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Minutes

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Minutes of a Meeting of the
Covid-19 -Strategy Ministerial Group
held at Number 10, Downing Street on

Friday 20th March 2020
At 0915 AM

P R E S E N T

The Rt Hon Boris Johnson MP
Prime Minister

The Rt Hon Rishi Sunak MP
Chancellor of the Exchequer

The Rt Hon Matthew Hancock
Secretary of State for Health and Social Care

The Rt Hon Michael Gove
Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster

The Rt Hon Dr Thérèse Coffey MP
Secretary of State for Work and Pensions

The Rt Hon Robert Jenrick MP
Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government

ALSO PRESENT

Sir Edward Lister
Chief Strategic Advisor to the Prime Minister

Dominic Cummings
Chief Adviser to Prime Minister Boris Johnson

Professor Chris Whitty
Chief Medical Officer (CMO) for England, UK government's Chief Medical Adviser

Simon Stevens
Chief Executive Officer of the NHS

Alex Aiken
Executive Director for Government Communications

Emily Beynon
Private Secretary to the Prime Minister

Sir Mark Sedwill
Cabinet Secretary

Jonathan Black
Director General, Cabinet Secretariat

Mark Sweeney
Director General, Cabinet Secretariat

Jess Glover
Director General, Cabinet Secretariat

Katherine Hammond
Director, Civil Contingencies Secretariat

Secretariat

**NR**

C O N T E N T S

Introduction

The PRIME MINISTER welcomed the group and said that the government would that day announce a package of measures to support businesses and workers through this period. He also said that a decision was needed that day on further restrictions on social gatherings.

Covid-19 Dashboard

The CHIEF MEDICAL OFFICER FOR ENGLAND said that the latest data in the dashboard showed an increase in overnight cases and deaths.

In discussion, the following points were made:

a) Patients were being moved from busy hospitals into hospitals which were less busy to spread the burden or cases. This was being misreported in the press as hospitals being overloaded, and should be corrected.

The Committee:

- took note.

Social Distancing

The PRIME MINISTER said that they would need to make a decision today to strengthen advice on social distancing. He said he wanted to consider if measures to close pubs, bars and restaurants needed to be applied to the whole of the UK or London only. He also said he wanted to consider what premises needed to close, including whether to close other shops.

In discussion, the following points were made:

a) there were advantages to applying the measures across the UK. The hardest question would be drawing the line on what should close. The Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government would be providing advice on the options.
b) compliance numbers for social distancing on the current measures was not high enough. If the policy was that groups of people should not meet in order to enable social distancing, it made sense to close

businesses with the purpose of bringing people together.

c) there was not a scientific definition on a social business - guidance would need to be developed if this definition was being applied.
d) if the measures applied to London, people might move out of London to avoid the measures.

The CHANCELLOR said that analysis was needed to understand the sector by sector impacts of the measures, and to join up with the proposed economic package. He said that the package would not be sufficient to ensure that all businesses closing would be able to reopen.

The Prime Minister said that the CABINET SECRETARIAT should provide him with final advice on increasing compliance with the Government's aim to prevent social gatherings by asking businesses to close services where the objective was to encourage groups of people to meet socially (pubs, restaurants, bars); and whether to do this locally in London or more broadly. He said that the CABINET SECRETARIAT should include sighting analysis on the impacts and implications of closing further 'non-essential' establishments – ie leisure businesses which do not have a primary objective of encouraging groups of people to meet. He said that the CABINET SECRETARIAT should prepare to convene COBR should his decision be to ask any businesses to close down, and consider whether to invite the Devolved Administrations and / or the Mayor of London depending on the decision on geographical extent.

The Group:

Shielding

- took note.

THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT said that the NHS were sending out letters on shielding to the clinically vulnerable group and that these would start to arrive the

following Monday. The website on gov.uk would be available from the following Monday, and the call centre would open the following Wednesday. Medicines would be delivered by the NHS through the pharmacy network, food would be delivered by supermarkets, military planners would be arriving at the local authority hubs to help with the volunteers. The first parcels of support would reach people by the end of the following week.

The PRIME MINISTER said that the delay between the announcement on the following Sunday and the operationalism of the phone line was too long and people would need to be able to ask for help immediately if they were being told to self-isolate.

During the discussion it was noted that:

a) it was a big task to get this package up and running. A judgement call was needed on whether to go ahead now with the announcement that clinically vulnerable people would need to self-isolate, or wait until the support package and information helplines were ready.

b) further discussion was being had with technology companies to see if the Government could deliver the call centre on a faster timescale. Rapid escalation with these companies was needed to escalate the timeline for delivery.

c) the message in the letters being sent was that from the following Monday people would need to start shielding. Those affected would need individualised packages depending on their needs.

The PRIME MINISTER said that they needed to consider how to close the gap between the announcement and the operationalisation of the call centre. He said that the Department for Work and Pensions should report urgently to the General Public Sector Ministerial Implementation Group

at 1pm that day (20 March) on how they were expediting work to put in place call centres to support vulnerable people subject to the shielding announcement, so that the shielding announcement could be made as soon as possible.

The Group:

- took note.

Testing

The PRIME MINISTER said that THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE, working with CDL, CMO, CSA and all departments, should articulate a three month battle plan to tackle the virus, to be scrutinised by the Health Ministerial Implementation Group ahead of being put to the PM strategy meeting the following Sunday; the battle plan should bring together all relevant activity alongside key milestones and targets on a timeline. The plan should include testing and new technology; data gathering; and social interventions.

THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE said that on testing they had a number of workstrands - a surveillance project of sample testing; negotiations to buy antibody tests in bulk; expanding testing to 25,000; and working on a private sector solution to develop 100,000 thermo-fisher tests for key workers. He said that work to ensure enough reagents for the testing kits was also taking place. He said technology based solutions to identify those who have had contact with an infectious person were also being developed.

The following points were made in discussion:

a) a powerful narrative was needed about the impact of testing, to increase confidence in the population of the ability to move past the crisis, and catalyse the market.

b) technology providing different forms of oxygenisation would also be considered so that fewer people would require ventilators.

c) all the swabs for tests currently being utilised in the UK were made in the same factory in Italy. Given the scale of the pandemic in Italy there could be a risk that supply was interrupted. While there was currently enough swabs, careful monitoring was required to make sure that supply was not interrupted.

d) oxygen supplies were adequate and hospital beds in private hospitals were being bought subject to HMT approval of funding.

The PRIME MINISTER reiterated the need for the three month battle plan and that the current plans across the board were not moving quickly enough, and said that THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE should lead urgent work on the battle plan.

The Group

- Took note.