

Message

From: Stewart, Chris (TEO) [chris.stewart@executiveoffice-ni.gov.uk]
Sent: 08/03/2020 18:13:17
To: Goodfellow, Mark [mark.goodfellow@executiveoffice-ni.gov.uk]; Ingram, June [june.ingram@executiveoffice-ni.gov.uk]; Morrow, Carol [carol.morrow@executiveoffice-ni.gov.uk]; Griffith, Deirdre [deirdre.griffith@executiveoffice-ni.gov.uk]; Sterling, David [david.sterling@executiveoffice-ni.gov.uk]
CC: Rooney, Bernie [bernie.rooney@executiveoffice-ni.gov.uk]; [REDACTED] [REDACTED]@executiveoffice-ni.gov.uk; McNabb, Chris [chris.mcnabb@executiveoffice-ni.gov.uk]; [REDACTED] [REDACTED]@executiveoffice-ni.gov.uk; McGlade, Stephen [dfmypad2@executiveoffice.info]; Weir, Philip [philip.weir@executiveoffice-ni.gov.uk]; [REDACTED] [REDACTED]@executiveoffice-ni.gov.uk
Subject: Covid 19 COBRA (M) 9 March 2020

Colleagues

I have just finished a teleconference with Cabinet Office and Whitehall Departments on tomorrow's COBRA(M) meeting.

An extensive slide deck has been prepared and is being revised on foot of the teleconference. It should be available later this evening.

The meeting will be highly significant. The UK is approaching (but has not yet reached) the transition point from 'contain' to 'delay' in the action plan. The meeting will focus on those measures that will need to be adopted and maintained when that transition point is reached (soon).

I will not rehearse the detail of the measures here (the slide deck will set them out), but they involve unprecedented behavioural change: self-isolation for 7 days of anyone with mild respiratory symptoms; 14 day full isolation of those in contact with people who contract the illness; and social isolation (self-imposed almost total quarantine) of people in high risk groups as a prophylactic measure. The latter is seen as the key to reducing mortality.

These measures are likely to be needed for 13 to 16 weeks if the disease is to be controlled, **and a second outbreak in autumn / winter prevented.**

COBRA will not be asked to take formal decisions tomorrow. Rather, the purpose of the meeting will be to present some quite detailed information on the benefits of the proposed measures and their negative effects, to allow a political judgement to be made on whether the political cost of any of them would outweigh the benefits. I assume that CMO will provide professional advice on the application of the measures in NI. I understand that, in addition to anything that he might say on the efficacy of the measures themselves, he is likely to advise that NI appears to be some way behind other jurisdictions in terms of the progress of the outbreak, and that there may be scope to introduce the measures a little later here (weeks, not months). I should emphasise that definitive advice on that (and the measures generally) can only come from CMO. Formal decisions will be taken and announced at the Wednesday COBRA meeting.

Two important points will need to be addressed as priorities in the coming week. Firstly, the effective communication of the measures is likely to be the key to securing the necessary behavioural change and compliance – without which there will be a higher disease incidence and more deaths. Secondly, all NI Departments will need to rapidly ramp up their planning activities (to at least Brexit levels) in relation to business continuity, and service continuity, liaising with Whitehall and Irish counterparts. We will need to plan for the effects of the disease outbreak itself, and the effects of the mitigating measures.

My sense is that this will require significant reprioritisation and reallocation of resources across Departments.

Further briefing will be provided when available – happy to take a call to add light and shade in the meantime if that would be helpful.

Chris Stewart