



# Responding to COVID-19 in the Liverpool City Region

**Communicating “Reopening” to the Public Credibly and Strategically: “Hardware and Heartware” Considerations from Singapore for Liverpool City Region**

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## Map of Liverpool City Region Combined Authority (LCRCA) boundary (in red) and constituent local authorities



Data sources: Westminster parliamentary constituencies (December 2018 - ONS), local authority districts (December 2018 - ONS), and combined authorities (December 2018 - ONS)

# Communicating “Reopening” to the Public Credibly and Strategically: “Hardware and Heartware” Considerations from Singapore for Liverpool City Region

## Key takeaways

1. The COVID-19 pandemic is easing in some parts of the world. This means the phased reopening of the economy is expected. Communicating the reopening credibly and strategically to the public is a challenge but also an opportunity for relevant authorities.
2. A focus on Singapore’s phased reopening is presented, particularly its communicative experience to the public. Singapore’s careful engagement through “hardware” (on the ground measures) and “heartware” (creating confidence and resilience in the public) is documented.
3. Appropriate lessons for Liverpool City Region (LCR) are drawn from Singapore. “Hardware” measures such as safe distancing measures, crowd control, and imposing harsh fines for repeat offenders are advocated in the reopening phase. A “heartware” approach through creating a public gallery to capture LCR’s COVID-19 reopening experience is suggested to instil social resilience among the public.
4. Communicating the post-lockdown reopening credibly is strongly recommended. If opportune, it should also be carried out strategically where possible in terms of “hardware” and “heartware” approaches. Additionally, a strategic communication engaging the “heartware” aspect can reflect LCR’s capacity to foster inclusive care for the hearts and minds of the locals as they embrace a “new normal” in times of pandemic.

## 1. Introduction

While the COVID-19 pandemic is slowing down in some parts of the world in the second half of 2020, thus prompting the relaxation of lockdown measures and the reopening of the economy, the threat of a second or even a third wave of infections still looms large in many countries. This was recently seen in Melbourne, Australia, and Hong Kong. This second wave of infections cannot be underestimated. Challenges remain as healthcare services continue to be strained and national economies disrupted. Any uncontrolled second wave will put immense pressure on the healthcare sector and delay the economy’s recovery.

This policy brief uses Singapore as a case study to reflect upon how it tackles the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly its

gradual reopening of the economy and the associated measures taken after its nationwide partial lockdown, the “circuit-breaker” (CB), ended in early June to prevent a second wave of infections and allowing the economy to recover faster post-CB. This briefing focuses mainly on how and why the safe transition measures are carried out in specific manners in Singapore, and draws some relevant lessons from Singapore’s communicative experience in terms of “hardware” and “heartware” to the public for the Liverpool City Region (LCR) to consider for adaption in both the short and long terms. In doing so, the policy briefing is mindful that there are distinct differences between both places. Singapore is both a country and a city-state. This means a strong centralised decision-making approach is more natural to take in engaging COVID-19 concerns.

However, the metropolitan area of LCR can still learn from Singapore's safe transition experience in its recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic.

## **2. Communicating credibly: Singapore's "Safe Transition" post-CB**

Before highlighting the nature of Singapore's safe transition post-partial lockdown, some earlier background context is provided. Singapore had its first case of COVID-19 on 23 January 2020. By the end of March, local transmissions had grown rapidly and Singapore registered 926 confirmed cases (Ministry of Health 2020a). In early April, the Prime Minister (PM) of Singapore, Lee Hsien Loong, gave a televised speech to update the nation on the COVID-19 situation. PM Lee indicated that despite Singapore's best efforts, the numbers of cases had climbed by more than 50 new cases daily and several clusters were detected at foreign worker dormitories (Prime Minister's Office 3 April 2020). PM Lee, in discussion with the Multi-Ministry Task Force (MTF) set up to tackle COVID-19 in Singapore, decided to move decisively to impose significantly stricter measures, describing them as a "circuit breaker" (CB) (Lee 2020). The enforcement took place on 7 April 2020 and was planned to lapse on 4 May 2020. Key features of the CB were the closure of all non-essential workplaces, and the closure of all schools except pre-schools, which would stay open for the children of those employed in essential services (Yuen 2020). Another notable feature was the discontinuation of dining-in. In mid-April, Singapore made the wearing of masks in public mandatory (still in effect), with fines and prosecution for offenders who refuse to do so. While the CB's measures were working in the first few weeks, the spread of the virus, however, was not slowed down to the extent expected. This subsequently led to an extension of the CB to 1 June 2020

(announced in late April), in order to "decisively" bring down the number of cases in the community, and to make sure that Singapore could detect and contain the virus early if any "leakage" occurred from the foreign worker dormitories to the wider community (Lai 2020; Mohan 2020).

On 19 May 2020, Singapore announced that it would exit the CB on 1 June 2020 after the MTF assessment that the situation had stabilised (Ministry of Health 2020b). It was a slow, progressive reopening, where the state was mindful of a resurgence of transmission potentially creating a second wave. Phase One started on 2 June and lasted until 18 June 2020. It was focused on "Safe Re-opening" of five aspects (see Figure 1), namely "Community, Commuting, Home, School, and Workplaces". In particular, the schools saw priority given to graduating batches such as Primary 6 (Primary School Leaving Examination), Secondary 4 and Secondary 5 students (GCE 'O' Levels) as they attended school on weekdays. The rest of the upper levels (Primary 4 and 5, or Secondary 3) alternated weekly with the lower levels (Primary 1, 2, and 3, or Secondary 1 and 2), where one week was spent in the schools, followed by a switch to home-based learning the next week (Ang 2020). Phase One also saw dining-in not resumed, as eateries and restaurants were given time to get safe-distancing measures implemented on the ground.

The safe transition of reopening during Phase One took place over approximately two weeks, with Phase Two starting on 19 June 2020 after it was deemed by the MTF that community transmission remained low and stable. It is worth noting that the exact start date of Phase Two was not indicated in mid-May, when it was announced that Singapore would exit the CB on 1 June 2020. The message to the public then was carefully crafted: that Singapore had to remain in Phase One until it was safe to progress further and

Phase Two's starting date was only announced four days before on 15 June 2020. Phase Two ("Safe Transition" - see Figure 2) saw the key resumption of dining-in and retail services, albeit with safe-distancing measures being implemented and gatherings of more than

five people considered inadvisable (Ministry of Health 2020c). Students from all levels except institutes of higher learning also returned to school daily from 29 June 2020. Working from home was still strongly encouraged wherever possible.

**Figure 1.** Safe Re-opening – Phase 1



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**Figure 2.** Safe Transition and Safe Nation – Phase 2 and Phase 3



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Some of the measures and achievements for which Singapore is best known in its battle with the COVID-19 pandemic include its aggressive system for testing and contact-tracing, its relatively low death rate compared to the rest of the world, and its usage of the military to help stabilise outbreaks in dormitories for foreign workers. However, as we move

progressively to the reopening of economies worldwide, it is the way that reopening is carried out that matters on the long road of recovery. With its phased approach to reopening, Singapore is seen to have been cautious in this regard. Useful lessons could be drawn in other places from Singapore's firm, credible, and relatively effective communication in

its reopening experience, as countries relax their lockdown measures while potentially coping with a second wave.

Phase One was used as a “springboard” to fine-tune implementations on the ground before moving safely to Phase Two. Singapore chose not to rush in reopening, post-CB, despite mounting pressures to ease restrictions. It chose and stuck to the gradual reopening it had planned. In the short run, grounded measures (the “hardware”) regarding workforce and schools, for example, were made explicitly and concisely, with fines imposed as added deterrence for people and organisations flouting rules. In the long run, Singapore knows that the much-desired Phase Three (“Safe Nation”) is still far off, with no precise date until an effective vaccine is readily available. Hence why it was communicated to the public that Phase Two (“Safe Transition”) will stay for months at least, with residents needing to remain vigilant and cooperating by adhering to the rules (Yang 2020). More widely, crisis response, economic and social resilience (such as diversifying our food sources) were also repeatedly stressed directly and indirectly by the government to instil confidence in the nation. Such strategic communication arguably helps not only to allow Singapore to tackle the pandemic in broad and decisive strokes for the nation’s economic pulse, but also, to some extent, allows a careful “scalpel approach” to treat the residents’ hearts and minds (the “heartware”). In this way, a resilient Singapore image is further reinforced among the masses.

### **3. Some considerations for LCR to communicate reopening strategically**

There are two aspects on communicating reopening strategically for LCR as a regional entity following Singapore’s experience. First, the “hardware” spatial

measures to be implemented on the ground. Take for example, the reopening of pubs in the UK. The reopening drew a backlash after the Treasury had “been accused of taking an irresponsible approach” by hailing the scheduled reopening on 4 July 2020 (Rawlinson 2020). In this case, the LCR should emphasise social distancing measures, encourage reservations and explore staggered timings to reduce crowding in public areas. Singapore’s deployment of safe distancing ambassadors as “soft hardware” measures and the usage of “hard hardware” approaches such as imposing fines sent strong deterrence messages, particularly for the latter. Similarly, the relevant LCR authorities could explore imposing heavier fines for repeat offenders or even the temporary closure of pub establishments who fail to control crowd size and enforce social distancing measures. LCR should communicate repeatedly to the public that their cooperation is particularly crucial in the long battle to contain COVID-19. The better LCR manages this on the ground, the less it needs to worry about a second wave of infection. More importantly, the LCR economy can slowly but surely recover, and potentially remain nimble to changes required in future when strict rules need to be adhered.

The second aspect is related to the “heartware”, whereby the common identity and vision of LCR as an enlarged community is forged in times of pandemic. LCR has shown it could consider and take a regional response that adapts accordingly with the national response through the mayor of Liverpool, Joe Anderson, where he initially stated he would delay schools from reopening unless convinced it is safe to do so (BBC News 2020). Indeed, some of Singapore’s “Safe Transition” measures mentioned above regarding schools reopening can be adapted accordingly, but the concern here is do potentially more. A localised

response is useful in creating the “heartware” for LCR, especially considering it is one of the areas most affected by COVID-19 in the UK. For example, LCR could consider creating an LCR COVID-19 repository – emulating Singapore National Library’s decision to enlist the public in the collection and preservation of digital materials documenting the pandemic (Ng 2020). LCR libraries could be tasked with carrying out this public engagement initiative – reopening post-lockdown in a public gallery to capture the memories of key sites such as the city centre, port, and the University of Liverpool. This could serve as an inspiration for other English cities.

Earlier COVID-19 briefs in this series have highlighted specific measures to improve the “hardware” of the economy, as well as areas such as food security and care homes. What is perhaps lacking is some “heartware” to create a more mentally resilient LCR through the documentation of collective memories, particularly the hardship overcome. This would arguably give the public of the LCR the confidence and hope to engage COVID-19’s detrimental impacts in the next one to two years of reopening. In the long run, this can be a feature of the LCR’s tourism and local cultural landscape, creating monetary benefit and instilling collective pride. Additionally, strategic communication engaging the “heartware” aspect can reflect LCR’s capacity to foster inclusive care for the hearts and minds of the locals as they embrace a “new normal” in times of pandemic.

#### 4. Concluding thoughts

While each country, region and city have their own reasons to relax lockdown measures – including the significant economic and mental health costs – the question of how much should be eased and how to go about reopening are the

key challenges. The cost of lost income and jobs from not easing lockdown measures needs to be carefully weighed against the potential cost of precipitating a second wave of infections. Moving forward, communicating the post-lockdown reopening credibly is strongly recommended. This should be carried out strategically, where possible, in terms of “hardware” and “heartware” approaches. The former is critical to preserving lives. The latter approach may prove decisive and meaningful in creating a resilient mindset. Not communicating clearly and effectively for the reopening of the economy could create confusion and frustration among the public, making policies harder to implement and objectives harder to achieve.

LCR should reflect on the capacity to learn and adapt appropriate reopening measures from Singapore and elsewhere. The COVID-19 crisis has surely damaged the economy and bruised morale. However, it also offers LCR and its people an opportunity to emerge tougher and forge a stronger collective identity. Therefore, the relevant authorities need to display resolve and the public to be supportive with their cooperation.

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