

OFFICIAL-SENSITIVE

Briefing paper by the Director-General, Constitution and External Affairs,
circulated by e-mail at 1:15 p.m. on Saturday, 19 December

Cabinet

Executive Team (and please circulate rapidly to lead officials)

This note summarises a Four Nations call earlier this morning; measures being prepared by the UK Government for announcement later today; and the measures for Scotland on which the First Minister has commissioned work and which will be discussed at Cabinet.

I haven't cleared this with the First Minister, given the need for speed, and it is a fast-moving and uncertain situation: so Ministers and colleagues should expect the situation and the details to change. The aim, however, is to give us a shared understanding of the context and the action required. If necessary, I will issue an updated version ahead of Cabinet. Officials should brief Cabinet Secretaries to contribute to the Cabinet discussion, including on the specific points numbered below.

Background

In a Four Nations call this morning, the UK Government's Chief Scientific Adviser (Patrick Vallance) briefed the First Minister and others on the new strain of the virus. This has also been discussed by the four CMOs.

In brief, the new strain is believed to increase transmission substantially, and may be contributing to the rapid growth of case numbers in London and the Thames estuary. Forecasts suggest that cases per 100,000 population in London may exceed 900, and the doubling time may be as fast as 3 days.

The UK Government is preparing to announce, today, that areas in London, the East of England and the South-East of England that went into Tier 3 on Thursday will move to an enhanced Tier 4. This will be similar to the lockdown earlier in the year, with a strong "stay at home" message. All non-essential retail and personal care will be closed, and the Christmas relaxations cancelled. Strict enforcement measures will be applied to prevent travel out of and into Tier 4 areas.

The rest of England will retain the tiers announced on Thursday, with a strong "stay local" message. Christmas relaxations will be tightened to apply to Christmas day only.

There are no current plans for a co-ordinated UK-wide or Wales-England general lockdown.

Any targeted business support introduced for areas in England subject to new restrictions should also be available for areas elsewhere subject to similar measures.

These UKG measures may change in the course of the day.

It is probable that the new strain is already seeded across the UK, and that it arose in the UK. There is limited evidence of it spreading internationally.

Scientific advice is that standard FACTS precautions should have the same preventative effect as for earlier strains of the virus, and the need for compliance with these should be reinforced. Further work is being done to assess the effectiveness of vaccines against the new strain.

Position in Scotland

Based on this morning's call, the First Minister's assessment is that the current situation in Scotland is less difficult than in the rUK. The new strain is seeded in Scotland, but at a lower level. This creates the opportunity to act early to prevent or reduce importation and transmission of the new strain. The indications are that, if that were not done and the new strain took hold in Scotland as it appears to have done in and around London, the situation in January could be very serious. This justifies consideration of additional measures in Scotland.

The First Minister has commissioned work to examine the following (portfolio leads in brackets).

1. The epidemiological implications for Scotland (Health).
2. Strengthened travel restrictions between Scotland and the rUK, including suspension of the planned Christmas easings; and consideration of implications for intra-Scotland and international travel (Transport)
3. Visible and active enforcement of travel restrictions by Police and operators (Transport with Justice).
4. Reducing the SG's Christmas easings on household gatherings to apply to Christmas Day only, as in England, with advice against meeting inside at all (DFM).
5. Precautionary higher levels of protection for 2-3 weeks for Scotland, starting on 26 December, applying Level 4 except for the Highlands and Islands, and possibly Level 3 for the latter. (DFM; including rapid four harms assessment).
6. Confirming direct with the Treasury the position on financial support (Finance).
7. Confirming the likely cost to SG in business compensation of proposed higher levels (Economy).
8. Schools to stay closed until 11 January (DFM).
9. Necessary changes to regulations and assessment of necessity, justification and proportionality [Redacted]

These measures will be discussed at an emergency meeting of Cabinet at 3 pm on Saturday 19 December. A media briefing is planned for 4.30 pm. Arrangements are being made to inform the Parliament.

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