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Call between the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and the First Ministers of Scotland and Wales, and the First Minister and deputy First Minister of Northern Ireland

19 December 2020, 10:45am

Ministerial Attendance

The Rt. Hon Michael Gove MP, Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster

The Rt. Hon Nicola Sturgeon MSP, First Minister, Scotland

The Rt. Hon Prof Mark Drakeford MS, First Minister, Wales

The Rt. Hon Arlene Foster MLA, First Minister, Northern Ireland

The Rt. Hon Michelle O'Neill MLA, Deputy First Minister, Northern Ireland

The Rt. Hon Robin Swann MLA, Health Minister, Northern Ireland

The Rt. Hon Simon Hart MP, Secretary of State for Wales

The Rt. Hon Brandon Lewis MP, Secretary of State for Northern Ireland

The Rt. Hon Alister Jack MP, Secretary of State for Scotland

Actions

Action 1: UK Government to keep the devolved administrations updated on any possible, additional financial support to be made available for businesses, and to confirm if this would apply on a UK-wide basis if so.

Minutes

- **The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster** welcomed attendees to the meeting and thanked them for their time.
- He noted that the UK Government's Covid-Operations Committee had met last night and this morning to discuss the challenges presented by the emergence of the new variant of the virus.
- **Steffan Jones, Director of Analysis and Data Directorate (ADD)**, presented a set of slides outlining the latest UK data picture and the impacts of the latest variant of the virus, focusing on cases per 100k across the UK, and particularly in those areas of South East and London where the variant is most prevalent. He noted that cases are increasing sharply, and that they have doubled in a week in worst-affected areas, despite the national restrictions and tier 3 restrictions that have been in place in the preceding weeks. He noted that while cases have risen most rapidly among those aged 10-14 and 15-19, we are beginning to see an uptick in the 60+ cohort, and that this would translate into a rise in hospital admissions, and number of deaths as well.
- **Sir Patrick Vallance, Government Chief Scientific Adviser (GCSA)**, noted that a programme of sequencing work had identified this variant has currently over 20 different mutations in regions known to be associated with transmissibility and immune response.
- He noted it was first identified in mid-September and has since grown very rapidly in the South-East in particular so that it is now the dominant variant. He stated that it is also present in other areas of the UK, though in lower numbers.
- The GCSA set out the three most important questions to understand about the new variant; to what extent did it increase transmission; to what extent did it alter disease outcome; and to what extent did it impact on immune recognition?
- On the first he noted there are now three lines of evidence to support the position that this variant has a significantly higher rate of transmissibility that will impact on the R number; the rate at which it has grown in contrast to other variants, genetic analysis, and other wider laboratory analyses.
- On the second, the GCSA stated there is no current evidence to suggest a change in pattern of disease, with expectations it will lead to a similar disease course and outcome, though he cautioned this was being looked at in more detail.
- On the final question of immune recognition, the GCSA stated there were theoretical reasons why it might alter antibody recognition, but that there was currently nothing yet to suggest this had happened. He noted the scientific community would likely need 7-10 days to get an answer on this, and whether vaccine will work. GCSA assessed that it was likely the virus would continue to work.
- **The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster** stated that these findings were clearly very serious leading rising cases rates and hospital admissions and that consequently the UK Government had assessed it necessary to take further action.

Official Sensitive

- He noted that the Prime Minister would announce further steps later today, and that while still subject to refinement, he was happy to share in confidence latest UK Government proposals.
 - He asserted that UK Government planned to move those areas recent moved into tier 3 in the South East, East England and London would be moved into a new tier 4, with enhanced levels of restrictions that would look similar to those in place throughout November. This would mean non-essential retail will close as well as personal care services, and would sit alongside a very strong 'stay at home message'
 - On the Christmas relaxations policy, he noted that this would be revoked in tier four areas and replaced with a stay at home message over Christmas. He stated that Christmas bubbles would not exist beyond pre-existing support bubbles.
 - He asserted that for those outside of the new tier 4, there would be a new message focused on staying local. He stated the plan was to continue allowing up to three households to meet in the rest of England, but that this would now only apply for one day.
 - He stated that new restrictions would resemble those in place through November in England, with one of the few exceptions being that places of worship would remain open for Covid-secure services during this period.
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- **The First Minister for Scotland** expressed her thanks for the updates and noted that they were sobering in detail. She stated she that while she had understood there was uncertainty as to whether this new variant had a higher rate of transmissibility, she took for the CSA's presentation that there was now stronger evidence to confirm this, and sought clarity on this point.
 - She suggested that for areas of the UK where the strain had been identified, it may require stronger preventative measures or otherwise the same patterns of a rise in case numbers could be expected. She noted that while cases in Scotland were currently lower than other parts of the UK and were leveling off, this latest information on the new variant showed there was no room for complacency.
 - She stated that she would convene her Cabinet later in the afternoon to understand what further steps the Scottish Government would need to take, and that she would keep UK Government and the other devolved administrations updated. She stressed that while the response was unlikely to be identical to what was being proposed by UK Government, there would probably be strong overlap.
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- **The First Minister for Wales** reconfirmed the worrying position with case numbers as set out in the data presentation, noting there were emerging pockets where this new variant had been identified. He noted how worrying this was, given the challenges already faced in dealing with variants with the standard level of transmissibility.
 - He noted that he and his Cabinet would now need to consider what further action would be required.
 - He asked whether for those areas in England moving into Tier 4 there would be additional financial support made available, noting that for non-essential retail this time of year was critical, and if so, whether this would read across to the rest of the UK, where similar measures were in place.

Official Sensitive

- He noted that given what transpired in March, where cases climbed most significantly in the Southeast and London before spreading to the rest of the UK, there was a case to be made for taking more significant action, and potentially at least for England and Wales, coordinating a full Tier 4 set of restrictions to apply nationwide in order to flatten the curve and afford respite to stretched NHS services.
- **The First Minister for Northern Ireland** reminded those on the call that the Northern Ireland Executive would be introducing a strict new set of measures from the 26 December.
- She asked with regards to the GCSA's point on the new variant's impact on an immune response whether it was yet known if this may impact on the rollout of the vaccine programme
- **The Deputy First Minister for Northern Ireland** reiterated the concerns raised by others on the latest figures and the impact of the new variant.
- She asked for clarity on what it meant for travel to and from those areas to be placed in the highest tier in England.
- **The Health Minister for Northern Ireland** asked for clarity on whether the basic messages on preventing the spread of the virus remained effective given the increased transmissibility of the virus, and whether stronger messaging was now required.
- **Sir Patrick Vallance, Chief Scientific Adviser (CSA)** provided greater clarity on the transmissibility of the new variant, stating that the scientific evidence on this point was now more robust, with multiple approaches to the same question producing the same answer. He reiterated that they would like get better estimates on how much more transmissible the new variant was in coming days, but there was a consensus across the scientific community that the increase was significant.
- He stated that the basic preventative measures remained the same - Hands, Face, Space - and don't mix indoors. But that given the higher transmissibility there would be a need to double down on this messaging.
- On the immune response to the new variant, he reiterated this was a theoretical worry for now, and further work was being undertaken to establish whether there was any evidence to suggest this might be the case.
- He concluded that this new variant highlighted the need overtime for different variations of the vaccine to address mutations in the virus.
- **The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster** stated that on business support, nothing had yet been announced or agreed beyond those measures of financial support already in place. He stated he would continue discussions with the Chancellor of the Exchequer, and that that any new business support packages would apply on a UK-wide

Official Sensitive

- He noted that on the issue of travel, those in the new Tier 4 areas would be told not to travel and to stay at home, and the regulations would be amended accordingly to prevent further seeding.
- He noted that on the point of broader, coordinated set of national measures proposed by the First Minister of Wales, the UK Government did not yet assess this was necessary, but that the situation was finally balanced, and would need to remain under review.
- He stated that he remained ready for further discussions with those on the call over the Christmas period as required.

- **Sir Patrick Vallance, Chief Scientific Adviser (CSA)** stated that cases of the variant have been seen in other countries, including Denmark, Australia, and Gibraltar. He stressed that UK has greater capacity to undertake sequencing and so it is possible that other countries may not have yet identified cases. He stated his assumption was that the new variant had emerged in the UK.

- **The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster** thanked everyone for their time and concluded the call.