

FROM: Dr Naresh Chada

DATE: 24th January 2020

TO: Minister Swann

BRIEFING FOR COBR(M) TELECONFERENCE – CORONAVIRUS

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ISSUE:	COBR(M) teleconference on the topic of Coronavirus.
TIMING:	You have agreed to participate in a COBR(M) teleconference with your counterparts from across the UK.
PRESENTATIONAL ISSUES	Press Office to input
FOI IMPLICATIONS	Not discloseable, policy in development
FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS	None at this stage.
LEGISLATION IMPLICATIONS	None.
EQUALITY/HUMAN RIGHTS/RURAL NEEDS IMPLICATIONS	None.
RECOMMENDATION:	You are invited to note the briefing including speaking notes and lines to take (Tab A).

Introduction

1. You have agreed to participate in a COBR(M) teleconference of the Health Ministers of the four UK countries. The topic of the teleconference is the coordinated response to the outbreak of Coronavirus which emanated from Wuhan in China.

2. The meeting will be held in the Chief Medical Officer's office at midday on Friday 24 January with your agreement for logistical reasons. Dr McBride (CMO) and if required Dr Chada (DCMO) can be in attendance to support you during the call. Dr McBride will attend a pre-brief in your office at 11.30 am.
3. COBR (Cabinet Office Briefing Rooms) meetings are usually convened when there is an emergency of national importance. For example, weather related emergencies, a terrorist attack or a public health emergency such as this. They are usually chaired by the PM or a Cabinet Minister and can take many forms. For example, across UK Government, officials only or as in this case involving Ministers from the UK Government and devolved administration Ministers. It is likely that this meeting will be chaired by SofS DHSC, Matt Hancock.
4. At the COBR meeting, Chris Witty, the English CMO, will outline a number of different scenarios:
 - Scenario 1 – The transmissibility of the virus remains low and China is able to prevent further spread of the illness and it remains largely confined to China.
 - Scenario 2 – The virus is already widespread and there is a surge in cases following the Chinese new-year celebrations. This leads to sporadic outbreaks in various countries and the virus is added to the list of routine winter virus circulating.
 - Scenario 3 – The virus mutates and becomes more transmissible but less virulent as it adapts in humans.
 - Scenario 4 - The virus mutates and becomes more transmissible but no less virulent as it adapts in humans.
 - Scenario 5 - The virus mutates and becomes more transmissible and more virulent – this scenario is considered highly unlikely.

Background

5. You have already had several briefings both written and oral on the outbreak of coronavirus which has emanated from Wuhan in China. As of 24 January there

are approximately 830 confirmed cases in China and 25 fatalities, 177 of the patients are in a serious condition. (**Not for public use** – the estimated mortality rate is 2% but could be up to 15%. It will take time to properly establish this rate based on the outcome of the confirmed cases.)

6. In addition to the cases in China there have been confirmed cases in Japan, Korea, Taiwan, USA and Thailand (4 cases), Macao (2), Hong Kong (2).
7. There have so far been no confirmed cases in the UK.
8. There have however been a number of potential cases in the UK. 5 individuals have already tested negative for Coronavirus while results are awaited in a further 9 cases. There are no reports of severe illness with any of the possible cases and all tests results are expected to be processed by Colindale within 24/48 hours. Two of these possible cases are in Scotland while one is here in NI. Systems are in place here for a transfer to the Regional Infectious Disease Unit, ward 7a Royal Victoria Hospital if a decision is taken to admit the patient.
9. It is anticipated that we may see a significant number of further possible cases in the coming days and weeks both in the UK and the RoI given the direct flights from China into mainland UK airports and the RoI. There are no direct flights into Northern Ireland. The majority of these initially are likely to be negative and more reflective of the high degree of appropriate vigilance and a precautionary approach by GPs and HSC staff.
10. The only direct flights between the UK and Wuhan arrived in London Heathrow three times per week. PHE had put in place enhanced monitoring on the direct flight from Wuhan which arrived on Wednesday 22 January. It is expected however that all further Wuhan flights will be cancelled by the Chinese authorities.
11. PHE have developed posters to be displayed in all UK airports. These have now been shared with the DAs who will consider and amend for local use but the clinical details will be consistent across the UK. The PHA are currently considering this issue and a meeting of the NI Port Health Authority was held yesterday (23 Jan).

12. DHSC are currently working up a range of scenarios and considering how the UK might respond in the event of the spread of the virus internationally and into the UK. The DAs are taking part in daily teleconferences hosted by DHSC to ensure the UK is appropriately prepared.
13. There has been considerable national media coverage of the Coronavirus outbreak as well reporting by local media. DHSC have arranged a meeting of officials from the Communication teams of the 4 UK health Departments for 10.30am today (24 Jan) to discuss the key messages and ensure a consistent approach is agreed across the 4 nations.

Recommendation

14. You are invited to note the briefing including speaking notes and lines to take at Tab A.

Dr Naresh Chada

Ext I&S

Copied to:

Richard Pengelly
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Liz Redmond
David Gordon
Gillian Armstrong

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SPEAKING NOTE FOR MINISTER AND LINES TO TAKE

We do not as yet have an agenda for the meeting but it is customary for DA Ministers to give an update from the perspective of their jurisdiction and raise any issues which they deem to be important.

Introductory remarks

- I am pleased to note the joint 4 countries approach that has been taken with this situation and I would encourage maximum co-operation between officials and public health organisations at all levels.
- I am very grateful for the advice and guidance being provided by officials in DHSC and PHE and for the ongoing close cooperation.

Northern Ireland Related

- My Department along with the PHA (our equivalent of PHE) are in contact with the relevant authorities across the UK and the Republic of Ireland to ensure any necessary precautions are in place in Northern Ireland in response to this situation.
- While it is important that we remain vigilant, we need to take a proportionate response to this emerging issue and ensure appropriate and effective measures are in place within Northern Ireland and across the UK.
- I hope to be able to speak with the Minister for Health in the Republic of Ireland, Simon Harris, to ensure a joined up approach is being taken across these islands.
- Officials in My Department and the PHA will work closely with DHSC and PHE to ensure that we have a coordinated approach both in terms of evidence based guidance and communications.

- Given that we are likely to see increasing numbers of possible cases and very probably confirmed cases in the UK over coming days and weeks I believe it is extremely important that we have agreed terminology when describing possible cases under investigation and early notification of any confirmed case given the public concern this will cause. A joined up approach to communications is vital. We must ensure that we are sending out clear coordinated and consistent messages across the UK.
- At a 4 country CMO meeting this morning it was agreed that the numbers of potential or confirmed cases across the UK should be collated at 12 noon each day and then shared with the media. If the numbers are broken down by country it is likely that NI will have to report 'less than 5 cases' rather than risk identifying individuals if the numbers remain low.