OFFICIAL-SENSITIVE

12. This situation represented a very significant challenge for the NHS (and other critical services), and with this in mind, all possible efforts were being brought to bear – both to slow the onward progress of the outbreak and to prepare for all eventualities across society.

13. The Chief Medical Officer emphasised that testing and contact tracing were vital at this stage: unexplained cases, where no link to a known source could be identified, were likely to sit at the apex of a 'pyramid' of a far higher number of undetected cases: this was likely to be indicative of the start of sustained community transmission.

14. Evidence-based decisions as to the timing of the different phases of the planned response would also be of critical importance in attempting to control the spread of the outbreak. To move to a more restrictive phase too late would plainly be disadvantageous, but to move too early might lead to reduced levels of compliance among the general population, as well as disproportionate social and economic disruption. Behavioural factors would remain vital in managing the crisis.

[Ms Cunningham joined the meeting.]

15. In discussion the following points were made:

(a) Cabinet was fully seized of the gravity of the situation that was unfolding. This was likely to require a 'whole of government' approach over a sustained period, and significant resources were already being devoted to the mobilising the Scottish Government's response. All relevant public and private sector bodies were being increasingly drawn into the response effort. The Government's approach should continue to be informed, at all times, by the best available scientific and medical advice. It would be vital to ensure effective and ongoing communications with the public, both in order to maintain trust and to gain support for the difficult measures that might require to be invoked, and which would inevitably impact on day-to-day activities;

(b) The individual measures set out in the paper, in combination, appeared to be likely to have the greatest impact on delaying the peak of the outbreak and hence on reducing the exposure of the most vulnerable and, ultimately, the number of additional deaths. All possible encouragement should be given to pursuing these objectives;

(c) Restrictive measures were likely to last for three months at a minimum, and society would need to be prepared, with very careful public messaging, for a (possibly very extended) period which could feel overwhelming for many, especially given what was already happening in Italy and other countries;

(d) The overall objective should be to do everything possible to keep the number of severe cases to a minimum: that is, to reduce hospital admissions and/or deaths among the most vulnerable. It was clear that delaying the overall impact of the outbreak (by reducing its amplitude) and ensuring adequate critical care capacity at all times would remain central elements of this approach. This would require sustained resourcing;

(e) The primary objective should not be to defer the outbreak indefinitely; nor should it necessarily result in a reduction in the overall number of cases: cases occurring in otherwise healthy people and which did not result in complications would, in theory, help a growing proportion of the population build up collective immunity, preferably before the following winter;

(f) The importance of building up collective immunity was likely to be important if, as seemed likely, the COVID-19 virus returned each year in the winter months (in the same way as influenza strains). This concept was not straightforward to convey to the general public, because no population group (even those in theory best able to withstand infection) would wish to be exposed to a risk of serious illness or death – especially since, in the absence of a vaccine or cure, this risk could not be eliminated wholly for any group or individual, whatever range of measures were taken;

(g) Should large-scale national events continue to be permitted to go ahead for very much longer, at a time when people, particularly the most vulnerable, were being advised to limit social contacts (or, in some cases, to self-isolate), this might reduce compliance with recommended measures and, more generally, dent people's trust and confidence in the authorities, which would not be desirable at a time of national emergency and might also reduce the effectiveness of any subsequent control measures;

(h) It would be all the more important to build up and retain public trust, in light of how long this crisis might be expected to last: it was not possible to predict when serious disruption might end, and emergency measures might be in place for a very significant period, so needed to be very carefully designed. Forward planning and timing would remain crucial;

(i) Although the situation would continue to evolve, the scientific evidence did not, at this point, indicate that school or college closures would contribute usefully to reducing the scale of the outbreak, although it was possible that, following the Easter holidays, some parents might not choose to send their children back to school. It was also possible that some school closures might result from other, linked factors, such as a lack of staff. It would be important to take an organised and consistent approach, based on close monitoring;

(j) In devising the most credible and sustainable set of measures to apply, it would be important to focus on the most important risks and to take into account a range of possible unintended consequences: for example, school and nursery closures might result, indirectly, in a reduction in NHS staffing capacity, because some health professionals would need to take time off to look after children at home, and there might also be increased exposure to the virus among vulnerable groups, such as older grandparents;

(k) It would be important to be clear about what was meant by terms such as 'vulnerable'. The definition in the case of COVID-19 was a medical one, and it was intended primarily to cover those whose immune systems were compromised;