

**COVID-19 Outbreak (M) (5)**

**CABINET OFFICE BRIEFING ROOMS**

—  
**COVID-19 (M) (5)**  
—

**Meeting on Wednesday, 26<sup>th</sup> February 2020**

**Irrelevant & Sensitive**

**70 Whitehall at 15:00**

—  
**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 Simon Hart  
Secretary of State for Wales

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

The Rt Hon Jo Churchill  
Minister for Prevention, Public Health  
and Primary Care at the Department of  
Health and Social Care

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

The Rt Hon Simon Clarke  
Minister for Regional Growth and Local  
Government at the Ministry of Housing,  
Communities and Local Government

The Rt Hon Lucy Frazer  
Minister of State at the Ministry of Justice

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 Undersecretary of State at  
the Northern Ireland Office

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

The Rt Hon Nadhim Zahawi  
Parliamentary Undersecretary of State at  
the Department of Business, Energy and  
Industrial Strategy

*OFFICIAL SENSITIVE*

*THIS DOCUMENT IS THE PROPERTY OF HER BRITANNIC MAJESTY'S GOVERNMENT*

The Rt Hon Nigel Huddleston  
Parliamentary Under Secretary for Sport, Tourism and  
Heritage at the Department for Digital, Culture, Media  
and Sport

The Rt Hon Penny Mordaunt  
The Paymaster General at the Cabinet  
Office

The Rt Hon Jesse Norman  
Financial Secretary at Her Majesty's Treasury

The Rt Hon Kevin Foster  
Parliamentary Under Secretary of State  
for Future Borders and Immigration at  
the Home Office

Lord Gardiner  
Lords Minister at the Department for Food, Rural and  
Agriculture

The Rt Hon James Heappy  
Parliamentary Under Secretary of State at  
the Ministry of Defence

**DIALLED IN**

Jeane Freeman MSP  
Scottish Government

Robin Swann MLA  
Northern Ireland Executive

Vaughan Gething AM  
Welsh Government

**OFFICIALS**

Chris Wormold  
Permanent Secretary, DHSC

Katharine Hammond  
Civil Contingencies Secretariat

Jonathan Van Tam  
Deputy Chief Medical Officer

Simon Stevens  
NHS England

Emma Reed  
Department of Health and Social Care

**Name Redacted**  
Department of Health and Social Care

Professor Keith Willet  
NHS England

Alex Aiken  
Director, Government Communications

Angela Perfect  
Home Office

**NR**  
Cabinet Office

Air Commodore **Name Redacted**  
Ministry of Defence

Max Blain  
Department of Health and Social Care

Ben Warner  
No 10

**Name Redacted**  
No 10

Ed Lister  
No 10

**Name Redacted**  
Department for Transport

Stuart Wainwright  
Director for GO Science

Charlotte Watts  
Department for International  
Development

*OFFICIAL SENSITIVE*

*THIS DOCUMENT IS THE PROPERTY OF HER BRITANNIC MAJESTY'S GOVERNMENT*

Laurie Bristow  
Foreign and Commonwealth Office

Yvonne Doyle  
Public Health England

**Name Redacted**  
Home Office

Paul Netherton  
Deputy Chief Constable, National Police  
Chiefs Council

Natasha Grant  
Cabinet Office

Peter Tallantire  
Cabinet Office

**OFFICIALS DIALLED IN**

Frank Atherton  
Chief Medical Officer - Welsh Government

Naresh Chada  
Chief Medical Officer - Northern Ireland  
Executive

**NR**  
Welsh Government

Doreen McClintock  
Northern Ireland Executive

**SECRETARIAT**

**NR**

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

1. 2020-02-26 Covid-19 CRIP- 15

*OFFICIAL SENSITIVE*  
*THIS DOCUMENT IS THE PROPERTY OF HER BRITANNIC MAJESTY'S GOVERNMENT*

**COVID-19**

## Item 1: Current Situation Update

### a: Situation Report

1. The CHAIR invited the Deputy Chief Medical Officer (DCMO) to update on the current global situation. The DCMO said that official data from China showed that case numbers continued to increase. Internationally case numbers in South Korea, Iran and Italy highlighted clear person to person transmission and the following areas of concern:
  - The connectivity of Iran, particularly with other countries in the Middle East.
  - Sustained human to human transmission in Italy - which receives a high number of travellers to and from the UK.
  - Two further serious cases and Germany.
  - It was still difficult to predict when or if case numbers would increase in the UK.
2. The DIRECTOR FOR THE GOVERNMENT OFFICE FOR SCIENCE (GO SCIENCE) said that the meetings of the Scientific Advisory Group for Emergencies (SAGE) that took place on 25 February, endorsed Public Health England (PHE) surveillance regimes and confirmed that the Reasonable Worst Case Scenario remained as previously stated.

### b Health advice for travellers and schools

3. The CHAIR said that the fact schools were closing, against advice to the contrary, remained a live issue and that the Department for Education had issued advice to education settings earlier in that day.
4. In discussion the following points were made:
  - Further public health advice was being prepared for schools.
  - The Welsh Government had issued updated advice to schools and educational institutions and similar advice to community level sporting clubs, signposting them to advice from Public Health Wales.
  - The Scottish Government had issued general advice and that health protection Scotland would update the advice tomorrow, advising against school closure.
5. Summing up the CHAIR said that schools with international planned trips should follow travel advice from Foreign and Commonwealth Office. The advice could not be different for schools as compared with the general public. The CHAIR said that schools should not close unless they had a case confirmed by a positive test and in cases where someone in the household was self-isolating children should still go to school.
6. The CHAIR invited the DCMO to give an update on medical advice to individuals arriving in the UK from impacted international regions. The DCMO said that current medical advice was that:
  - Iran, specific areas of Northern Italy and South Korea (as designated by their respective Governments), and the Hubei province - anyone travelling from these areas was advised to self-isolate regardless of whether they have symptoms on arrival in the UK.
  - For further countries or areas, including Northern Italy, Cambodia, Myanmar, Laos, Vietnam and Thailand - anyone travelling from these areas was advised to self-isolate if symptoms present.
7. In discussion the following points were made:
  - International posts were prepared to deal with queries.

- In Tenerife there were 168 UK nationals staying at a hotel where an Italian family had tested positive. The Foreign and Commonwealth Office were in touch with 113 of the UK nationals and were trying to reach the rest. UK nationals had been advised to follow instructions from the Spanish Health Authorities. There were approximately 30 elderly, high risk, individuals at the hotel.
  - That all major and regional airports, including in Scotland, had the advice they needed to share with individuals disembarking from flights but that communications materials at airports and ports could be improved to ensure the maximum amount of exposure to the public.
8. The CHAIR invited the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport for an update on mass gatherings. The PARLIAMENTARY UNDER SECRETARY FOR SPORT, TOURISM AND HERITAGE AT THE DEPARTMENT FOR DIGITAL, CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT, said that there was considerable anxiety around mass gatherings and no concrete advice as of yet. That there was a strong need to speak with sports bodies, particularly around the upcoming rugby matches and the marathon. That unless companies felt that they would be compensated they would not risk cancelling events.

**c: International response**

9. The CHAIR invited the Department for International Development to give an update on the UK's international response. The SECRETARY OF STATE FOR INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT said that they were moving to support the World Health Organisation response, including offering £35 million to supporting research and aid organisations such as the Red Cross and UNICEF. There were already issues arising for example the lack of diagnostic tests in vulnerable countries. They were looking at how the UK could offer more support, including offering NHS experts.
10. Summing up the CHAIR said that it was vital that we did not rush to offer NHS staff abroad if it was detrimental to the service at home.

**d: HMG preparedness**

11. The CHAIR said that the reasonable worst case planning assumptions looked close to becoming the reasonable planning assumptions as cases in Italy demonstrated the need for heightened alertness in most sectors. This should include progressing COVID-19 legislation, updating formal 2011 pandemic influenza plans, and ensuring good public communications. The CHAIR said all departments should step up preparations and think about all sectors that could be affected. In discussion the following points were made:
- COVID-19 legislation policy proposals should be expedited.
  - The basic principle of the Civil Contingencies Act was that if you can foresee the emergency then you should take forward other legislation, therefore an emergency COVID-19 Bill was the appropriate legislative vehicle.
  - The pandemic influenza excess deaths planning assumption (800,000 deaths) greatly exceeded ordinary capacity and would have significant cost and logistical implications.
  - Publication of guidance on excess death management was highly likely to spark public and media interest.
  - There was a huge variation in local plans to manage excess deaths and significant work needed to be done to properly audit local plans.
  - Economically COVID-19 would have a severe effect on growth, in effect eliminating all growth for 2020.

- All financial claims by departments to respond to COVID-19 would be treated as reserve claims and should be requested in the normal way.

12. Summing up the CHAIR said that the committee agreed that excess deaths plans would be published along with other plans and that these plans would be four nations plans.

**Item 2: Public order**

13. The CHAIR invited the National Police Chief's Council (NPCC) to give an update on public order. The DEPUTY CHIEF CONSTABLE, NPCC said that there were very few community tensions at this stage however they planned to move to daily rather than weekly reporting on tensions. That business continuity plans for policing were well tested - that the police could manage up to a 33 per cent reduction in staffing and still maintain law and order but that concurrency would be difficult to manage. Normal mutual aid arrangements had been tested and were working.

14. The PARLIAMENTARY UNDER SECRETARY OF STATE AT THE HOME OFFICE introduced a paper on behavioural science insights they said it showed that people were more likely to be altruistic in the event of widespread outbreaks but that there are two areas of which could cause this situation to change:

- The potential for individuals to deliberately try to provoke tensions.
- Long waits due to overcrowded hospitals, closed transport etc and perceived unfairness.

15. The PARLIAMENTARY UNDER SECRETARY OF STATE AT THE MINISTRY OF DEFENCE said that they had 5,000 people at readiness from twelve hours to five days.

16. The CHAIR invited the Ministry of Justice to update on prisons. The MINISTER OF STATE AT THE MINISTRY OF JUSTICE said they had been looking at reasonable worst case scenario issues in courts and prisons. That there was a risk that a prison outbreak and lockdown could provoke disorder, and further issues could arise if prisoners could not be moved between prisons. A prison 'Gold Command' had been stood up and was developing and disseminating national guidance to prisons.

**Item 3: Communications**

17. The DIRECTOR FOR GOVERNMENT COMMUNICATIONS said that the cross-Government communications response remained science led and supported by a new public information campaign - designed to raise awareness of the seriousness of the impact of the virus and get the public to take more action for example washing hands etc. The campaign would be implemented the following week.

18. Summing up the CHAIR said that specific communications were needed for businesses.

ANNEX 1 - ACTIONS

---

Novel Coronavirus Outbreak (M) (5)

CABINET OFFICE BRIEFING ROOMS

COVID-19

---

26 February 2020, 15:00 I&S, Cabinet Office, 70  
Whitehall

ACTIONS

**1. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE**, to work with **FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE**, to develop a set of criteria which may inform future decisions on the repatriation of British nationals, taking into account domestic resource pressures.

**2. PUBLIC HEALTH ENGLAND** to work with **DEPARTMENT FOR EDUCATION** and the **DEVOLVED ADMINISTRATIONS** to update guidance for schools on the risk of Covid-19.

**3. DEPARTMENT FOR TRANSPORT**, working with **DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE**, **PUBLIC HEALTH ENGLAND** and the **DEVOLVED ADMINISTRATIONS**, to ensure that all international and regional ports have the required public health information for returning travellers and are making it sufficiently visible.

**4. DEPARTMENT FOR TRANSPORT** to ensure signposting in ports to medical support facilities is available and in an extended range of languages.

**5. DEPARTMENT FOR EDUCATION**, working with **PUBLIC HEALTH ENGLAND**, **FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE** and the **DEVOLVED ADMINISTRATIONS**, to develop advice for international students attending educational establishments in the UK.



**6. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE** to take into consideration the recess dates for **DEVOLVED ADMINISTRATIONS** parliaments in Covid-19 Bill timetable planning.

**7. CABINET OFFICE**, working with **MINISTRY OF HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT** to assess preparedness of local plans to manage excess deaths.

**8. CABINET OFFICE**, working with the **HOME OFFICE, DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE, MINISTRY OF JUSTICE and MINISTRY OF HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT**, to prepare a plan for communicating with local responders on preparations for Covid-19 including guidance on excess deaths management and the Bill.

**9. ALL DEPARTMENTS** to engage with **MINISTRY OF DEFENCE** should consider whether they have a requirement for military support so that **MINISTRY OF DEFENCE** can consider whether the available military capabilities are sufficient.

**10. BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY**, working with **HM TREASURY and DEPARTMENT OF WORK AND PENSIONS**, to establish a dedicated business communications capability to provide a single point of contact for businesses and employers to get advice on all matters relating to Covid-19.

**11. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE and CIVIL CONTINGENCIES SECRETARIAT** to circulate the lessons from **EXERCISE CYGNUS** relating to excess deaths management.

**Decisions**

1. Advice to schools should follow **FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE** Travel advice and be consistent across all four nations.
  
2. The updated guidance on excess deaths for local planners should be incorporated in the wider set of Covid-19 planning advice for local responders currently under development.
  
3. Guidance to local planners on managing excess deaths should be aligned, as appropriate, across the four nations.

**Cabinet Office**

**26 February 2020**