

## OFFICIAL-SENSITIVE

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### Minutes of Meeting held on 22 December 2020

1. The minutes of the meeting held on 22 December (SC(20)50th Conclusions) were approved.

### COVID-19: Coronavirus Update (*oral item*)

2. The First Minister invited the Chief Medical Officer (CMO) to provide Cabinet with an update on the progress of the COVID-19 pandemic and the work under way to counter its effects. As at 9 a.m. on Monday, 4 January, there had been 136,498 confirmed cases of COVID-19 infection in Scotland, an increase of 1,905 compared with the previous day. Test positivity for the previous day's testing stood at around 15 per cent. Both measures were significantly higher than when Cabinet had last met, on 22 December. This was likely to reflect the increasingly rapid spread of the new, more transmissible variant of the SARS-CoV-2 virus (VOC 202012/01), which already accounted for around half of new cases in Scotland. New cases were spread across all mainland NHS Boards, although previous days had also seen a number of cases in island areas, including a localised outbreak in Shetland.

3. CMO drew Cabinet's attention to the rapidly deteriorating situation across the four nations, especially in England and Northern Ireland. Although Scotland appeared to be lagging slightly, there was no doubt that the situation would worsen north of the border too. Earlier, the four UK CMOs had met and determined that, based on the advice of the Joint Biosecurity Centre (established in May 2020), the UK alert level should move, for the first time, to Level 5 – its highest level – indicating that there was now a material risk of the NHS being overwhelmed (probably over the following three weeks). There were very high rates of community transmission in all parts of the UK, with substantial numbers of COVID-19 patients in hospitals and in intensive care. In a worrying development, there seemed to be no evidence that the recent 'lockdown' measures in England had had any noticeable effect in controlling the spread of the new variant.

4. The First Minister described the current situation as highly perilous and of greater concern than at any time since March 2020, notably because the NHS now had less capacity and resilience than the previous spring. In the week from 23 to 30 December, the seven-day incidence of cases per 100,000 population had increased by some 65 per cent – from 136 to 225 – and the statistics did not yet reflect any increase in cases that might have resulted from gatherings over the Christmas and New Year holidays. The prospects for the immediate short term therefore appeared worrying.

5. Bed occupancy in the NHS had almost reached the peak levels last seen in April 2020, and was nearing surge capacity in many cases. Intensive Care Units (ICUs) were currently less full, partly as a result of improved treatment protocols for COVID-19, but all mainland Boards were working at above their normal winter ICU capacity. However, current demand for beds reflected cases contracted two to three weeks previously, and it followed that – whatever new measures were now taken – the NHS would inevitably find itself in a much more severe situation in a fortnight's time.

**COVID-19: Additional Emergency Measures in Level 4 (Paper SC(21)02)**

6. The First Minister and Mr Swinney introduced paper SC(21)02, which invited Cabinet to consider a range of immediate emergency braking measures to strengthen protective measures in all Level 4 areas, in response to the spread of the new variant strain of the coronavirus.

7. The First Minister noted that, while it might appear reasonable to await further data before deciding on additional measures, the course of the pandemic thus far had shown that this would be a mistake: the actions described in the paper were needed to be put in hand immediately if they were to have any substantial effect in arresting the spread of the new variant. Taken as a whole, the package had been designed to have the maximum impact, by reducing as far as possible the opportunities for the new, more transmissible strain of the virus to be transmitted between people, while still balancing consideration of the Four Harms.

8. Chief among the package of strengthened measures summarised in the paper at Annex B were proposals to make it a legal requirement – as of the following day – to stay at home (except for essential shopping, education, childcare, or to support the vulnerable) and to work from home wherever possible.

9. Numbers meeting outdoors would also be limited further, reducing the number of people (except children under 12) from two households who could meet outdoors (moving from 'six from two' to 'two from two'); the 'two from two' limit would also apply to adults meeting for organised outdoor exercise and sport. The current exemption for organised activities for under 18s would be amended to apply only to under 12s.

10. Although the paper also proposed that the current 'six-from-six' rule allowing gatherings of up to six 12-to-17 year olds from up to six households be replaced by a 'three-from-three' limit, Cabinet was asked to consider whether imposing the same 'two-from-two' limit as for other outdoor gatherings might be a simpler message to communicate with the aim of improving compliance.

11. Other key measures proposed in the paper (to come into effect from Friday, 8 January) would include closing places of worship to the public, reducing numbers at weddings and civil partnerships to the legal minimum, and prohibiting wakes and other post-funeral gatherings. In addition, further classes of premises, service providers and non-essential retail would be closed: this would cover larger retailers' showrooms, clinics offering cosmetic and aesthetic procedures, and ski centres. Finally, the one metre physical distancing exemption in works canteens would end.