

5. Further to the discussion at Cabinet on Sunday, 19 December (SC(20)49th *Conclusions refers*), CMO noted that Public Health England (PHE) had officially designated the new variant of the SARS-CoV-2 virus as a Variant of Concern (VOC 202012/01). It now appeared that the standard laboratory polymerase chain reaction (PCR) test for COVID-19 was able to show the presence of the new variant, which was indicated by S-gene dropout. A technical paper entitled *Investigation of novel SARS-COV-2 variant*, published by PHE on 21 December, suggested that the additional effect of the new variant on the reproduction number of the virus (R) could be as high as 0.5 to 0.7. It was not currently possible to be sure whether this effect would vary between different age groups.

6. Public Health Scotland now estimated that, during the week commencing 9 November, some 14 per cent of positive cases in Scotland already had the S-gene dropout, which suggested a far higher incidence of the new variant in Scotland than previously thought.

7. There was still no evidence to suggest that the new variant would have had an impact on the gravity of the illness or on mortality rates, or that existing vaccines would be less effective. Challenge tests were being undertaken by the Defence Science and Technology Laboratory at Porton Down, the results of which were expected in one to two weeks' time.

8. If increased rates of transmissibility were to be confirmed among young people, this would be a significant factor in decisions about how and when all tiers of education should resume after the Christmas break and, in particular, about when schools might return to full-time teaching. Mr Swinney intended to seek further advice from the COVID-19 Advisory Sub-Group on Education and Children's Issues before reaching final conclusions, and it was entirely possible that the return of at least secondary school pupils to face-to-face schooling might need to be delayed longer than currently planned.

9. The First Minister noted that, given that the stringent 'lockdown' regime instituted in March 2020 had succeeded in reducing the R number in Scotland to no lower than around 0.6, a new variant which added 0.4 to R as a result of its increased transmissibility implied that R would still be over 1.0, even with very strict protective measures.

10. Put briefly, this meant that there was a strong risk that growth in the new variant would be exponential unless significant new mitigations were put in place. This raised a number of questions. Would the set of restrictions contained in the current Level 4 offer sufficient protection? And how long would additional measures need to last?

11. In the very short term, school holidays and university vacations should provide some additional protection, assuming a good level of general compliance among the public. However, options such as a general 'stay at home' direction and a tightening of the definition of non-essential retail were likely to need to form part of a reinforced protection regime.