

7. Until established otherwise, the assumption should be that the new variant, although much more transmissible, had the same characteristics of morbidity and mortality as previously. Importantly, there was no suggestion at this stage that vaccines would be any less effective as a result. It was, however, vital to underline that these were preliminary findings, and the urgent research at Porton Down was designed to clarify this point.

8. Some 17 instances of the new strain had been isolated in Scotland (16 in Greater Glasgow and Clyde and one in Lanarkshire). However, it needed to be borne in mind that this figure would inevitably understate the total to some extent, since genetic sequencing was only performed on a statistical sample of cases for comparative purposes over time. The earliest such case dated from 4 November.

9. The age of those hospitalised recently in south-east England appeared to be lower compared with earlier in the outbreak, and there was also a concern that there might have been some nosocomial transmission of the new variant, which would clearly be of concern in hospital and care home settings.

10. There was no easy way to distinguish between 'old' and 'new' variant cases, and this would, in any case, be of limited practical utility in the context of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic – the virus would, in any case, continue to mutate. It was, however, possible that the standard laboratory polymerase chain reaction (PCR) test for COVID-19 might show some variation in results indicating the presence of the new strain. Any such change would not be evident from the faster, but less accurate lateral flow testing, and the implications of this for the testing programme would need to be considered in due course.

11. The First Minister introduced the proposals which were to be put forward in response to a fast developing situation, drawing on the briefing note prepared earlier that afternoon by the Director-General Constitution and External Affairs, which had been supplied to Cabinet in advance of the meeting, and which summarised the range of options that were open to the Government at this stage.

12. She noted that the single most important lesson since the initial outbreak in February 2020 had been that waiting for more data (and therefore delaying action) could have highly negative consequences. It was essential to act quickly, decisively and preventatively.

13. In order to prevent the new variant from taking hold, there were two key spheres of action: first, to prevent the importation of the new variant from elsewhere in the UK; and second, to limit its further transmission in Scotland, given that it was already seeded north of the border, albeit nowhere near the extent being seen in parts of England;

14. It would, naturally, be hard for the public to grasp that radical and immediate action was now required: the situation in Scotland was relatively stable: COVID-19 was currently only half as prevalent as in England, and there were three times as many cases in Wales. It would, however, be vital for people to accept that much tougher restrictions would be required now because of the threat posed by the new variant.