

COVID 19 – Core Group meeting:- Wednesday 18th March 2020 (08:30)

Present -

Ministers: First Minister; Rebecca Evans; Julie James; Lesley Griffiths; Ken Skates; Kirsty Williams; Eluned Morgan; Jeremy Miles; Hannah Blythyn; **Via telephone link:** Vaughan Gething; Lee Waters; Julie Morgan and Dafydd Elis Thomas.

Officials: Permanent Secretary; Andrew Goodall; Frank Atherton; Rob Orford; Reg Kilpatrick; Albert Heaney; Toby Mason; [Name Redacted]; Carys Evans; Will Whiteley; Huw Morris; Neil Surman; Joe Trott, [Name Redacted]; Christopher Morgan. **Via telephone link:** Des Clifford.

Special Advisers: Jane Runeckles; Claire Jenkins; Sara Faye; Andrew Johnson. **Via telephone link:** Alex Bevan.

Public Health Update

1. The CMO informed the Group that it was likely that the virus was rapidly circulating in the community and the number of those infected was expected to double every three to five days. London was of particular concern. In Wales there were currently 136 cases and two fatalities.
2. It was important to be clear on when the rate of infection would peak, to help the NHS put contingency plans in place, whilst it was currently attempting to reduce demand for services. There was some concern that not everyone was following the advice about social distancing.
3. The Chief Scientific Adviser for Health advised Ministers that modelling suggested the UK was four weeks into the 'curve' and it was expected to be another eleven weeks before the spread of the virus peaked, whereas the NHS was four to five weeks away from maximum capacity.
4. The Chief Executive of the NHS notified the Group that the NHS business continuity response was in place and, with the decision to suspend routine out-patient appointments and the postponement of non-urgent surgical procedures, staff were being retrained and redeployed. There were plans to double the current number of intensive care beds and consideration was being given to providing care in non-hospital settings. However, it was likely that the NHS would become overwhelmed at the peak of the epidemic.
5. It was noted that officials would investigate reports that certain urgent operations were being cancelled. Ministers agreed that officials would need to produce a one page document setting out clearly the policy on testing for the virus.

Public Services Update

6. The Director of Local Government informed Ministers that the Welsh Government were continuing to engage with Chief Executives of Local Authorities on contingency planning matters, such as dealing with excess deaths, and emergency responses were being tested.
7. Communication issues would need to be fine-tuned, and there would be discussions with Local Resilience Fora on clear reporting structures. The Ambulance Service was considering how fire service personnel could be redeployed to support their crews.
8. There would be a meeting with the Third Sector later that morning to discuss the role of the voluntary sector, as they may need to assist with provision of social support services for those vulnerable people who would need to stay at home.
9. Ministers suggested that social care workers should be considered as key workers.
10. In terms of communications, messages to the public would need to be clear, concise and specific to Wales, while avoiding party politics.

Schools

11. Ministers discussed the policy on school closures and noted that SAGE were in the process of updating advice for COBR. It was acknowledged that some schools were already closing or partially closing because of staff and pupils needing to self-isolate.
12. If the current policy changed and schools were asked to close before the start of the Easter holidays, there would be a need to consider the impact on afterschool and private nursery provision and how to support families whose children were in receipt of free school meals. There was also the issue of maintaining some provision for children whose parents were key workers, particularly NHS staff.
13. It was recognised that once schools were closed, it was unlikely they would reopen until the Autumn term, so the impact on exams would need to be considered.
14. A decision on the policy was expected later that day.

Forward look

15. UK Ministers had shared a document outlining the new structures to lead the Government's key lines of operation. It was unclear how the Welsh Government would feature in these proposals and it was agreed that there was a need to ensure that Welsh Ministers were part of the decision making process. Officials indicated that they would raise these concerns with their Whitehall counterparts that afternoon.
16. It was reported that vets were offering the NHS use of their respirators and certain manufacturing sectors were looking to change production lines to focus on ventilation equipment.

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Not for publication

17. With the closure of museums and libraries, there would be a need to consider how people without access to the internet at home could claim benefits. In addition, there was a need to change the housing allowance limit to allow those affected to claim benefits.

CABINET SECRETARIAT

March 2020