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COVID-19 OPERATIONS

Minutes of a Meeting of the Covid-19 Operations Committee

Irrelevant & Sensitive

, No 10 Downing Street and by video conference on

THURSDAY 15th October 2020

At 1430 PM

P R E S E N T

The Rt Hon Boris Johnson MP

Prime Minister

The Rt Hon Rishi Sunak MP Chancellor of
the Exchequer

The Rt Hon Michael Gove MP

Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster

The Rt Hon Matthew Hancock MP

Secretary of State for Health and Social Care

ALSO PRESENT

The Rt Hon Robert Jenrick MP

Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government

Sir Patrick Vallance

Government Chief Scientific Adviser and Head of Government Science and Engineering Profession

Professor Chris Whitty

Chief Medical Officer and DHSC Chief Scientific Adviser

Professor Jonathan Van Tam

Deputy Chief Medical Officer

Sir Edward Lister

Prime Minister's Chief Strategic Adviser

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Baroness Dido Harding
Executive Chair, Test and Trace

Dr Clare Gardiner
Director General of the Joint Biosecurity Centre

Kate Josephs
Director General, COVID-19 Taskforce

Helen Dickinson
Director, COVID-19 Taskforce

Imran Shafi
Private Secretary to the Prime Minister

Dr Catherine Cutts
Chief Data Scientist, No 10

Rosie Bate-Williams
Communications Officer, No 10

NR

Senior Press Officer, Prime Minister's Press Office

Henry Cook
Special Adviser to the Prime Minister

NR

Senior Policy Adviser, HM Treasury

Secretariat

S Case
S Ridley
E Payne

NR

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Situation Report THE PRIME MINISTER said that the Committee were discussing steps to help avoid a national lockdown, through the use of a difficult but attainable package of local measures. A great amount of work had been done over the past week with local leaders to seek buy-in to a set of measures. Local buy-in, active local enforcement and local test and trace were needed to ensure the measures worked. Leaders of the Liverpool City Region had been brought on board. However, others had not been. Those in Lancashire were requesting £30 million in support and it is likely the Government would need £300 million to secure all the agreements they want. While it was more desirable to carry local leaders with the Government in the process, the imposition of measures may ultimately be needed to overcome recalcitrant local leaders.

THE GOVERNMENT'S DEPUTY CHIEF MEDICAL OFFICER said that the position of rising cases in the North West was set against a backdrop of rising case rates across the country. There was an increasing spread in the south of the country too, and an increasing rate of change in cases. Transmission was not just between young adults but also between younger and older people, with increasing infection rates among the over sixties. This older cohort were most likely to end up in hospital, have longer stays and more deaths. The heat maps for Greater Manchester showed this same trend in the case rates among the age cohorts, and similarly in the seven day infection rates into early October. There was one anomaly in the Greater Manchester data for early October which seemed to be linked to fewer tests taking place in Central Manchester on two days. There was also a slight drop in case rates among 16-29 year olds which may have been linked to students returning from university. Neither appeared to be part of a change in trends.

Continuing, THE GOVERNMENT'S DEPUTY CHIEF MEDICAL OFFICER said that hospitalisations now reflected cases from two to three weeks ago. The trends being seen were consistent across Greater Manchester, and were particularly pertinent in Bolton. Cases now could not be 'undone' and would result in hospitalisations and deaths in the coming weeks. The hospital admission rate now looked reminiscent of the first wave of the virus and was increasingly dramatically among the over sixties. This data had been seen by local leaders in Greater Manchester. There was a similar pattern in case rates in Lancashire as a whole. Burnley has had high case rates for three to four weeks already. Lancashire hospital admission among the over sixties had seen similarly sharp upticks to Greater Manchester. Despite this picture, it did not appear to be too late for local measures to have an effect. There were areas of the country, particularly the South East and South West, which were not in the same position as the North East. Action taken immediately would not have an impact on the numbers for two to three weeks.

THE GOVERNMENT'S CHIEF SCIENTIFIC ADVISOR said that the response needed to get ahead of the virus. There was an advantage in keeping incidence low so that test and trace could remain a more effective tool, and more testing could be put into tier one regions (areas that were categorised as medium risk from coronavirus) to help prevent them from going higher.

The Committee:

— took note.

Local COVID Alert Levels
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THE PRIME MINISTER'S CHIEF STRATEGIC ADVISER said that leaders across Lancashire had generally accepted that the County would become a very high risk area (categorised as a tier three Local Covid Alert Level area). The Government's Deputy Chief Medical Officer had done a brilliant job the previous day in setting out the data. Local leaders were concerned about damage to local businesses as the region had never really been out of lockdown. Businesses needed help. Greater Manchester's leaders were using a similar argument but also maintained that local lockdown measures would not work and national lockdown would be the only solution. They were pressing for more money for the Job Support Scheme (furlough). One more round of negotiations with the local leaders in Greater Manchester was proposed, following which the Prime Minister may need to speak to the Greater Manchester Mayor. After this intervention a line should be drawn under efforts to get Greater Manchester's leaders on side.

THE GOVERNMENT'S CHIEF MEDICAL OFFICER said that he agreed that local measures could still have an impact with compliance and enforcement where needed. The country could be split into three: a third where the virus was increasing quickly, a third where the virus was taking off but more slowly, like London and the Midlands, and a third where it was moving at a much slower rate. The position could change at any point.

Continuing, THE PRIME MINISTER'S CHIEF STRATEGIC ADVISER said that he was confident that Lancashire's leaders would that day, agree voluntarily to move Lancashire to be designated as a very high risk (tier three) area. They recognised the importance of test and trace, enforcement and the right messaging in knocking the infection rate on its head. The Fylde coast was seeking to go into tier three at a later stage, given the upcoming Blackpool illuminations

event. The negotiations were complex and time consuming as negotiators had to engage with local political leaders, then local officials and then again with local political leaders in over twenty local authorities. In order to meet the Prime Minister's target to have an agreement to tier three measures in the North of England by the following Monday, negotiations would then continue with Tyneside the next day and subsequently with South Yorkshire, West Yorkshire and the Tees Valley.

THE DIRECTOR GENERAL IN THE COVID TASKFORCE said that the challenge that week had been the backlog in negotiations. A small amount of discretionary funding would be key to success. Yorkshire and other areas could be bought over the line, to agree with measures needed, by the following Monday.

THE CHANCELLOR OF THE EXCHEQUER said that he had received reassurance that the recently approved £1 billion for Local Authorities would ensure their buy-in to moving up the alert levels without the need for further negotiations on funding. He had been asked to agree this £1 billion without knowing what specific outcomes the funding would achieve. Local Authorities would always ask for more funding, and the discussions must be considered in the round rather than as negotiations on separate pots of money. It had already been agreed that a further half a billion pounds would be provided for tier two and three in addition to the previously mentioned £1 billion to manage in year pressures as a result of the Covid-19 (coronavirus) crisis. This was a huge card that the Government had to play, but it seemed to have yielded nothing in response.

Continuing THE CHANCELLOR OF THE EXCHEQUER said that the paper before the Committee suggested that Lancashire should keep £30 million in unspent grants. This was an accounting fiction as the grants had been provided to help local areas get support out of the door quickly. If this commitment were scaled up it would mean a further £1.3 billion of support on top of the existing £1 billion of business support. The figures being proposed were extraordinary.

Concluding, THE CHANCELLOR OF THE EXCHEQUER said that a figure for supporting local areas should be agreed and the Government must stick to it. If not, then each local area would attempt to extract more funding from the Government. If the reassurances he had received the previous week were wrong and that the £1 billion did not ensure the support of local areas, he would now consider what incremental funding was possible and agree his proposals with the Prime Minister. These

figures would then need to be adhered to. This process would mean taking funding away from other Government priorities.

In discussion the following points were made:

- a. there was support for resisting additional funding requests in negotiations;
- b. people in Greater Manchester and Lancashire were experiencing a public health emergency. If those who were taking decisions locally also had responsibility for the NHS, they would be moving more quickly. The Government needed to set out clearly what restrictions were needed, what local areas needed to do as a result and what funding was available. It was preferable that local leaders were willing partners in introducing local lockdown measures. But local leaders holding out on taking action where it was needed had to be avoided;
- c. the Mayor of Greater Manchester was behaving appallingly. He would not agree to any package and there was nothing the Government could do to secure his support. The Government should specify what was needed in public health terms;
- d. the distribution of the £1 billion of funding had been designed to be generous towards those areas in financial distress. The overall package was large and the value of further funding was not clear;
- e. business grant funding should not be retained by local areas that had not spent it. This funding much better sat with HM Treasury;
- f. from a public health perspective, the key thing was to put strong measures in place and enforce them. Economic cost would be greater if measures were delayed where cases were going up rapidly;
- g. the Fylde Coast areas should move into tier three at the same time as the remainder of Lancashire. Where there had previously been a delay to measures in this area, their infection rate had quickly increased;
- h. there would be problems if the Liverpool City Region ended up with a worse deal than Greater Manchester, having negotiated with the Government in good faith. Lancashire should have a lighter set of measures imposed than Greater Manchester, since they had shown

willingness to co-operate on enforcement and therefore lighter measures would have a greater impact;

- i. tougher measures should be imposed on Greater Manchester that day;

- j. messaging should reinforce to the whole country the need to take seriously the rising transmission rates;
- k. data about the infection rate should continue to be made available in Greater Manchester's media to apply public pressure to local leaders to act. This could continue over the forthcoming weekend. It was not clear that local leaders had a better alternative and they should come around to the Government's proposals. Local leaders in Greater Manchester were out of step with the people in their region. Their arguments had veered wildly between suing the Government for action and wanting firmer action nationally. Nor were they subject to the same level of scrutiny as politicians in the Government; and
- l. Government was losing the moral authority to enforce rules, and therefore additional rules were likely to be ignored. The police were not visibly enforcing the lockdown rules. Some people in the north of England felt that the country had left national lockdown too early for London's benefit.

Responding THE DIRECTOR GENERAL FOR THE COVID TASK FORCE said that the paper did not intend to propose that Lancashire should retain unspent business grants. The area had been subjected to restrictions for over 76 days and businesses needed support. If funding was allocated under a formula, then local leaders would not feel that they were taking part in a genuine negotiation.

Summing up, THE PRIME MINISTER said that the epidemiological position was likely to get worse before it got better. Negotiations had been going on for some time and it was time for local leaders to step up and ensure their communities got through this tough time. An equitable deal for Lancashire should be agreed as swiftly as possible, including all parts of the region moving into tier three measures without delay. The Blackpool Illuminations would not be able to go ahead that year. This deal could not suggest that all areas would expect the exact same or additional funding, and all funding needed to be justified.

Concluding, THE PRIME MINISTER said that the Greater Manchester deal needed to be concluded forthwith. He would call the Mayor of

Greater Manchester to explain the need for action. Manchester should be placed into tier three by the weekend with the full panoply of measures. The uncertainty could not continue. The plan for engagement with the North East should continue to ensure that there was buy-in from local leaders for action by the following Monday. There should be a set of measures and support, including giving hope to regions by supporting them with test and trace and enforcement.

The Committee:

— took note.

