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EXERCISE BARNCHESTER - DANGEROUS VOC OUTBREAK - DRAFT TERMS OF REFERENCE

30th April 2020

On 15 April, CDL commissioned a ministerial simulation exercise of the response to the outbreak of a dangerous variant. This exercise will identify any policy gaps in our contingency planning and response toolkit, and highlight strategic choices for a subsequent discussion by a Small Ministerial Group.

Objective of Exercise

The objective of the exercise is to work through a scenario where Ministers can assess the various tools at their disposal to contain a dangerous variant, and determine their appetite for using enhanced measures. It aims to recreate the level of uncertainty in the risk the variant poses at the time that decisions need to be made.

In particular, the exercise will be designed to test ministerial appetite to use enhanced measures in response to a worsening VoC outbreak, including:

- Use of the strongest TTI tools including those engaging issues around privacy and enforcement;
- Localised social and economic restrictions, including options on education, shielding, enforcement and travel (respecting frameworks such as the DfE contingency framework); and
- The implications of financial support packages for an enhanced response.

An exercise report will be produced highlighting the lessons identified to inform contingency planning, the shape of response proposals and the design of escalation briefing products.

Date and format of Exercise

The exercise will take place on the 12th May. This comes after the Step 3 decision on 10 May, but maximises our ability to engage other government departments and offices so that participating ministers are well prepared and best placed to make the exercise a success. The exercise will last 1½ hours.

The core of the exercise will be a simulated ministerial meeting (with most attending virtually) set at a single point in time on the steep up-slope of a local outbreak. This is a simplification of the format envisaged by the actions arising from the meeting with CDL on 15 April (see Annex), which was 'accelerated real time'. This is (i) to enable us to deliver the exercise before Step 3 (typical lead times for more complicated exercises are over a month), (ii) to make the most of ministerial involvement and prepare with departments for a high-quality discussion, and (iii) in order to fit the time into ministerial diaries at relatively short notice.

CDL will chair the meeting, which will begin with a situation report / data briefing led by DHSC SoS and then a presentation of potential response options for discussion. Ministers will be asked to make recommendations for the PM (not present in the exercise) on a range of enhanced interventions to contain the outbreak, including the option to impose local

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economic and social restrictions across a specified area. The views of local leaders will be communicated clearly as part of the exercise, including the challenges faced by local leaders (political or otherwise) in implementing some of the options.

The simulated meeting would be designed to test:

- The value of the data presented in supporting ministers to make informed recommendations on further action;
- Whether the implications of different courses of action are understood, and identifying where more information may be needed to support timely decision making;
- Decisions on the geography for action, including the concept of the 'minimum unit for intervention' and considering how modelling guides the appropriate footprint;
- The reaction of local leaders to enhanced interventions and restrictions being imposed in their areas, and the support they will require; and
- How quickly enhanced interventions could be delivered, and the operational considerations that may need to be addressed in advance (including communications).

We recommend including other ministers who will have a strong interest given the nature of the enhanced options being discussed, for example restrictions on education and travel. The current proposal is based on the Ministers involved in tiering decisions.

Participants <i>Playing an active role in the meeting</i>		Facilitators/Observers <i>Observing or briefed to make key interventions or steer the conversation</i>
CDL SoS DHSC SoS MHCLG SoS/JM DfE SoS/JM DfT SoS/JM HO CX/JM HMT SoS/JM BEIS (Each Minister supported by 1 senior official)	Jenny Harries Kathy Hall 2-3 "local leaders" (such as Metro Mayor, Local Council Leader, Local MP, Public Health Director) played by briefed officials or one a trusted LA Chief Exec (for example drawn from the 'Regional 9' who MHCLG engage with regularly)	CMO Carolyn Wilkins Paul McCloghrie Susie Owen Susan Hopkins Clare Gardiner Clara Swinson

Outline Scenario

Set in the fictional urban environment of Barnchester, the scenario will be based around a growing cluster of a relatively new and dangerous variant with multiple cases where transmission links are not clear. There is some - but not conclusive - evidence that the variant may escape vaccine-induced immunity, with known cases of severe illness and death among vaccinated individuals. There is increasing concern about the ability of local and TTI measures to contain the variant. The scenario takes place after Step 3.

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In the scenario, a Gold meeting has already taken place and now key Ministers are coming together to discuss further to agree on further options prior to a COVID O.

Exercise Planning and Ownership

UKSHA are leading the development and running of the exercise, with Cabinet Office support from the COVID-19 Taskforce and CCS.

The development and planning of the exercise is being led by a Steering Group, chaired by Paul McCloghrie, Director of Response, Support and Learning, as the SRO for the exercise. Key strands are being led as follows:

- **Overall Coordination and Secretariat:** Leading overall co-ordination and xWH engagement, and reporting - UKHSA Lead with CO
- **Scenario:** Detailing scope of outbreak, case distributions, wider regional and national picture - PHE Lead with JBC
- **Policy:** Outlining all the measures (from existing TTI/Contain toolkit) taken so far in the course of the outbreak, and defining the "toolkit" of policy options - JBC lead with CO
- **Exercise Control:** producing and distributing final materials for exercise, running the exercise logistics and producing record/evaluation of exercise - PHE Lead (Porton Down)

From

Paul McCloghrie, UKHSA
Susie Owen, C-19 Taskforce

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ANNEX Extract from actions agreed at meeting with CDL on 15 April

1. **Cabinet Office and UKHSA** to rapidly organise an accelerated real-time simulation exercise of the response to an outbreak of a dangerous variant. This should inform contingency planning by promoting a shared cross-departmental recognition of the policy gaps and by testing the governance and communications frameworks. Key features to include:
 - a. Exposing the kind of high-risk scenario that our latest assessments suggest we may face by late summer/early autumn;
 - b. Convening ministerial decision-making moments and role-playing of local actors, including potential opposition;
 - c. Understanding of the measures that may be required in response to an outbreak;
 - d. Considering how to incentivise the right level of public buy-in to public health guidance, such as testing or compliance with self isolation; and
 - e. Evaluating what could have been improved in the response to the simulated scenario and whether those lessons would differ in the case of alternative scenarios, e.g. more or less dangerous variants, earlier or later detection.
2. Following the conclusion of the exercise, **C-19 Taskforce** to convene a Small Ministerial Group to agree the Government's preparations for outbreaks of dangerous variants.