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Minutes

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COVID-19 STRATEGY MEETING

Minutes of a Meeting of the Covid-19 Strategy Committee
held in No 10 Downing Street and by video conference on

THURSDAY 2nd July 2020
At 1015 AM

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 Dominic Raab MP
First Secretary of State, and Secretary of State for
Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs

The Rt Hon Priti Patel MP
Secretary of State for the Home Department

The Rt Hon Michael Gove MP
Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, Minister for
the Cabinet Office

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

The Rt Hon Alok Sharma MP
Secretary of State for Business, Energy and
Industrial Strategy

ALSO PRESENT

Professor Chris Whitty CB
Chief Medical Officer for England and the UK

Sir Patrick Vallance
Government Chief Scientific Adviser

Simon Case CVO
Permanent Secretary at No 10 Downing Street

Tom Shinner
Senior Advisor to the Prime Minister

OFFICIAL-SENSITIVE

Secretariat

S Ridley

NR

E Payne

OFFICIAL-SENSITIVE

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Contingency Planning:
Reactive measures and
COVID-19 Winter Planning

THE PERMANENT SECRETARY AT NO 10 DOWNING STREET said that the papers in front of the Committee set out the work required on contingency planning, and the work plan to prepare the UK for the winter period. A cross-departmental group had been established, including the Government Chief Medical Officer and the Government Chief Scientific Adviser as well as operational colleagues to work up smarter non-pharmaceutical interventions (NPIs). This included looking at issues including segmentation of the population to apply rules to certain people.

THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE said that preparation for the winter period needed to be a top priority. Conversations between his department and HM Treasury were ongoing to ensure the NHS was prepared. The three scenarios in the paper were reasonable planning assumptions. It was likely that the Government would want to have imposed a smarter set of NPIs in advance of the third scenario materialising, rather than being forced to be reactive. The strategic question was what to do to prevent the rate of infection rising as the weather got colder throughout the winter. The Government needed to be ready to stop it happening.

Continuing, THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE said that the NHS must be prepared. He would do all he could to increase the productivity of the NHS, but the infection control regime meant that the NHS would be inherently less productive. His department was working at pace to ensure the NHS was better organised, including working up a plan to use the 111 phone number to triage accident and emergency admissions. He was grateful for the letter from the Prime Minister's Private Secretary that set out a suggested timetable for preparedness. There was a large amount to get on with to ensure winter preparedness. The more powers that the Government had to enforce the Covid-secure guidelines for businesses, the better it would be and the less likely that there would be a need for national lockdown measures.

In discussion, the following points were made:

- a) the Government had learnt a lot from the process to lockdown Leicester. That lockdown had won widespread public backing. The Government should be as decisive as possible when making decisions about local lockdowns. A playbook was being developed;

- b) better data and the best possible detection tools were needed to enable action to be more targeted;
- c) information should be shared more effectively to allow local leaders to put plans in place to tackle the virus, and to help the Government to understand better when it should step in. Local agencies should be held accountable for providing some of that information, such as on the propensity of houses of multiple occupancy, and also on acting on that information. This was needed to control the spread of infection. Decisive action to address local outbreaks was important to avoid the need for a national lockdown;
- d) the plan for the winter should ensure that the priority was to save lives and to protect the NHS. Public health messaging would be important to ensure these two goals were met. A reaffirming of the strategy would strengthen public confidence, emphasise the importance of the health of the nation, and place responsibilities on local authorities, care homes and the NHS to rise to the standards expected of them;
- e) the virus had spread in part due to care homes and hospitals being dirty. The Government should take the opportunity to make changes to ensure care homes and hospitals were legally obliged to act responsibly as institutions. There should be greater transparency on those hospitals that failed. Individual institutions should be accountable;
- f) the NHS should be given the resources it needed for everything from treatments to stockpiles of personal protective equipment (PPE). The UK could not afford shortages;
- g) consideration should be given to what powers could be given to third party partners to enforce NPIs. Those organisations were more likely to be on-the-ground and closer to communities. It was important to have clarity about which organisation had the powers and responsibility for which actions;
- h) multi-agency partners should be brought into the exercising that was due to take place. They could help provide capacity and put in place their own contingency measures;

- i) effective segmentation of the population should be considered. The risk of death and strain on the NHS needed to be reduced. Shielding and longer-term public health measures should be considered as a means to reduce risk and deaths; the police had plans in place to ensure those who broke the law on 4 July would be dealt with. Local Authorities were responsible for ensuring that licensed premises followed the rules;
- j) there should be an acknowledgement of the weaknesses of the test and trace system, and the plans for how to improve them. Some people were reluctant to be tested, to reveal their contacts or to follow isolation rules. A strategy should be developed to address this;
- k) the trajectory to open the economy further should be communicated. To keep up the goodwill from businesses, they should continue to feel involved in developing guidance and the Government should ensure clear messaging when local lockdowns are imposed. The business community should be involved in the planning of smarter NPIs;
- l) in January, the Department for Health and Social Care had ordered millions of doses of influenza vaccines to prepare for the winter. These would be rolled out as widely as possible; and
- m) contingency plans for very bad weather over the winter months would be needed.

Responding, THE GOVERNMENT'S CHIEF MEDICAL OFFICER said that the Government should steer a steady path between a cautious approach and reopening the economy.

Responding, THE GOVERNMENT'S CHIEF SCIENTIFIC ADVISER said that the important work to be done now on preparing for the winter was ensuring that the plan would be able to be operationalised without missteps. Some of the proposed contingency measures should be considered as proactive options.

Responding, THE SENIOR ADVISER TO THE PRIME MINISTER said that he was grateful that the Committee had agreed that the three scenarios in the paper were right, that the third scenario would be used as the Reasonable Worst Case scenario for the purposes of the Civil Contingency Secretariat's plans and that the ten work streams that the

Government would take forward to prepare for winter were the right ones. In particular, he noted that there would be exercising in August, an audit of all supplies and work to identify where powers lay at which level of government. This would include consideration of non-governmental third parties.

Summing up, THE PRIME MINISTER said that the Government's messaging about what was allowed on 4 July would be key to ensuring the public struck the right balance. There should be a reinforcement of safety messages including around face coverings.

Continuing, THE PRIME MINISTER said that the papers were too reactive and needed to set out more clearly the Government's vision. The last date in the Roadmap published by the Government on 11 May was 4 July. Further information was required on when the rest of the economy would open, including conference centres, mass gatherings, theatres and gyms. A plan should be set out soon with dates, and this should include the circumstances under which the reopening would be allowed: there should be a new Roadmap for at least the following three months. An internal target could be set for when the Government was comfortable lifting NPIs further, such as a low number of deaths or cases. London was the engine of the UK economy and would not fully recover until people could return to their business in the usual way.

Concluding, THE PRIME MINISTER said that there should be an examination of the powers held at different levels of government. Government needed to be able to act quickly to respond to local outbreaks. Another national lockdown would be a disaster. The public should be told about alternative, smarter NPIs, once they had been developed and it should be explained that they would be deployed instead of a national lockdown. Businesses should be told that this meant that they could continue to rely on their workforce, and a customer base. They would then be able to start a virtuous circle of investment and do the right thing by way of compliance. Segmentation was important, both in terms of demographics and geographically. The Government needed to impose its own timetable and avoid being reactive to future events, in order to deliver its ambition to get back to as normal as possible as quickly as possible.

The Committee:

- took note.