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Minutes

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COVID STRATEGY COMMITTEE

Minutes of a Meeting of the Covid Strategy Committee
held in Number 10 Downing Street and by video conference on

FRIDAY 19th June 2020

At 1500 PM

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 Priti Patel MP
Secretary of State for the Home
Department

The Rt Hon Michael Gove MP
Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster

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

The Rt Hon Alok Sharma MP
Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial
Strategy

The Rt Hon Gavin Williamson CBE MP
Secretary of State for Education

The Rt Hon Grant Shapps MP
Secretary of State for Transport

ALSO PRESENT

Professor Chris Whitty CB
Chief Medical Officer for England and the UK

Sir Patrick Vallance
Government Chief Scientific Adviser

Simon Case CVO
Permanent Secretary at No 10 Downing Street

Secretariat

Sir Mark Sedwill
S Ridley
E Payne

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Preparing for Autumn:
Education settings

THE PRIME MINISTER said that the aim of the meeting was to ensure that plans were in place to get every eligible child back into school by September. There was a social imperative to allow children to make up for lost time by returning to school. He had spoken recently to the President of France, who had set out that all schools in France would be returning the following week. The Secretary of State for Education's announcement on catch-up learning had been well received and had been warmly welcomed at the school in Hemel Hempstead which he had visited earlier that day. His preference was for a full return of schools in September. He was grateful to The Secretary of State for Education and his Department for all their work on this issue.

THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR EDUCATION said that there were two main options: a full return in September, and a fallback option for a partial return should the circumstances require it at that stage. Contingency planning was important to ensure that plans were in place should they be needed. A cross-Whitehall and agency taskforce had been set up to assure plans and identify challenges. Sufficient transport capacity would be critical. Guidance and clarity of plans would need to be provided in the following two weeks so that schools could prepare and inform pupils before closing for the summer.

In discussion, the following points were made:

- a) a full return of schools in September was welcomed and supported. Children had been off school for a long period of time and a full-throttled approach was needed to get them back as soon as possible;
- b) school closures were only one out of a wider number of non-pharmaceutical interventions to limit the spread of the virus. It would be possible to put in place other restrictions to avoid scaling back the return of schools, should the circumstances in September require it;
- c) the Secretary of State for Education had the powers to compel schools to open. Local authorities had been informed of these powers. There was only one area, Knowsley, where there was not an agreed plan for the return of eligible year groups before the summer and where these powers could be used;
- d) sufficient transport capacity needed to be in place to support the return of schools. This would be almost impossible if the two

metre social distancing rule were to remain in place. Walking and cycling should continue to be encouraged;

- e) more needed to be done to give parents confidence to send their children back to school. Some in unions and certain councils were making this more difficult;
- f) the announcement on catch-up learning had received support from every part of the education sector;
- g) children would have lost out from the months during which schools had been closed, and the most disadvantaged would have been most affected. Returning children to school was central to levelling up. Options should be pursued to regain some of the lost time, including: increasing the number of school days taught the following year and in subsequent years; extending the length of the school day; and expanding 'Teach First' and teaching apprenticeship programmes to support the effort in the longer term;
- h) it would be possible to build a broad cross party consensus to build greater political momentum to support the need to get all children back to school;
- i) the return of schools would have positive impact on the economy and would support parents in returning to work;
- j) £1 billion funding had been provided to fund catch-up provision for the next academic year, including specifically small group tuition for disadvantaged children and some more general catch-up funding for all schools. Any additional initiatives would need to be funded from this allocation, and any changes to how this allocation were to be used would need to be agreed very soon; and
- k) higher education had not been closed by the Government and therefore they were expected to take their own decisions on reopening and the type of provision offered.

Responding, THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR EDUCATION said that he agreed with the full-throttled approach to return all schools from September. His Department would consider how to manage the fall-back option. He would also consider extending the school day, extension of one-to-one tuition and use of pupil premium funding.

Summing up, THE PRIME MINISTER said that there was agreement to the Secretary of State for Education's plan, with a strong determination to get children and schools back in all settings at the beginning of September. Schools that were not already open should be compelled to do so. The fallback plan should be worked up but it should not be announced, and the message should be clear that there would be a full schools return from September - with a fully worked-up plan for achieving this, including how local lockdowns and the relationship between schools and the JBC would work. The British people had made a huge sacrifice, teachers had worked hard to keep schools going, but children had lost out on education and fallen behind. Incidence of the virus was coming down, test and trace was improving all the time and would be outstanding by September, and instant reactive measures and local lockdowns would be possible. Provision of new treatments was changing the relationship with the virus. Children would therefore be going back to school in September.

The Committee:

- took note.