

## A city left to fend for itself

While the British government has been frantically trying to handle COVID-19 for the last year, one city seems to have been left behind during all the commotion. That east Midlands city with an estimated population of around 557,000 is Leicester, home to Leicester Tigers rugby club, Leicester City football club, the remains of King Richard III, the National Space Centre, Red Leicester cheese and Walkers Crisps.

Leicester has been under some form of lockdown restrictions since March 2020 and it is the only UK city to have been in lockdown for almost a year. This has led to the sentiment that Leicester has become a forgotten city, left to fend for itself by a preoccupied government.

“It’s funny how people call it the third lockdown because Leicester never really came out,” said store assistant, Julie Jearum. Like many others in her position, Julie feels that “after some time we were ignored”.

Julie has not seen some of her loved ones for almost a year. “I can’t see my friends and I miss my grandson, but I’m used to it now.” Julie added: “All the countries that are doing well put health first and economics second, we put economics first and that was our mistake.” This humble organic health store employee may be a single individual but her experience is that of thousands of people whose lives have been reduced to a simple routine of work, shopping and staying at home.

The adequacy of the support provided by the government for cities enduring local lockdowns has often been called into question, but in the case of Leicester it is especially pertinent. In addition to the initial £85m given to the Leicester City Council during England’s first national lockdown (of which £10m of unallocated funds had to be returned to the Treasury), the government provided a £2.6m business support package. Council members were displeased with the amount of funds as they believed it was only “a fraction” of what the city needed.

Later, when Greater Manchester was put under Tier 3 restrictions, the region received a £60m business support package. Regions such as Lancashire, South Yorkshire and Liverpool city also received support packages of £30m. The sum provided to Leicester paled in comparison to those given to other regions. Mayor Sir Peter Soulsby and Labour MPs for Leicester Liz Kendall and Jon Ashworth voiced their discontent with the lack of support for Leicester and urged the government to review its decision.

The city, known for being one of the most multicultural UK cities, has had its unemployment figures more than double since the lockdown began. “The need for foodbanks has increased significantly,” said Independent MP for Leicester East Claudia Webbe.

There are a number of reasons as to why Leicester experienced its own outbreak however, the failure of the test and trace system and the large number of vulnerable workers in the city remain at the forefront.

Webbe said: “There’s a grim intersection of race and class and it’s had a deadly consequence in this pandemic.” This has been abundantly clear in the case of garment factories which were exposed during the summer of 2020 for subjecting workers to

sweatshop conditions with overcrowding, lack of PPE and very low pay. Due to the lack of public funding for certain groups of people “many workers have resorted to these unscrupulous garment factories, as well as undocumented workers who are particularly vulnerable abuse.”

Over the course of the pandemic Leicester’s inhabitants have become increasingly more aware of the role that the disparity between wealthy and impoverished areas, especially with London where it would seem the government has been placing most of its priorities. “The government has shown its disregard for areas outside of London through the examples of Manchester, Newcastle and Leicester by providing nowhere near enough support,” Webbe continued.

For business owner, Ronald Stabana, the government’s “on and off” approach and favouritism of larger businesses have been major issues. Ronald Stabana (known by locals as Mr. Stabana) owns Stabana Cultural Products, a store which sells a range of products targeted towards people of African and African-Caribbean descent. He feels that the government’s general refusal to fully commit to a lockdown is the reason why the effects of COVID-19 are still rampant. “After the first 3 months we needed more.

“Closing for three months then opening, then closing again doesn’t do anything. I don’t see any real leadership there.”

Mr Stabana who is normally complimented for his bubbly personality and first-class customer service has been disappointed continually throughout Leicester’s extended lockdown. “Nobody wants to see how we’re doing,” he said, in reference to the government’s apathy. “It’s frightening to see things happening here because they tell a different story on the television.”

Since the beginning of its local lockdown, Leicester has become synonymous with isolation. Unessential movement in and out of the city as well as indoor household mixing have been prohibited for close to 11 months, but with the ongoing vaccination effort, the city’s severe case of long COVID may be coming to an end. As Claudia Webbe pointed out: “We are only as safe as the most vulnerable amongst us.”

“We need to rebuild from the pandemic. It’s been an incredibly difficult and tumultuous time for Leicester,” said Webbe. For now, the population is putting its faith in the vaccine rollout, but the mishandling of Leicester’s outbreak has yet to be addressed.

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