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**IMPROVE COVID-19 ALERT LEVEL SYSTEM TO SAVE LIVES**

*‘Close to meaningless’ current system leads to confusion and more deaths*

The UK’s COVID Alert Level system\* is close to meaningless to the public and is simply adding to confusion about what people should or shouldn’t be doing, according to a new report published today by the UK’s National Preparedness Commission (NPC).

The five-level alert system is pointless because the levels are not linked to specific actions, unlike systems in other countries that have been praised for their response to the pandemic. The result is that the UK version has little value or benefit and just adds to the torrent of messages the public receive, causing confusion and putting lives at risk, according to the NPC report, ‘*Enhancing Warnings’*.

The report’s authors Dr Carina Fearnley and Professor Ilan Kelman, of the UCL Warning Research Centre, explain how warnings *must* translate into decisions and actions, otherwise they are not fulfilling their purpose. In New Zealand, for example, the COVID-19 Alert Levels Summary sets out four levels, each with clear guidance on the risk assessment and range of measures in place across key sectors. As a unified and comprehensive source of information, it gives authorities the credibility, accountability and transparency they need to ensure everyone knows what to do, setting expectations and responsibilities from the outset.

Having introduced the UK COVID Alert Levels system two months into the first lockdown, the UK government *did* later create a three-tier local alert system which included specific actions. However, with this then sidelined by further national lockdowns, the report’s authors are clear this has only added to the public’s confusion.

**Co-author of the report, Dr Carina Fearnley, says:**

“Successful Alert Level Systems provide a framework to help people understand what is happening in a crisis and how they should respond as its severity ramps up or down. They save lives by supporting people to prepare for, and navigate through, a crisis and fostering a collective sense of responsibility. Without a robust Alert Level System at the heart of our country’s pandemic response, people are being bombarded with a stream of ever-changing advice that is reactive, inconsistent and unclear. There is no doubt this is costing lives.

“In the UK, government advice on COVID-19 is increasingly seen as politically driven, rather than representing the best available information from trusted, expert sources, supported by decisive leadership from politicians. Conflicting messages have led to confusion and an increasing sense of ‘them and us’, which we know reduces compliance.”

The report’s authors also point out that in the UK the triggers for raising or lowering the COVID-19 alert level – in this case, the ‘R’ number – are regularly redefined, adding to a lack of trust. Whilst adaptability and adjustability are important, the report states that the decision-making process on crossing alert-level thresholds should be clear and transparent to enhance compliance with measures.

Given the spread of Omicron and the likelihood of further variants in the future, the NPC believes that it is not too late to improve the COVID Alert Level System, to help restore credibility in the UK’s pandemic response and, ultimately, save more lives.

**Lord Toby Harris, Chair of the National Preparedness Commission, said:**

“A strong Alert Level System should provide a roadmap for a country dealing with a crisis, maintaining independence from the ebb and flow of politics and personalities. We are at a crucial point in this pandemic where there is a risk that non-compliance with guidance becomes a serious problem for the NHS and for wider society, as official advice is undermined.

“The National Preparedness Commission brings together some of the UK’s best experts in handling emergencies. It is clear the country could do better. There is still time to make a difference and to save countless lives and we stand ready to support the government in this effort.”

The report sets out how to implement a successful Alert Level System in the UK. Key advice includes\*\*:

* Encourage the public to work together by setting clear expectations as to how the public should respond at each level of alert
* Consider carefully the criterion used to determine thresholds, or whether it will be based on broader risks. This requires a wide range of independent input.
* National level standardisation significantly reduces confusion whilst also being able to facilitate local requirements
* Enforcement of the rules is needed.

The *Enhancing Warnings* report also looks more broadly at lessons from several key large-scale crises including human-caused climate change, terrorism and poverty. It makes practical recommendations on how to develop effective warnings and successfully engage the public to prepare, and to act when a crisis hits.

**ENDS**

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**Notes to editors**

* \*Alert graphic: *(The national alert system, UK government)*. See slide 1 [here](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/885652/2020-05-17_COVID-19_Press_Conference_Slides_-_to_be_published.pptx.pdf)
* \*\*For the full list of recommendations see p29 of the report

**About the National Preparedness Commission**

The aim of the National Preparedness Commission is to promote better preparedness for major crises or incidents. The Commission includes leading figures with hands-on experience of responding to emergencies and had its inaugural meeting in November 2020. It hears from experts across the world, holds roundtable events and publishes guides and policy papers outlining good practice to ensure an effective response. The objective of the National Preparedness Commission is to urge policymakers ‘to think ahead’ to ensure our society, infrastructure and financial systems are able to cope with major shocks in the future.

**About Dr Carina Fearnley**

Dr Fearnley is Director of the UCL Warning Research Centre and an Associate Professor in Science and Technology Studies at University College London. She is an interdisciplinary researcher, drawing on relevant expertise in the social sciences to enable concepts of scientific uncertainty, risk, and complexity to be re-framed and communicated within the context of Disaster Risk Reduction and provide practical insights into how warning systems, specifically alert level systems, can be made more effective. She is an active researcher in two key areas: first, hazard warning systems and second, in Art/Science projects that address some of the complex issues surrounding our understanding of environmental hazards.

**About Professor Ilan Kelman**

Ilan Kelman is a Professor of Disasters and Health at University College London, and a Professor II at the University of Agder, Kristiansand, Norway. His overall research interest is linking disasters and health, including the integration of climate change into disaster research and health research. That covers three main areas: disaster diplomacy and health diplomacy, island sustainability involving safe and healthy communities in isolated locations and risk education for health and disasters.