

Action Research Journal

July 1st

The Leicester Lockdown

Being a city in the centre of England, Leicester's fairly removed from us over here in NI but that doesn't mean it doesn't raise concerns, namely the fear of a return to lockdown. Leicester is the first city in the UK to have its own local lockdown and I wanted to understand exactly why coronavirus cases had suddenly spiked there, I thought for sure it must be due to some influx of tourists or some other concrete reason but it appears not. The BBC believes population density is to blame and the Express thinks it's due to people prematurely returning to work but the point is that there is no certain cause and that's what concerning. If there was something special about Leicester maybe it would indicate the rest of the UK is ready to return to normal but it's just a city with a lot of people and if that's all it takes for cases to spike maybe lockdown is being eased too quickly.

Sudden shifts between lockdown and not lockdown are proving to be unpopular in Leicester and especially disruptive to businesses so this model will not work for the future. My school is closed for the Summer, we intend to return a week early in August to study for the exams that will singlehandedly control our A-Level grades and by extension our admission into university, we cannot afford to have lockdown switched on and off erratically, I need stability to do my best work. While I was not initially fond of the contact-tracing app the growing issue of local outbreaks had endeared me to it, if there is a way to minimise the disruption to day to day life while also preventing the spread of Coronavirus it needs to be implemented fast. I'd like to do further research on this app and the plans to implement it in wider society.

I wanted to look at how Germany was handling local lockdowns as it was mentioned alongside that of Leicester's but those affected by Germany's first local lockdown have a very similar opinion; they're angry. It also highlighted to me the frustration felt by individuals who have been set free of restrictions only for them to return just as suddenly and I can empathise with that. In my opinion the laissez-faire actions of the government(s?) are allowing people to think Coronavirus isn't really an issue anymore and so when this "non-issue" suddenly turns back into an active threat and lockdown is reimposed the legs are swept from under businesses and individuals alike and I think it raises an uncertainty that these restrictions are being treated with the respect their severity deserves.

Mixed Messages

There have been a number of instances of government officials breaching lockdown restrictions but I wanted to talk about a particular instance of this closer to home. Michelle O'Neill the Deputy First Minister attended the funeral of Bobby Storey, this funeral had hundreds of people attending and social distancing and it is clear that among the crowds lining the streets social distancing was not being practiced. Ms O'Neill was, as I understand, a friend of Bobby Storey's and while I can understand the loss of anyone close to you is heartbreaking people across the country have missed funerals of mothers, fathers and children to comply with the governmental restrictions that Michelle O'Neill, as part of Stormont, enacted and asked us to comply with.

I wanted to make sure this story hadn't been misrepresented to me as this was undeniably a politically-charged event. Ms O'Neill has said that social distancing inside the St Agnes church where the funeral service took place was obeyed and the cortège had a maximum of 30 people in it and this I accept as good practice but that's not the point. I watched the news today and I heard Ms O'Neill make her case that she was in-keeping with the regulations and she was wearing a face mask and she believed that her actions were justified and that's just it, her emphasis was on her own compliance rather than that of the crowds around her. Now, it's not the responsibility of a person to babysit those around them but as a member of Stormont Michelle O'Neill has a duty to the public during this crisis to make the restrictions she helped create crystal-clear, ensure they are abided by and most importantly, to respect them herself. To attend a funeral where she knew there would be hundreds of mourners was irresponsible and ultimately she took the risk she has implored us not to take. I'm worried this is going to cause an influx of people to disregard the restrictions due to the new precedent that's been set and more so that it will lead to a localised lockdown making true the worries I'd talked about. I'm taking the UCAT soon, the test window is already smaller than it's been before and places in test centres had disappeared rapidly this

morning when the registration opened. If lockdown in Northern Ireland is reimposed, I don't know what I'll do and I don't know how my ability to take the UCAT will change. This test is a vital part of my medical aspirations and it's fast approaching, I just hope it's over before any potential consequences today may lead to.



*Illustration 1 -
"Window"*

July 22nd (The week spanning 20th - 26th)

On the topic of face masks

The first time I really thought about wearing a mask was about two weeks ago; we'd gone down to Newry to a shopping centre, it was nearly a whole family ordeal as no one wanted to be left at home any longer. As we arrived my mum had mentioned an outbreak near the border and, as a shopping centre is a fairly busy place, given my sisters and I (as well as my nana) each a face mask to wear as we walked about. It was a bit of a nuisance at first, kept steaming up my glasses, but quickly wearing one became as typical as using the hand sanitiser at every shop door. Recently we've been exploring more fashionable options from looking online, in stores and even homemade as my mum brought out the sewing machine and made a pretty little yellow mask from some thick fabric we had that's now sitting in my bag for the next outing. We'd thought it was a given masks would become mandatory in shops here just like the case will be in the rest of the UK but it took a while for the Executive to come to a decision.

Both Retail NI and Belfast Chamber have said the retail sector remains "in a fragile place" and have introduced the counter-proposal to compulsory face coverings: don't make them compulsory at all. They expressed concern that if face coverings become mandatory it would negatively impact the shops enforcing these rules. Now as we are just returning from an extended period of high street closures it's understandable that the retail sector and those who represent it want a cautious return to ensure the stability of our shops but personally, I think taking this stance on face masks is a mistake. Rules for face masks that have been introduced for other UK countries, such as England, have been generous with the number of exemptions they include; from being excused due to physical health conditions to mental health conditions such as anxiety to exception for small children the rules on face masks are obviously not there to catch you out, they're to keep you safe.

I think masks are an especially appropriate solution for a pandemic as niche as COVID-19 where, as some individuals present no symptoms despite being infected with the virus, asymptomatic carriers can pass on an infection to anyone around them without even knowing they'd put anyone at risk. As current research suggests masks are much more effective in preventing the wearer from spreading an infection than being infected, wearing a mask is less an act of self-interest but rather an act in the interest of others. As long as the rules on compulsory face coverings are made with a consideration for those who have a genuine reason for exemption, wearing a mask is a minor inconvenience with a huge potential to save the lives of those around us that could have a fatal reaction to the virus.

I'd had a few more points on this topic but on Sunday 26th (today) the Executive released a statement that masks will be mandatory in all shops from the 1st of August and this will be enforced after August 20th if the majority of the populace is not compliant. I think this is a great way to introduce the new guidelines and allow people to remember to bring their masks! In my opinion mask-wearing had to be mandatory, too many people will forget or just not bother otherwise and for face coverings to be effective everyone needs to wear one so I think this is great news! I wonder will I have to wear a mask for my UCAT? That could be distracting but I'll bring one just in case. I'm working on a more lighthearted illustration at the moment, should be done at some point soon.

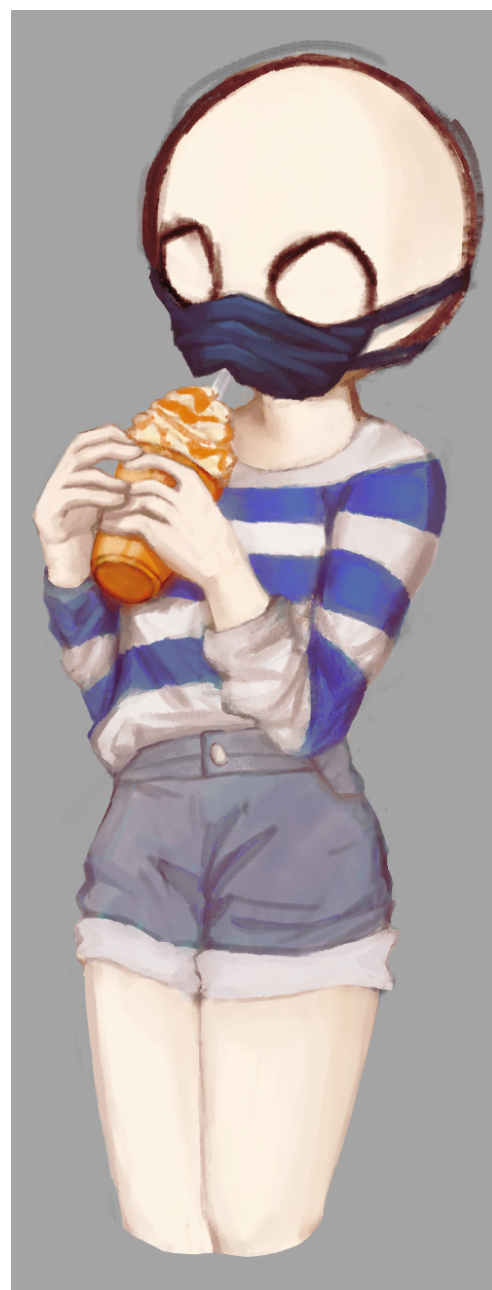


Illustration 2 -
"Mask"

August 22nd

On the topic of school and exam results

Results week was tumultuous as well as the days that followed. I've been on holiday for the past two weeks which is why I haven't written about this sooner, it was actually part way through the first week of my holiday that I received my first set of results from CCEA. I was fortunate on results day, I'd received all the grades I needed but some of my friends weren't as lucky. Two friends from school were marked down significantly, one was marked down from B to C and C to D on two separate subjects while the other had shown proof and was completely on course to receive a B but was arbitrarily marked down to a C (I haven't mentioned their names here as I assume they would be anonymised anyway). Thankfully, as far as I know, these mistakes have been rectified by the government's snap decision to ditch the "algorithm" and go off teachers' predictions which begs the question, why not do this in the first place? To me, at least, it seems far more reliable to use teacher's recommendations as their primary source and, rather than using the fact that teachers have a tendency to up-grade than down-grade as a reason to disregard their professional advice, why not work towards minimising that risk rather than taking the advice of teachers and then promptly chucking it out the window?

The other problem that arises from this situation is that since the A-Level results were such a disaster (even after the various exam boards pulled their algorithms their effects are still felt by students that missed out on university places because their real grade came too late), how can we trust in the stability of the whole examination system? And no I don't mean getting people to resign (as they do so often within the government at least), that does nothing and assigns blame to one person when the problem is so much more complicated. Rather, there needs to be increased clarity in the awarding process and more importantly these enigmatic algorithms need to be seriously looked at. Next year CCEA has said they intend to use yet another algorithm to calculate a full A Level performance based on our A2 exams, making the AS grades awarded this year null and void (which brings into question their legitimacy and, if they are argued to be legitimate, why not to the extent that they can't be relied upon and need to be 'recalculated' next year?).

After hearing about the number of students who have lost university places, been failed or downgraded I do feel guilty about being discontent with an A for my overall grade for the Mathematics A-Level I completed in one year. This grade will stick with me and as I aim to do medicine at university, it'll meet the minimum requirement, sure, but it puts increased pressure on me for the next year. Without the assurance of an A* at this stage my medical aspirations depend on my results next year, my results that I will once again have to trust to an algorithm, as far as I know. Wanting perfect results is a bit of a taboo but the fact is that I need A*s. Whether or not I could have achieved an A* at Maths had I done an exam I don't know, my teachers predicted me an A and the algorithm didn't change it. I know my work ethic, I know my GCSEs, I know my performance in other exams and assessed tests I've done. I don't know, however, anything about how other students doing Mathematics have fared or even the number of A*s that teachers were allowed to give out. In the end wherever I ended up, I didn't make the cut. How do I know this won't be repeated next year? That I won't just be given A's again and told "well an A* is very difficult to achieve you should be happy an A is a good score". This isn't about vanity or having a string of perfect results this is about whether or not I can even reach the grades I need to study medicine. I hope they have some answers for us soon.



*Illustration 3 -
"Cloud"*