

50,000 a day and the number of deaths from Covid currently stands at more than 1,000 a week. Infection rates in the UK are more than 18 times those in Spain and nine times those in France. Without some action to control infections, the risk is that Covid rates will continue to rise and heap further pressure on the NHS, leading to more deaths not just from Covid but from other conditions that go untreated as a result of the crisis.

The government is simply ignoring the warning signs. Health secretary Sajid Javid has maintained in recent weeks that the NHS is coping and that the pressures are manageable. This is incongruous with what hospital chiefs and frontline staff are reporting. Boris Johnson remains ideologically committed to misleading the country that everything is under control and there is nothing to worry about, while Jacob Rees-Mogg frivolously claimed that Conservative MPs do not need to wear masks in the Commons because they know each other. Labour's message on what it wants the government to do lacks clarity. Yet senior scientific advisers to the government have warned of the need for caution and for incremental restrictions to manage pressures on the NHS before it is too late.

The government is in danger of repeating the same mistakes it has made over and over again: throwing caution to the wind and leaving it so late to act that the restrictions needed to prevent a collapse in emergency healthcare will in the end be greater. Speeding up the vaccine booster rollout is unlikely to sufficiently control rates of infection. The government urgently needs to put in place its winter plan B, which includes compulsory mask wearing in public places, guidance for people to work from home if possible and vaccine certificates for entry to bars and restaurants, which could boost vaccination rates further. But it must go beyond this: improving sick pay so people on low incomes with Covid symptoms can afford to test and self-isolate and investing in proper ventilation technology in places such as schools. These are measures that will help avoid the need for any further social restrictions over the winter. It is better to implement them now rather than to require more disruptive measures for longer later.

Time and again, Boris Johnson has failed to take more moderate action in the here and now to prevent a greater number of deaths – and even more severe restrictions on our lives – later. All the signs are that he is set to repeat exactly the same mistakes again, but it is not too late for him to shift course.