

NOTE OF CABINET CALL, 17 JULY 2020

THE PRIME MINISTER said that later that morning he would make a public statement on the progress to tackle Covid-19 (coronavirus) and what was planned for the following months. In May the Government had set various conditional dates to ease social distancing measures and other restrictions. Most of these had been met. Businesses and people across the UK wanted to see the Government's vision for the way ahead. Some would say that it was not possible to predict how the virus would behave. Nevertheless, the Government should try to impose its timetable and logic on the virus; it had been collective human action which had led to the success so far.

Continuing, THE PRIME MINISTER said that the Government had to decide whether to continue the current social distancing measures until spring 2021. Businesses and public transport would not be full. The economic consequences of that course would be severe. There would be more anticipatory lay-offs and greater pessimism. The Government should at least aspire to get back to as close to normal as possible, as fast as possible.

Continuing, THE PRIME MINISTER said that from 1 August the decision to work from home would become one for employers and employees, rather than government guidance. Public transport would reopen, as would most remaining leisure settings. Indoor performances to live audiences would be allowed, all in line with Covid-secure guidelines. Wedding receptions would also be enabled with no more than 30 guests, subject to guidance.

Concluding, THE PRIME MINISTER said that there were preparations being made so that the NHS was prepared for the winter. PPE was being stockpiled. Progress was being made on treatments for the virus. He hoped that if, and only if, the conditions were right by November, in the run up to Christmas, people would see life returning to as close to normal as possible. It may be then possible to do away with social distancing measures whilst retaining other measures, such as face coverings and hand washing. The Government should set out that it hoped for the best but was prepared for the worst.

In discussion the following points were made:

- a) the extra support that had been agreed for the Nightingale Hospitals was welcome, as was other support for winter planning;
- b) the challenge was to keep the virus suppressed but also give hope to people and address the terrible economic consequences of the virus. There was a logic to set out a positive, best case scenario;
- c) given the risk of an influenza outbreak that winter, there would be the largest influenza vaccination programme in the UK's history. The vaccines only lasted a few months so their deployment could not be brought forward;
- d) there should be consideration of the role that employers could play in testing their employees for coronavirus on their return to work;

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- e) business leaders may ask employees to come back to the office once they realised that they were responsible for the health and safety of their employees in their own homes; and
- f) public transport capacity was not full during non-peak hours.

Responding, THE GOVERNMENT CHIEF MEDICAL OFFICER said that all the changes that were going to be made would make it easier for the virus to spread. The virus was helped by the winter. In Israel and the USA, cases had increased and it was still only summer. The Government needed to be clear about the impact of the changes they were making.

THE GOVERNMENT CHIEF SCIENTIFIC ADVISER said that the scale and timing of winter pressures were unknown. The Government needed to be very alert and responsive. The approach was not risk-free; it was very likely that the hand brakes would need to be applied in different places.

Summing up, THE PRIME MINISTER said that although surges were a risk, he could not see a better alternative. He may be wrong taking these steps, and he would say so. People needed to know what the Government was hoping and planning. The months ahead may be bumpy: the NHS would face winter pressure and there would be a big rise in joblessness. But the virus would be managed with the systems in place including local lockdowns. People had continued to absorb advice and change accordingly. He appreciated all the work the Government Chief Scientific Adviser and the Government Chief Medical Officer had done so far. Decisions on the way forward were for the Government to make, having weighed up the advice in front of them. On balance, the decisions he would be announcing that day were the right ones.

Attendees:

The Rt Hon Boris Johnson MP (chair)
The Rt Hon Dominic Raab MP
The Rt Hon Rishi Sunak MP
The Rt Hon Priti Patel MP
The Rt Hon Michael Gove MP
The Rt Hon Robert Buckland QC MP
The Rt Hon Ben Wallace MP
The Rt Hon Matt Hancock MP
The Rt Hon Alok Sharma MP
The Rt Hon Elizabeth Truss MP
The Rt Hon Dr Thérèse Coffey MP
The Rt Hon Gavin Williamson CBE MP
The Rt Hon George Eustice MP
The Rt Hon Robert Jenrick MP
The Rt Hon Grant Shapps MP
The Rt Hon Brandon Lewis CBE MP
The Rt Hon Alister Jack MP
The Rt Hon Simon Hart MP
The Rt Hon Baroness Evans of Bowes Park

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The Rt Hon Oliver Dowden CBE MP
The Rt Hon Anne-Marie Trevelyan MP
The Rt Hon Amanda Milling MP
The Rt Hon Stephen Barclay MP
The Rt Hon Jacob Rees-Mogg MP
The Rt Hon Mark Spencer MP
The Rt Hon Suella Braverman QC MP
Professor Chris Whitty CB
Sir Patrick Vallance

Secretariat

Sir Mark Sedwill

Name Redacted

CABINET SECRETARIAT
6 AUGUST 2020