

Corona virus: English Measures and options for Wales

19 December 2020

Context

At 4pm today the Prime Minister will be announcing significant new measures to control Covid in London, Kent, Essex and the East of England. While the case rate per 100,000 population for the UK is around 250 per 100k, London is at 450 cases and has doubled in a week; and other areas in the Thames Estuary are over 900 cases per 100,000. Cases are rising fastest in younger age groups (10-14, 15-19) and are beginning to manifest in growing rates for over 60s.

This rapid growth is driven by a new mutation of the virus which early, but robust evidence, suggests is substantially more transmissible. It is thought that the disease pathways and outcomes remain in line with existing strains of Covid and there is no evidence to suggest the mutation will respond differently to the vaccines.

We understand that the new English measures will:

- Move Tier 3 areas in the east and south east of England to an enhanced Tier 4, in effect a full lockdown. There will be strong stay at home messages which will likely be supported by regulation and the Christmas relaxations will be removed;
- The rest of England will remain in their existing Tiers but with an enhanced stay local message and we believe a reduction in the Christmas household relaxations to Christmas Day only.

We have already signalled our intention to move Wales into Alert Level 4 from 28 December. This is against a background of

- High and increasing incidence in almost all areas of the country, particularly in south Wales, possibly 600 cases which may add 0.4 to the R value
- Of the current sample of cases we have available shows that the highest proportion of cases testing positive for the new mutation is in North Wales suggesting there is a reservoir of cases there
- The new mutation is possibly 70 per cent more transmissible
- Hospital admissions running ahead of the Reasonable Worst Case Scenario
- Significant pressure on the social care sector
- Calls for early and robust measures from a range of public sector partners.

Options to respond

In considering how to respond, there are a number of factors to consider:

- Rates per 100,000 in some areas of Wales will be higher than in some of the English Tier 3 areas which are being moved to enhanced Tier 4;
- We believe that the mutated virus is present in Wales, mostly in south Wales but with isolated cases in all regions

- The travel relaxations will enable large numbers of people to continue to move around the UK at Christmas
- Household mixing will drive the spread of the virus and increase incidence in January

The options for a Wales response might include:

1. No change

We have signalled a move to Alert Level 4 so we would continue with that.

Advantages

- Simple, clear and understandable by the public.
- Will enable those who need to shop closer to Christmas because of their economic circumstances to do so.
- Business and commercial activities can prepare as planned

Disadvantages

- Rates will continue to grow including those of the mutated virus. This is therefore likely to spread beyond current areas
- This would create extra, and possibly unforeseen levels of pressure on NHS in areas which are already reducing routine services
- Difficult to explain why England is moving areas to significant measures when they have rates below Wales

2. Move immediately to Alert Level 4 nationally

Advantages

- Quick, decisive action which will have the maximum impact on the spread of the normal and mutated viruses
- Simple, clear and understandable by the public.
- Support by public sector partners
- Maximum leverage to control pressure on NHS and social care sectors

Disadvantages

- Disproportionate impact on the less well off who would be unable to shop closer to Christmas because their economic circumstances force them to do so
- Potential for displacement activity in England
- Undermine public trust, appear to be changing mind shortly after setting out our strategic approach
- Economic impact on business

3. Move to Alert Level 4 nationally on Tuesday

Advantages

- Quick, decisive Welsh Government response which will have an impact on the spread of the normal and mutated viruses.
- Simple, clear and understandable by the public who would have sometime to adjust to the measures
- Supported by public sector partners
- Extra leverage to control pressure on NHS and social care
- Less, but not insignificant, economic impact

Disadvantages

- Reduced potential for displacement activity in England but possibly drive extra crowds into cities and towns in Wales for shopping
- Underline public trust, appear to be changing mind shortly after setting out our strategic approach

4. Respond Regionally in any one of the above configurations

Advantages

- Focus measures on the most affected areas where NHS pressure is greatest
- Response would be more proportional and targeted and therefore legally rational
- Easier for the public and those subject to the measures to understand

Disadvantages

- Is not in line with our stated national approach, introduces complexity and challenges around messaging
- Does not recognise the need for prevention and that in all likelihood, those areas will in a relatively short time require similar interventions