

**Cabinet Office Briefing Rooms**

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**Covid-19 (M)**

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Meeting to be held in Irrelevant & Sensitive Cabinet Office, 70 Whitehall

**on Monday 02 March, 10:30**

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**CHAIR’S BRIEF**

You are chairing a COBR on UK Preparedness for Covid-19. The key objectives of the meeting are to:

- Agree the Covid-19 Action Plan for publication on 3 March.
- Ensure progress on development of a Bill to provide the powers needed in a Reasonable Worst Case Scenario and buy in from the Leaders of both Houses and Chief Whip.
- The meeting will be held at OFFICIAL SENSITIVE
- The following individuals will be on video link:
  - Nicola Sturgeon MSP - Scottish Government First Minister
  - Jeane Freeman MSP - Scottish Government (Health)
  - Dr Catherine Calderwood - Scottish Government CMO
  - Arlene Foster - NI First Minister
  - Michelle O’Neill - NI Deputy First Minister
  - Robin Swann - NI Executive (Health)
  - Dr Michael McBride- NI CMO
  - Mark Drakeford AM - Welsh Government First Minister
  - Vaughan Gething AM - Welsh Government (Health)
  - Dr Frank Atherton - Welsh Government CMO

**AGENDA**

- 1) Current situation including science update
- 2) Agreement of Covid-19 Action Plan
- 3) Covid-19 Bill
- 4) Next steps

#### **ITEM 1: Current situation, including scientific update**

**Aim:** To ensure there is a common understanding of Covid-19, the information known about the virus, and the domestic and international response so far.

#### **Handling:**

- YOU should open with the following points:
  - The number of coronavirus cases around the world is rising every day - and the UK is no exception.
  - There now seems little doubt that it will present a significant challenge for our country.
  - But we are well prepared, and the government and the NHS will stop at nothing to fight this virus.
- Invite **CHRIS WHITTY (CHIEF MEDICAL OFFICER)** to provide an update on the global outlook for the Covid-19 outbreak and risk assessment to the UK.
- Invite **PATRICK VALLANCE (GOVERNMENT CHIEF SCIENTIFIC ADVISER)** to update on the latest scientific understanding of the Reasonable Worst Case Scenario, in particular the mortality rate.
- Invite **NIGEL ADAMS (FCO)** to provide an update on UK Nationals in Tenerife and FCO/DHSC thinking about the approach to repatriation going forwards.
  - You may wish to make the point that the FCO must continue to work with other nations’ authorities to ensure that British nationals are receiving appropriate care and support.

#### **ITEM 2: Agreement of Covid-19 Action Plan**

**Aim:** To agree on publication of Covid-19 Action Plan and the corresponding communication and handling strategy.

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**Background:** The Department for Health and Social Care has coordinated the Covid-19 Action plan at pace. All departments and Devolved Administrations have had an opportunity to contribute - this is the formal clearance moment to ensure that comment after release demonstrates cross-UK consensus, reassures the public that the risk is being gripped across all four nations, and further galvanises planning.

**Handling:**

- YOU should reinforce that this battle plan lays out in detail the measures we could use - if and when they are needed.
- Invite **MATT HANCOCK (HEALTH SECRETARY)** to provide an overview of the Covid-19 Action Plan and public health campaign.
- Invite **ALEX AIKEN (CABINET OFFICE Comms)** to comment on the Parliamentary and communications strategy for the launch of the plan.
- Invite **NICOLA STURGEON (Scottish Government)** to confirm Scotland's agreement to the plan and comment on communications in Scotland.
- Invite **MARK DRAKEFORD (Welsh Government)** to confirm Wales' agreement to the plan and comment on communications in Wales.
- Invite **ROBIN SWANN (Northern Ireland Executive)** to confirm NI agreement to the plan and comment on communications in NI.
  
- YOU should turn to **ROBERT JENRICK (COMMUNITIES SECRETARY)** to ask what his department is doing to communicate the need for urgent planning to local responders.
  
- YOU should turn to **ALOK SHARMA (BUSINESS SECRETARY)** to ask what his department is doing to ensure business readiness, and to **RISHI SUNAK (CHANCELLOR OF THE EXCHEQUER)** to describe how HMT and the Bank of England will ensure market stability and support for businesses through the peak of a pandemic.

**Recommended decisions:**

- The Covid-19 Action Plan should be published on Tuesday 3 March.
- Alex Aiken to ensure that the comms and handling approach is jointly developed with all departments and Devolved Administrations so that they can play their part.

**ITEM 3: Covid-19 Bill**

**Aim:** Ensure progress on development of a Bill to provide the powers needed in a Reasonable Worst Case scenario and buy in from the Leaders of both Houses and Chief Whip.

**Background:** The purpose of this Bill is to ensure that the things which need to be done differently in a pandemic, can be. It includes both some new powers and streamlining of existing processes by altering legal requirements. The deadline for policy instructions to Counsel is today. COBR will give final approval of content in the week commencing 9 March. No title for the Bill has yet been agreed.

Business Managers’ support for the Parliamentary time needed is essential. They were briefed on the Bill last week and are not yet fully supportive. The Leader of the Commons in particular would prefer that Part 2 of the Civil Contingencies Act is used to take these powers. The CCA is intended for use in no-notice crises. In the case of a pandemic - a rising tide event - the ‘urgency’ test in the Bill means the Bill should be taken forward through a normal but rapid Parliamentary process. Using the CCA would in any event only delay Parliamentary scrutiny - any powers taken under it would lapse in 5 days without it. It would be the first use of these very extreme powers, and would undoubtedly signal lack of grip.

**Handling:**

- Invite **Matt HANCOCK (HEALTH SECRETARY)** to outline the purpose of the Bill and why it should be allocated Parliamentary time in March.
- Invite any of the **DEVOLVED ADMINISTRATIONS** to confirm that they are making plans for Legislative Consent Motions as needed.
- **THE LEADERS OF THE HOUSE OF COMMONS AND LORDS** may want to comment.
- Remind **ALL DEPARTMENTS** that the timetable is pressing and that they should be absolutely sure that all legislative requirements have been captured.

**Recommended decisions:**

- That preparation of the Bill proceeds, including for Parliamentary time in March.
- All to ensure they finalise policy requirements for the Bill rapidly.

**ITEM 4: Comms, media and parliamentary handling**

**Aim:** To capture any communications issues that have not already been covered in the earlier discussion.

**Handling:**

- Turn to **ALEX AIKEN (CABINET OFFICE Comms)** to update on wider communications issues as necessary. In particular, YOU may wish to explore the extent to which planned media events will shape public and parliamentary perceptions of Government’s handling of events.
- The **DEVOLVED ADMINISTRATIONS** may wish to update on specific media events in their areas and proposed handling.

**ITEM 5: Next steps**

**Aim:** To agree the rhythm or triggers for future meetings.

**Recommended decisions:**

- Planning for managing a potential pandemic should be taken forward at pace by all departments.
- The next ministerial COBR should meet on Wednesday. This will be chaired by the Health Secretary.

**CABINET OFFICE**  
**02 March 2020**