

COVID 19 – Core Group meeting:- Wednesday 15th April 2020 (08:30)
Skype meeting

Present -

Ministers: First Minister; Rebecca Evans; Vaughan Gething; [NR] Julie James; Lesley Griffiths; Ken Skates; Jeremy Miles; Hannah Blythyn; Julie Morgan; Lee Waters; and Dafydd Elis Thomas;

Local Government: Andrew Morgan – Chair WLGA.

Opposition party leaders: Paul Davies MS; Adam Price MS.

Officials: Permanent Secretary; Andrew Goodall; Frank Atherton; Des Clifford; Reg Kilpatrick; Jonathan Price Albert Heaney; Huw Morris; Carys Evans; Toby Mason; [NR] [NR] Will Whiteley; Chrishan Kamalan; Jo Trott; Christopher Morgan; Jonathan Scourfield.

Special Advisers: Jane Runeckles; Ian Butler; Sara Faye; Clare Jenkins; Gareth Williams; Tom Woodward.

NHS and Public Health Update

1. The Chief Executive of the NHS reported that all Health Boards were continuing to report Green/ level 1 as an indicator of capacity and response.
2. 46% of secondary hospital beds, around 3,150, were currently unoccupied and available for use. There were 919 confirmed COVID-19 patients in NHS beds across Wales, of these 132 were in invasive ventilated beds and 787 were in acute beds. There were a further 272 suspected cases, of these 19 were in invasive ventilated beds and 253 were in acute beds.
3. Around 46% of Welsh critical care capacity was unoccupied and available. Of the occupied beds 34% of patients were confirmed COVID-19 cases, this increased to 38% with the suspected cases. There was more pressure on critical care beds in South East Wales.
4. In addition, there were currently 64 confirmed and 65 suspected COVID-19 patients in community hospital beds across Wales.
5. The number of A&E attendances over the last two weeks had reduced by around 60%, whereas ambulance arrivals at Emergency Departments across Wales had reduced by 21%. There was a need to ensure that patients were being signposted to hospitals if considered necessary.
6. So far, 81 care homes in Wales were reporting cases of COVID-19 and there were more with suspected cases.
7. Over 5,000 NHS staff had been tested. In terms of sickness absence, the NHS was reporting around 8%-10% of its workforce were absent, whereas, 15% of Ambulance Service staff were off ill. Four members of Welsh NHS staff had died from complications from contracting the virus.

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8. 12.2 million items of PPE had been released from the pandemic stock, which had contributed to the total of 35 million items that had been distributed so far. It was recognised that there would be a need to replenish these stocks.
9. The CMO reported that the rate of transmission amongst the general public appeared to be stabilising and community transmission directly generated by one case appeared to be somewhere between 0.5 and 1. This would need to be considered when preparing the strategy for lifting the restrictions. However, it was important that this information was not made public at this stage to avoid any reversal of what had been achieved. A clear communications strategy would be important.
10. There would be a need to closely monitor transmission rates in hospitals and care homes and have better community surveillance and increased testing to help retain transmission rates as low as possible. This would enable the NHS to manage future cases effectively and help inform wider decisions on when and how to lift the current restrictions.
11. It was reported that Public Health Wales was in discussions with universities on the use of their laboratories for testing. Targeting testing was important, as was increasing capacity. It was acknowledged that swab testing was quite sensitive and that initial tests could be recorded as negative during the early stages of infection. An anti-body test should be available within the next few weeks.
12. SAGE was monitoring the World Health Organisation's discussions on the wearing of face masks in public.
13. The Welsh Government was seeking to procure additional ventilators to a specific standardised model, but it was accepted that clinicians would undertake their own assessments of what was suitable equipment. Officials would provide opposition party leaders with the details of who within the Welsh Government they should direct queries from companies that wanted to produce medical equipment.

Local Government Update

14. Cllr. Morgan reported that Local Authorities had paid out over £300m of grants to businesses. The shielding work was increasing and it was reported that, in spite of letters to individuals being sent to the wrong address, all Local Authorities and Supermarkets had been provided with the correct addresses from the outset.
15. The number of cases of the virus in care homes was a concern and it was noted that this would be raised at the Ministerial meeting with the WLGA later in the week. Local Authorities were continuing to provide names of people who should be tested, but a more streamlined process would be welcomed.

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16. Further supplies of PPE had been delivered to Councils the previous day, but it was important to ensure that they followed the guidance on how it should be used. There was some discussion on whether individual Authorities should procure their own supplies and it was recognised that obtaining equipment from established regular suppliers should not be problematic, but any offers from new sources should be directed to the Welsh Government to avoid Councils from competing with one another.
17. It was noted that the additional £40m for Local Authorities to support adult social care arrangements would be paid as directly as possible.
18. There would be further discussions on the distribution of food parcels for the vulnerable, given the increased demand, but it was acknowledged that distributors were reporting that there was currently capacity in the system.

Contingencies / Resilience update

19. The Director of Local Government informed the group that the Police had reported that the Easter weekend had been quite quiet, with people generally following the social distancing rules. There had been increased patrols to deter people from travelling to recognised holiday destinations. Police forces were confident that they had the tools to deal with the restrictions.
20. Despite general crime levels being lower than usual, there had been an increase in reports of domestic violence and there had been some tensions in certain communities in relation to people travelling from outside. It was noted that the Welsh Government had announced, the previous week, additional funding to help accommodate victims of domestic abuse and sexual violence.
21. As usual for the time of year, the Fire Service was reporting an increase in grass fires.
22. The Strategic Co-ordinating Groups were considering the contribution of volunteers.
23. It was noted that the UK Government was due to review the Coronavirus Restriction Regulations that week and there would be a further review in the next few weeks. It was important to take advantage of this to update the Regulations to ensure they were relevant to the emerging situation.

Update on Economic Situation

24. The First Minister welcomed Jonathan Price to the Group and invited him to provide an update on the economic situation.
25. There was very little official data yet available, but the Office of Budget Responsibility (OBR) had recently published a scenario, rather than a forecast, as it was difficult to predict the impact COVID-19 would have on the economy.

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26. The OBR had assumed a three month 'lockdown' and predicted on this basis a 35% fall in UK GDP in the second quarter of 2020. Unemployment would rise to 10%. A rapid recovery was assumed in the third quarter, with the UK economy returning to pre-coronavirus performance over the following 18 months.
27. This was considered to be if anything optimistic as the recovery would depend on the protracted nature of the lockdown and the expected continuing uncertainty was itself damaging. In terms of employment figures, the issue would be ensuring job creation to balance redundancies. The IMF was more pessimistic and considered adverse scenarios with global reductions in GDP continuing to 2024 and beyond.
28. Wales might be hit harder than some areas of the UK, but such geographical variation would be relatively modest, given the broad-based nature of the economic impact. There would be a greater impact on young people, and on those with low skills and the low paid with poor terms and conditions. Evidence from previous recessions indicated that there would also be longer terms impact on the physical and mental health of the population.
29. The longer the period of 'lockdown' the greater the cumulative impact on the economy in the longer term.
30. The nature of the recovery would depend on the evolution of the disease, the macro-economic response of the UK Government and how far it would be prepared to accept high levels of government debt. How the public responds to the lifting of the restrictions would also be crucial. In addition, there was also a need to consider uncertainty over the UK's future trading position with the EU and rest of the world.
31. It was suggested that a UK wide protocol on how to respond to the lifting of the restrictions would be important to help inspire public confidence and it would be important to work with the UK Treasury to ensure that policies were in place to encourage job creation, including supporting the creation of new SMEs.
32. The First Minister, indicated that the next meeting would be the following Wednesday at 08:30, where, in addition to the standing items, a Chief Constable would be invited to attend.

CABINET SECRETARIAT
15th April 2020

Actions

- Officials would provide opposition party leaders with the details of who within the Welsh Government they should direct queries from companies that wanted to produce medical equipment – **completed**.