

COVID-19

Item 1. Current situation including science advice

1. The CHAIR welcomed attendees in the room including the Devolved Administrations and reiterated the importance of preparing the UK for disruption caused by COVID-19. The CHAIR said that the Government's approach to the response would be guided by science and would focus on helping the most vulnerable and the elderly. The CHAIR stressed the importance of good hygiene to prevent the spread of COVID-19.
2. The CHAIR invited the Government Chief Medical Officer (CMO) and the Government Chief Scientific Advisor (GCSA) to provide a situation update. The CMO said that contact tracing for the source of infection for the last two cases in the UK had not been successful and that in both France and Germany there was now sustained community transmission. That the aim for the DELAY phase, if CONTAIN failed, was to delay the peak of infections, to reduce the peak, and to minimise loss of life.
3. Continuing the CMO said that interventions to delay the spread of the virus must not be implemented too early in order to ensure maximum effectiveness. The Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE) was looking at measures for social distancing and exploring measures that both Hong Kong and Singapore had utilised. This advice would be ready in the following few days.
4. The MINISTER OF STATE FOR ASIA AT THE FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE said that British Nationals were the hotel in Tenerife that had an outbreak of COVID-19. That all British nationals that stayed in the hotel were being tested for COVID-19 and would be returning to the UK through commercial means over the following days. Further repatriations of UK nationals may not be undertaken in a similar manner to the Wuhan and Diamond Princess repatriation flights should the COVID-19 outbreak continue to get worse.

Item 2. Agreement of Covid-19 Action Plan

5. The CHAIR invited the Department of Health and Social Care to update on the COVID-19 action plans. The SECRETARY OF STATE FOR HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE thanked the Devolved Administrations for their work drafting the response plans and said that the headlines of the plan had already been published and proposed that the entire document be published externally the next day.
6. The CHAIR asked the Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government whether the Local Resilience Forums were suitably prepared for COVID-19. The MINISTER OF STATE AT THE MINISTRY FOR HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT said that each of England's 38 Local Resilience Forums had plans for responding to a viral outbreak but that levels of preparedness varied.
7. Responding the Devolved Administrations said they were content with their engagement with their Local Resilience Forum equivalents.
8. The CHAIR invited Her Majesty's Treasury to present to the Committee on what the impact on the economy could be. THE CHANCELLOR OF THE EXCHEQUER said that in a reasonable worst case scenario, GDP could retract by 1.6 per cent (forecasts with no COVID-19 modelling showed GDP growing by 1 per cent). That departments should consult Her Majesty's Treasury if extra spend was required to respond to COVID-19.

9. In discussion the following points were made:
- The importance of clear communications throughout the response which up until this point had focussed on reassuring the public. That they now needed to explain what HMG was doing to respond to the outbreak. Public concern was at 28 per cent, up from 9 per cent a few weeks previously.
 - The NHS would be severely disrupted by the outbreak and that modelling for the potential hospital bed requirements was underway.
 - Whether the NHS had enough ventilation capacity.
 - Adding extra ventilation capacity was not as simple as procuring more equipment - staff need to be trained to use the new equipment otherwise it would be dangerous for the patient.
 - Medics in Asia were more likely to ventilate due medical practises in the region, which might have inflated the figures for the number of individuals expected to require ventilation.
10. Summing up CHAIR said the Committee agreed that the action plan should be published.

Item 3. Covid-19 Bill

11. The CHAIR invited the Department of Health and Social Care to give an update on the 'Covid-19 Bill' which would give the Government emergency powers to respond to the reasonable worst case scenario. The SECRETARY OF STATE FOR THE DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE said that the bill included a sunset clause and that it was a priority that the Bill gained royal assent by the end of March 2020.
12. In discussion the following points were made:
- Whether emergency powers under the Civil Contingencies Act (2004) could be used, however it was agreed that the Civil Contingencies Act (2004) could not be used in place of a new bill as there is still time to legislate.
13. Summing up, the CHAIR said the Committee agreed to proceed with the 'Covid-19 Bill' as a priority.

Item 5. Next steps

14. Summing up the CHAIR said that the Government's response must be guided by science and protecting the vulnerable. The CHAIR said that COBR will continue to meet on a regular basis.

ANNEX 1 - ACTIONS
