

DATE: 12th May 2021

EXERCISE BARNCHESTER: READOUT
12th May 2021 (scenario set on 1st July 2021) | 2:45pm

Please note this is a detailed summary for internal planning purposes and should not be considered a formal minute of the exercise

The purpose of the exercise was to test the tools and options available to the government in these circumstances; and also to understand from the participants what information they are looking for to support decision making.

START OF EXERCISE

INTRODUCTION

The Chair introduced, noting that Barnchester is a busy urban center near the Bedford and Buckinghamshire border.

OVERVIEW

The Covid Taskforce referred to the previous GOLD meeting which discussed the Barnchester outbreak and agreed a set of escalated test and trace measures. There had been more concerning news on the variant's transmissibility and impact on the effectiveness of the vaccine. The Health & Social Care Secretary would present GOLD recommendations and the latest epi data. Ministers would need to consider the toughest set of actions to date based on January 2021 with adjustments. Key questions: is this the right balance of action; is it too much or is more needed, particularly on travel; is the geography right; is the economic and financial support right; will compliance and behaviours be in line with what is needed; how quickly can the Government implement; and what will the exit strategy be.

SITUATIONAL BRIEFING AND RECOMMENDATIONS (DHSC)

The recent information on the variant was very worrying. The public health assessment was that if the new variant wasn't gripped it would undermine the vaccine programme. GOLD recommended firm action and it was important to persuade people to take the action seriously. The main recommendation was to impose social and economic restrictions on Barnchester alongside enhanced Test and Trace measures and boosting uptake of the approved vaccines for those eligible in these areas.). It was also vital to use personal data (with consent) to improve contact tracing.

The Local Council was adamant that it needed additional financial assistance. Given the outbreak was likely to spread fast there was a recommendation to reintroduce shielding due to low vaccine efficacy. The biggest issue is keeping support for the action as the MP for Barnchester has threatened to resign from his junior ministerial position if Barnchester is locked down. Barnchester had an elected Mayor and is on the border of two upper tier local authorities, with one thinking firmer action needed and other thinking should be protecting the local economy. It was clear that closure of early school settings, schools and colleges are needed. If comms were not completely clear, people would sense the lack of surety and compliance would fall. The final point made was that the Government would likely lose a vote in parliament on a separate piece of legislation due to some MPs concerned about returning to lockdown.

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The Chair asked how effective travel restrictions were going to be and would they work. DHSC replied that they hadn't been done before and it may be that the variant had already spread beyond Barnchester. But the precautionary principle was relevant. Regulations were difficult and would be a challenging call to introduce.

DATA

UKHSA said there had been rapid growth including a large increase of cases with no travel link, with a significant impact on hospitalisation and deaths in Barnchester. The origin was in country A where you could see a clear rise in infections. Countries B and C were closely linked and were about a month/six weeks behind with all three countries on the red list for the last six weeks. There was evidence it was more than 20% to 50% more transmissible than the Kent variant. There was limited evidence on infection severity but there was evidence of hospitalisation and death. It was difficult to rely on international evidence due to the difference in international healthcare systems. There were international laboratory studies suggesting lower rates of antibody neutralisation, but no systematic data on reinfection.

Cases in fully vaccinated age groups with neutralisation by AZ and Pfizer were reduced significantly. There were three main clusters, one of which is a care home. One cluster was of particular concern with around 50 cases with no known epidemiological links to each other. This was consistent with significant community transmission and fitted in with an exponential increase over the last six weeks. Barnchester had a high mobility score and was in the top third in interconnectivity so there was a significant risk of spread in the wider area.

The Chair summarised that this is a new VOC which almost certainly had been imported. There was concern about the reduced effectiveness of existing vaccines on the VOC and that it was fast spreading. It could have a significant deleterious impact on the vaccination programme. Because of location, mobility, demographics, unless actioned, Barnchester is an area where it would spread faster and put more pressure on its services and create issues beyond Barnchester.

LOCAL AND POLITICAL VIEWS

The Chief Executive of Barnchester Council was concerned about the seriousness of the situation and the proposals. They had good relationships with their regional partnership team but the major issue was uncertainty on funding. With regards to the Contain Outbreak Management Fund, all funds were fully committed with no resources available to spend on additional compliance. There were also concerns about timescales and exit strategy as they did not want to repeat Leicester's difficult lockdown lift experience. Residents were asking for financial support for businesses and continuing furlough. Time was needed to bring communities together, recognising there were community tensions. The illegal economy was also proving challenging with concerns around human trafficking.

The Chair asked what financial support was available and what resources were needed. The Chief Executive highlighted the need for additional capacity for more boots on the ground. There was no option of mutual aid given neighbouring areas, being concerned about the spread, were providing limited support. The request was for £8 per head in line with the original lockdown.

The Local Public Health Director noted data had a lag on it but there was more timely local data which showed a continuing increase in cases with the situation getting worse. The Local Authority team was under extreme strain with PHE and health protection teams struggling with the numbers.

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The response had been running for four weeks with additional measures needed to bring the situation under control. There were also community tensions around sharing personal data and this might inhibit people coming forward for testing.

The Chair asked if the Public Health Director believed that the current Test and Trace resource was sufficient to meet the potential scale of infection growth. The Public Health Director said that it needed supplementing with more boots on the ground to do more local contact tracing.

The Mayor of Barnchester agreed with the Chief Executive about the need for restrictions to protect local hospitals. However the key requirement was for sufficient business support extending beyond the time limits currently in place e.g. extension of furlough, self-employment support schemes, business grants and loans, tax cuts and business rates relief.

The Chair asked if the Mayor could put a figure on what level of support may be required to which the Mayor said they would need a guarantee that the level of business support will be no less than in the full lockdown in January 2021. The other demand is around having an exit strategy with a key measurement or benchmark by which we would be lifting the restrictions and a guarantee of weekly reviews of data so as not to repeat the situation in Leicester.

DISCUSSION

In discussion the following points were made:

- Support for the Chief Executive on the need to provide certainty to councils on all individual measures e.g. COMF funding (the amount and distribution mechanism); business support funding; and councils' role in any boost to vaccine take-up (communications and outreach, workforce deployment, funding models). There was also a need for guidance on high risk locations, with clarity to local government on what they should be communicating and to whom (councils want flexibility in how they communicate measures to the community). They highlighted that a number of people shielding wouldn't be able to attend council meetings with remote meetings no longer permitted, so there would need to be provision for them to continue to meet. How the statutory functions of the council can continue needs to be considered, including the decision making processes with MHCLG, whether an emergency route was required or by providing good guidance to councils.
- The situation was serious but also relevant was the priority the Government had placed on children and their education (their mental health, development and educational attainment). The Contingency Framework made education a national priority and the Government should only resort to restricting education when other measures have failed. There had not been a period when other measures had been tried before moving to closing early years, schools and colleges. These measures should happen first, with other measures taken to keep schools open e.g. asymptomatic testing, reintroducing face coverings for teachers and students.
- Support for proposals for restricting travel through 'stay at home' but there needed to be clear messaging to people on not leaving the area or arriving in the area. People would need to travel through the area (e.g. the M1 and major rail lines pass through Barnchester). The best way to reduce the amount of travel and use of transport was to regulate the destinations themselves, not through roadblocks or other travel restrictions. There would always need to

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be essential workers that needed to get to work, given for example that Barnchester has a hospital. Hauliers would need to access the area to get goods in and out and there would be people around the border who would need to cross over to get to essential services. The Equality Impact Assessment would show that restrictions on travel would fall heavily on the disabled, those on low income, and those without access to private vehicles. Enforcement would be incredibly difficult and there may be a massive exodus prior to it coming in.

- There was a question if it would be possible to prevent travel *into* the affected area, except for authorised travel. The Police representative noted that the scale of Barnchester made that extremely difficult due to routes in and out and the sheer volumes of traffic would make it unmanageable. The Regulations would also not be in place to start with to allow enforcement to occur. To stop people the Police would need to have confidence in what the different exemptions are to test they are being utilised correctly. If travel restrictions were introduced as proposed, there might be unintended consequences to other transport networks connected to the one being blocked with severe traffic disruption likely in surrounding areas.
- A reference towards lessons learnt over the last year and the need to come down quickly to make these interventions to ensure the lockdown does not last as long. Otherwise there was a risk of widening to a national set of restrictions with a stop-start scenario which would not be desirable. They highlighted the importance of clear comms and were glad to hear that the issue of local government resources was being addressed. On going further on non-essential retail to make changes to takeaway, they flagged there are still key workers that rely on takeaways so was against that proposal.
- There was a question as to whether the package of measures should cover Barnchester itself or other surrounding areas in Bedfordshire and Milton Keynes.
- There was a point on the timing of the intervention given the data available on VoCs was 2 weeks old, therefore actions should be taken one-step ahead of the variant given the reliance on old data. There would also be local considerations. They commented that workers may travel a long way for certain occupations so that needed to be taken into consideration. The interventions would be most effective if applied early.

The Chair summed up by saying that the Government should take forward a series of measures for the crisis with a 6pm press conference announcing the measures to come into effect at midnight, with a statement in the House of Commons at 7pm. All of the Annex A measures should be accepted with education settings closed as recommended but permitted takeaways to remain open. There would be a boost to vaccine take-up and surge capacity for effective testing and tracing. The Mayor was asked to accept the personal data contract tracing proposal with a commitment to use that data exclusively and only for contact tracing with an expert offered to advise the Mayor. Guidance on high risk locations would be published.

- The Chair recognised the need for financial assistance that went beyond the Contain Outbreak Management Fund (which itself needed to be funded as before). There also needed to be a financial support package for business.

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- The Chair recommended reviewing measures every 72 hours. He noted the point on travel restrictions due to logistical and legal difficulties. Government needed to find a legislative route to ensure that local authorities can meet virtually.
- UKHSA was asked to increase asymptomatic testing, including door-to-door. On parliamentary handling, DHSC recommended bringing in the Regulations first and having the vote afterwards as they are not nationally significant. The Whips would need to be supportive of this approach. On travel, DHSC thought the government should try communications first, then proceed with regulations. The most important aspect was communications and DHSC urged everyone to coalesce behind the decisions. If one person locally were to say they were not supportive of the restrictions the package would be undermined so DHSC asked the Mayor to join the PM at the 6pm press conference.
- The Chair agreed to talk to the Chief Whip to understand the Barnchester MP's likely actions.

The Chair summed up that the Committee had agreed all the recommendations including the broader geography, the five week period with review after four weeks, and 72 hour interim reviews for any escalations. HMG would commit to the funding package and additional resources for testing. The Chair asked if the Mayor could reinforce the importance of this message to their citizens and local community leaders.

In further discussion:

- Full support of the public health recommendations on the actions to be taken, and recognition that these must lead the government's response, but a note of caution about moving straight to full lockdown with a need to consider exit strategy and have clarity on when restrictions might be lifted. Even with this lockdown the variant might spread and there may be a situation of extending the lockdown into an increasing region.
- There was a request to look at the financial package outside of this process and discuss with DHSC. It was noted that there was a strong need for a financial package but many support schemes put in place at the start of the pandemic were still operational, with some having entered a tapering phase e.g. furlough scheme, limited business rates, VAT relief. The significant package of support already in place did not cover everything but must be taken into account when considering the need for additional funding. Support for local authorities would still need to be considered.
- Businesses had adapted much better than expected with the economy having only contracted by 1.5%. This should be taken into account when agreeing the financial package, with the need to approach these discussions differently to the way they were handled in Autumn 2020 to ensure they come to the right agreement with the Mayor and local authorities without this playing out over a long period of time.
- There was a question why, given the average vaccination rates in the area an approach of "door to door jabbing" should be considered. They also asked about the propensity of people to submit themselves to asymptomatic testing and what the plan was for those that refused to be tested.

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- It was noted that the uptake on testing in south London was very high and there was confidence that the big increase in asymptomatic testing would work but there was an action to take away the point around door-to-door vaccination for a clinical decision.
- Having agreed collectively to take action and having agreed with the Mayor to offer local business support, there was a need to announce now, so this participant pushed back on delays to finalise the financial package. This participant thought this meeting should make the financial package decision and it should not be deferred to later Ministerial discussions.
- A participant said their department wanted to scrutinise any decisions on financial support. This could happen in a very short period of time but further work and discussions with DHSC must happen. CDL offered to arrange a meeting with the PM, Health Secretary and Chancellor.

END OF EXERCISE

REFLECTIONS FROM THE EXERCISE

The following points were made:

- a) The exercise was far easier than in real life. The junior ministerial resignation was brushed aside, HMT negotiations were less challenging, DFEs point on education closures was quickly overruled and relations with the Mayor were cordial. The end-point was sensible and they noted how practiced ministers were;
- b) Reflection on lessons learnt about unintended consequences of other decisions;
- c) On local relationships, conversations are always much smoother when there is clarity on the financial issues and there are lots of difficulties on handling local leaders when there isn't this clarity. Clarity determines and shapes the local reaction and engagement and ease of that process. The Mayor was supportive due to the assurances on funding;
- d) A question as to what the trigger is for when something moves from the local (e.g. closing down school with a decision by local PHE Director) to when it moves up to become a cross-government decision;
- e) JBC asked whether the data pack was sufficient or whether more data was needed to ease decision making;
- f) One participant found the exercise too easy with ministerial stakeholder engagement outside of this process not taken into account. They also noted that at this stage in the pandemic behaviours had moved on with many areas not widely observing the rules. There were clearly lots of people meeting indoors so to require people to go back into lockdown would likely meet with lots of behavioural resistance. This challenge needed to be considered;
- g) It would be worth doing more strategic thinking on communicating travel restrictions given it may to many people feel draconian and be incredibly difficult to enforce with police given the number of local roads but it is clear that some action would be needed. The participant questioned whether on communications you categorised people into three groups: "in" "out" and "travelling through" and then subsequently identify who people are. This strategy would need to be in the arsenal;
- h) There needed to be a strategy to prevent a mass exodus of Barnchester after the announcement and before it coming into effect;
- i) There needed to be a systematic package (i.e. when you reach this level this is the financial package offered) with a set of triggers (e.g. automatic cash for local areas, automatic

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additional vaccination and testing and an offer on how we get the data needed). There was a need to look again at the legislative tools given the difficulty of policing movement out of an area when new restrictions are imposed.

- j) There was a need to develop a preliminary structure for the financial package so that as much as possible can be agreed in advance. If the financial package wasn't nailed down the Mayor would be unlikely to support the announcement.
- k) One participant said the meeting should have probed further on important operational points (e.g. how do you get the communications right; how do you close the roads).
- l) On transport issues, one participant spoke of the need to develop a "ring of steel" plan to work through the additional resources that police and others would need.

ANNEX A: DECISIONS WITHIN SIMULATED SCENARIO IN BARNCHESTER

1. **UK Government** to put in place a series of measures in Bedford, Central Bedfordshire, Barnchester and Milton Keynes. These will include:
 - a. Local use of economic and social restrictions akin to January 2021 (with no tightening of takeaways);
 - b. The use of the DfE Contingency Framework to close all education settings, including Early Years, except for children of key workers, and vulnerable children;
 - c. Publication of guidance on the types of locations (e.g. high contact workplaces) likely to be high risk. Individual businesses would not be named;
 - d. Use of personal data, with consent, to improve contact tracing based on location information was to be explored. It would be ensured that this would be compliant with regulatory requirements;
 - e. Further detail on the use of self-isolation payments to be developed;
 - f. A boost to vaccine take-up including door to door; and
 - g. Reintroduction of shielding, following recommendation from CMO.
2. **UK Government** to announce the measures at a press conference at 6pm, with the Mayor of Barnchester. Statement to be made in the House of Commons. Further legislative action required:
 - a. Scheduling of a vote to follow the implementation of regulations; and
 - b. For affected local councils to be able to meet virtually.
3. **UK Government** agreed that these measures were to be in place for 5 weeks, reviewed formally at 4 weeks. Reviews were agreed to take place every 72 hours to identify (i) any requirements for further escalation and (ii) whether this period could be shortened.
4. **HMT and DHSC** to rapidly agree a funding support package for Barnchester.

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ANNEX B: EXERCISE BARNCHESTER ATTENDEES

Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, Rt Hon. Michael Gove MP (Chair)
Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, Rt. Hon Matthew Hancock MP
Minister of State for Home Office, Kit Malthouse MP
Minister of State at the Department for Education, the Rt Hon Nick Gibb MP
Minister for Small Business, Consumers and Labour Markets, Paul Scully MP
Minister for Regional Growth and Local Government, Luke Hall MP
Parliamentary Under Secretary of State at the Department for Transport, Baroness Vere of Norbiton
Kate Joseph (HM Treasury)
Alex Holmes (COVID Taskforce)
Andrew Furber (PHE)
NR (COVID Taskforce)
Carolyn Wilkins (DHSC)
Claire Pimm (Cabinet Office)
Clara Swinson (DHSC)
NR (DHSC)
Claire Gardiner (Chief Executive JBC)
NR (CCS, Cabinet Office)
Emma Floyd (BEIS)
NR (No10)
NR (DHSC)
James Bowler (COVID Taskforce)
Jenny Harries (Chief Executive UKHSA)
NR (DHSC)
Griffiths/Maclean (DfE)
NR (DfT)
Kathy Hall (COVID Taskforce)
Mark Aldworth (DHSC)
NR (DHSC)
NR (DHSC)
Neil Pattinson (Home Office)
NR (DHSC)
Paul McCloghrie (DHSC)
NR (DHSC)
Rebecca Shrubsole (DEFRA)
NR (DHSC)
NR (COVID Taskforce)
Susan Hopkins (PHE)
NR (Metropolitan Police)
William Welfare (PHE)
NR (DHSC)
Jan Sensier (DHSC)