

**OFFICIAL SENSITIVE**

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**FROM: BERNIE ROONEY  
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**DATE: 30 JANUARY 2020**

**TO: PS/FIRST MINISTER  
PS/DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER**

**SUBJECT: UPDATE: COBRA MEETING, 29 January 2020,  
RE : CORONAVIROUS – UK PREPAREDNESS**

**Issue:** To provide an update from the COBR MEETING, Coronavirus – UK Preparedness, of 29 January 2020, including agreed actions and decisions.

Minister for Health, Minister Swann participated in the meeting and was supported by the Chief Medical Officer (CMO) and Health officials.

Next meeting is an - Ad hoc officials meeting is scheduled to take place on Friday 31 January at 11.30 am.

Minister Swan will provide an oral update at the next Executive meeting.

**Timescale:** Immediate.

**Press Office Advice:** COBR are leading communications on a UK wide basis.

<b>FOI Implications:</b>	In the event of a request for disclosure of information contained in this submission under the FOI Act, the request would be considered in the context of the relevant provisions of the legislation, including any relevant exemptions that may be applicable.
<b>Financial Implications:</b>	None.
<b>Legislative Implications:</b>	None.
<b>Executive Referral:</b>	An oral update will be provided by Minister for Health under Any other Business at the next Executive meeting.
<b>Recommendations:</b>	<p>It is recommended that you:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>(i) Note that Minister Swann is a member of COBR;</li> <li>(ii) Note the current position;</li> <li>(iii) Note the actions and decisions agreed at COBR, 29 January, <b>Annex A</b>;</li> <li>(iv) Note suggested holding Lines to Take, <b>Annex B</b>.</li> </ul>

## **Background**

1. The Secretary of State for Health, Matt Hancock chaired a COBR meeting on Wednesday 29 January at 4.30pm to discuss coronavirus and consider UK preparedness. Devolved Administrations were invited to participate and the Minister for Health, Minister Swann was in attendance the meeting.

2. The World Health Organisation (WHO) is scheduled to meet today and is likely to increase the level of risk and advise that this may and could become pandemic. COBR intend to raise the level of risk in the UK to 'Moderate'. In practical terms this makes little or no difference but rather reflects the increase in spread of the virus. Health officials will continue to undertake the same precautionary measure and levels of preparedness.

## **Detail**

3. The Department for Health in Northern Ireland, as the lead government department are closely monitoring the rapidly evolving situation. The Secretary of State for Health, Matt Hancock chaired the COBRA meeting.

A key point to note is that FCO are currently actively involved in detailed negotiations with authorities in China regarding policy matters and logistics. A number of issues are still under negotiations, and remain unresolved, for example; flight departure details and clarification on what passengers would or would not be permitted to travel. The Foreign Secretary has spoken to the Chinese FM to press for China to allow dual nationals and dependents to depart via the evacuation flight, should the wish to do so.

## **Current situation update**

4. The Chief Medical Officer for England, following consultation with the Chief Medical Offices across the four nations, provided an overview of the clinical situation highlighting the following:

- Explanation of the nature of Coronavirus and current modelling on how it is spreading throughout China and globally.
- The clinical effects of the virus which range from asymptomatic to a relatively mild illness through to pneumonia.
- At risk groups which are currently thought to be older people and those with an underlying illness.
- The likelihood that a positive case will be detected at some point in the UK.
- The need for the NHS to look at existing plans as a model for preparedness which includes well developed plans for Pandemic Influenza.

## Summary of UK position @ 29 January 2020

5. Current UK Situation report. There are no reports of severe illness. There have been no positive cases reported in the UK to date. The table below summarises the position a 29 January 2020.

	People being tested	Tests concluded	Confirmed cases
England	*	115	0
Scotland	*	12	0
Wales	*	2	0
Northern Ireland	*	2	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>47</b>	<b>131</b>	<b>0</b>

- Breakdown by country to follow once technical laboratory data issue resolved.

(Data of 11.00 GMT 29/01/2020)

Individuals are assigned geography according to hospital specimen source (not residency).

## Risk Picture and Trigger Points

6. The risk factors and levels of risk and triggers including a number of potential scenarios were discussed. It was concluded that:

- Risk to the UK population : **LOW** (*PHE Risk Assessment 21/01/2020*); and
- Risk to UK travellers to affected areas of travel: **MODERATE**.

## Critical planning assumptions

7. The Chief Medical Officer outlined several planning assumptions and outlined proposed next steps. Whilst it was noted that there are existing, well established plans in place for dealing with flu pandemics which have been tried and tested, it was considered prudent for England and all Devolved Administrations to review Reasonable Worst Case Scenario (RWCS) pandemic plans for preparedness.

## Communications

8. Finally, the need for careful handling of communications was discussed. It was acknowledged that careful and consistent handling of communications will be required, in order to provide appropriate information and advice to citizens. There was agreement on the need to avoid unnecessary panic and to provide assurance that all reasonable and necessary steps are being taken.

9. DHSC and The Minister for Health, Minister Swann agreed that he and Department for Health officials will continue to monitor the situation very closely and are liaising with, Department of Health, Devolved Administrations and Cabinet Office to ensure timely accurate and informative communications are issued in Northern Ireland.

### Recommendations:

It is recommended that you:

- (v) Note that Minister Swann is a member of COBR;
- (vi) Note the current position;
- (vii) Note the actions and decisions as agreed at COBR 29 January 2020; **Annex A**;
- (viii) Note suggested holding Lines to Take, **Annex B**.

Personal Data

**Bernie Rooney**

**Civil Contingencies, TEO**

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**PS/Minister for Health**

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**Deputy Chief Medical Officer**

**HoCS**

**Dr McCormick**

**Chris Stewart**

**Mark Browne**

**Karen Pearson**

**Chris McNabb**

**Bernie Rooney**

## **COBR agreed actions – 29 January 2020**

## **Annex A**

The following actions were agreed:

1. NHS ENGLAND to confirm with the FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE when details of the isolation facility can be shared with UK Nationals in China.
  2. HOME OFFICE to support NHS ENGLAND to assure the security of Arrowe Park Hospital.
  3. The DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE to share with the DEVOLVED ADMINISTRATIONS the legal advice regarding options for isolating passengers from the chartered flight.
  4. The FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE, with the NORTHERN IRELAND EXECUTIVE, to agree the arrangements for individuals returning from China on Irish passports.
  5. The MINISTRY FOR HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT to engage with the relevant Local Resilience Forum for Arrowe Park Hospital to ensure appropriate local plans are in place.
  6. The MINISTRY FOR HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT to engage all Local Resilience Forums to ensure they are reviewing their pandemic flu plans based on the National Security Risk Assessment scenarios and assumptions.
  7. PHE to develop and run a Ministerial table top exercise within the fortnight to consider the range of decisions that may be required in the event of a reasonable worst case scenario.
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## **COBRA agreed decisions – 29 January 2020**

COBR members agreed the following decisions were agreed;

1. COBR agreed to increase planning for a reasonable worst case scenario, using the NSRA pandemic flu assumptions as a starting point, with the additional information that the elderly and those with existing health conditions will be disproportionately affected.
2. COBR agreed the objectives for reasonable worst case scenario planning as set out in slide 9 of CRIP 2.
3. COBR agreed, with the Chief Medical Officer's advice, that the crew of the charter plane returning UK nationals to the UK do not need to be isolated, as long as they have sufficient personal protection on flight.
4. COBR agreed that the DEPARTMENT FOR DIGITAL, CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT should stop the search for alternative isolation facilities.
5. COBR agreed

that the Chief Medical Officer, taking advice from colleagues, should advise when the risk assessment level for the UK population should be raised to moderate, and when the risk assessment level for travellers to China should be raised to high, and when both should be communicated.

## **ANNEX B**

### **PROPOSED HOLDING LINES TO TAKE**

- Coronaviruses are common throughout the world.

- Illnesses caused by coronaviruses range from common cold to more serious illness as seen with;
  - (i) Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS – CoV); and
  - (ii) Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS- CoV).
- The Minister for Health, Minister Swann and his officials are closely monitoring this rapidly evolving situation.
- Minister Swann is participating in COBR meetings.
- The Health Service in Northern Ireland has existing and well established procedures for dealing with communicable diseases such as pandemic influenza and Ebola.
- The Department for Health is publishing advice and guidance on **NI Direct** website and further advice is also available on the **PHA website**.
- It is important not to panic and if you require advice to make contact directly with your GP by telephone in the first instance and you will be guided from there.
- The Minister for Health, Minister Swann and his officials are closely monitoring this rapidly evolving situation.
- Minister Swann is participating is involved and is participating in COBR meetings.
- The Health Service in Northern Ireland as existing and well established procedures for dealing with flu pandemics of this nature.
- The Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) advise against all travel to Hubei Province due to the ongoing novel coronavirus outbreak. Travellers in this area, if able, are advised to leave