

**Four Harms Meeting  
Friday 5 March 2021, 2 - 3 p.m.**

**1. Welcome, introductions, purposes**

- The purpose of the meeting was to discuss:
  - principles underpinning the updated Strategic Framework;
  - upcoming Cabinet papers and potential changes to protective measures in the coming weeks, particularly:
    - Changes for consideration at 9/3 Cabinet: schools, outdoor meeting, etc.
    - Changes for consideration for 16/3 Cabinet: places of worship etc.
    - Review of the levels table, indicators and geographies, ahead of consideration at Cabinet on 16/3;
  - Governance.

**2. Note of previous meeting**

- The note of the 1 March meeting was agreed.

**3. Principles underpinning the Strategic Framework**

- Two short papers were to be circulated after the meeting, providing further detail on the principles underpinning the updated Strategic Framework. The first would relate to the rationale for continued border measures and the second paper would set out the conceptual basis and principles for easing restrictions, taking a deliberately cautious approach to manage the risk of pushing the R number above 1.
- These papers were not critical to future decision-making, but detailed the technical basis for the strategic approach taken and should inform a shared understanding of that approach. Comments were welcome on these.
- It was noted that Ministers had committed to a future public inquiry into the COVID response and it would be important to be prepared to pull together the advice given to Ministers, decisions taken and the timeline. Work to capture these documents had already started in the Health and Social Care Directorate and should be followed across government. A proposal was being put together on how this should best be done starting with the Cabinet papers that have been submitted to Ministers thus far.

**4. Changes for consideration for 9/3 Cabinet / statement: schools, outdoor meeting etc.**

- A draft package of modest easing within Level 4 was being considered for announcement on Tuesday, March 9, for entry into force soon afterwards. Broader decisions and publication on the revised levels framework and easing would come the week after (w/c 15 March).
- A paper had been circulated to the group with proposed easings for consideration. These included: increasing the numbers of adults (4/2) and children (4/4) who can meet outdoors for exercise, social and recreational purposes; allowing contact and non-contact sports as well as organised

activities for 12-17 year olds; and allowing outdoor group exercise and non-contact sports for adults. Other possible activities to consider were: allowing contact sports for adults, opening gyms and increasing permitted travel.

- It was noted that even though case numbers were looking promising, much of the available headroom for easing restrictions had already been used up with schools reopening.
- It was noted that the proposals for consideration largely mitigated harms 1 and 3. In relation to harm 2, we were still in the situation of making sure the NHS was not overwhelmed, although the risk of developmental and mental health harm to children from prolonged isolation could be considered an indirect harm under harm 2. In relation to harm 4, it was necessary to acknowledge and continue to promote the message that Ministers had taken a decision to prioritise children, young people and education, as those not affected by these easings may feel that not much is happening.
- It was agreed that proposals to Cabinet should set out (1) those easings that were being recommended, (2) further options to consider and (3) other proposals not yet considered to be safe.
- It was agreed that the focus on outdoor activity required less R 'headroom' and that the wellbeing of children and young people should remain a key priority – particularly given how important socialisation was to development. As a result, the proposals on increasing numbers for outdoor meeting and allowing non-contact sport and group activities for the 12-17 age group were to be recommended. Permitting contact sports for adults and the 12-17 age group could be considered. It was considered premature to open gyms and expand the possibility of permitted travel, as both presented a significant increased transmission risk.
- It was important to recognise that this set of easings would do little to mitigate economic harms and to progress separate work on this. Economy officials were discussing economic harms with the DFM early in the next week and Ms Hyslop, Ms Forbes and the DFM would have a Ministerial-level discussion on Monday.
- Early data from return to schools showed that there had not been widespread outbreaks, but where there had been, there was a higher number of cases than had been seen before. Because of the new variant, a single case was more likely to become a cluster, meaning a rapid local response to any outbreaks was key. Ongoing work needed to be done with local authorities to ensure the safest regimes around schools but also other premises as they open up. Lateral Flow Devices were being deployed in schools and were showing low numbers of test positivity (0.04%)
- The greatest defence against increased transmission from schools opening was to keep community transmission low.
- Other issues raised included the need to continue sophisticating how harms were compared and judgements made within this process, and the need to consider the post-election landscape and how to present strategic issues to a new government.

## **5. Changes for consideration for 16/3 Cabinet: places of worship, etc.**

- Ministers would be invited to consider a proposal to open places of worship on 26<sup>th</sup> March in time for upcoming religious events, with a go/no go review on

23<sup>rd</sup> March. There was also a proposal to increase the cap on attendance at places of worship to 50 or the number that could safely be accommodated with social distancing, whichever was lower.

- It was noted that there was limited scope for resuming indoor activities as things stood and a decision to open places of worship would limit the headroom to ease other restrictions.

**6. Review of levels table, indicators and geographies, ahead of consideration at Cabinet on 16/3**

- A paper would go to Cabinet on 16 March on the broader review of the levels table, indicators and geographies. Ministers' views would allow for finalisation of a publication on these topics to be released in w/c 15 March (possibly on the 18<sup>th</sup>).
- It was noted that this will be an important document for stakeholders and would require intensive engagement, including with local government and the business community.
- It was also noted that shifts in data as a result of school opening would become apparent in the next weeks and this should be taken into account.

**7. Governance**

- It was noted that there was a need to further consolidate the role of the 4 Harms group. A small group of officials would be working on this, including developing Terms of Reference.

**8. AOB**

- Three cases of the Brazilian variant were under investigation in Scotland and contacts were being traced. So far, no contacts had given cause for concern. Discussions were ongoing with the Grampian IMT.
- Parts of Europe were seeing greater prevalence of the B.1.1.7. and the South African variants. The situation in Brazil with the P1 variant is of concern and there are four variants currently in play in the US, with concerns about patterns of data around New York and New Jersey.
- A note would be circulated to the group on decision-making on schools and what decisions are likely be taken when.