

PRIME MINISTER

From: CDL

Date: 30 November 2020

WINTER

This will be a uniquely difficult winter. While we continue the battle against COVID we also face the challenges brought by the end of the transition period, challenges which will inevitably be greater in the short term if we leave without a negotiated outcome. The twin economic impacts of COVID and the end of the transition period have to be navigated alongside the potential for other crises to consume Government time and place a strain on our resources. These other risks include, but are not limited to, potential terrorist and cyber attacks, flooding, snow and severe weather, industrial action and public disorder.

I want to make sure we are as prepared as possible, and that when we are putting decisions to you or taking decisions in key Committees, we do so with better knowledge of what is happening in the round and the potential trade-offs between them. In support of this, the Cabinet Secretary has established a Winter Coordination and Control Cell, which has conducted an assessment to help inform what we, in the centre of government, should - and should not - focus on this winter.

We are relatively confident we have identified what needs to be done to prepare for key winter risks. But there are still significant steps we need to take to assure ourselves that we have actually done everything that is necessary to be ready. A case in point is maritime security. We know we need assets in place from 1 January to be as confident as possible we can avoid disruption but their deployment has not yet been finalised.

It is vital that we ensure every Government department is ready to take responsibility for the winter risks in its own area - from Defra's preparedness for flooding to BEIS's responsibility for fuel and power - we cannot afford to have departments assume "the centre" can manage all risk.

That said, there is much more we have to do to improve our resilience capacity at the centre. I have been worried for weeks now by the failure of the COBR facility to manage effective cross-Government communications and decision-making. These concerns were only reinforced last week when a technical failure in COBR meant we were unable to communicate with devolved administrations when discussing COVID Christmas rules. After 15 minutes when simple two-way communications were still impossible I had to decamp with my team to my own office to hold a basic zoom conversation. This was bad enough for a cross-administration discussion on COVID, and while I am assured that the secure systems are distinct, if we had experienced such an error when trying to manage, say, a terrorist incident in Glasgow, it would have been catastrophic. That is why it is so important to

refurbish the COBR facility and establish the Situation Centre. I know Beth Sizeland is gripping this, and will be updating me this week.

The greatest challenge of course is concurrent crises unfolding on top of one another. Our systems will be stretched if we have to respond to difficult issues in parallel. Even in a scenario where only a modest number of events occur at once, it is possible that some capabilities will be overwhelmed, and we will need to make hard choices in calibrating a response and balancing other risks. The Winter Cell's analysis suggests there are relatively few combinations of risks which could have a 'more than the sum of their parts' impact. For example, medical supply chain disruption and bad weather exacerbate each other and put pressure on emergency response resources. These are the scenarios of which we must remain particularly vigilant.

We have not tried to imagine every possible scenario, but the Winter Cell assesses that the greatest pressure will be felt as we pass through mid-December to mid-January 2021, where we are likely to see a build up of: end of the transition period disruption; end of school and university terms and then their returns; flu season; and an increase in COVID-19 infections. We must plan now for the fact that easements over Christmas will likely coalesce with more COVID-19 cases and normal NHS pressure in January just at the moment that transition period disruption hits. There is then another potential peak around February half term, where greater passenger movements, bad weather and the possibility of further COVID-19 incidence will intersect. Now that we know this, we can develop plans for getting through these key moments, and ensure we are clear who is leading on what.

Geography will play its part. Most issues are national, but we should keep an eye on some areas which are more vulnerable, such as Northern Ireland, where the implementation of the Protocol will be particularly sensitive, and Kent, which has the potential to suffer from unfortunate combinations of border disruption, COVID-19 and bad weather. Working with the devolved administrations to coordinate responses to these pressures will be challenging, and we anticipate that their planning for concurrent events is not especially developed or sufficiently resourced.

Unforeseen events - the known unknowns - can always occur. If we were faced with launching Irrelevant & Sensitive for example, this would all look rather different, but ultimately we will need to rely on the adaptability and resilience of our core capabilities as a nation. That does mean we must remain cautious of adding pressures to the system over the next couple of months, which could degrade the effectiveness of our response.

Reflecting on all of the above, I suggest the following:

1. **Pressing departments on their readiness and resourcing.** I recommend you ask the Cabinet to focus ruthlessly on our agreed top priorities this winter, and be prepared to reallocate rapidly staff to crisis response (potentially sharing them across departments, if some are bearing more strain than others). We will collectively succeed or fail this winter. Departmental protectionism will not help.
2. Assuring ourselves that we have an in-the-round view of how we **draw on the military and other emergency services** through winter and how to prioritise.
3. Ensuring the Cabinet Office's **crisis response machinery is better integrated and more user friendly** (you should not notice the difference between the service you get when you are overseeing a flood response or a terrorist incident).
4. **Developing a battle rhythm** for the various meetings, committees, COBRs and other fora so that we can make joined-up choices through a punishing winter schedule and so that we can give you the best possible support. It will be vital to have deputy chairs for XO and COVID-O so we remain resilient.
5. **Considering more proactively where we can act on a 'no regrets' basis** so that we can get more control of the winter risk profile. This could include averting local authority financial failure, activating military reservists, or taking a policy view now on how the NHS will respond during the potential January COVID-19 spike.

I have been working on the first four, and would be happy to discuss any of these in more detail with you.

While COVID-19 continues to pose medium to longer-term uncertainty and our focus on risks this winter should not take away from that, using the lens of winter risks will help us identify where we can confront some issues at a time and in a manner of our choosing, rather than being pushed into a scenario where the demands to multitask are too great.

I am copying this note to Simon Case, Alex Chisholm, and James Bowler.

Personal Data

MICHAEL GOVE