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The Presiding Officer
c/o The Chamber Desk

30 March 2021

Dear Presiding Officer

UPDATE ON EASING OF PROTECTIVE MEASURES ON 2 AND 5 APRIL 2021

I am writing to inform you of the latest set of decisions being made to update protective measures in force against the spread of Coronavirus.

The First Minister was able to announce in a statement in the chamber of the Parliament on 16 March that some initial easing was already taking place of the restrictions on outdoor gatherings and activities. She was also able to signal an intention to introduce further easings at the beginning of April, as long as epidemiological data indicated a continued suppression of the presence of Coronavirus in Scotland, and roll-out of the vaccination programme was maintained.

The most recent data from Public Health Scotland now indicates that test positivity remains low and at a stable rate. And while the latest estimate of the reproduction number (R) has risen slightly to between 0.8 and 1.0, numbers in hospital with Coronavirus continue to decline, and hospital admissions are also falling. And, while NHS capacity remains fragile, our approach now builds in headroom for resumption of some of the non-COVID-19 elective capacity that has been displaced until now.

Data now published on Variants of Concern indicates that, while there remains need to monitor closely any possible variant escaping immunity, there is likewise a small scope for proceeding with easings that is bolstered by the ongoing expansion of both Test and Protect and by the success of the vaccine roll-out.

An assessment of whether it is safe to proceed with the intended easings has also been conducted against the six criteria recommended by the World Health Organisation. This assessment is that, while a limited headroom means it remains critical to retain mitigating protective measures and conduct close monitoring, it is possible to proceed with the intended easings. This recommendation, together with the supporting data to justify it, have been provided to First Minister today, who has been content to indicate that the easings should go ahead.

The easings are:

From 2 April:

- Lifting the Stay at Home rule and replacing it with a Stay Local message (retaining the current, Local Authority-based travel restrictions for this three-week period)

From 5 April:

- Return of college students within the top three priority groups identified by Colleges Scotland as most likely not to complete this academic year;
- The resumption of outdoor contact sport for 12-17 year olds;
- Re-opening of non-essential 'click and collect' retail;
- Extending the list of retail permitted to include:
 - garden centres (indoor and outdoor);
 - key cutting;
 - mobility equipment;
 - baby equipment;
 - electrical repair;
 - hairdressers/barbers (with shopfronts ie not mobile) by appointment only;
 - homeware;
 - showrooms and forecourts.

In accordance with the recommendations prescribed by the WHO, these easings will be accompanied by clear and extensive messaging about the need for strict adherence to wider protective measures. Furthermore the on-going course of the epidemic, including any specific effects of these adjustments, will continue to be monitored carefully, and further advice provided on whether any of these or other measures should be reconsidered in light of experience.

Work to prepare Regulations to give effect to these adjustments is underway. The Regulations will be shared with the COVID-19 Committee on 31 March, then made and published on 1 April. They will come into force Friday 2 April and on Monday 5 April. Guidance will also be updated and published at the same time as the regulations.

I am sending copies of this letter to the convenors of the committees on COVID-19, and Health and Sport.

JOHN SWINNEY