

**Novel Coronavirus Outbreak (M) (4)**

**CABINET OFFICE BRIEFING ROOMS**

---

**Novel Coronavirus Outbreak (M) (4)**

---

**Meeting on Tuesday, 18<sup>th</sup> February 2020**

**I&S**

**Cabinet Office**

**70 Whitehall at 15:00**

---

**MINUTES**

---

**PRESENT**

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

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

Edward Argar MP  
Minister of State at the Department of Health  
and Social Care

The Rt Hon Stephen Barclay MP  
Chief Secretary to Her Majesty's Treasury

Lucy Frazer MP  
Minister of State at the Ministry of Justice

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

The Rt Hon Lord Goldsmith  
Minister of State at the Department for  
Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, Foreign  
and Commonwealth Office and the Department  
for International Development

Nigel Adams MP  
Minister of State for Asia at the Foreign and  
Commonwealth Office

James Heappey MP  
Parliamentary Under Secretary of State at the  
Ministry of Defence

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

Mims Davies MP  
Parliamentary Under Secretary of State at the  
Department for Work and Pensions

Nadhim Zahawi MP  
Parliamentary Under Secretary of State at the  
Department for Business, Energy and Industrial  
Strategy

**DIALLED IN**

Clare Haughey MSP  
Scottish Government

Mark Drakeford AM  
First Minister of Wales

Robin Swann MLA  
Northern Ireland Assembly

**OFFICIALS**

Sir Chris Wormald  
Permanent Secretary, DHSC

Katharine Hammond  
Director, Civil Contingencies Secretariat

Professor Chris Whitty,  
Government Chief Medical Officer

Keith Willett  
NHS England

Sir Patrick Vallance  
Government Chief Scientific Adviser

Stephen Groves  
NHS England EPRR

Emma Reed  
Director, Department of Health and Social Care

Yvonne Doyle  
Director, Public Health England

Jennifer Anderson  
Foreign and Commonwealth Office

Julia Longbottom  
Foreign and Commonwealth Office

Charlotte Watts  
Department for International Development

Andy Shields  
Department for Digital, Culture, Media and  
Sport

Gareth Davies  
Department for Transport

Emma Moore  
Border Force

Jillian Kaye  
Ministry for Housing, Community and Local  
Government

Major General Charles Stickland  
Ministry of Defence

Max Blain  
Head of News, Department of Health and Social  
Care Communications

Alex Aiken  
Director, Government Communications

NR

Ed Lister

No10

No10

**OFFICIALS DIALLED IN**

Dr Catherine Calderwood  
Chief Medical Officer (Scotland)

Dr Frank Atherton  
Chief Medical Officer (Wales)

Dr Michael McBride  
Chief Medical Officer (Northern Ireland)

Jonathan McAdams  
Northern Ireland Office

**SECRETARIAT**

Zonia Cavanagh

**NR**

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

1. 2020-02-18 COBR Novel Coronavirus (M)(20)(04) CRIP 11 - FINAL
2. 2020-02-18 COBR Novel Coronavirus (M)(20)(04) Paper\_ Collective agreement for COVID19 legislative policy - FINAL

## **Novel Coronavirus Outbreak**

### **Item 1: Current Situation Update**

1. The CHAIR invited the Government Chief Medical Officer (CMO) to update on the global situation and the latest UK risk assessment. The CMO said that the regional epidemic in Hubei province and China more widely was reducing in intensity. However, he said that there was increased risk there as people return to schools and workplaces.
2. Continuing, the CMO updated on the global risk, particularly countries where there was a risk of onward transmission, highlighting Japan and other South Eastern Asian countries. The risk to Japan was primarily from domestic transmission. Both escalation to a global pandemic, and isolation of the majority of cases to China remained realistic possibilities.
3. The CMO said that in the UK there were nine positive cases confirmed, and almost 5,000 tests returned as negative by the NHS. There were eight workplace sites where employees had reported symptoms, along with several cases of self-isolation. A member of the Rural Payments Agency staff was presently aboard the Diamond Princess.
4. The CHAIR invited the Minister of State for Asia at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office to update on the plan to repatriate UK nationals from the Diamond Princess cruise ship. THE MINISTER OF STATE FOR ASIA AT THE FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE said that they had concerns about preparations for a flight that Wednesday, given difficulties determining a landing time with Japan. That the best case scenario would now be a Thursday repatriation, but Friday remained a possibility. That a Friday repatriation would not be acceptable.
5. Continuing, THE MINISTER OF STATE FOR ASIA AT THE FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE said that:
  - Communications had been opened with British Nationals as to whether they would choose to be repatriated to the UK, given that approximately 60 per cent live in Hong Kong. The intent would then be to quarantine those repatriated, for 14 days, and Arrowse Park has been identified as the quarantine site.
  - There were concerns about protection of Foreign and Commonwealth Office consular staff, noting that other nations had sent teams of infection specialists to repatriate their citizens.
  - There was a possibility for EU nationals, particularly Irish nationals, to join the flight.
  - Japanese authorities had stated that passengers had served a 14 day quarantine on the ship, and would be free to depart for onward travel on disembarkation. The UK government position was that quarantine had not been served at sea. This therefore raised the question of what action should be taken at the border, should these individuals return independently.
  - There were challenges with using NHS staff to support the repatriation and the use of Ministry of Defence aeromedical personnel remained the preferred option. Whilst the Ministry of Defence would have medical staff on the flight, it was not for them to

- The legislation should be ready to go through both Houses of Parliament by the time a decision is made whether legislation is required.
13. The CHAIR introduced the Legislative Policy paper and maximalist list of possible provisions, emphasising the significance that any Bill covered all four nations of the UK.
14. In discussion the following points were made:
- The Bill was referred to as 'COVID-19', but there remained a question of whether it should apply more generically to any pandemic.
  - Concern about scope creep based on the provisions presented.
  - The importance of the public being adequately persuaded that such provisions were necessary.
  - That provision with respect to staff ratios and school standards was included in the Bill but required further development.
15. Responding, the CHAIR said that all departments should work at pace if the Bill was to be developed promptly. Policy decisions were imminently required, so that drafting could begin.
16. Summing up the CHAIR urged care in developing legislative positions. He said that they should not be extended beyond core ministerial groups and agencies, and stated that there should be no external engagement without Ministerial consent.

**Item 3: Planning for a Reasonable Worst Case Scenario (RWCS) – next phase**

17. The CHAIR invited the Director of the Civil Contingencies Secretariat to give an update on planning for the RWCS. The DIRECTOR OF THE CIVIL CONTINGENCIES SECRETARIAT said that there was work to be done to create a clear plan of activity (across the UK Government) from the moment of sustained transmission to its estimated peak, which was likely to be a period of three months. That a detailed agenda of decisions and actions required over a period of twelve weeks was required.
18. In discussion, the following points were made:
- The further from central government, the more difficult it would be to create detailed plans, particularly in the social care and voluntary sectors. Therefore information should be shared to undertake proper planning but there remained a risk that some of this information could reach the media.
  - The need for preparatory work with the voluntary sector. The voluntary sector's response would be important.
  - Welsh response structures had been heavily tested recently with flooding and were as ready as they could be.
  - That the Northern Ireland Executive Strategic Civil Contingencies Group meeting on 19 February would discuss the response to a potential pandemic.
  - 38 English Local Resilience Forums (LRFs) had been asked to review their reasonable worst case scenario pandemic influenza plans and report back to the Ministry for

Housing, Communities and Local Government via a questionnaire. The results of the questionnaire and potential next steps would be shared with the committee.

19. Summing up the CHAIR said that the Civil Contingencies Secretariat should continue developing their timeline and asked that all departments contribute key decisions and milestones. The CHAIR stated that LRFs should be aware of the assumptions therefore planning assumptions should be shared with them.
20. In discussion, the following points were made:
  - A concern that a reliance on the voluntary sector to pick up aspects of social care provision could lead to exploitation of vulnerable people by those who had not been suitably checked by the disclosure and barring service.
  - That conversations were taking place with the Home Office, Department for Education and Department of Health and Social Care to look at appropriate levels of checking that may exist between a disclosure and barring service check and no check. Options would be brought back to the committee.

**Item 4: Lessons learned from ministerial exercise**

21. The CHAIR invited feedback on the recent exercise, stating that they were open to repeating the event, if needed.
22. In discussion, the following points were made:
  - When would Local Government aspects of the response be exercised?
  - The exercise had highlighted the Department for Education's dependency on local authorities for action, particularly those working in early years and schools
23. The CHAIR said that planning and exercising should continue within departments, testing against the reasonable worst case scenario.
24. In discussion, the following points were made:
  - Whether there was a need for legislation change to manage consequences to ground water from managing excess deaths. The committee noted that the Ministry of Justice held the policy and that they were looking at relaxing regulations around cold storage. 70 per cent of bodies are cremated and only 30 per cent buried which reduced the potential risk.
  - That the excess death strand of work required further development and was the only red rated workstrand for the reasonable worst case scenario planning. It required substantial cross-department and devolved administration input.
  - A working group on excess deaths had been convened with representatives from across the UK Government, including the Environment Agency. There would likely be a requirement for a significant Bill, looking at funding and operational aspects of excess death management.