

Dear Ollie

By your standards a positively leisurely turnaround, which allows for proper comments.

It is a good and clear document. I attach some comments, some for technical accuracy/clarity, and a couple of substantive ones. I expand 2 of them below.

1. I think the pros and especially cons of the current DfE case are not fully laid out in a way that Ministers can make an informed choice. It's obviously a bit of a shot in the dark, with limited but worrying data. The current DfE proposal in response to this substantial new threat is absolutely minimalist; delay by 1 week some secondary school pupils returning- that's it, everything else steady as she goes. Which if we get control is fine and will look sensible. But if in 4 weeks we find that we have lost control in the sense cases are rising significantly despite Tier 4 + school opening, and we may well find that (modelling suggests we will), and the NHS is under significant pressure / deaths are rising fast we will have to pull the emergency brake. At short notice this is likely to mean close all of education (primary, secondary, uni, FE), as that's the only thing we have left with a significant impact on R. This would obviously be very disruptive to all education. This is not reflected in the advice, and Ministers need to be aware that would have to be Plan B if the current Plan A does not have sufficient bite. At that stage stopping education for a selection of secondary students would not be likely to work, so the price of chancing it on some bits of education now in a planned way may be disrupting all education subsequently as an emergency measure. May, not will- we don't know yet- but it's a realistic non-trivial possibility.
2. In contrast to wave 1 the current situation is regional, although the pattern will shift over time. Currently the south, especially SE, London, east of England are under greatest pressure and rising due to the new variant. Closing schools in part of the north and midlands because of this will seem surprising. Not closing schools in the rapidly rising new variant areas because the north is not seeing rises, with consequent significant loss of life, may in retrospect also seem surprising. It is likely in areas which currently have low proportions of new variant will peak later, and may need more vigorous measures later in time (depending on vaccine rollout), starting later but ending later. A regional approach has not been laid before Ministers, and I wonder if it should be. This is a policy question, but to dismiss it before Ministers have had a chance to discuss it because generally educational decisions are taken nationally may not be ideal.

Chris

From: Oliver Ilott <oliver.ilott@cabinetoffice.gov.uk>

Sent: 28 December 2020 19:52

To: Whitty, Chris <Chris.Whitty@dhsc.gov.uk>; Vallance, Patrick (GO-Science) <P.Vallance1@go-science.gov.uk>; Whitfield, Simon (GO-Science) <Simon.Whitfield@go-science.gov.uk>; Wainwright, Stuart