

**COBR COVID-19 (M) (12)**

**CABINET OFFICE BRIEFING ROOMS**

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**COVID-19 (M) (12)**  
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**Meeting on Wednesday 18 March 2020**

**I&S** 10 Downing Street,

**And via Video Teleconference**

**at 16:00 (scheduled for 15:45)**

**Present**

The Rt Hon Boris Johnson MP  
Prime Minister  
In the CHAIR

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

**Dialled in**

The Rt Hon Rishi Sunak MP  
Chancellor of the Exchequer

The Rt Hon Michael Gove MP  
Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster

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

The Rt Hon Robert Buckland MP  
Lord Chancellor

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

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

The Rt Hon Thérèse Coffey MP  
Secretary of State for Work and Pensions

The Rt Hon Gavin Williamson  
Secretary of State for Education

The Rt Hon Ben Wallace MP  
Secretary of State for Defence

The Rt Hon Grant Shapps MP  
Secretary of State for Transport

The Rt Hon Robert Buckland MP  
Secretary of State for Justice

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

The Rt Hon Penny Mordaunt MP  
Paymaster General

Jo Churchill MP  
Parliamentary Under Secretary at the  
Department for Health and Social Care

### Officials

Sir Mark Sedwill  
Cabinet Secretary

Jonathan Slater  
Permanent Secretary at the Department for  
Education

Chris Whitty  
Chief Medical Officer

Sir Patrick Vallance  
Government Chief Scientific Advisor

Alex Aiken  
Cabinet Office Comms

Sir Simon Stevens  
Chief Executive Officer NHS

Dom Cummings  
No 10.

Sir Ed Lister  
No 10.

Imram Shafi  
No 10.

Jonathan Black  
Cabinet Office

Mark Sweeny  
Cabinet Office

**NR**  
Civil Contingencies Secretariat

Emma Payne  
Cabinet Office

**NR**  
No 10.

### Officials dialled in

Chris Wormold  
Permanent Secretary at the Department for  
Health and Social Care

Dr Frank Atherton  
Welsh Government Chief Medical Officer

Dr Catherine Calderwood  
Scottish Government Chief Medical Officer

Dr Michael McBride  
Northern Ireland Chief Medical Officer

Andrew Slorance  
Scottish Government

Reg Kilpatrick  
Welsh Government

**NR**  
Cabinet Office

**NR**  
Department for Health and Social Care

Ben Warner  
No 10.

**Secretariat**

Natasha Grant

**NR**

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

1. 2020-03-18 Covid-19-CRIP 28 FINAL
2. 2020-03-18 COBR(M)(12) DFE Schools Measures
3. 2020-03-18 COBR(M)(12) Paper 3 Key Workers Definition

## **COVID-19**

### **Item 1. Current situation including science advice**

1. The CHAIR welcomed attendees and the Devolved Administrations and reiterated the importance of working together, across the Four Nations, to agree an approach to potential school closures. The CHAIR said that the Government's response to COVID-19 would continue to be guided by science and would focus on protecting the NHS and public services.
2. The CHAIR turned to the Government Chief Scientific Advisor (GCSA) to provide a situation update. The GCSA said that without further interventions they expected London was approximately 2-3 weeks away from Intensive Care Units (ICUs) being full with COVID-19 patients.

### **Item 2. Policy Measures (Schools)**

3. The GCSA said that even if social distancing measures were increased London remained at risk of exceeding its ICU capacity. Modelling suggested that school closures would play an important role in helping to ensure that ICU demand was not exceeded. The Scientific Group for Emergencies (SAGE) estimated that school closures could potentially reduce COVID-19 cases by 10-15 per cent - and below the threshold for breaching ICU capacity. SAGE modelling had been offset by an expected increase in use of grandparents for childcare - more likely to be used by single parent families. Modelling assumed that schools should be kept partially open to ensure that key workers could continue to contribute to the national effort. For example an estimated 15 per cent of the NHS's workforce would be impacted by school closures. SAGE modelling suggested that if school attendance was limited to 10-20 per cent the social distancing effect would be equivalent to 60-70 per cent of a total shut down.
4. Continuing, on the success of the social distancing measures already in place. The GCSA said that the current interventions had led to a 40 per cent reduction in transport usage and a 15 per cent reduction in individuals attending workplaces. That changes were not at the rate needed, that the UK would be in a vulnerable position if it watched and waited for a further two weeks before implementing any additional social distancing measures. In order of the most to least effective, the following additional measures could be considered: closure of schools and colleges, closure of leisure facilities, closure of indoor workplaces and closure of non-essential retail.
5. In discussion the following points were made:
  - The need for further work on increasing compliance with the measures already implemented including options for enforcement.
  - London was two to three weeks ahead of the rest of the UK that further work to prepare the rest of the UK should be prioritised.
  - There were likely to be further, significant economic impacts from school closures as a result of wider contributors to the economy not having access to school for childcare.
  - There was an increased need for intervention now to slow the rate of spread of the virus.
  - Further measures to limit the impact on the economy could be considered at future meetings.
  - The impact of school closures should be kept under review.
6. Summing up, the CHAIR said that the proposal to close schools on 20 March for Easter (in effect bringing forward the Easter holidays) had been agreed. That a minimal school service

should be made available for the children of key workers and for vulnerable children. That schools should be asked to remain open over the Easter holidays to provide childcare for the children of key workers. That exams scheduled in England for May and June should be cancelled.

**Item 3. Communications, Media and Parliamentary Handling**

7. The point that communications on the issue should be carefully planned to ensure that they did not increase the risk of further panic buying was made.

**ANNEX 1 - ACTIONS**

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**CABINET OFFICE BRIEFING ROOMS**

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**COVID-19**

18 March 2020, 16:00

**I&S** 10 Downing Street

**ACTIONS**

1. CABINET OFFICE and HER MAJESTY'S TREASURY to work with ALL DEPARTMENTS and the DEVOLVED ADMINISTRATIONS to agree a list of key workers whose children will be supported with ongoing school based care, following UK school closures.
2. The DEPARTMENT FOR EDUCATION to work with the DEVOLVED ADMINISTRATIONS to consider arrangements for, and communications to, pupils on the cancellation of examinations and the pathway for students to move from school to universities in September.
3. The DEPARTMENT FOR EDUCATION to work with the DEPARTMENT FOR WORK AND PENSIONS and HER MAJESTY'S REVENUE AND CUSTOMS to consider the most appropriate method of continuing free school meals arrangements.
4. The DEPARTMENT FOR EDUCATION and the DEPARTMENT FOR WORK AND PENSIONS to consider any guidance that can be provided around the minimum age children may be left at home alone.

**DECISIONS**

1. The committee agreed to bring forward the Easter Holidays for all schools in England, simultaneously with Northern Ireland and in line with Scotland and Wales. This will have the effect of closing all schools from the evening of Friday 20 March 2020.
2. Schools will remain open over the Easter Holidays and until further notice for children of key workers.
3. There will be no examinations in schools in May or June in England. Each of the Four Nations has a different examination regime, but all will look to other arrangements to ensure pupils are awarded the qualifications they would have achieved.

**Cabinet Office**

**18 March 2020**