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COVID-19 (M)(20)(7)

CABINET OFFICE BRIEFING ROOMS

COVID-19 (M) (7)

Meeting on Wednesday, 4th March 2020

Irrelevant & Sensitive Cabinet Office

70 Whitehall at 17:00

MINUTES

PRESENT

The Rt Hon Matt Hancock
Secretary of State for Health and Social Care
In the CHAIR

The Rt Hon Anne Marie-Trevelyan
Secretary of State for International Development

The Rt Hon Robert Buckland
Secretary of State for Justice

The Rt Hon Simon Hart
Secretary of State for Wales

The Rt Hon Kelly Tolhurst
Parliamentary Undersecretary of State at the
Department for Transport

Baroness Susan Williams
Lords Minister at the Home Office

The Rt Hon Christopher Pincher
Minister of State for Housing at the Ministry
of Housing, Communities and Local
Government

The Rt Hon Nigel Adams
Minister of State for Asia at the Foreign and
Commonwealth Office

The Rt Hon Nick Gibb
Minister of State for School Standards at the
Department for Education

The Rt Hon Douglas Ross
Parliamentary Undersecretary of State at the
Scotland Office

The Rt Hon Robin Walker
Parliamentary Under Secretary of State at the
Northern Ireland Office

The Rt Hon Jo Churchill
The Parliamentary Under Secretary of State at
the Department of Health and Social Care

The Rt Hon Mims Davies
Parliamentary Undersecretary of State at the
Department of Work and Pensions

The Rt Hon Nadhim Zahawi,

The Rt Hon Edward Argar

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Parliamentary Undersecretary of State at the
Department of Business, Energy and Industrial
Strategy

The Rt Hon Nigel Huddleston
Parliamentary Under Secretary at the Department
for Culture Media and Sports

The Rt Hon Penny Mordaunt
The Paymaster General, Cabinet Office

The Rt Hon Steve Barclay
The Chief Secretary of the Treasury, Her
Majesty's Treasury

Minister of State at the Department of Health
and Social Care

The Rt Hon Victoria Prentis
Parliamentary Under Secretary at the
Department for Environment, Food and Rural
Affairs

The Rt Hon Johnny Mercer
Parliamentary Under Secretary of State,
Ministry of Defence

ATTENDANCE VIA VTC

Jeane Freeman MSP
Scottish Government

Vaughan Gething AM
Welsh Government

Robin Swann MLA
Northern Ireland Executive

OFFICIALS

Chris Wormold
Permanent Secretary, DHSC

Emma Reed
DHSC

David Lamberti
DHSC

Chris Whitty
Chief Medical Officer

Anthony Mcgee
MOD

Imran Shafi
No 10

Stuart Wainwright
GO Science

Emma Moore
Border Force

Beverley Warmington
DFID

Mark Sedwill
The Cabinet Secretary

Katharine Hammond
Civil Contingencies Secretariat

Alex Aiken
CO Comms

Ed Lister
No 10

Ben Warner
No 10

NR
PHE

NR
NHS England

Mike Green
DFE

Laurie Bristow
FCO

NR

NR

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BEIS

HMT

OFFICIALS DIALLED IN

Dr Frank Atherton
Welsh Government CMO

Chrishan Kamalan
Welsh Government

Reginald Fitzpatrick
Welsh Government

Andrew Slorance
Scottish Government

Dr Michael McBride
Northern Ireland CMO

SECRETARIAT

Natasha Grant

NR

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The Cabinet Office circulated the following papers to inform the Committee's discussion:

1. 04032020 SAGE interventions table for COBR(M)

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COVID-19

Item 1: Current Situation Update

a. Statutory Sick Pay

1. The CHAIR opened the item by noting the Prime Minister's recent statement on statutory sick pay and thanked the Department for Work and Pensions and Her Majesty's Treasury for their quick action in responding to the necessary policy changes. The CHAIR said that the announcement was high level and that the decision was made at pace so additional work remained.
2. The PARLIAMENTARY UNDER SECRETARY OF STATE AT THE DEPARTMENT FOR WORK AND PENSIONS presented the item and outlined ongoing work on changes to Statutory Sick Pay and the process for claiming and receiving Universal Credit. That the legislative changes to Statutory Sick Pay would need primary legislation. These included suspending waiting days for absences related to COVID-19 and a rebate for statutory sick pay for small and medium sized enterprises through government compensation. They were also looking into regulation changes for those self-isolating due to Government advice or looking after sick children and an extension of the window of self-certification from 7 to 14 days.
3. In discussion the following points were made:
 - The importance of ensuring that changes allow workers in key sectors to self-isolate if symptomatic without fear of being financially penalised.
 - There were already processes in place for self-certification over the phone. The Department for Work and Pensions was working with NHS 111 to get barcodes to say that Public Health England (PHE) had asked them not to go into work, in order to claim benefits more easily, thus reducing pressure on the National Health Service.
 - People on zero-hours contracts would be able to apply for statutory sick pay if they earned over a certain threshold.
 - The lack of laptops for Department for Work and Pensions staff remained a challenge but they were looking to be as flexible as possible.
 - Language needed to be as clear in public messaging including advice and guidance on the eligibility criteria being required in order to implement in Northern Ireland.
4. Summing up the CHAIR said that all messaging should reinforce that workers would not be without support if forced to self-isolate.

b. Schools and educational settings

5. The CHAIR invited the Department for Education to provide an update on the nine schools closed in England due to deep cleaning being undertaken and/or staff absence. THE MINISTER OF STATE FOR SCHOOL STANDARDS AT THE DEPARTMENT FOR EDUCATION said that they had opened a helpline that Monday and were emailing schools daily with advice and noted the biggest risk for the department was the forthcoming exam season and that their first priority was to get children to take exams, including GCSEs, A levels and SATS. Another risk was OFSTED school inspections which were not expected to

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be able to take place to the same degree due to staff shortages. There had been a large number of queries regarding school trips and they had met with the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, Public Health England and the Devolved Administrations to get more advice to schools on this and to international students who may be returning home for the school holidays.

6. In discussion the point that school exams in Scotland take place before those in England, and that similar mitigation measures were being considered was made.

c. Local Resilience Forum readiness

7. The CHAIR invited the Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government to provide an update on readiness among Local Resilience Forums (LRFs) in England. The MINISTER OF STATE FOR HOUSING AT THE MINISTRY FOR HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT said that every LRF had contingency plans for a pandemic influenza outbreak and these would be used to respond to the COVID-19 outbreak, but that not all LRFs had tested their readiness with exercises. All LRFs would carry out tabletop exercises to test readiness by the end of the month and a taskforce would work with the LRFs to identify any requirement and capability gaps, and put mitigation measures in place including the pooling of resources and expertise.
8. Continuing the MINISTER OF STATE FOR HOUSING AT THE MINISTRY FOR HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT said it was important that the LRFs continued working collaboratively and not just locally, particularly in excess deaths planning
9. In discussion the following points were made:
 - That West Mercia would be late in submitting their audit and required extra assistance due to other issues they are dealing with, including recent floods.
 - Concerns that sufficient resources were not in place to support the LRFs and that they were not receiving sufficiently detailed information from the central government. There was a call for extra resources from the centre to liaise with LRFs, both Civil Servants and military planners to ensure granularity of information for readiness plans.
 - The Ministry of Defence had 20 emergency planners available to help other Government Departments prepare, in addition to staff available to LRFs.
 - Police forces in England and Wales were content with the current situation following a recent tabletop exercise and were prepared for staff absence of up to 30 per cent.
10. The CHAIR invited the Devolved Administrations to provide an update on their emergency preparedness:
 - Welsh Local Resilience Forums were already up and running to deal with flooding.
 - Readiness exercises in Northern Ireland were scheduled to take place over the next few days.
 - The Scottish Resilience Group was being chaired by the Deputy First Minister to prepare the response.

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d. Businesses

11. The CHAIR invited the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy to provide an update on the macroeconomic outlook in light of the COVID-19 outbreak, and what support was being considered for businesses. The PARLIAMENTARY UNDER SECRETARY AT THE DEPARTMENT FOR BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY said the most recent macroeconomic forecast, drawn up in conjunction with Her Majesty's Treasury implied impacts would be severe with the potential for severe sectoral impacts. A review of measures to support business was underway and a business support helpline would be stood up and rolled out to the public on 9 March. Support from All Departments was required to ensure scripts for helpline operators were accurate and up-to-date. Some sectors had already been impacted severely, including airlines and tourism, and officials were reviewing business monitoring and support measures that could be made available in the case of business failure. That support for sectors was being reviewed as a matter for the Budget.

12. In discussion the following points were made:

- The tourism sector was currently experiencing severe negative impact problems as a result of the COVID-19 outbreak and options for short-term assistance should be considered.
- Messaging on major sporting events was calm and measured compared to other countries.
- Contingency plans drawn up for the event of a no-deal exit from the European Union were being employed to support COVID-19 planning..
- Support for impacted businesses should not be confined to England.
- That Her Majesty's Treasury would meet the Devolved Administrations before the Budget to discuss specific COVID-19 measures.
- The Northern Irish Budget had been delayed until after 11 March.

Item 2 - UK nationals overseas repatriation criteria

13. The CHAIR invited the Foreign and Commonwealth Office to update on the policy agreed with the Department of Health and Social Care on the repatriation of British Nationals abroad. The MINISTER OF STATE FOR ASIA AT THE FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE said the policy, included the following assumptions:

- UK Nationals that test positive should remain in and be treated in the country where they were tested.
- Anyone who was subject to in-country quarantine/isolation requirements should do so in that country.
- For UK Nationals that were not infected the primary responsibility should be with the travel companies to manage their return to the UK appropriately and this message had gone out to companies.

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- There would be some exceptional circumstances, likely to include the vulnerability of the patients or an imminent risk to their health, safety or security. These would be dependent on the NHS's ability to treat these patients.
14. Continuing the MINISTER OF STATE FOR ASIA AT THE FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE said that actions by other governments could put pressure on HMG to deviate from this approach, but noted that other G7 governments had agreed in principle to publish a joint policy. That effective communications around this were needed in order to retain discretion to respond.
15. In discussion the following points was made:
- The risk of possible business failures among airlines.
16. Responding, the MINISTER OF STATE FOR ASIA AT THE FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE said they were in touch with struggling airlines and agreed to discuss the matter with the Department for Transport.

Item 2: Non-pharmaceutical interventions

17. The CHAIR invited the Government Office for Science (GO Science) to give an update on non-pharmaceutical interventions. The DIRECTOR FOR GO SCIENCE said there were a number of interventions, including social distancing, closing schools, and discouraging mass gatherings, that could be taken to delay and flatten the peak of the outbreak of COVID-19. A range of different options were outlined, including pushing the peak out of the winter or simply flattening the peak. They had not yet looked at combinations of the interventions for modelling and this was being done in the coming days. There was a lot of uncertainty and the biggest variable that behavioural scientists had noted was compliance to the interventions. The public needed to understand why certain measures were taken in order to ensure more compliance. That different regions would be at different points of the curve at different times.
18. In discussion the following points were made:
- Economic modelling had been done and the biggest economic cost would be days lost. The UK was expected to lose 140 million days over a 30 week period.
 - That the measures were not additive and more work was needed to look at them as a package.
 - The analysis only looked at economic impacts and not social impacts. Work was being undertaken to look at social impacts.
 - There may be a gap between what the science says and what the public believes, for example around mass gatherings.
 - That analysis needs to be done on the implications of the social distancing of the over 65s and on social care for those at home and in primary care to understand how best to deploy resources.
 - The need to stick to the science and have clear public messaging to explain why actions are being taken.
 - The actions of the Republic of Ireland who need to be considered too.

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- That good communication would be essential to ensure that social distancing did not mean social isolation.
 - Confidence was needed in food supplies. The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs would talk to supermarkets on delivery and ensure the Cabinet Office was engaged.
 - The Department for Education were working on plans as to how to close schools, including early years and further education.
 - The need to understand parents' behaviours and the implications for young carers was important.
19. Summing up the CHAIR said that the science was guiding them towards self isolation but noted that this could raise an issue for people obtaining food and posed the question of asking supermarkets to allow free delivery for those who were self-isolating. That some of these decisions would be devolved but agreed the UK should take a Four Nations approach to this problem and stick to the science.

Item 4: Communications

20. The CHAIR asked the Committee for any further updates on the reasonable worst case scenario, the bill, and communications.
21. In discussion the following points were made:
- HMG needed to speak with power companies in detail about the reasonable worst case scenario in order to allow them to plan.
 - Communication of the Bill had to be confidential as the detail was not yet public.
 - That there may be 'sunsetting' clauses in the Bill that powers could be turned off power.
 - That a clause should be added to the bill regarding the elections that May. That postal votes could resolve this issue.
 - That the closure of ports would be a communications issue and noted the need to work on the threshold for this. Science advice should be taken on this.

ANNEX 1 - ACTIONS

CABINET OFFICE BRIEFING ROOMS

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COVID-19
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04 March 2020, 17:00

I&S

Cabinet Office, 70 Whitehall

ACTIONS

1. DEPARTMENT FOR WORK AND PENSIONS to ensure key communications lines on amends to Statutory Sick Pay are shared with all DEVOLVED ADMINISTRATIONS by close 4 March.
2. CABINET OFFICE to work with MINISTRY OF HOUSING, COMMUNITY AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT and MINISTRY OF DEFENCE to plan what resources and capabilities are required to support Local Resilience Forums.
3. BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY and the COMMS HUB to work with DEVOLVED ADMINISTRATIONS and ALL DEPARTMENTS, to ensure information for businesses is sufficient and of high-quality.
4. CHIEF SECRETARY TO THE TREASURY to meet with the DEVOLVED ADMINISTRATIONS the day before the budget to discuss COVID-19 related announcements.
5. FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE to work with DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE and the COMMS HUB on communication of the agreed repatriation policy.
6. FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE and DEPARTMENT FOR TRANSPORT to discuss the immediate risk of an airline failure.
7. DEPARTMENT FOR ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS to work with supermarkets to consider whether delivery fees for online food shops could be waived for over 65s (in the event of social distancing).
8. CABINET OFFICE, working with ALL DEPARTMENTS, to consider options to mitigate the impacts of social distancing measures e.g. use of existing helplines to place food orders.

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9. ALL DEPARTMENTS to consider how social distancing measures could be implemented, incorporating behavioural science.
10. CABINET OFFICE to ensure that the analysis of social distancing measures takes into account social and economic impacts.
11. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE to work with the DEVOLVED ADMINISTRATIONS to resolve how the powers in the Bill will be switched on and off.
12. HOME OFFICE to seek advice from SAGE on whether impacts on workforce could result in insufficient workforce to safely manage the borders.

DECISIONS

1. The committee agreed to adopt the repatriation policy as set out by Foreign and Commonwealth Office.
2. The committee agreed to share the reasonable worst case scenario assumptions with wider stakeholders, including the voluntary sector.
3. The committee agreed to share details of the Bill with trusted partners and operational stakeholders on a confidential basis.

Cabinet Office
04 March 2020