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COVID STRATEGY COMMITTEE  
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**RESPONSE TO RISING INCIDENCE  
PAPER FROM THE COVID-19 TASKFORCE**

1. The accompanying data pack from the JBC shows that the number of people testing positive for COVID-19 is increasing sharply across England.<sup>1</sup> This increase has been particularly stark in the 17-21 age group, but, as in the US, Spain and France, an initial outbreak in the young has been followed by a general growth of infections in other age groups. These comparison countries are also, after a lag, beginning to show an uptick in hospitalisations and mortality. The key conclusion from this data is that if the trend is allowed to continue, we could expect to follow France and Spain into a second wave of significantly increased infections. This paper presents the options for the Government's response.

### **Decisions**

2. Ministers are asked to agree the recommendations in table 1, below.

### **Strategic approach**

3. The short-term choice is whether to go harder now, with a greater degree of disruption, or whether to adopt a softer approach, buying time to see whether the response is effective, while accepting that this might necessitate a more onerous response in the future. Given the rate at which infections are increasing, the recommendation is that any package launched this week must be designed to, at the very least, stop the growth in infections. Any changes will take at least two weeks to

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<sup>1</sup> We have seen the start of this increase in other data sources. Whilst the ONS survey represents data from two weeks ago, it did show an increase in the proportion infected in younger age groups and particularly a high infection rate from those who had been on foreign trips. In addition we have seen a small uptick in hospitalisation across the country, and particularly in the North West, although absolute numbers remain very low.

have an effect; we should expect at least a further doubling in the numbers before we know whether the package has been sufficient to halt the growth.<sup>2,3</sup>

4. The long-term choice is whether the Government intends this response to be a short, temporary intervention designed to deal with a specific outbreak, or whether it is recalibrating to a new position which should endure until the Spring. The recommendations below are all for a permanent shift in the Government's approach, adopting a new posture that could last through the winter. If this adjustment is successful, and if the Moonshot programme is not delivered before Christmas, this package will provide a new baseline on which the Government can begin to build an optimistic picture for the Spring.
5. The response should target the 17-21 age group. We do not, however, fully understand the causal relationships driving transmission and we should therefore take broader measures which also reduce the risk of transmission in society as a whole. Growth has already 'crossed over' into the general population, with upticks in the 20-29 and 30-39 groups, as demonstrated by the accompanying data pack. Nor is it possible to 'segment' the young, so that the outbreak is limited to that group.<sup>4</sup>
6. The strategy for responding should be informed by the evidence on what behaviour is driving the increase in transmission. The social contact rules governing household mixing are poorly understood.<sup>5</sup> People are not maintaining social distance when they

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<sup>2</sup> The international comparison is informative: the situation in the UK mirrors that seen in France and Belgium 4 weeks ago. The two countries took contrasting approaches. France has not taken significant action, and exponential growth continues. Belgium introduced a 28-day curfew in Antwerp, banned gatherings of more than 10 people, reduced indoor venue capacity to 100, and restricted household mixing. Numbers in Belgium have been brought under control.

<sup>3</sup> Inaction at this point also risks exacerbating health inequalities given the strong evidence of heightened impacts of COVID-19 on the elderly, on BAME groups and on men.

<sup>4</sup> There is a high degree of mixing across age groups, and the young are disproportionately employed in public-facing roles: 35% of 16-24 year olds work in "sales operations" and "elementary administration and service", with an additional 16% in "caring and personal service occupations" and other "admin occupations". ONS data (Annual Population Survey 2019, table 3, SC10MSJ, AGE, PWTA20)

<sup>5</sup> Although, of those who had seen friends or family in the previous seven days, 11% reported meeting in a group of 7 or more; the mean group size when people met was 4.3%. Polling also suggests that low proportions of people (19%) are exceeding the recommended limit of two households when meeting indoors at the home of friends or family.

do meet up, whatever the setting.<sup>6</sup> Any response will therefore need to drive a significant behavioural change. Finally, there is strong evidence of infection from abroad.<sup>7</sup>

7. The Government's priority remains keeping schools open. There is a risk that the recommendations below deter parents. The Government should tackle this by ensuring that all communications and messaging around these changes should emphasise that the Government is taking these steps *in order* to keep schools open. The prioritisation of keeping schools open will also have significant benefits for young people, children and working parents, particularly women, who have taken on more childcare responsibility since the Spring.

### Options for response

8. The recommended response (table 1, below) is to double down on the current strategy. This means more forceful communications, tighter social contact and tougher enforcement. These actions would form the basis of an announcement on Wednesday. In addition, the Government will develop proposals to go further, by increasing compliance with self-isolation following a positive test result, standardising its local interventions into tiers and strengthening the policies applied at the border.
9. There are short-term pressures on testing capacity. Testing in venues such as care homes must continue to be prioritised. As such, the recommendations below do not include proposals to introduce asymptomatic testing for students, young people or at the border.

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<sup>6</sup> Over time the proportion of people who say they stick strictly to social distancing rules all of the time has gradually declined from c.70% in mid-May to 30-40% in August. Those who say they stick to the rules all of the time but have occasionally lapsed has gradually risen from c.20% in mid-May to settle in the range 40-45% in August

<sup>7</sup> ONS study data for 15-25<sup>th</sup> August found that participants who travelled abroad in the last 30 days had a positivity rate of 0.17% (CI 0.06-0.4%) compared with 0.05% among those who had not travelled (CI 0.04-0.06%). There are similarities between the recent clusters of disease seen in British holidaymakers returning from Greece and Croatia and the pattern seen in March among those who had travelled to Spain or the Alps.

Table 1: Recommended announcement for Wednesday	
<b>Comms</b>	<p>1) Renewed hands/face/space campaign and 1-page social contact guidance.</p> <p>2) Adopt a ‘publish by default’ approach to JBC data, to increase public awareness.</p> <p>3) Target 17-21 year olds and high contact individuals through greater use of influencers; encouraging symptomatic testing; emphasising the need to socially distance. In addition, increase communications in higher risk settings through e.g. posters in pubs etc. Targeting the young could exacerbate tensions with this group given the disproportionate impacts of prior restriction measures that reduced employment opportunities in sectors where young people are strongly represented (e.g. hospitality). Communications should appeal to young people rather than accuse them to reduce this risk.</p> <p>4) Use Contact Tracing data and Travel Information to publicise sites of infection, with comms about the <i>behaviour</i> at this site which caused the outbreak.</p> <p>5) Maintain current position in guidance on return to offices, and only communicate on the return of the civil service.</p>
<b>Social contact</b>	<p>1) Change social contact rules to only permit a fixed number of people from different households/bubbles to meet in all settings, including private homes: while the current guidance limits this to two households, a numerical limit may be easier to understand, comply with and enforce.<sup>8</sup> If that numerical limit is too small, it will impact larger families and multi-generational households which are more likely to be ethnic minorities. The government would address this to some extent by carving out single households from the limits.</p> <p>2) Place these new rules into law. The police will find it easier to enforce</p>

<sup>8</sup> The current rules permit two households to mix indoors, 6 people or two households to mix outdoors, and the regulations limit more than 30 people meeting outdoors or in private dwellings.

	<p>if we have moved everything to a simple numerical limit, including changing the legal gathering limit (currently 30). Depending on the numerical limit, this may rule out a number of social activities, with a significant impact on people’s lives, subject to a list of exceptions.</p>
<p><b>COVID-19 Secure on businesses</b></p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1) Faster use of powers to close venues by local authorities, consistently publicising examples where this has already been done successfully.</li> <li>2) Existing guidance on test and trace data collection for individuals to be put into law alongside launch of the app, which makes data easier to collect.</li> <li>3) Radically simplified guidance for key businesses + push on comms.</li> <li>4) Develop new non-regulatory measures to promote compliance.</li> </ol>
<p><b>Stronger enforcement</b></p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1) Police focus on enforcing new legal limits on social contact.</li> <li>2) Create legal duties for businesses to follow COVID-19 Secure guidelines. Enforce against and issue fines for egregious breaches.</li> <li>3) Create a register of new or recently retired Environmental Health Officers; and recruit COVID-19 Secure Marshalls, who would not wield powers themselves, but could support EHOs.</li> </ol>
<p><b>Borders</b></p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1) Legislate to require carriers to check the Passenger Locator Form pre-departure and increase upstream messaging on need to complete.</li> <li>2) Simplify the Passenger Locator Form to improve compliance, and increase messaging around need for self-isolation</li> <li>3) Following 1 and 2, increase use of FPNs at the border - on an intelligence-led basis, focused on risk profiles - and effectiveness of spot checks on self-isolation.</li> </ol>
<p><b>Pilots and Roadmap</b></p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1) Continue the current pilots programme, but delay some larger pilots from mid-Sept, while persisting with pilots that are used in the Moonshot programme.</li> <li>2) Communicate that we expect to delay the roadmap’s 1 October target for the return of stadia and business conferences.</li> </ol>

<p><b>Universities</b></p>	<p>1) The Government will work with universities, including through direct comms with Chief Scientists and Clinicians, to make sure: that they are COVID-Secure; that they understand the need to retain students even in the face of a local outbreak; and to identify safer social activities, especially for Freshers, that centre on campus and away from city/town centres.</p>
<p><b>Local restrictions on operating hours</b></p>	<p>1) As part of the tiers proposal the Government will consider the introduction of operating-hour restrictions on in the most-severely impacted areas, as is proposed for Bolton.</p>