchor outlined some general context to school children isolating as did a reporter before a brief sound bite from the Secretary of State for Education. But at no point was it stated that his decisions related to schools in England only. The accompanying on-screen rolling banner did not provide any geographical signposting either.

**Anchor:** There were 28,000 confirmed cases of COVID-19 amongst school children last Thursday, but more than half a million were self-isolating as a result. The extent of the impact of COVID restrictions on education is one of the reasons the Government is moving to scrap school bubbles and all self-isolation for under 18s.

**Reporter:** Over 600,000 children are out of school due to COVID, but only 4% of them have the virus. That's why bubbles are going.

**Gavin Williamson (Secretary of State for Education):** Keeping children in consistent groups was essential to control the spread of the virus when our population was less vaccinated. We recognize that the system of bubbles and isolation is causing disruption to many children's education. That is why we'll be ending bubbles and transferring contact tracing to the NHS test and trace system (Sky News at Ten, 6 July 2021).

Sky News at Ten also produced an on-screen rolling banner during the item that did not provide any geographical signposting: *"Education Secretary Gavin Williamson has announced bubbles, social distancing and mask-wearing will end in schools as part of step four of roadmap and students will only need to self-isolate if they test positive"* (Sky News at Ten, 6 July 2021).



Likewise, in an interview between the anchor and two guests on Channel 4 News at 7, there was a general discussion about COVID-19 measures at schools, with a reference to the Secretary of State for Education, Gavin Williamson. But at no point in the lengthy exchange was it mentioned that he had responsibility for schools in England, with powers about COVID-19 school measures devolved to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. There was also a reference to the country in the opening introduction to the item, but it was not made clear if that referred to the UK as a country or England specifically.

**Anchor:** Now, the number of children not in school is at its highest since the March reopening. Entire classes and in many cases whole year groups have been sent home across the country after one pupil has tested positive for COVID or come into contact with someone who has. This disruption comes on top of the loss of many weeks of school during lockdown and is causing alarm among parents and school staff alike. Let's talk now to [Guest 1] — the headteacher of Newham Roman Catholic College in Oldham — an area with one of the highest infection rates in the country — and to [Guest 2] — the joint General Secretary of the Teachers Union, the NEU. [Guest 1] Could you just tell me how your day began and what you had to do?

**Guest 1:** Well, unfortunately, it's like the past few weeks, Monday morning is usually three or four positive cases that have come in over the weekend. It's the calculation of then who has to isolate and go home, it is the frantic phone calls to parents, and the apologies for the disruption it causes, and then of course it is the support to the students, who are anxious about having to leave home, and then the gratitude and thanks to the staff who are putting themselves under a real pressure to make sure they meet this demand. So, it's not the best scenario.

**Anchor:** But you haven't described how many you had to send home this Morning.

**Guest 1:** So this morning, we totalled 400 young people who are not in school out of 1200 possible who should have been in school, out of a school the size of 1500, with year 11 having left, and that has been our position now for about three weeks, if not four now. And of course it is relentless, it is hugely disruptive to students, and hugely frustrating to parents, and the impact on staff is significant, because they are having to plan lessons for the children in school but also deliver and plan lessons for those children at home. Above all, it is just a relentless battle to keep going, and with 3000 students isolating in Oldham alone in the past week, it really does need a different view on it.

**Anchor:** [Guest 2], therefore what is the view of your union, the NEU?

**Guest 2:** We are hearing reports like the one we've just had, that the Delta variant is spreading through schools much faster than the situation before. A quarter of a million children were self-isolating last week. The doubling time on the virus is 11 days. We think it is doubling faster among school-age children, and so that quarter of a million could be half a million or a million children before the end of term, if we're not careful. And I want to ask, where is Gavin Williamson? What is he saying about this? Why has he not reversed his position on masks? Why has he not spoken out about the drop in mass testing, from 60% of children on March the 8th to only 15% now? Why has he done nothing about ventilation? New York administration has just announced two HEPA filters for every classroom for September, filtering the virus out. Gavin Williamson needs to act on this. I think that won't stop all of the increase, but SAGE have told Gavin Williamson that mass testing and mask wearing reduces transmission in schools by one third, so why isn't he doing it?

**Anchor:** Let me go back to the sharp end for a moment, because [Guest 1], even managing to secure care for these children when they go home, there must have been many families that simply could not provide?

**Guest 1:** Yeah, I mean, it is incredibly difficult for us and we're doing our very, very best and I'm blessed to have the very hardest working team in education who will do everything they can to safeguard and protect our children but also give them hope. But we know there are a number of families who are in dire circumstances, and I accept what my colleague from the union has said, I accept the frustration are being phased but I think what parents want and what educators on the ground want at the moment is a bit of clarity, is a little bit of leadership, and a little bit of gratitude that this is not over. People standing up and saying that this is over is an insult to my colleagues who are in a daily battle, trying their best to serve our young people.

**Anchor:** So, you are calling for Gavin Williamson, the Education Secretary, to come and tell the world what on earth is going to happen now. What do you think should happen [Guest 2]?

**Guest 2:** We have to hope for the best for September, we have to hope that vaccination of adults suppresses the virus but I'm afraid that we have to plan for the worst, that vaccination of adults does not work, does not suppress the virus and in that case we need to be thinking about vaccination of children. We need to be thinking about testing all children before they return in September. We have to be thinking about ventilation, and those plans need to be put in place now.

**Anchor:** Let me just ask you this. Is sending children home to their home bubbles the solution or what. Would you want [Guest 1] to somehow handle it another way?

**Guest 2:** [Guest 1] is doing the very best that he can in following the public health advice that he has been given. Many head teachers like [Guest 1] will describe to you, having worked every day for the last 14 days, for the last 21 days, including weekends receiving notifications from parents that children are positive and then the head teacher having to do the test, track, trace. They are following the public health guidance. They are not in a position to gainsay the public health guidance. We have been in a meeting today when we know that the Government is going to ask headteachers to do the test, track, trace for the first six days of the summer holidays (Channel 4 News at 7, 28 June 2021).

While the focus of attention was on English school policies, there was no geographical reference to England. For audiences to understand the relevance of the interview on network news, it would have been helpful to acknowledge this public health advice may be different across the four nations of the UK.

The next day in another Channel 4 News at 7 interview - with a mother of a school child in England - the anchor once again did not provide any geographical reference in his line of questioning. While the opening part of the discussion was about the general impact of school distribution and isolation, the anchor then asked: "*If you had the chance to talk to the Government about what they should be doing what would you say to them?*" (Channel 4 News at 7, 29 June 2021) without stating which Government of the four nations.

On the same programme, an interview with an MP also made *singular* references to the Government and towards the end of the item mentioned Gavin Williamson, the Secretary of State for Education.



**Anchor:** Joining me now is the Conservative MP [Name], who's a former Children's and Families Minister. I have to put it to you that the Government once again has massively let down children.

**Guest:** It is not a case of the Government massively letting down children, the Government has got a really difficult job and schools have a really difficult job as to how to keep schools going and keep children safe. I have to say, your last interview with [name of the mother they interviewed], what she said, she was absolutely right, the way things are going has been hugely disruptive to schools, to school kids and to parents and family life. And it is not just about academic catch up, what they are missing in the classroom, it is about socialising, it is about the impact on physical health and it is about the impact on mental health as well. I am really worried about the epidemic of mental illness, that this is only adding to it as well. We have a big job to catch up on all fronts when we get back to normal. And we got to get back to normal, with normal school hours and normal classroom activity as soon as possible. This cannot go on as it is.

**Anchor:** You want to lift the restrictions on school children even though we are not vaccinating them or taking any of the measures to make classrooms safe the way the Americans are?

**Guest:** We've got to lift this restriction sooner rather than later. And absolutely, when children come back from the school holiday in September we must get back to some degree of normality.

**Anchor:** So just let the virus run wild through kids?

**Guest:** It is not about letting the virus run wild. You've just given us the figures, 375,000 school kids off school at the moment because somebody has tested positive but only 4% of kids who are actually positive. There are better ways of getting kids back to school with more testing. I think that is the way forward, without being so risk averse that we have to send children home with the postcode lottery of whether online learning is actually up to it or not. Missing end of term events, I'm getting loads of complaints from parents, missing sports days and end of term plays, prom (...)

**Anchor:** I agree it is a total mess as we demonstrated earlier. My question is why aren't we mitigating it in any other way beyond testing? We are not even offering that, it is not clear that children or their parents would want vaccines or that their parents would want them but we are not offering them and there are definitely some children who are relatively vulnerable who do want them.

(...)

**Anchor:** Have you spoken to Gavin Williamson about this? Where is Gavin Williamson apart from bleating on about mobile phones?

**Guest:** That is rather disparaging to the Education Secretary. You've had [Name], the Schools Minister on your programme and he has been across all of the airwaves talking about the pilots that they have done in other schools to see if they can relax these restrictions and rely on testing rather more which is what I think we can do. We need to see the signs but we also need to see the signs of the impact it is having on all the aspects of children's lives, as well and the teachers and their parents. And that is why I think we are being too risk averse and I want these restrictions relaxed sooner rather than later (Channel 4 News at 7, 29 June 2021).

There were some signals to help viewers know the interview was focused on English COVID-19 policy making (for example, when the interviewee said schools started back in September, which

was different to Scotland when they started in August), as well as references to MPs from England and the Secretary of State for Education.

The following day the anchor introduced an item that discussed specific decisions about lifting COVID-19 rules but again without reference to England.

**Anchor:** The Education Secretary Gavin Williamson has said school bubbles could be scrapped from July the 19th to reduce the number of children being sent home. There has been rising concern over the large number of pupils being made to isolate, if another child in their bubble tests positive for COVID-19. Recent data shows 375,000 children in state education were out of school last week, as a result of the virus (Channel 4 News at 7, 30 June 2021).

All of the items represent missed opportunities to add clarity and include any signposting to devolved issues.