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COVID-19 OPERATIONS COMMITTEE 20(95)

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Response to the new COVID variant

PAPER BY THE COVID-19 Taskforce

1. As set out in the accompanying data brief, cases are rising rapidly in the country: the weekly average case rate for England has increased by over 66% compared to two weeks previously¹; in London it has nearly doubled over the last week. In parts of London, Kent and Essex, cases rose during the November restrictions and have continued to grow. The North and Midlands have not seen large rises in cases at a regional level, but, at best, cases in these regions are level or beginning to rise slowly. Some areas in the North West are demonstrating rapid growth.
2. A number of factors could be driving this growth, including: the tiering allocation; compliance; seasonal impacts on hospitality and retail; and seasonal impacts on transmission. However, very initial findings suggest that the new variant constitutes a significant proportion of the recent cases in the South East. The accompanying paper from the Government's Chief Scientific Adviser (GCSA) presents the latest information on the variant.
3. **The Government's objectives should be to curb the spread of the variant in the areas where it has taken root and slow its spread to the rest of the country.** The key decision for the Committee is how and when it wants to respond, noting that the data is, at present, incomplete.

¹ Weekly average of cases by specimen date to the 15th December compared to weekly average to 1st December

4. The areas where the virus is growing fastest are those where the volume of concurrent risks are higher. Kent is of particular concern given that it is an EU-transition-critical LA, facing health capacity and workforce pressures, and is vulnerable to poor weather conditions.

Approach to a response

5. The Committee should commission the following urgent work:
 - a. C-19 Taskforce to develop options for tightening restrictions;
 - b. Gold to consider the appropriate allocation of those restrictions;
 - c. C-19 Taskforce and DfT to develop options to limit both domestic and international travel, with HO providing advice on enforcement and FCDO providing advice on international considerations;
 - d. C-19 Taskforce to develop options relating to Christmas; and
 - e. The Government's Chief Scientific Adviser to produce an updated note on what we know about the variant - being clear on what we know, and what is still unknown.
6. The rest of this paper presents initial thinking on these issues. In making this decision, we will want to ensure we are accounting for the full spectrum of winter risks, including a potential non-negotiated outcome for the end of EU transition and any potential mitigations or tailored support we may need to deliver to transition-critical LAs.

Detail on the options

A. Domestic travel

7. The Government could limit travel within those areas which are most severely affected, namely London and the South East, by asking people to:
 - a. **Stay at home:** travel only allowed for a very short list of exemptions, with a stronger and clearer message on working from home.
 - b. **Only travel 5-miles:** the Scottish Government advised people not to travel more than 5 miles from home.

- c. **Stay in their locality:** tell people to stay within their local area, defined as their nearest village or part of town/city.
 - d. **Stay within their region:** allowing more travel within a specified region, be that LAs or counties.
8. Exemptions will be needed for any guidance, including to allow the flow of freight through Kent to mitigate D20 risks and to surge staff into Kent to support those same activities.
9. There will need to be a decision as to whether any restrictions are delivered through law, or guidance. We have never placed travel restrictions in law. There are three reasons for this. First, travel is a derived demand; it is by closing sectors, telling people to work from home or (in March) closing schools that we have reduced people's movement around the country, rather than through specific travel messages. It is worth noting that increased staff absences in the affected areas may impact the level of public services available. Second, it would require a large number of the number of exemptions. Third, there are the practical difficulties in enforcing any regulations given these exemptions. Where there have been legal restrictions on travel (March and November), those have been a function of broader 'stay at home' regulations, rather than specific travel restrictions themselves. Seeking to place travel restrictions in law may also slow the timetable for action. On the other hand, we know that public compliance with legal restrictions is higher than with those which are placed in guidance. As above, these issues will need to be explored rapidly.

B. International travel

10. While other countries have detected small numbers of cases of the new variant, none have identified quantities comparable with the UK. Our working assumption is that the variant has originated in the UK. Given the traits of this new variant, it is likely to represent a significant development in the pandemic globally. We have notified the WHO of the existence of the variant. We will also move quickly to communicate the new information on the likely significant increase in transmissibility. We should expect some countries to respond by limiting arrivals from the UK, in the same way that countries (including the UK) limited arrivals from

Denmark following the identification of a new strain in its mink population. We should also consider whether we would want a message to ask people to avoid travel to the UK, to avoid the risk of visitors exporting the new variant home with them.

11. The options are to:

- a. **Rely on broader restrictions** requiring people to stay at home to curtail international travel, as in November and March.
- b. **Provide guidance against international passenger travel from the affected areas.** This includes London airports and ports. The expectation is that it would not affect freight (or drivers of vehicles). This should apply *only* to people living within the affected areas (i.e. transit through areas for international travel remains permitted for those living outside of the area), or whether it should represent a closure of international travel from those areas (other than for freight). DfT and BEIS will want to consider in more detail the impacts of either choice.
- c. **We will work with DfT and BEIS to explore whether there is a more severe option**, such as a prohibition on departures from the country.

C. Tighten restrictions

12. If the Government were to tighten restrictions, the proposal is that this would apply only in the affected areas, as a new 'Tier 4', rather than applying nationally.

13. The objective would be to drive a significant change in behaviour. In any scenario, we would strengthen our messaging, with a particular emphasis on the need for people to work from home, and to meet people outdoors wherever possible.

14. **We would recommend exploring a Tier 4 based on November restrictions.**

This would constitute a 'stay at home' injunction and, in addition to the Tier 3 closure of hospitality and indoor entertainment, the closure of the non-essential retail, personal care, leisure and outdoor entertainment.²

² We could soften the November restrictions to permit communal worship and outdoor sports facilities to open (for use by households or groups of two people). These were the two issues on which we received most pressure in November, so would need a clear steer and justification to close them again.

15. The November restrictions did not manage to suppress the virus in Kent. The March intervention was stronger than November; schools were closed, many people were not travelling to work (with overcompliance with that measure) and meeting someone from another household outdoors was banned. In practice, however, schools have now broken up for the Christmas holidays; a November model is therefore substantially the same as a March model. If Ministers wanted to strengthen the November model, they could strengthen the stay at home message by reducing the number of exceptions. These exceptions were, however, introduced to manage the most challenging edge cases.
16. An alternative approach would apply tighter restrictions nationally, though this is not the lead option.
17. Ministers have the option to reintroduce shielding in target areas to protect the clinically extremely vulnerable, with advice from the Deputy Chief Medical Officer. If restrictions on social contact were imposed, the key impact would be to lower the numbers of CEV going to work outside the home. However, Ministers may want to wait until we have more information on the new variant's impact on the severity of illness towards the middle of next week.

Christmas

18. The Christmas bubble period is due to start on Wednesday 23 December. Some people will travel this weekend, in contravention of the regulations. The Government has also provided coaches to transport people around the country, including from London and the South East, where the new variant is prevalent.
19. By limiting travel, as above, the Government will curtail many people's Christmas plans. The Government would tell people not to leave the affected areas in order to form Christmas bubbles.
20. In addition, the Government could:
- a. **Reinforce caution on Christmas**, stating that the new variant provides more cause for caution.

b. Cancel the planned Christmas relaxation in London and the South East.

In the time available, if we were to do this in law, this would mean preventing anyone living in those areas (which would need to be clearly defined) from forming a Christmas bubble anywhere in England (or the UK if the Devolved Administrations could be brought on board). The alternative non-legal option would be to draw more circumspect areas within and between which we are advising (but not enforcing) against travel.

c. Cancel the planned Christmas relaxation for the whole of England.

21. There is reasonable public support for cancelling the Christmas easing (c.50%)³, but the c. 35% of the public who have made plans are unlikely to change them without a significant nudge. Cancelling the easing for all of England will disadvantage those areas with lower prevalence, but is easier to achieve in law than a regional approach and may provide the 'shock' factor needed to improve compliance.

Timing and next steps

22. We will notify the WHO of the new information on the transmissibility of the variant.

Subject to decisions of the Committee, further work will be undertaken rapidly to:

- a. Develop a full communications plan including updating the public tomorrow;
- b. Engage with the Devolved Administrations; and
- c. Prepare further detail on the preferred approach including preparing regulations where relevant.

Economic and social impacts and equalities considerations

23. Decisions to introduce any of the proposed measures will have wider economic, social and equalities considerations. Extending restrictions to non-essential retail and other sectors will place further pressures on businesses which have already faced falls in revenue from earlier restrictions and would have been seeking to recover revenues over the Christmas period. The retail sector has experienced

³ YouGov survey of c. 4000 adults found 57% thought Christmas relaxation should be dropped and tier levels maintained: <https://yougov.co.uk/topics/health/survey-results/daily/2020/12/15/c95fe/2>; an Ipsos Mori poll of 1000 adults found c. 49% who thought the rules were not strict enough: <https://www.ipsos.com/ipsos-mori/en-uk/half-believe-christmas-coronavirus-measures-not-strict-enough>

several high profile business failures since the start of the pandemic. Further, many of these businesses are SMEs and cannot easily shift sales online. However, the counterfactual of allowing cases to continue to rise exponentially would have a significant short and long term impact on the economy.

24. The economic cost of new restrictions will be disproportionately felt by young people and ethnic minorities who are employed in higher than average numbers in the retail, accommodation and food service sectors in England. Tightening restrictions on social contact and removing exemptions for support bubbles will lead to increased social isolation for many. More widely, persistent restrictions will continue to contribute to an increase in poor mental health across society, but particularly for the most vulnerable and disproportionately impacted groups.