

COVID-19

Item 1: Situation Report

1. The CHAIR welcomed all attendees before inviting the Chief Medical Officer (CMO), the Chief Medical Officer Scotland (CMO Scotland), the Chief Medical Officer Wales (CMO Wales), and the Chief Medical Officer Northern Ireland (CMO NI) to provide updates.
2. The CMO said that based on ONS data COVID-19 rates had stabilised in England and had begun to fall for Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. He summarised:
 - It was predicted that rates would start to fall later in that week for England.
 - Hospital numbers in England were falling. However, there was a worryingly high rate of infections in people over 60 across all four nations, which could lead to pressure on the NHS and increased mortality rates so a comfortable place had not yet been reached.
 - The R rate was falling in all four nations - with the R number hovering around 1 for England but lower for Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.
 - Death rates had been going up but were expected to peak and fall. They had not reached the death rates seen in the first peak yet but it was still something to be worried about.
3. The CMO for SCOTLAND said that Scotland was seeing an easing of pressure in general and ICU admissions in hospitals which was encouraging news.
4. The CMO for WALES said that they recognised that relaxing the rules for winter festivities would bring a cost to it and agreed that all needed to enter this period of relaxation with as lower prevalence as possible, and needed to think about an exit strategy.
5. The CMO for NORTHERN IRELAND said that they had nothing to add.

Item 2: Winter plan - Christmas

6. The CHAIR invited Simon Ridley, Director General Covid-19 Taskforce to outline the proposal for the festive period. The DIRECTOR GENERAL COVID-19 TASK FORCE said that they had put the Christmas proposal together as there was a significant risk of non-compliance and it allowed the public to come together when needed in a more managed way. The focus of the work was in providing a common set of social and travel measures. It was important to be clear that people should not necessarily meet and that the focus was on ensuring the public made informed decisions in the right context. Families needed to understand the risk of further social contact and take this into consideration when meeting with older people
7. Continuing the DIRECTOR GENERAL COVID-19 TASK FORCE set out the proposal:
 - The measures would enable households to come together with up to two other households in an exclusive bubble. The ability to travel between areas of the UK would be eased and it would be possible to travel to Northern Ireland.
 - The four nations would be able to define households slightly differently depending

- on particular rules and preferences across the UK.
 - The approach to flatshares would be slightly different; as individuals would be able to join separate exclusive Christmas bubbles.
 - During the Christmas period the rest of the rules relating to specific tiering would still apply.
 - There had been specific discussions of care homes. With agreement to communicate on them at the same time across the UK
8. The CHAIR invited the Devolved Administrations and the Secretary of State for Transport to respond.
 9. The FIRST MINISTER OF SCOTLAND said that they were broadly content with the idea, that their main concerns were how to pitch this to the public and the balance of the message. It was important to talk about 23 to 27 December as a window of opportunity but that households did not need to be mixing the whole time. Public transport could become congested during this period so consideration of guidance and mitigations was needed.
 10. The FIRST MINISTER OF WALES said that they agreed with the top messages of the proposal. It was important to remind people that the restrictions should be used responsibly and modestly and that there was no proposal to relax care home visits. They agreed that the UK needed to plan ahead for public transport disruption. It was important to plan ahead, and the plans for what happened after Christmas were unfinished. There needed to be a common approach to the inevitable uptick in infections. Wales was the only nation without a tier system so they were considering what to revert to post 27 December and would need to ensure clarity on that for consistency of public messaging.
 11. The FIRST MINISTER OF NORTHERN IRELAND said that they welcomed the paper. Public Communications were very important for people travelling from the mainland. It was important to engage with faith leaders in Northern Ireland in order to get the message right, to mitigate where possible spikes in the new year.
 12. The DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER OF NORTHERN IRELAND agreed with the joint four nations approach regarding COVID-19 Christmas relaxation measures and reiterated the importance of ensuring continued cooperation and joining up where possible. The proposed England Guidance on Christmas restrictions was very reader friendly and easily adaptable to the Northern Ireland context.
 13. The SECRETARY OF STATE FOR NORTHERN IRELAND outlined that his office was in contact with the Irish Government regarding Christmas measures and that they would have a further meeting later that week to finalise cross-border agreement. There was a complication for the Irish government as Northern Ireland were in a two week circuit break lockdown. Northern Ireland and Ireland would therefore have differences in restrictions but that Ireland was looking at some easement of restrictions for the Christmas period too. They were liaising to get clear communications for people crossing the border.
 14. The SECRETARY OF STATE FOR TRANSPORT set out that disruptions to both public and private transport were predicted, that they would need clear messages for people planning their journeys. He continued that: