

COVID-19 (M)(20)(14)

CABINET OFFICE BRIEFING ROOMS

COVID-19 (M) (14)

Meeting on Monday, 23 March 2020 at 1700
Held via Video Teleconference,
and chaired from

Irrelevant & Sensitive

PRESENT

The Rt Hon Boris Johnson
Prime Minister
In the CHAIR

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

DIALLED IN

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

The Rt Hon Suella Braverman
Attorney General

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

The Rt Hon Rishi Sunak
Chancellor of the Exchequer

The Rt Hon Gavin Williamson
Secretary of State for Education

The Rt Hon Thérèse Coffey
Secretary of State for Work and Pensions

The Rt Hon Mark Drakeford AM
First Minister of Wales

The Rt Hon Nicola Sturgeon MSP
First Minister of Scotland

The Rt Hon Arlene Foster MLA
First Minister of Northern Ireland

The Rt Hon Michelle O'Neil
Deputy First Minister of Northern Ireland

Sadiq Khan
Mayor of London

OFFICIALS

Sir Mark Sedwill
Cabinet Secretary

Jess Glover
Cabinet Office (Cabinet Secretariat)

Alex Aiken
Cabinet Office

OFFICIALS DIALLED IN

Professor Sir Patrick Vallance
Government Chief Scientific Adviser

Professor Sir Chris Whitty
Chief Medical Officer

Martin Hewitt
National Police Chiefs Council

SECRETARIAT

Civil Contingencies Secretariat

OFFICIAL SENSITIVE

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

1. 20200323 Social Distancing - Temporary Additional Measures

COVID-19

Item 1: Current situation update

1. The CHAIR said that the level of social distancing needed to increase and that further action needed to be taken as it did not seem like there were high levels of compliance. The CHAIR invited the Government Chief Scientific Advisor (GCSA) to give an update from that day's Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE) meeting. The GCSA said that the current rate of infection by a single person was 2.6 - 2.8 and this doubled in Intensive Care Units. The rate was doubling every three to five days which was similar to Italy, Germany and Spain.
2. The GCSA said for social distancing measures, the figures were positive and showed that there had been an encouraging drop in footfall, but in some areas these were not where yet at a level that was acceptable:
 - High street - drop by 28 per cent.
 - Travel - drop by 60 per cent.
 - Socialising - drop by 52 per cent, and seeing family - drop by 47 per cent.
3. However, park attendance had gone up by 200 per cent and queues in shops had increased. There were regional differences and showed lower compliance rates in some areas outside London.

Item 2: Compliance with social distancing

4. The CHAIR invited the Cabinet Secretariat to outline the proposed measures as highlighted in the paper. The CABINET SECRETARIAT said the proposed recommendations for further additional temporary measures were to ensure the spread did not continue:
 - The first measure was to tell all citizens to 'stay at home' except for the following four reasons: Shopping for basic necessities - no more than once a day, one form of exercise per day (run, walk or cycle - alone or with your household), medical needs, or to provide care or to help a vulnerable person, and travelling to and from work, where this cannot be done at home.
 - The second measure proposed was for the government to request the closure of all non-essential retail, including clothing and electronics stores. Also other premises including libraries, communal places within parks (playgrounds) and places of worship.
 - Furthermore, the ban of all gatherings of more than two people in public.
 - Lastly, the ban of all social events, including weddings, baptisms and other ceremonies but excluding funerals.
 - That these measures should be communicated to the public that evening, followed by updated communications online.
5. In discussion the following points were made:
 - These steps would help to reduce transmission between households, and were the measures needed to stop the spread; that there will be an economic impact which in itself would be detrimental to people's health and more detail on enforcement was needed.
 - It should be made less attractive for the public to leave their homes. The police were a big part of this, and Government needed to work through the particular powers that the police might need, which were being worked on.
 - The recommendations were strongly supported and the sooner better for their implementation.
 - Concerns were noted about the underpinning detail and terminology for enforcement, communications needed to be clear that the police would be enforcing this.

- Communications needed to be clear that one session of exercise a day was important, and it needed to be reiterated that this should be alone or with a member of the same household.
 - New guidelines would have an economic impact and options to extend business rates to businesses who will be affected by new guidelines, for example casinos, bookies etc should be considered.
 - Communications on travel from work needed to be clear on whether it was just for key workers or for anyone travelling to work.
6. The CHAIR then turned to The Mayor of London to advise on the impact on London and the running of the tube. The MAYOR OF LONDON said that on London transport there were 20 per cent staff absences due to sickness or self-isolating and tube service was running at a 50 per cent reduction. Buses were running a Saturday service (10 per cent down on weekday service) and the DLR and Overground were also running a reduced service. The MAYOR OF LONDON said that advice to construction workers should be that they must stay at home unless working on safety critical construction projects and that messaging needed to be given to supermarkets that safe distancing needs to be more strongly implemented.
7. In discussion the following points were made:
- Messaging needed to use the correct channels - preferably using mass texting and mass communications.
 - That Her Majesty's Treasury was working on the self-employment offer and requested that further communications were made that day.
 - Even Italy and Spain had not banned construction work, and that they had found it beneficial to administer more construction whilst it was quiet.
 - Messaging should be aligned with the construction sector on what measures needed to be put in place, that the guidance for the construction sector should be developed further.
 - If more could be done to support London Black Cabs to move people around? Cab drivers had advised they were more than happy to move people around.
 - If staff absences were 20 per cent and services were down by 50 per cent were there options to put on more services, and to reiterate the stance of when individuals were at work they must remain two metres away from others?
 - 273,000 people had made universal credit claims the week before which was a huge surge (five times the normal amount).
 - Scotland was aligned with the measures however enforcement of the measures rather than guidelines needed to be thought through.
 - Wales were putting stronger enforcement options around the guidelines later that week.
 - Paragraph eleven needed joint guidance on how the guidance affected vulnerable groups who had been advised to remain at home for twelve weeks and those who received free school meals.
 - On shielding those travelling to people who needed care were exempt from enforcement and would be advised that they would be exempt.
 - The issue of free school meals needed to be addressed but many of the children who would still be attending school were from vulnerable families and would be accessing free school meals. There needed to be clear messaging on the need for social distancing of children who were travelling into schools to receive their free school meals. That some vulnerable children also relied on free school breakfasts.
 - Easter weekend would be kept under review.
 - Funerals should be kept at the graveside if the weather permitted.
 - A lot of construction workers in Northern Ireland had to take flights or move across borders to work, and that guidance should be clear that these workers must only continue in exceptional circumstances.
 - Credit unions and self-employed packages needed to be addressed in communications that evening.

8. Summing up the CHAIR said that the measures were not to stop all work, there was work in government and other offices that must be maintained. That there was a balance that must be struck. There would be a huge economic impact if all work was halted. That there must be clear guidelines for construction workers and supermarkets from Public Health England .

9. The CHAIR invited the Attorney General for an update on legality.

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10. In discussion the following points were made:

- For the police, this had to be about deterrence as the police wished to retain their relationship with the public, so the penalty system needed to be thought through. The police were running nationally at around 10 per cent absence, which was within their ability to deal with, but that in time it would get higher. Options for how the Government would use other agencies and apply further powers, especially in cases such as domestic violence should be considered.
- There would need to be more clarity around police enforcement. The Government does not want to get into a position where the police are stopping everyone on the street and asking why they are out.
- Language needed to reflect the risk of panic buying and increase foot traffic to supermarkets.
- That there needed to be assurance around benefits as the Department for Work and Pensions had previously stated that it may take five weeks for people to get their benefits through. It was noted that advances were made and available but the Department for Work and Pensions could not change the five week process.

Item 3: Communication

11. The CHAIR said that there will be a communications pack issued to all and the basic information on social distancing needed to be promoted by attendees.
12. In Summing up the CHAIR said that the measures needed to be taken as social distancing was not being adhered to at present. The CHAIR noted the sensitivities of what had been discussed and that the discussion needed to remain between attendees until announcements were made that evening.

ANNEX 1 - ACTIONS

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ACTIONS

1. DEPARTMENT FOR TRANSPORT and MAYOR OF LONDON to discuss further freeing up capacity from the national transport network to support certain parts of the London Underground network.
2. CABINET OFFICE to develop guidance on social distancing for the construction sector.
3. A discussion of free school meals and vulnerable children in relation to social distancing will be taken at the Public Sector Ministerial Group on 24 March 2020.
4. MINISTRY OF HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT to share guidance on social distancing in supermarkets with the devolved administrations.
5. CABINET OFFICE to review and refine wording on shopping for necessities for this evening's announcement.

DECISIONS

1. The committee agreed to the measures set out in the paper "Social Distancing: Temporary Additional Measures" in paragraphs five and six, to be announced with immediate effect by the Prime Minister and devolved administrations at 20:30 on 23 March and followed by a communications campaign.