

COBR(Ministerial) (6) Covid-19 - Briefing
2 March, 10:30-11:30

- The PM is chairing a COBR Meeting on the UKG response to Coronavirus. Minister Walker has been attending weekly COBR meetings over the past month, chaired by the Health Secretary.
- Northern Ireland Health Minister, Robin Swann (UUP) and NI Chief Medical Officer, Dr Michael McBride will be in attendance. Health is devolved in Northern Ireland, the NI Health Minister is there to take the operational decisions on behalf of NI.
- Your role is to ensure that UKG is fully considering Northern Ireland in its decision making. So far this has been the case.
- Your officials, alongside NI Civil Service, have been attending COBR (O) meetings. The most recent officials meeting was on Friday, where they discussed a similar agenda.

Agenda

1. Current situation update, including Scientific Advice
2. Agreement of Covid-19 Action Plan publication
3. Covid-19 Bill
4. Comms, media and parliamentary handling
5. Next steps

1) Current situation update

a. UK situation report

- As of 1 March, UKG data shows that 36 cases have been confirmed in the UK, (33 from England, 1 from Northern Ireland, 1 from Scotland and 1 from Wales)
- Of those 36 cases 21 remain in the care of the NHS and 15 have been discharged from hospital following two consecutive negative results.
- The Japanese Health Ministry has confirmed that a British National who was onboard the quarantined Diamond Princess cruise ship in Japan has died in hospital.

b. Northern Ireland situation report

- Northern Ireland has one case of Coronavirus, diagnosed on 27 February. This patient is being treated at Royal Victoria Hospital (Belfast). DoH has concluded 'contact tracing' for the patient (testing people with whom they have been in contact).

- Under the agreed protocol by the UK's 4 Chief Medical Officers, the patients would be brought to one of four specialist clinical facilities, all of which are in England.
- Department of Health (NI) made a request for military assistance to transport the patient to Royal Victoria Infirmary (Newcastle). This request was denied by MoD. As part of the **MACA** request DoH confirmed that there are no other transport options (plane or boat) to bring the patient to the hospital.
- Commercial providers will not fly contagious disease patients due to the damage that decontamination does to airframes.
- The patient was transferred to a ward in Royal Hospital in Belfast, but in NI clinicians' opinion, the standard of care is not the same. Expert consultant cover is not available round the clock in Belfast. They have arranged that the hospital the patient was meant to transfer to in GB will be available by phonecall 24/7.

If asked for a view on the MACA request that was denied:

- *I am disappointed that it has not been possible to provide transportation for this individual to the identified specialist centre. However, I'm pleased that they are receiving excellent care in Northern Ireland. I hope that future requests will be approved if there is also a scientific basis to them.*
- More information on MACA is at **Annex A**.
- Northern Ireland now has access to the NHS 111 helpline for Coronavirus advice (previously they used a separate local system).
- Ulster Hospital has opened a 'drive through' testing facility, to allow potential patients to be tested from their cars.
- The first case was confirmed in the **Republic Of Ireland** on 29 February. The case involves a teenager whose school is now closed for two weeks. Both the NI and ROI cases travelled from Northern Italy.
- The Taoiseach held a conference call with FM, dFM and Robin Swann on 29 February. They agreed that North/South cooperation should continue. This has so far been compatible with the cross UK approach.

c. UKG repatriation efforts

- UKG has conducted three repatriation flights, two from China and one from Japan.
- The approach has been for both British nationals and Irish nationals (regardless of whether they reside in NI or ROI).
- 30 British and 2 Irish nationals were repatriated to Arrowe Park for a 14 day quarantine period.
- 4 of these British Nationals have since tested positive for Coronavirus and have been transferred to medical facilities.

- Some British Nationals departed the ship and didn't wait to leave on the evacuation flight. They are being tracked so as to be put in quarantine should they return to the UK via commercial flights.

d. Italy

- On 25 February, the UK updated its advice to passengers returning from Northern Italy to self isolate if they start to show symptoms.
- This region has 3 direct flight routes to Northern Ireland, from Verona, Milan and Venice (a further 8 routes fly to Dublin).
- There are three schools in Northern Ireland that have taken trips to this region of Italy and have issued guidance to pupils, to follow the CMO guidance of self isolating if they have symptoms. These messages have made local news. More than a dozen schools in the UK are in this situation, including schools in England, Wales and Guernsey.

2) Covid-19 action plan

- Ministers will be asked to sign off the government's action plan for tackling Coronavirus at this meeting ahead of publication on gov.uk on 3 March.
- The action plan will reassure the public of the government's response to date and set out its plan for dealing with the virus.
- We expect it to be a joint UKG/DA announcement; the draft has been shared across the DAs and has received input from Department of Health (NI) officials.
- The action plan includes:
 - **Information on the virus**- what the virus is, how it spreads, and how it compares to other flus;
 - **An outline of the planned government response**- social, health, international, and economic;
 - **Decision making** - that the government gets its advice from different government scientific groups and how decisions are then made;
 - **How the public can help**- washing hands, calling NHS 111, it also outlines the expectation that not everyone will receive hospital treatment and that this is normal, as with flu. To date, all patients have been admitted to hospital; and
 - **The advice given to different agencies**- including prisons, schools and hospitals.

3) Coronavirus Bill

- DHSC are leading preparations for a Coronavirus specific bill that will strengthen ministerial powers for slowing an outbreak - particularly for DHSC and other departments delivering front-line services. The plan is to expedite its passage through Parliament, with Royal Assent by 31 March.
- The bill will include NI clauses - NICS have been consulted and NI Ministers have signed off on their specific clauses.
- The Coronavirus Bill is likely to have just less than two weeks of parliamentary scrutiny.

4) Comms, Media and Parliamentary Handling

- A dedicated communications team is now based in the Civil Contingencies Secretariat.
- Government Ministers have been doing regular press interviews to inform and prepare the public.
- A large public information campaign will launch this week, informed by behavioural insights.
- The Health Secretary has been regularly updating parliament, most recently on 26 February.

Annex A:

MACA

- When required, the military can provide specialist capabilities and assistance to the devolved authorities as part of their response to a health emergency. The process to agree this is generally referred to as MACA (Military Aid to the Civilian Authority). It works on the basis of full cost recovery.
- The provision of military air support in Northern Ireland can be controversial and is always carefully considered.
- These requests could be made to alleviate pressures with excess deaths, which may be more acute given the reliance on burial as opposed to cremation in Northern Ireland.
- The final decision rests with the MoD duty manager or MoD Minister.