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MEMORANDUM E (20) 188 (C)

ADVICE OF CMO AND CSA – REOPENING OF PUBS

As things stand, non-food serving pubs and bars in Northern Ireland are expecting to reopen next Monday, August 10. We are writing today to recommend today that this indicative date be put on hold, in light of current data on the progression of the COVID epidemic.

While we have not seen so far spikes of the same magnitude as those experienced in different parts of the UK and the Republic of Ireland, recent data has underlined the continuing threat from the virus and in particular a significant increase in virus transmission since the beginning of July which has accelerated in the last week.

The seven day rolling average number of cases per day in Northern Ireland was approximately 4 at the beginning of July and has increased more than three fold to its current value of over 13. In addition, the seven day average for the percentage of tests which are positive has increased over the same period from 0.27% to 0.89%. The upward trend for each of these appears to be increasing, as can be seen from the graphs at the end of this letter.

Furthermore, while R will show a high degree of volatility and will not be the key indicator for policy decisions, modelling indicates that the R number is likely to be close to 2 by the end of this week, substantially above the Executive's stated target of less than 1. While community transmission of the virus remains low, this provides another warning light on the current situation.

The changes in number of cases and percentage of positive tests which we are seeing reflects relaxations which occurred 2-3 weeks ago, and the impact of more recent relaxations is still to be seen. We have all seen evidence with our own eyes in recent weeks of relaxed attitudes from some people towards social distancing and we are concerned that this will lead to a further decline in the situation.

A delay in the reopening of non-food serving pubs and bars will undoubtedly dismay the hospitality sector and we recognise the economic damage that will be caused to some businesses. This is something which the Executive will wish to consider carefully in coming to a decision as to the best way ahead. However, this sector and the wider economy will be much more severely impacted if Covid-19 prevalence climbs to a level that puts general lockdown measures back on the agenda.

We are also very conscious that schools are scheduled to start a new term in a few weeks' time. Opening schools is an important priority, given the implications of closure for the health and wellbeing of children, and one we are keen to support. However, there is no doubt that school opening will also tend to increase community virus transmission and we believe that the combination of this shortly after wider opening of the hospitality sector creates too great a risk at present. We must continue to take all feasible steps to suppress the virus, not least to create the best possible context for schools to re-open.

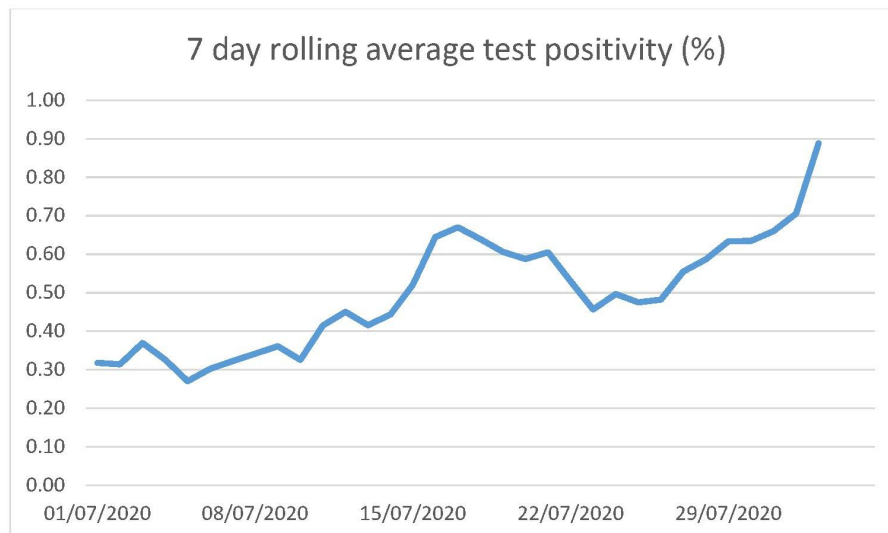
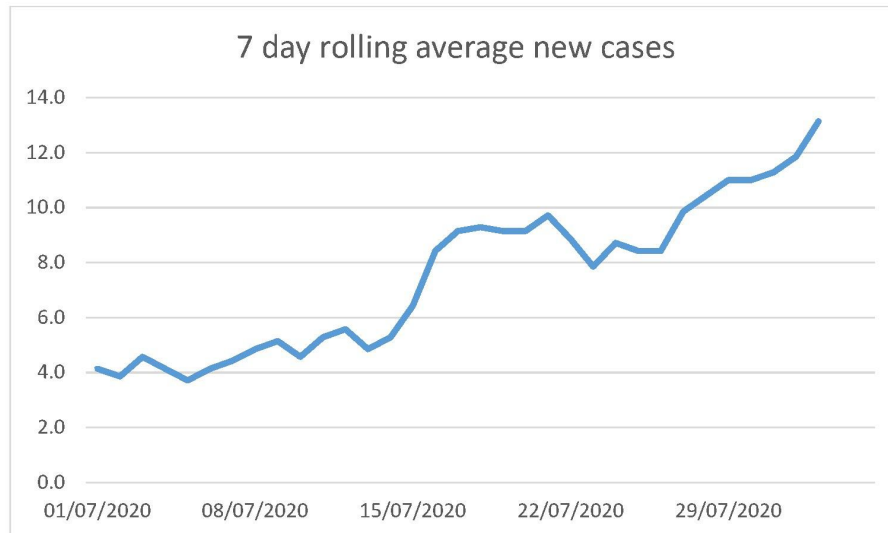
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A delay of three weeks will allow the impact of recent relaxations to be properly assessed, and for the wearing of face coverings in indoor settings to begin to have impact.

It has to be reiterated that there can be no return to pre-COVID normality until such times as a vaccine is successfully developed and available to the population and that continues to remain a number of months away at the minimum.

Annexe:



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