

COVID-19 (M) (11)

CABINET OFFICE [Irrelevant & Sensitive]

COVID-19 (M) (11)

Meeting on Monday, 16 March 2020

[Irrelevant & Sensitive]

PRESENT

The Rt Hon Boris Johnson
Prime Minister
In the CHAIR

The Rt Hon Priti Patel
Secretary of State for the Home Office

The Rt Hon Robert Jenrick
Secretary of State for the Ministry of Housing,
Communities and Local Government

The Rt Hon Dominic Raab
Foreign Secretary

The Rt Hon Gavin Williamson
Secretary of State for the Department for
Education

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

The Rt Hon Vaughan Gething (AM)
Minister for Health and Social Services, Welsh
Government

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

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

The Rt Hon Oliver Dowden
Secretary of State for the Department for
Digital, Culture, Media and Sport

The Rt Hon George Eustice
Secretary of State for the Department for
Environment, Food and Rural Affairs

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

Sadiq Khan
Mayor of London

The Rt Hon Rishi Sunak
The Chancellor of the Exchequer, Her
Majesty's Treasury

DIALLED IN

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Nicola Sturgeon MSP
Scottish Government

Robin Swann MLA
Northern Ireland Executive

Mark Drakeford AM
Welsh Government

Arlene Foster MLA
Northern Ireland Executive

Michelle O'Neill MLA
Northern Ireland Executive

Jeane Freeman MSP
Scottish Government

OFFICIALS

NR
Permanent Secretary, DHSC

Mark Sedwill
The Cabinet Secretary

Natasha Grant
Civil Contingencies Secretariat

Katharine Hammond
Civil Contingencies Secretariat

Lee Cain
No.10

Alex Aiken
CO Comms

Chris Whitty
Chief Medical Officer

Dom Cummings
No.10

Patrick Vallance
Government Chief Scientific Officer

Ben Warner
No.10

Imran Shafi
No 10

Emma Payne
CO

Frank Atherton
Welsh Government

OFFICIALS DIALLED IN

Dr Michael McBride
Northern Ireland CMO

Dr Catherine Calderwood
Scotland CMO

SECRETARIAT

NR

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

1. 20-03-16 COBR COVID-19 (M)(20)(11) CRIP 27 - FINAL

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COVID-19

Item 1: Current Situation Update

1. The CHAIR welcomed the committee to the meeting and thanked the Mayor of London for attending. The CHAIR turned to the GOVERNMENT CHIEF SCIENTIFIC OFFICER (GCSA) and the CHIEF MEDICAL OFFICER (CMO) who said there had been an increase in confirmed cases, the UK was now at the cusp of a fast upward swing of the infection curve. On the basis of the NHS capacity model, further action should be taken. That there are now 35 confirmed deaths and a further 20 unannounced. There were 55 cases in Intensive Care Units.

Item 2: Next Steps for Interventions

2. The DIRECTOR GENERAL AT THE CABINET SECRETARIAT said that there were four proposed intervention measures in the circulated paper:
 - Full Household stay at home: where any member of a household was symptomatic, the whole household should fully isolate.
 - Social distancing: to reduce social contact where they can through 'soft' social distancing - for example. encouraging home working, advising against social mixing, not going into crowded areas when unnecessary.
 - Advice to specific groups: for those groups in a more vulnerable category the advice is to follow this social distancing guidance more rigorously: (i) 70+ (regardless of medical conditions); (ii) under 70 with defined long-term medical conditions; (iii) pregnant women.
 - Shielding the most vulnerable: This involves shielding the most vulnerable, approximately 1.4 million individuals.
3. The DIRECTOR GENERAL AT THE CABINET SECRETARIAT said that large gatherings were advised to not go ahead, and that public and emergency service cover would not be provided to any large events. This would be advice rather than a ban. Shielding related only to England. That there would be greater pressure in London and there should be more forward leaning advice for London residents.
4. The CHAIR said that communications remained important and noted that this is an immense change for the public, possibly the biggest since WWII.
5. In discussion the following points were made:
 - Support for the package of measures outlined and noted the importance of language in explaining the measures to each affected group.
 - An advertising campaign about the measures would be released the following day and the overarching message of the campaign had been well received: 'Protect yourself, Protect others, Protect the NHS'.
 - Measures would form part of an England only package, which would also contain changes to how the NHS works.

- Compliance was expected to be high in the early stages of these measures being implemented and an extensive questions and answer document was also being published.
 - The Secretary of State for the Department of Health and Social Care would make a statement to Parliament after the Prime Minister's press conference that day.
 - The importance of understanding how COVID-19 and social distancing measures would affect the workings of Parliament.
 - The communications strategy would be vital in presenting this to the public as maintaining compliance might be difficult as the measures should be expected to go on for a substantial amount of time.
 - Social distancing measures may suggest that schools should be closed, although not immediately.
 - Scotland had its own unique package of measures for the Scottish NHS.
 - The potential economic impact the measures will have. The CHAIR responded by noting that the current priority was saving lives by flattening the curve but work would take place to consider economic impacts.
 - Whether full household isolation would result in the clock restarting for all members in the household if another member becomes ill?
 - The importance of language and behavioural science. By 'strongly' advising one group of people and simply advising another group, the message may lack clarity.
 - The importance of the Devolved Administrations having sight of the advertising campaign prior to release as English based media is widely accessible in the devolved administrations.
 - The need for clarity on the definition of numbers on large gatherings, given that both the Republic of Ireland and Scotland had set this as 500.
 - The need for clarity on the definition of long term medical conditions.
 - The complexity of the island of Ireland's two separate jurisdictions.
6. Responding, the CMO said that the clock would not restart for the whole household if an individual became ill at the end of the 14 days and the rest of the household were well. The higher risk group included those aged 70+, pregnant women and/or individuals who had been advised to have an influenza vaccination. Longer term medical conditions would include those with serious medical conditions, including renal conditions. That the combined measures would result in an estimated 70 per cent reduction in peak of the virus. The issue of school closures was under constant monitoring. That avoiding gatherings was the overall aim of the policy; large gatherings were merely a subset of this.
7. The CHAIR then invited the Mayor of London to provide an update. The MAYOR OF LONDON said that in London there had been 298 positive cases confirmed, with 14 deaths and there would be questions about why large gatherings were advised to stop, instead of banning them. London had a diverse population and multilingual communications were a necessity and that religious congregations were of increased importance, given that these were often large gatherings. That full household isolation would have an impact on public service delivery (there was a 40 per cent reduction that day of London Underground passengers), that social care provisions for the elderly and vulnerable must be in place and that rough sleepers were also an affected group.
8. In the discussion the following points were made:

- The UK would not be setting a precedent in discouraging religious congregations as the Vatican and religious authorities in Saudi Arabia have already cancelled theirs respectively.
 - Religious congregation was an issue being considered by the Morality and Ethics committee.
 - There had been a documented spread of the virus through religious congregations.
 - Multilingual communications were essential and should include sign language.
 - The modelling suggested that schools were okay to remain open for now but may change based on scientific advice.
9. The CHAIR then invited the Secretary of State for the Ministry for Housing, Communities And Local Government to provide an update on local preparedness. The SECRETARY OF STATE FOR THE MINISTRY FOR HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT said they had liaised with 300 local councils in England on plans to only deliver core services (social care, services to support the vulnerable, and delivering budget measures for the local level, including operating the hardship fund for those in need). That the NHS was a key aspect of every Local Resilience Forum and the Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government were working with local councils to ensure a coherent chain of command. The Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government had also been working with the Department for Media, Culture and Sport and the Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs on food supply issues, especially for the vulnerable and were encouraging all local councils to set up a local hub to provide basic care in a specific set of circumstances. That rough sleepers were a key issue: 65 per cent have respiratory issues. Public Health England had issued guidance on how to handle the situation. Plans would be released the next day giving councils additional funding to put the most vulnerable into suitable accommodation.
10. The CHAIR then invited the Secretary of State for the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy to provide an update on business preparedness. The SECRETARY OF STATE FOR THE DEPARTMENT FOR BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY said that they had been in discussions with businesses. It was evident that impacts, including employee impacts, would be different in each sector. That Critical National Infrastructure had not yet reached the 20 per cent staff absence rate. However, if schools were to close, businesses would need to prepare in order to mitigate impact on employees.
11. In discussion the following points were made:
- There would be a huge impact on the hospitality sector.
 - Large gatherings could be explained in the context of wider social distancing measures.
 - There should be consideration for exceptional cases in relation to the refusal of emergency service provisions for large gatherings.
 - Cancelling large gatherings was complex. Insurance premiums on events could only be reclaimed if the event is banned and defining large gatherings is key.
 - School closures were a key issue as the most vulnerable children were often safest at school.

- Communications should be localised to ensure that they are bespoke to the region in question.
 - The Police were resilient and could maintain services with a 30 per cent absence rate.
 - The Department for Education was exploring options around free school meals.
 - It was noted that these measures might put pressure on head teachers to manage staff absences. Therefore consideration should be given to measures that could take administrative burdens off schools.
 - Singapore had not yet closed schools. School closures in the UK would put a huge strain on the NHS, supply chains and the food network.
 - It was likely that eventually social distancing measures would make school closures difficult to avoid.
 - The previous week had seen a 10 – 15 per cent increase in panic buying. That week saw 50 – 60 per cent increase in panic buying, with some supermarkets introducing rationing to mitigate. Stock rooms had been invaded in certain cases and the announcement of social distancing measures could lead to more panic buying.
 - There was plenty of food. Dealing with the spike in demand was the current challenge.
12. The CHAIR then invited the Secretary of State for the Foreign and Commonwealth Office to provide an update on the international situation. The FOREIGN SECRETARY said that the international situation was fluid. There were further plans to change the travel advice, including advising against travel in particular areas to avoid further repatriation flights. However flights would be kept going in order for people to come home - obtaining agreement from G7 on this would be valuable. They would make a statement to the Houses of Parliament the following day and guidance for Easter holidays would be released shortly. The EU was currently proposing to stop all travel by air the following day.

Item 3: Comms, Media and Parliamentary Handling

13. In discussion the the following points were made:
- Proactive communications were needed to avoid panic and potential school closures.
 - School closures would compromise the resilience of the frontline workforce.
 - Singapore had introduced social distancing within schools, with children being kept two metres apart from each other
 - In relation to using the influenza vaccine list as a guide to affected communities, all school children were vaccinated in Scotland. Communications needed to be clear on this one.
 - The points raised for school closures were applicable across the public sector, including the NHS.
 - The maintenance of schools was very important as front line workers would have school-aged children.
 - Increasing help to the NHS was key, an example being private business responding to HMG's call for ventilators.
 - Singapore temperature tested all school children for assurance levels. This was a possibility.
 - It had been made clear that the influenza vaccination guidance did not include school children.
 - They needed a fall-back position on school closures.

- The Department for Education had been liaising with universities to see how university accommodation could be accessed to help vulnerable individuals. This would be picked up with the Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government .
- Easter holidays were fast approaching. Consideration should be given to what form the reopening of the schools will take after the holidays.
- There was a need for flexibility to work with the Irish government. There were two separate jurisdictions with different public messaging. That HMG were coordinating with the Irish government on COVID-19.
- There was no current time frame for these measures that these measures will need to be sustained for a lengthy period of time to be effective.
- Measures could be implemented on a rolling basis, possibly over twelve months or more.

14. Summing up the CHAIR said the package of social distancing measures as set out in the CRIP had been agreed. He said public sentiment was important and highlighted the importance of reassuring the public that this was temporary and for the collective good.

ANNEX 1 - ACTIONS

COBR COVID-19 (M)(20)(11)

CABINET OFFICE Irrelevant & Sensitive

COVID-19(M)

To be held in Irrelevant & Sensitive

On Monday 16th March 2020 at 15:15

ACTIONS

1. The COVID-19 COMMS HUB to share the content of the advertising campaign starting tomorrow with the DEVOLVED ADMINISTRATIONS by close of play today.
2. The DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE and DEPARTMENT FOR EDUCATION to explore immediately with the DEVOLVED ADMINISTRATIONS what measures could be taken in educational settings short of closure to reassure and align with wider measures.

DECISIONS

1. The committee agreed that the package of measures as set out in the 'summary and recommendation' slide of the CRIP should be implemented and announced. Messaging should include that there may be a need to sustain these measures.