

COBR COVID-19 (M)(20)(13)

CABINET OFFICE BRIEFING ROOMS

COVID-19(M)

Meeting on Friday 20 March 2020

In Irrelevant & Sensitive

70 Whitehall, and via Videoconference, at 1600

PRESENT

The Rt Hon Michael Gove
Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster
In the CHAIR

The Rt Hon Matthew Hancock
Secretary of State for Health and Social Care

The Rt Hon Priti Patel
Secretary of State for the Home Office

The Rt Hon Robert Jenrick
Secretary of State for Housing, Communities
and Local Government

The Rt Hon Alok Sharma
Secretary of State for Business, Energy and
Industrial Strategy

The Rt Hon Suella Braverman
Attorney General

The Rt Hon George Eustice
Secretary of State for Environment, Food and
Rural Affairs

The Rt Hon Robert Buckland
Secretary of State for Justice

Sadiq Khan
Mayor of London

DIALLED IN

Nicola Sturgeon MSP Scottish Government	Arlene Foster MLA Northern Ireland Executive
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Simon Hart
Secretary of State,
Wales Office

The Rt Hon Brandon
Lewis
Secretary of State,
Northern Ireland
Office

OFFICIALS

Patrick Vallance
Government Chief
Scientific Officer

Chris Whitty
Chief Medical Officer

Alex Aiken
CO Comms

Katharine Hammond
Civil Contingencies
Secretariat

NR

No.10

Craig Chalcraft
Scotland Office

NR

Department for
Transport

NR

Department for
Digital, Culture,
Media and Sport

NR

Department for
Business, Energy and
Industrial Strategy

NR

Go Science

Cressida Dick
Commissioner,
Metropolitan Police

OFFICIALS DIALLED IN

SECRETARIAT

Roger Clarke

NR

The Cabinet Office circulated the following paper to inform the Committee's discussion:

1. 20200320 Social Distancing - Temporary
2. 20200320 Mandatory Closure of Social Venues

COVID-19

Item 1: Current Situation Update

1. The CHAIR invited the Government Chief Medical Officer (CMO) to provide a situation update. The CMO said that given the scale of the outbreak, infections were likely to double every four to five days and that the timescale for ascertaining evidence of the effectiveness of intervention measures was approximately two to three weeks. This two to three week timescale was also the timescale expected for effects from the current outbreak to be significantly felt in Intensive Care Units (ICUs). This applied across the UK.

Item 2: Further Social Distancing

2. The CHAIR turned to the Cabinet Secretariat to introduce the paper setting out the recommendations for further social distancing measures. The DIRECTOR GENERAL AT THE CABINET SECRETARIAT said that the objectives of the measures in the paper were to reduce the demand on ICUs and that they were created within the context of the previously announced measures and that the measures were aimed to address the gap between the current situation and the required 75 per cent reduction in non-essential social mixing. The questions posed were - if these measures were agreed - how to implement them and on what timeframe this should occur. On businesses targeted in the paper. They were businesses predicated on bringing people together, whether in a bar or a restaurant. That encouraged the very behaviour that measures sought to discourage. That the reduction in social mixing was lower amongst these businesses than in other sectors, which was a particular concern.
3. In the discussion the following points were made:
 - Proposals were regarded as essentially enforcing existing measures and that this was an issue of fairness and ensuring compliance was increased.
 - Legal provisions for ensuring compliance, including the Public Health (Control of Disease) Act (1984) were suggested.
 - There was an initial preference for announcing the enhanced measures the following day.
 - The legal implications of the measures raised concerns around legal challenge for losses incurred. Three criteria need to be met to provide legal justification for the Public Health (Control of Disease) Act (1984): A clear public health need, appropriate and proportionate response (including whether the virus warrants this response, whether current measures were failing), and alternatives had been considered and were not appropriate.
 - Ideally supporting evidence alongside any announcement on enhanced measures would be published.
 - The significant impacts on the economy were highlighted and a two week review period was recommended to assess the effectiveness of the measures.
 - Any announcement would require additional financial support.
 - A preference for an announcement that evening (20 March), rather than the next day (21 March) was expressed.
 - There had been excellent teamwork between Whitehall and the Mayor's Office and statistics on reductions in travel from TFL were presented.
 - The UK had achieved substantial reductions by voluntary means, and Milan had only achieved similar results via enforcement.

- Questions were raised around mutual support for ICUs in London and why places of worship were not being included in these measures.
 - On timing of any announcement, there was potential for a rush to venues as a result.
4. The CHAIR invited the Devolved Administrations to comment on the proposed measures and the following points were made in discussion:
- That this was a strengthening of existing policy to ensure social distancing and was in line with the scientific evidence.
 - Concerns were raised around legal powers to enforce these measures.
 - An announcement that evening, in light of the two to three week time frame for effects to be realised, in ICUs was preferred.
 - The economic package was highlighted as a vital component to support business during these measures.
 - The need for forward thinking and having a clear picture of upcoming decisions was also raised.
 - The FIRST MINISTER FOR NORTHERN IRELAND requested a conversation with the Attorney General to further discuss the legal powers and how they would be implemented in Northern Ireland.
5. In wider discussion the following points were made:
- The measures would require operational decisions by local forces but that more resources would be required for them to effectively police the measures.
 - That 'illegal' gatherings following the announcement of measures were possible but that compliance with the measures was expected to be high. The issue of younger people exploiting any delay in announcement was highlighted.
 - The prospect of food deliveries as a lifeline for restaurants and other food businesses. Work was underway to ensure these were possible.
 - Specific details on the circumstances for mixed premises would need to be outlined.
 - The need for any measures to be enforceable - fixed penalty fines or similar penalties for non-compliance were favoured.
 - An option to stagger the measures by industry, was deemed as not workable.
 - That trends were demonstrating that the current measures were reducing social mixing and that modelling from Her Majesty's Treasury indicated significant losses to GDP as a result of increased measures.
 - Whether the measures were proportionate considering the long-term economic implications?
 - On legality, coronavirus was evidently serious enough to warrant a response of the kind in these measures and the measures outlined are required to meet the 75 per cent reduction.
 - On ICU mutual aid, this happened normally and so far ICUs were not collectively facing unexpected pressures, though this was expected to change in the near future, as ICUs were put under greater strain.
 - That the Civil Contingencies Act (2004) could not be used as this is not an unforeseen event and the Public Health Act (1984) was recommended instead.
6. Summing up the CHAIR said that the measures were needed because there had not been full compliance with the previously announced advice. That the Government was committed to the

social distancing measures and these enhanced measures would serve to enforce them. It was agreed that an announcement would be made that evening at the daily Prime Minister's briefing and measures would be effective from then (20 March) and those measures would be reviewed every three weeks. The wider economic package would be announced alongside those measures. It was noted that measures may need to be extended should the situation evolve.

Item 3: Communications

7. The DIRECTOR FOR GOVERNMENT COMMUNICATIONS said that the communications strategy in the paper would be followed. The CHAIR then ended the meeting.

ANNEX 1 - ACTIONS

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On Friday 20 March 2020 at 1600

DECISIONS

1. Agreed that as of tonight measures will come into effect for the closure of those premises set out in Annex B of the paper: "Social Distancing: Additional Measures" across the United Kingdom.
2. In England and Wales these will be enforced by powers taken by the Health Secretary under the Public Health Act 1984. In Northern Ireland and Scotland powers included in the COVID-19 Bill should be applied retroactively.