



Northern
Ireland
Office

COVID OPERATIONS

10 DECEMBER 2020

11:15-12:45

STEER

- The first and second agenda items are a discussion on Mink and the regular weekly decision making point on Travel Corridors. The Transport Secretary will lead these sections.
- The second item is to discuss travel and transport over the Christmas period. The Transport Secretary will lead this section.
- The third item is to discuss risk stratification. The Health Secretary will lead this section.

Agenda

1. **Mink and Travel Corridors** | 09.15 - 09.45
The Rt Hon Grant Shapps MP, Secretary of State for Transport
2. **Christmas Transport Plans** | 09.45 - 10.15
The Rt Hon Grant Shapps MP, Secretary of State for Transport
3. **Risk Stratification** | 10.15 - 10.45
The Rt Hon Matt Hancock

1. Mink and Travel Corridors

a. Mink: Protective measures taken and possible further measures

Steer: We expect you will largely be in listening mode for this item, which the Transport Secretary will lead. The paper notes impact of measures implemented to mitigate the risk from Danish mink, considers the public health risk from COVID-19 in other mink farming nations, sets out options for protective measures, and makes recommendations on measures to be applied in response to the risk from mink farms in Poland:

- The travel corridor to Poland should not be reopened
- Sectoral exemptions should be allowed.
- UKG will closely monitor for any new variants of Covid-19 in Polish mink farms and in Poland, including genome testing people who have recently arrived in the UK from Poland and tested Covid-19 positive to ensure any new strain is detected.
- UKG will consider specific testing for those arriving to work in UK agriculture - using the sectoral exemption in place for this purpose.
- We expect that the Health Minister will ask DAs to align on measures and that DAs will be amenable to this, considering alignment during the similar situation relating to Denmark

Poland is under specific consideration because there are large numbers of mink (see annex A), currently limited means to detect new strains (although Poland is working to introduce this) and significant UK-Poland travel. This will be kept under review and you should support alignment.

Points to make (if required)

- I am happy to see that the measures taken to stop the spread of this strain of Covid-19 have been comprehensively reviewed.
- I am keen to support alignment on future measures to prevent new strains of Covid-19 in the UK, and am happy to facilitate discussions to support this.

Background

Mink farming internationally

Countries with the highest level of mink farming are Denmark, China, Netherlands, Poland, USA and Canada. Eleven farms in the USA have returned positive tests. FCDO is scoping the scale of farming in other countries (including Spain, Ireland, France, Italy, and Sweden). Ireland is set to cull all 120,000 of its mink, following CMO advice to kill the animals as a matter of urgency at end November. See annex A for a summary of Mink farming nations.

Mink in the UK

There are no mink farms in the UK, although there are c.120,000 wild mink and an estimated 0.8 - 1 million captive ferrets. It is assessed that these pose a very low risk to the general public, but there is a high likelihood of infection for high risk groups in contact with infected ferrets. Steps are being taken to mitigate the risk in the UK.

UKG response to Denmark outbreak

The action taken to limit the spread of the new variant in Denmark is difficult to quantify, but the paper suggests that it was tough, but avoided significant economic or diplomatic damage because of its time limited nature. Covid-O banned travel from Denmark but agreed that UK nationals could return to the UK from Denmark and be subject to a strict mandated self-isolation requirement of 14 days. This did not mitigate the risk that this strain of COVID-19 spreads to other countries and then to the UK.

b. Weekly Review of Travel Corridors

Steer: You will largely be in listening mode for this item, the weekly review of Travel Corridors. The Transport Secretary will lead discussions. The paper setting out proposed changes is expected to be circulated tomorrow (Thurs 10th Dec) morning. We do not expect there to be particular points for you to land.

Background

The four UK CMOs have confirmed that a 2 week pause over Christmas is acceptable from a Public Health perspective, provided there are appropriate processes in place to deal with any urgent issues.

Restrictions in Ireland and their Effect on Travel from NI and GB

Ireland is part of the EU traffic-light system for international travel. Arrivals from GB in Ireland are asked to restrict movements for 14 days, they must fill in a passenger information form. People from 'red' countries - like the UK- arriving in Ireland can take a test 5 days after arrival, and be excused from movement restrictions after a negative result. Travel from NI to Ireland is permitted, but travellers from both Northern Ireland and GB must follow level 3 restrictions - non-essential travel within a county is permitted, but outside a county is not.

2. Christmas Transport

Steer The item sets out the travel demand picture over the Christmas period and the work DfT is doing to manage crowding, communications and residual risks. The Transport Secretary will lead the item, and we don't propose there are any points for you to land. The measures discussed will largely apply to GB.

Points to make

- I note that key areas of focus are Anglo-Scottish rail services and aviation routes into Belfast and Dublin and am happy to facilitate a further meeting on this with NIE and Irish Government if helpful.
- We are keen to facilitate discussions between NIE and the Irish Government to support coordination on the island of Ireland over the festive period. There is a further quadrilateral meeting before Christmas in which this can be raised.
- The paper doesn't say anything about ferries but these will be particularly important from an NI perspective, it is especially important that these keep running as air fares tend to go up steeply over the holiday period and affordable travel between GB & NI is important to so many.

Background

DfT are implementing measures agreed at Covid-O last week and have taken forward further work with HMT on measures to increase coach capacity

Travel Demand

There is considerable uncertainty around travel demand for the Christmas period. Overall demand is likely to be the same, or lower, than previous years on both roads and public transport. There may be issues at key pinch points as demand is more concentrated during the Christmas travel window and public transport capacity is constrained by social distancing. Demand on the rail network is high. Operators will seek to spread demand, but will not strand passengers; meaning some trains may exceed socially-distanced capacity. Work is ongoing with the coach industry to ensure mitigating services are provided

There is less clarity about demand on the road network, but a concentration of travel is expected during the easement period. To help the network cope, Highways England has lifted 778 miles of roadworks. On aviation, maritime and international rail, there is some indication of ticket sales rising, but this is in line with, or lower than previous years.

Crowd management

Operators are putting crowd management plans in place to respond to demand increases and continue to deploy non-pharmaceutical interventions that have proven effective over the course of the pandemic at managing crowds.

Residual Risks

Residual risks remain in relation to staffing (particularly on Sunday 27 December), engineering and road works, and weather. DfT is working to mitigate these risks or their effects.

Communications

The headline message continues to be that passengers should plan and book ahead and consider quieter routes, and DfT is working to deliver this message across various channels. **Ministers are asked whether they agree to a Transport Secretary held press conference as soon as possible to deliver this message.**

Intra-UK travel

DfT is working with the Devolved Administrations, in particular to align communications between the four nations. Ministers in the DAs may, in some instances, adopt slight differences in tone. **Operationally, key areas of focus are Anglo-Scottish rail services and aviation routes into Belfast and Dublin**

UKG are keen to achieve a joint statement solidifying alignment on UK travel. CDL chaired a call with First Ministers today (9th Dec) to seek agreement on principles for intra-UK travel, to inform enforcement and communications around the policy area.

Any statement which could limit travel from GB-NI will be sensitive for the Executive and will cause concern for UKG on an economic basis. Similar statements on travel have not succeeded in the past as the more interventionist approach of Wales and Scotland have contrasted with the wording proposed by UKG. Currently, NIE do not advise against travel to elsewhere in the UK and we anticipate this will remain the case. Scotland have recently legislated to reduce travel from England, Wales and NI. Travel to Wales is prohibited from NI, as well as from high alert levels in England and Scotland.

3. Risk Stratification

Steer The Health Secretary will lead this item to update Ministers on embedding the new COVID-19 predictive risk model into the NHS in England, and the plans of the Devolved Administrations to implement the model in their respective nations. The model will likely be ready by 14 January.

Ministers are asked to:

- Agree that the model should be applied at population level to support vaccine prioritisation;
- Note progress on the clinical support tool; and next steps for the potential development of a public facing tool; and
- Note plans of the Devolved Administrations to implement the model in their respective nations.

Points to make

- **I am pleased to see that this model has been developed in consultation with DAs and think it could form a useful tool in the rollout of the vaccine.**
- **I am happy to facilitate coordination between NIE and UKG on the implementation of the model.**

Background

The JCVI inclusion of Clinically Extremely Vulnerable (CEV) at level 4 (alongside those who are 70+) within the prioritisation list for access to vaccines has made this a crucial tool for the coming months and indications from ONS are that the model is 'excellent'. Applying the risk threshold identifies c600k potentially new highest risk patients (CEV aged 19 to 69) where the data is complete. Some key risk variables such as BMI and ethnicity are historically poorly recorded and there are possible missing or conflicting data. The upper estimate for additions due to missing data is c300k, taking the maximum in the new highest risk group alongside the existing SPL to c900k.

DHSC aim to provide GPs with guidance to confirm who should be prioritised. The intention is to make the lists and the guidance available to GPs in early January

Delivering the clinical decision support tool

While feedback has been broadly positive, some barriers to use mean DHSC recommends that rollout is delayed until 14 January. DHSC has been collaborating with the Devolved Administration throughout the tool's development, with the aims of all four nations to being able to deploy NHSD's tool in clinical settings. While this is technically possible, there remain a range of complex information governance, legal and regulatory issues to work through. Due to the differences in reserved powers, the implementation approach will not be the same for each nation.

Public-facing tool

DHSC are scoping a future public-facing tool to support the provision of information to individuals to mitigate COVID risks. The initial focus is likely to be on mitigating the risk of catching, being hospitalised or dying from Covid. Longer-term opportunities include incorporating location and activity-based risk. DHSC are starting to test proposals with the Devolved Administrations and will work in partnership on a proposal for alignment in this area. A progress report to COVID-O is expected in mid January.

ANNEX A - MINK FARMING NATIONS

<u>More than 100 mink farms and/or >1m minks:</u>			
Country	Number of Mink Farms & Total Number of Minks	SARS-CoV-2 Detected in Mink?	Testing and Genome Sequencing (Sample) in Mink
China	8,000 farms & number of individual minks unclear	None reported	Unknown
Denmark	1,200 farms & 17 million minks (prior to culling)	Yes	Yes, although most minks have now been culled.
Poland	345 farms & 6.4 million minks	None reported	Some testing but not systematic. No genome screening of mink samples as government reports there are no positive samples.
USA	245 farms & up to 3.4 million minks	Yes	Yes, where minks are symptomatic. Not routine at present and technicalities are variable by state. Genome sequencing of positive mink samples is being undertaken.

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Lithuania	71 farms & 1.9 million minks	Yes	Yes, as of 26 Nov mink are being routinely tested. Positive samples are sequenced.
Canada	98 farms & 1.7 million minks	None reported	Unknown
Greece	86 farms & 1.4 million minks	Yes	Farmers are being routinely tested with rapid antigen tests, unclear if mink are being routinely tested. Positive tests from minks have been sequenced but unclear what is happening moving forward.
Finland	150 farms & 1.25 million minks	No	Yes
Ukraine	11 farms & 1 million minks	None reported	Unknown
Netherlands	120 farms & 800K minks	Yes	Yes, although DEFRA reports that all infected mink and those in cull zones have been culled. Approximately 15 farms remain.
<u>10-100 mink farms and/or 100K – 1m minks:</u>			

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Russia	No data	No data	No reports
Latvia	No data	No data	No reports
Spain	No data	No data	1 farm tested positive; culled
Sweden	40 farms	No data	20 tested positive; not culled
Bulgaria	No data	No data	No reports
Fewer than 10 mink farms and/or <100K minks			
Iceland	No data	No data	No reports
Italy	9 farms	No data	1 positive
Romania	No data	No data	No reports
Ireland	3 farms	No data	All tested negative
France	4 farms	No data	1 positive
Slovakia	No data	No data	No reports