

**OFFICIAL-SENSITIVE**

9. Recent trends in case numbers in North and South Lanarkshire were of some interest. NHS Lanarkshire as a whole had been very hard hit during the first two waves of COVID-19 infection, with case rates consistently among the highest in Scotland, but the rise in case numbers was now less than in many comparable areas, with seven-day case rates of 366 and 266 for North and South Lanarkshire, respectively, and lower case positivity. It was possible that these encouraging trends reflected a higher degree of acquired immunity among local populations, and it was also likely that it was at least partially due to NHS Lanarkshire's recent (and very effective) vaccination campaign. It was noted in discussion that other NHS Boards should be encouraged to follow a similar route in encouraging vaccination and making it readily available.

10. The First Minister noted that the country stood, once again, at a sensitive juncture. On the one hand, there had been an important reduction in reported new positive cases over recent days, but levels of infection stood at uncomfortably high levels. Furthermore, not all cases of infection were confirmed by testing, so the statistics would always underestimate the true situation to some extent. It was also possible that, now that the school holidays had begun, there would be a reduction in (predominantly negative) lateral flow tests of schoolchildren, and this might also skew the statistics somewhat. Other forms of surveillance data were therefore being analysed, including wastewater sampling, in order to confirm wider trends.

11. The relatively high figures for Scotland compared with the rest of the UK were thought to reflect the fact that Scotland had been 'behind and below' the curve in terms of infection levels during the previous two waves, whereas it now appeared to be 'above and ahead' of the rest of the UK in terms of the spread of the far more transmissible Delta variant (reflecting especially the early seeding of the Delta variant in the Glasgow area). Statistics for the rest of the UK were, however, beginning to catch up with those for Scotland, and the Delta variant was also posing increasing challenges in Europe.

12. There was a continuing need for caution: the fact that COVID-19 was becoming, increasingly, a disease more likely to be caught by younger people should not cause any complacency. Even if a much smaller percentage of cases was likely to result in severe illness than earlier in the pandemic, a smaller proportion of a much larger number of cases still represented a significant number. Pressures on the NHS (*SCN(21)6th Conclusions refers*) remained at a heightened level, and unless COVID-19 case numbers fell back, efforts to address the backlog in NHS operations from before the pandemic would slow, and pressures on NHS and care staff would remain at excessive levels.

13. Increasing knowledge of so-called 'long COVID' (a highly debilitating, chronic condition which was especially prevalent among young people) should also give pause for thought. To assume that the risks posed by long COVID could be ignored, when its long-term consequences were still unknown, would be to treat young people as an experiment.

14. A prudent reading of the current situation therefore suggested that easing of restrictions should proceed, but at a careful and gradual pace, in order to minimise demands on the NHS – both now and in expectation of autumn/winter pressures.

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(m) It would therefore be worth taking the time to prepare an update for Cabinet on how best to support and promote the culture sector through recovery, including the need for practical and funding assistance to help with rebuilding. It would also be worth looking further at what more could be done to increase the profile of the culture sector, both within the Scottish Government and beyond;

(n) As noted in paragraph 33 of the paper, given that many island communities were already at Level 0, some of the proposed changes – notably changes in licensing hours and delays in return to office working – might represent a tightening of restrictions in many islands, but the measures were nevertheless required to take account of the particular characteristics of the dominant delta variant;

(o) Good public communications and messaging would be critical over the coming period, including about the continuing need for baseline measures, which would be required for some considerable time, even once the country moved beyond Level 0. It would be especially vital to emphasise the importance of baseline risk-reduction measures (as listed in the paper at paragraph 59) if the situation (and the response to it) were to evolve differently in Scotland compared with England and/or the rest of the UK;

(p) It was impossible to predict how long it might be before the country returned to a form of normality – with the virus becoming endemic (though not eradicated) but more manageable thanks to the vaccination programme. Despite a sometimes vocal minority opposed to continuing restrictions, and who would no doubt oppose the changes to be announced later that day, it seemed relatively clear that the set of proposals outlined in the paper represented the most measured path through the coming period and the challenges and difficulties it would bring.

**24. Cabinet agreed:**

(a) That, from Monday, 19 July, Level 0 should be applied across the whole of Scotland, but with the following modifications:

- (i) There should be no requirement for physical distancing outdoors within a social grouping of 15 people (although each group of 15 would be required to maintain a one metre distance from other groups);
- (ii) One metre distancing in all indoor public settings, including within social groupings of ten people from four households;
- (iii) Gatherings in outdoor public places restricted to 15 people;
- (iv) A delay in the move to permit up to 200 people to gather to mark a life event (other than weddings and funerals) until the 'gateway condition' (SCN(21)6th Conclusions refers) had been met;
- (v) A revision in hospitality trading times, which would now be from 4 a.m. until midnight;



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- (vi) A delay in the staged return to workplaces until the 'gateway condition' had been met;
- (vii) Children under 12 would no longer count towards the number of people or households gathering in indoor public places or indoor private dwellings;
- (b) That the approach to baseline measures set out in paragraphs 56 to 62 of the paper should be pursued, and that, in her planned statement to the Parliament later that day, the First Minister should signal that further advice on this subject be published by the end of July;
- (c) To delegate to the First Minister any final decisions on matters of detail that might be required in advance of her planned statement to the Parliament on the afternoon of Tuesday, 13 July;
- (d) That Regulations should be made to give effect to these decisions, where required;
- (e) As agreed at the previous meeting of the Cabinet (*SCN(21)6th Conclusions refers*), to continue to delegate to the First Minister decisions which were broadly consistent with the *Strategic Framework* and timetable, supported as required by the Gold Group structure of key Ministers and any other Ministers with an interest, with input from LPP [REDACTED] chief advisers and senior lead officials.

**(Action: First Minister; Deputy First Minister and Cabinet Secretary for Covid Recovery; DG Constitution and External Affairs)**

**COVID-19: Self-Isolation (Paper SCN(21)16)**

25. The Deputy First Minister introduced paper SCN(21)16 which invited Cabinet to consider changes to the way in which requirements to self-isolate were applied in relation to a number of groups of people, specifically: fully vaccinated close contacts of a positive COVID-19 case; children and young people under 18 years old (subject to advice from the Educational Advisory Sub-group); travellers (including children) arriving from Amber List countries; and those working in critical services such as the NHS, care homes, and organisations supporting Critical National Infrastructure. The good progress being made in vaccination had made it necessary to revisit the rules on self-isolation so as to ensure that these remained proportionate and effective.

26. In discussion the following points were made:

- (a) Absences caused by the requirement to self-isolate were becoming a problem for sectors such as transport – notably road hauliers involved in food distribution and public transport staff – as well as for a number of other sectors supporting Critical National Infrastructure, and the further consideration that was to be given to these areas over coming weeks was welcome;