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**COVID-19 OPERATIONS COMMITTEE 20(96)**

**19 12 2020**

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**Detailed response to the new COVID variant**

**PAPER BY THE COVID-19 Taskforce**

1. Following the meeting of the Committee yesterday, this paper proposes a package for responding to the recent increase in cases and the new variant.

**Proposal**

2. **Tighter restrictions:** we will introduce a 'tier 4' in the affected areas where the prevalence of the new variant is highest. These will be based on the November restrictions. The Government would introduce a 'stay at home' message in law, with some exemptions permitted. Guidance would tell people not to enter the tier 4 areas. In addition to hospitality and other tier 3 restrictions, the regulations will close non-essential retail, indoor leisure, entertainment and personal care sectors, and introduce tighter social contact restrictions (i.e. 'rule of 2' in some public outdoor spaces). There would be two changes to the November package: communal worship would be permitted and outdoor sporting facilities would remain open (where they can be used by a single household/bubble, or group of 2 people). The Committee will want to revisit the question of the return of universities, FE colleges and secondary schools should the Government need to retain the same level of restrictions in January.
3. **The geography of those restrictions:** the proposal is that the restrictions would apply in all Tier 3 areas in the South East (Kent, Buckinghamshire, all Berkshire UTLAs, Surrey excluding Waverly, Gosport, Havant, Portsmouth, Rother and Hastings), London (all 32 London boroughs and the City of London) and the East of

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England (Bedford, Central Bedford, Milton Keynes, Luton, Peterborough, Hertfordshire, Essex excluding Colchester, Uttlesford and Tendring), including those escalated by the Committee on Thursday. The Committee could decide to apply the restrictions in a narrower area, constituting those parts of London, Kent, Essex and Hertfordshire with the highest prevalence, or for a broader area.

4. **Domestic travel:** as above, we propose a 'stay at home' message in law for those tier 4 areas most significantly affected. We propose a 'stay local' message in guidance for the rest of England. There will be exceptions, including for people travelling for work or education, for emergencies, and for people providing haulage or transportation services. There are three options for those outside the tier 4 areas:
  - a. keep this as a general 'stay local' message, for instance, asking people to keep to their village, town, or part of their city. This is the recommended approach; or
  - b. Be more prescriptive, and specify that people should not travel more than 5 miles from home (this may make accessing services more difficult in remote areas).
  - c. Go further and place such a '5 mile' requirement in law. Placing such a requirement in law may increase compliance, but there is a risk it is unenforceable and requires exemptions that make it ineffective in practice. We recommend ministers pursue these restrictions in guidance in the first instance, but that DFT, DHSC and Home Office should consider further over the next few days whether operable legal restrictions can be introduced at a later date.
  
5. **International travel:** Our understanding is that the variant most likely developed within the UK and is primarily prevalent here. As such, there is a responsibility on the UK to manage its risk. As a function of the 'stay at home' regulation, people in the areas most affected by the new variant will not be able to travel abroad (other than for 'reasonable excuses' for leaving home, like work). In all cases, people will be able to transit through affected areas to ensure continued freight flows. The Committee could decide to take additional steps with regard to passenger travel, for the next week initially while we learn more about the variant. If they are minded to do so, we recommend issuing a message through any headline statement and guidance today advising everyone in the UK not to travel abroad unless necessary

(e.g. work, education), to reduce the risk of spreading the variant. The alternative would be to seek to do through FCDO Travel Advice, but this would be hard to justify given only some regions of England are currently significantly affected by the variant, and would be novel, so is not recommended.

6. **Christmas:** the new information about the variant necessitates a reduction in Christmas flexibilities. To reduce the risk of transmission we propose that the Committee agrees to repeal the regulations that allow Christmas bubbles in England. The CDL will speak to the Devolved Administrations after this meeting. It is probable that a significant minority of people will not comply. The Committee should be aware that in tier 1 areas, people will still be able to travel locally and visit up to six people indoors at any time over the Christmas period. The alternative would be to cancel Christmas bubbles only in the new 'tier 4' areas. The committee will want to note that in agreeing this recommendation travel within and out of tier 4 areas for Christmas would be restricted in law. We should task DfT to ensure that we are not actively facilitating travel (for example, the extra coaches which had been planned and will incur residual cost of c. £750k) and whether to support refunds on any Christmas Christmas, which could cost in the low £million, and would require HMT spending approval.
  
7. **Communication:** Cases continued to rise in Kent during November. It is possible that restrictions based on the November package will be insufficient to control transmission of the new, more infectious variant, although the closure of schools for the holidays should be expected to have an additional effect. It is almost certain that the proposed restrictions will slow the spread of the virus, even if they do not fully arrest growth - this is not an argument for inaction. But to maximise effect, the new package will need to be accompanied by a nationwide communications campaign - and specific messages in the South East - designed to encourage higher compliance with restrictions than we saw in November. The behavioural impact of the specific measures above - a stronger 'stay at home' message, limiting travel, cancelling Christmas easing - should be supplemented with a renewed campaign based on the clear national messaging in the New Year. Fear of the new variant ("protect your loved ones from this new virus") and succumbing to the virus in the few weeks before a vaccine is widely available ("the vaccine is nearly here - don't give up now") may amplify the behavioural effects.

## **Economic and Social Impacts**

8. The new, tighter restrictions should help curb the outbreak in the fastest growing areas and slow the spread of the virus to the rest of the country. They will, however, inevitably have significant economic and social impacts on the populations of the affected areas. In particular, the economic cost to the non-essential retail and personal services sectors in the last week before Christmas will be severe, especially for those without an online presence. The economic cost of new restrictions will be disproportionately felt by young people and ethnic minorities who are employed in higher than average numbers in the retail, accommodation and food service sectors in England. The move to repeal Christmas bubbles will cause significant distress to those who have been looking forward to spending Christmas with loved ones, especially the elderly, vulnerable and single-person households.

## **Timing**

9. These measures will be announced this afternoon. The travel policy should start with immediate effect. The business restrictions should start from 00.01 Monday or, if the Committee wanted to move more quickly, 00.01 on Sunday. Regulations, where required, will be signed into law on Monday at the earliest (probably to come into effect Tuesday). The regulations will be reviewed at the existing fortnightly review points. The measures proposed would probably meet the criteria for a vote in advance of their coming into effect were parliament sitting. Since Parliament is not sitting, we are not proposing a vote. The made affirmative regulations will require a vote within 28 days of coming into force. There may be calls for a recall purely to vote on these regulations.
10. The CDL will speak to the DAs to align the Christmas policy, but will press ahead with the announcement for England only in the event that this alignment is not forthcoming. The DAs have their own approach to tiers and local travel restrictions.