

Message

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Sent: 23/03/2020 11:04:47 PM
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Subject: Cobr Meeting on Social Distancing and Additional Measures
Attachments: SOCIAL DISTANCING - TEMPORARY ADDITIONAL MEASURES.pdf

All

I sat in on this evening's COBRA meeting which focussed on need for greater social distancing and the closure of more non-essential businesses. The meeting was chaired by the PM with representatives from across Whitehall and the three DA's, with the First and deputy First Ministers representing NI. The PM started by saying that stricter rules on social distancing were essential. He pointed to the news reports over the weekend which highlighted the wide range of social gathers and recreational pursuits that were still taking place albeit outdoors in many cases. He said it was clear that whilst the restriction brought in last Friday were having an effect, the impact simply wasn't as much as was required. He again reiterated the need to reduce social interaction by a minimum of 75%, otherwise the risk would remain far too high.

He asked the Chief Medical Officer and the Chief Scientific Officer who have both come from a SAGE meeting to give an update. They pointed out that the infection rate from each person suffering the virus was between 2.6 – 2.8 people and that the doubling time of the infection was running between 3-5 days, which is high and reflective of the rates in France, Spain and Germany. The predicted that there would be rapid acceleration unless greater social distancing was encouraged. They said that overall footfall across the high street was down by 28%, airports down 40%, travel down 60% and socialisation with friends was down by 52%, although there are variations across the UK. However, footfall in parks over the weekend were up 200% and ques in shops were more acute. So whilst compliance across the board was generally good it just wasn't good enough.

The PM asked Jess Glover to outline the new proposed measures. She said that further temporary measures were needed and these needed to be put in place this evening. Outlining the changes she highlighted that citizens should be allowed to go out shopping only once a day, go exercising i.e. walking, once a day, that weddings and baptisms should be banned and that no more than two people should be gathering outside of work or the home. She highlighted the need for widespread communications to explain the changes and that clear guidance should be published.

The CMO explained that these changes were essential if we were to reduce the R value below 1 if we are to control and contain the spread of the virus. He pointed out that Italy had now maintained to reduce their R value to below 1 and that the impact of that should be seen in the next two weeks.

The Health Minister and the Home Secretary both spoke in support of the measures. The Home Secretary then discussed the issue of enforcement. She said the main aim was to make socialisation less attractive and outlined the role she saw police taking up as a result of the changes. She felt that there would be little major impact on policing and cited the changes brought in on Friday as example that once the powers were engaged business basically followed the rules. Both the Commissioner of the Met and the Chair of the Police Chief's Council agreed with this assessment but both also asked for clarity of the rules and to remember that the police would still need to maintain a good relationship

with the public going forward. It was highlighted that there was currently a 10% absent rate amongst police officers but that this was well within acceptable tolerances.

The Attorney General highlighted that enforcement in Scotland and NI would be difficult and could only really occur after the passing of the Covid-19 bill given the different legal systems in operations in both jurisdictions. She highlighted the need for people to realise that this is not a holiday from work for a period of three or four weeks, it is a public emergency and that they needed to understand that it was a matter of public protection.

The Chancellor estimated that the new policy would impact on 2-3 million employees but he thought that many of them would already be out of work at the moment so the overall additional impact wouldn't be that significant. He stated that they would extend the business rates exemption to those businesses now brought into scope and that support packages would already be available to help them out.

The Lord Mayor of London also supported the proposals but thought that they should go further and include construction workers and the construction industry. FM and dFM were very supportive of this view as was the Scottish First Minister. She highlighted that overall the changes were in line with the thinking of the Scottish Government and reflected some announcements she had made earlier today.

The FM and dFM highlight issues that were impacting on NI such as the need to include credit unions in the exempt list of businesses and the issue of funerals and large attendances at such events. They also highlighted the issue of local construction workers travelling weekly back and forth to GB for work and the potential for them to spread the virus from cities like London to NI. The PM was quite strong on the need to keep construction going and in some ways to actually increase the work as he thought there was an opportunity to take advantage of the quiet roads and cities to do work that otherwise would be quite difficult and disruptive.

The Welsh FM highlighted the issue of free school meals and the need to ensure children at risk were both cared for and fed. He said that they were anxious to ensure that a system could be put in place to protect these children and ensure that they had ready access to meals. The PM agreed to take that issue of line and see what could be done to ensure vulnerable children were not disadvantaged.

When the meeting ended FM and dFM stated that they wanted the NI guidance to be put in place this evening and for that guidance to cover the challenges facing the construction industry and manufacturing. I touched base with the Permanent Secretaries in Economy and Infrastructure to see if this could be done. Following discussion with both it was considered that before we could extend the guidance specifically into the construction and manufacturing arenas we would need to have a greater understanding of the possible negative impacts on the local industry and the fight against Covid-19. It was pointed out that a number of manufacturers are retooling to provide goods to help fight the virus e.g. O'Neill's has moved from manufacturing sporting garments to making protective clothing for the health service, four local firms are now manufacturing test kits and others are switching production to provide medical equipment such as ventilators. It was agreed that we should examine these areas further before producing any additional guidance.

Anthony

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