

12. Although the manufacturing and construction sectors would be permitted to continue their activities for the present, while following stringent safety rules, the First Minister intended to signal that a change in this position might yet be required, depending on future progress made and the course the pandemic took. Indeed, while all the new measures were intended to remain in force for at least the month of January, with a review after two weeks, the First Minister intended to emphasise, in her statement to the Parliament that afternoon, that it could not be predicted with any certainty when measures might be able to be relaxed, and a considerably longer period of severe restrictions could not be ruled out at this point.

13. The current situation might usefully be compared to a race, in which the coronavirus occupied one lane, and the vaccine(s) the other. The new variant meant that the virus was accelerating rapidly, and tougher restrictions would therefore be required to slow its progress, while ensuring that the vaccination programme proceeded as rapidly as possible.

14. The final change which the First Minister planned to announce that afternoon was a requirement for all schools to continue to use remote learning (except for vulnerable children and children of key workers) until – at the earliest – 1 February, instead of the current planned date of 18 January. This was necessary both because of the scale of community transmission of the new variant and because of the uncertainties currently surrounding the ease and extent of transmission of the new variant between symptomless young people.

15. Mr Swinney noted that the current position was deeply serious and, arguably, presented a set of problems of greater magnitude than in the spring of 2020. One of the main challenges over the coming few months would be to get across to the public at large that, despite almost ten months of severe restrictions, now was not the time to relax observance, despite the arrival of vaccines.

16. Mr Swinney had discussed the proposed approach to education with the COVID-19 Education Recovery Group earlier that morning. Issues discussed included the interaction of education with the wider economy, since greater economic activity would mean higher demand for ‘key worker’ places in schools. Local authorities were already reporting that demand for ‘key worker’ places was reaching levels significantly higher than in spring 2020: careful oversight would be required to ensure that levels remained manageable and that ‘key worker’ status was only accorded in appropriate circumstances.

17. The language used to describe new measures for education would need to be carefully calibrated so as to avoid unintended consequences – such as making it more difficult to resume face-to-face teaching in due course. It would therefore be better to speak of moving to the delivery of remote learning rather than the shorthand of ‘closing schools’.

18. The early learning and childcare (ELC) sector presented a number of particular challenges, not least the financial difficulties currently endured by private providers over recent months, which would be likely to make the ultimate delivery of the annual target figure of 1,140 hours of funded childcare for eligible two year olds