

Call between the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and the First Ministers of Scotland and Wales, and the First Minister and deputy First Minister of Northern Ireland

11 November 2020, 5pm

DRAFT ONLY

Ministerial Attendance

The Rt. Hon Michael Gove MP, Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster
The Rt. Hon Nicola Sturgeon MSP, First Minister, Scotland
The Rt. Hon Prof Mark Drakeford MS, First Minister, Wales
The Rt. Hon Arlene Foster MLA, First Minister, Northern Ireland
Michelle O'Neill MLA, deputy First Minister, Northern Ireland
The Rt. Hon Simon Hart MP, Secretary of State for Wales
The Rt. Hon Brandon Lewis MP, Secretary of State for Northern Ireland

Actions

Action 1: The UK Government and Welsh Government to work closely on establishing the maximum possible alignment on the approach towards mass testing and vaccinations given the implications for cross-border communities.

Action 2: Shona Dunn (DHSC) to confirm with the relevant health departments of the devolved administrations the supply terms around lateral flow tests.

Action 3: UK Government and devolved administrations officials to progress work on Christmas and mass testing.

Minutes

- **The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster** welcomed attendees to the meeting and thanked them for their time.
- **The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster** highlighted the uncertainty across the UK of how the restrictions will proceed in the next couple of months. He set out that the UK Government wants to achieve aligned messaging on what will and will not be encouraged or allowed at Christmas across the UK. He noted that officials of all administrations are working together on this and welcomed thoughts from DA ministers on how the UK Government can support this process.
- He highlighted the importance of mass testing, and the progress being made on the mass testing in the pilot in Liverpool. He noted that the learning outcomes from this will help inform the logistics and support required for mass testing more widely..
- He invited Susan Hopkins of Public Health England and Shona Dunn (lead on mass testing for the UK Government) to provide further detail.
- **Susan Hopkins (PHE)** set out the work that has taken place on validating and evaluating a wide range of lateral flow tests, and noted that more than 100 had been desk reviewed in DHSC. More than 40 tests had been tested in laboratory settings

and 6 had passed this validation. She highlighted that field evaluation is now underway in regional test centres, schools and universities in Liverpool.

- She highlighted the research on the efficacy of lateral flow testing compared to PCR (polymerase chain reaction) tests. The specificity of the tests in laboratory settings is 99.9% accurate, with only 1 in 1000 presenting a false positive, while out in the field the specificity was 99.7%. She confirmed that more than 50,000 lateral flow tests have been performed in Liverpool, largely by trained military leads, and that this was producing a 0.6% positivity rate of the population, which was against the expectation of there being more positive cases. She noted that they had detected about 600 cases per 100,000 three weeks ago and that that had reduced to about 200 per 100,000 in the last week, demonstrating the rapid decline following the move to tier 3 restrictions. PCR tests are now being undertaken to make sure that false positives weren't being picked up.
- She further highlighted that learning has come from the military on how to deliver this, including how to incentivise people to come forward. She suggested that the first people to come forward were likely to be the same people as those who follow the rules, and that behavioural scientists were studying how to better engage people who are less likely to do so. She confirmed that in the first 5 days, 10% of the target population had been tested so far.
- **The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster** queried how we might prioritise and incentivise the delivery of lateral flow tests, and what the public policy aim would be if we were to secure buy in.
- **Susan Hopkins (PHE)** set out that detecting asymptomatic cases would work to break the chains of transmission. She noted that the current approach is based on asking people to support their community, with no other current incentives. She highlighted the public may ask "What can you do with a negative test that you otherwise couldn't do". Proponents of lateral flow tests assert that the test should at least mean that individuals reduce the risk of transmitting the virus for a few days, and up to a week. She noted that this could reduce transmission by at least 50%, but noted that a test is only a spot check at one moment in time. She concluded a test would mean that you would generally be safer to go about your business than you otherwise might be.
- **Shona Dunn (DHSC)** added that, as the technology matures and as we learn lessons from the pilot, she will be working collaboratively to think about the role of mass testing in various forms and what role it can play in controlling the virus during the early availability of the vaccine and in the longer term.
- She noted the importance of exploring how mass testing interacts with NPIs over the coming months, and in identifying incentives and available levers which can be used as part of that strategy. She highlighted the work being done on how operational models, incentive packages and policy objectives intersect.
- She concluded by proposing to discuss with ministers how all parts of the UK can work together on this.
- **The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster** invited views on how the best possible alignment can be achieved around Christmas, and on lateral flow mass testing.

- **The First Minister of Wales** noted, in relation to Christmas, that he was very keen that all parts of the UK have as close as alignment as possible, given the permeability of the border between Wales and England. He noted that clearer, simpler and a more common set of rules would be easier for people to understand. He highlighted that work was ongoing at official level on this.
- He considered social actions as more important to people around the festive period than economic. He raised questions of what we might be required after a period of relaxation given that easements will drive prevalence upwards, and the need for a plan for both before and after the period in order to mitigate this. He also noted the importance of getting common agreement between the different parts of the UK as much as possible on travel. He suggested that the group return to these issues when officials had worked through the necessary questions.
- On lateral flow, the FM congratulated those in Liverpool and what they have achieved to date. He asserted that the Welsh Government would be very keen to learn lessons from a practical and operational point of view, and on persuading people to come forward. He noted that military planners who have been involved in the Liverpool programme were coming to Wales on 13 November, which was positive, but shared concern that while they have been deployed helpfully on mass testing, he did not believe this approach was sustainable elsewhere. He queried what 'Plan B' was where the military is unable to provide lateral flow test devices under controlled circumstances given the training requirements; and highlighted the tricky interplay between the plan for mass testing and vaccinations which are likely to happen concurrently and make use of much of the same personnel resource.
- He noted that the Welsh Government had been considering settings where people may be able to do more if lateral flow tests were used, highlighting care homes as an example. He noted potential options related to a negative lateral test result (alongside other protections) making visits possible. Additionally, he suggested opportunities could exist for children where, instead of isolating a full class, lateral flow tests could help them continue learning in the classroom when one student tests positive; and for the release of individuals from self isolation more widely. He asserted that, while many in Wales will undertake tests to contribute to the greater good, other reasons will be necessary too. He noted that, in looking at how we use lateral flow tests, we should also consider that if restrictions in settings such as gyms or community centres had to be reapplied,, whether we could use the tests to enable some of these opportunities. He noted that tests could also give us the opportunity to loosen restrictions in areas such as the arts and sporting venues. He reaffirmed his belief of the need to link the test with a practical benefit and confirmed he would be very happy to share that thinking and learn from others across the UK.
- **The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster** welcomed the comments of the FM of Wales and agreed with the points made on sports and the arts.
- **The First Minister of Scotland** noted that she was keen that all administrations develop an aligned approach on Christmas and that the approach is sensible and recognises the importance of Christmas to everyone, but also the practical reality which surrounds it. She noted that people may, to some extent, do what they want and that sensible boundaries around Christmas will be more likely to get people to comply. She noted the importance of being careful that individuals aren't enabled to

have a good Christmas at the expense of lost lives in January and February. She asserted that each would need to come to some very careful decisions on time, extent of the easing, and on travel. She noted the importance of allowing some form of travel across the UK but was skeptical about any easing around international travel. She cautioned the need for people to be informed on how to also try and mitigate risks around the Christmas period.

- On lateral flow testing - she noted the enthusiasm of the Scottish Government to try and use technology as sensibly as it can to try and limit the virus and the impact it has on peoples' lives. She noted that it would be helpful for planning purposes to get clarity, on as far as is possible, on the quantity of testing kits the Scottish Government is likely to have access to and over what period. She noted her interest in thinking on ongoing logistical arrangements to allow all administrations to plan, given the army would be unable to maintain their current role. She noted her agreement with the First Minister of Wales on the importance of making sure that testing and vaccination align and complement one another rather than undercutting each other on resources. She highlighted the opportunities this would give towards planning and prioritisation and cited the work surrounding students and the ambition to use the devices on NHS workers; and her agreement on using them to support care home interactions and to open up places that may otherwise be shut for longer.
- She noted that there were careful considerations to be made on geographic usage, taking learning from Liverpool as it would be important to select geographies which are most conducive to uptake. She highlighted some thinking in the Scottish Government around the benefits of city wide vs. sub-city uptake, where in the latter there's a more personal sense of responsibility. She further articulated her concerns of the need to recognise the importance of testing and what it does and doesn't deliver, and the need to not treat it as if it is a vaccine.
- She noted the importance of clarity on the necessity of PCR tests to confirm lateral flow tests results to exclude false positives, or whether that was a temporary measure. She noted that while it was clear what was necessary if a positive test is received, it would also be important to be clear on what the message is for those who test negative, as there is a danger that a negative test result is taken as a pass to note adhere to restrictions and guidance. She concluded by welcoming ongoing close support and dialogue on Liverpool and how that feeds into the development of respective strategies.
- **The First Minister of Northern Ireland** noted that, on Christmas, it's critical that the communications are in place across the UK so that people understand the rules in effect. She asserted the importance of setting a bar without being too restrictive, as in that case people may take their own actions. She referenced the announcement made today around the return home of students and noted that that had been warmly welcomed in Northern Ireland. She asserted that if the group is able to get a clear message across the UK then that too would be warmly welcomed.
- On mass testing, she noted that the Northern Ireland Executive had been considering how it can form part of their exit strategy in terms of how they live with the virus in the future. She queried whether there was any work on behaviour science that could be shared, particularly on uptake and compliance. She noted her belief that economic interests damaged by covid, such as hospitality, could benefit from regular testing which would allow a different approach in terms of dealing with the virus. She

welcomed any further information from the Liverpool pilot so that it could be integrated into their strategy. She asked Susan Hopkins what the optimum level of transmission would be to maximise the benefits of the testing system, highlighting that she had heard it suggested that it needed to be as low as 50 in 100,000 for the mass testing system to be worthwhile. She concluded by confirming that this conversation had been useful and that she would take the learning away to inform the Northern Ireland local strategy.

- **The deputy First Minister of Northern Ireland** reiterated the support for the briefing, and highlighted that it was timely given that all parts of the UK are trying to work out how they find a way to live through the pandemic. She highlighted that she was keen to understand Northern Ireland's share of the distribution of tests. She noted that the pilot in England remained underway but queried what the timeline was for the devolved administrations to receive clarity on distribution. She queried whether it was up to devolved administrations on how to distribute tests.
- **The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster** confirmed that the UK Government would want an equitable distribution of tests across the UK, but that this would also apply to vaccines in a similar way to a 'barnett formula'. He confirmed that in Scotland, for example, the NHS and Scottish Government could determine who to prioritise and in what way this work should be applied and distributed geographically. He concluded that the UK Government's responsibility, as well as to the approach in England, was to make sure there was a fair and equitable approach on this, including on devices and logistical support.
- **Susan Hopkins (PHE)** responded to several questions. She confirmed that PHE doesn't have a cut off in the population prevalence that they would recommend lateral flow tests being used at and noted that the more they are used in both symptomatic and asymptomatic situations, the more cases will be found. She highlighted that the lower the prevalence of the virus, the more confirmations would be needed through PCR to address any false positives. She noted her belief that the lateral flow tests are important to use where there are high risks of transmission and high vulnerability, such as in the NHS sector and in the care home sector due to any delay in PCR result returns poses a risk to increased transmission in those sectors. She highlighted other opportunities such as for domiciliary care workers and care home visitors. She further noted that PHE is keen to evaluate their usage in high risk workplaces. She cautioned the need for appropriate training to use the devices to make sure voids and false positives are not common and to make sure the consequences of the results are managed appropriately. She concluded that there remains a need to evaluate their usage with employers in the workplace, but noted that, in the run up to Christmas, it poses particular opportunities for businesses such as manufacturing and the food industry.
- **The Secretary of State for Wales** noted that, while it was for vaccinations or tests, and the responsibility for distribution and strategy would lie with the devolved administrations, it would remain important to many border communities to gain consistency on this.

- **The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster** confirmed that the UK Government would work very closely with the Welsh Government to ensure the maximum possible alignment on the mass testing and vaccinations work.

Action - The UK Government and Welsh Government to work closely on establishing the maximum possible alignment on the approach towards mass testing and vaccinations given the implications for cross-border communities.

- **Shona Dunn (DHSC)** agreed on the need to make sure the UK Government and devolved administrations work together on an approach that can work for everyone, and confirmed that the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster's point around Barnett Principles was right. She confirmed the need to move quickly and that she would confirm the numbers of lateral flow tests which would be given to the devolved administrations.

Action - Shona Dunn (DHSC) to confirm with the relevant health departments of the devolved administrations the supply terms around lateral flow tests.

- Shona Dunn reiterated that this had been a valuable conversation, particularly in highlighting interactions in this work across all of the nations of the UK. She noted that this UK-wide approach would be very helpful to take forward with officials in the devolved administrations. She suggested there was a need for a better sense of whether the value in alignment, coherence and consistency.

The Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster closed the discussion by summarising the points raised. He concluded that there was a need for both fairness and a sense of justice in both work strands. On Christmas he summarised that we should recognise how important it is for people across the UK but also ensure that the relaxation of restrictions do not impose too many burdens on people later as a consequence. He noted that fairness applied even more when thinking about testing, and the importance of ensuring a fair allocation of resources, a fair process of where and how testing is going on, and a sense of reciprocity in this - individuals supporting their communities but also being supported themselves. He confirmed that the group will seek to make sure it has a shared understanding of how the vaccine's rollout can be prioritised in a fair way.

Action: UK Government and Devolved administrations officials to progress work on Christmas and mass testing