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Minutes

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COVID-19 OPERATIONS COMMITTEE

Minutes of a Meeting of the Covid-19 Operations Committee
held by video conference on

SUNDAY 13th June 2021
At 19:00 PM

P R E S E N T

The Rt Hon Boris Johnson MP
Prime Minister

The Rt Hon Michael Gove MP
Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, Minister for
the Cabinet Office

The Rt Hon Rishi Sunak MP
Chancellor of the Exchequer

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

ALSO PRESENT

The Rt Hon Mark Spencer MP
Parliamentary Secretary to the Treasury (Chief Whip)

Professor Chris Whitty
Chief Medical Officer and Department of Health and Social Care Chief Scientific Adviser

Sir Patrick Vallance
Government Chief Scientific Adviser

OFFICIAL-SENSITIVE

James Bowler
Permanent Secretary, COVID-19 Taskforce

Simon Ridley
Director General, Strategy, COVID-19 Taskforce

Kathy Hall
Director General, Delivery, COVID-19 Taskforce

Rob Harrison
Director General, Analysis, COVID-19 Taskforce

Dan Rosenfield
Chief of Staff, Number 10

Rosie Bate-Williams
Special Advisor to the Prime Minister

Henry Cook
Special Advisor to the Prime Minister

Jack Doyle
Director of Communications, Number 10

Secretariat

S Case
E Payne

CONTENTS

Item	Subject	Page
1.	Step four of the Roadmap	1

OFFICIAL-SENSITIVE
OFFICIAL-SENSITIVE
OFFICIAL-SENSITIVE

Responding, THE GOVERNMENT'S CHIEF MEDICAL OFFICER said that putting the modelling aside, there were a number of facts. Hospitalisations were now doubling and it looked as if case rates were starting to creep up the age groups. Within five to six doublings, the numbers would be at very dangerous levels. The speed of doubling would increase as the next phase of opening up took place. The proportion of people going to hospital who had been double vaccinated was starting to creep up.

Continuing, THE GOVERNMENT'S CHIEF MEDICAL OFFICER said there were two epidemics: the Alpha variant which was decreasing, and the Delta variant which was growing. A key difference between this variant and previous strains was that the second dose of the vaccine was required to give more protection, and this needed more time. Vaccines were likely to be highly effective against serious illness. The additional four weeks would enable all adults in the groups that transmitted the most to be offered a first dose, and to enable everyone in the most vulnerable groups to be offered a second dose.

Responding, THE GOVERNMENT'S CHIEF SCIENTIFIC ADVISER said that the wave now expected was a bigger version of the one that had been predicted at the start of the Roadmap, as a result of the Delta variant. A delay of a month would bring this back down to something more similar to the original Roadmap modelling. At any other stage in the pandemic, the current growth rate for cases and hospitalisations would see the Government considering reimposing measures. Thanks to the vaccine, this was not needed. The vaccine was enabling a lot of activity, more so than in most of the rest of Europe. Step four was a big step for indoor mixing, and so there would be a big impact from getting more protection into the younger groups to reduce R (the reproduction rate of transmission) and into the more vulnerable groups to protect against serious illness. No one was arguing for a delay of more than four weeks, though it was still possible that the virus could present surprises.

Summing up THE PRIME MINISTER said that the rationale for waiting four weeks for second doses needed to be stronger, and it was unclear why this length of time was needed to administer 1.8 million doses which could logistically be delivered in a few days. One of the problems being faced was the failure to internalise the effect of a third wave, even though this had been predicted. The proposal seemed to offer infinite delay.

Continuing, THE PRIME MINISTER said that the conditions under which the unlocking would take place in four weeks time needed to be understood. At this point, more doses of vaccine would have been

delivered and more people would have been protected, but the numbers will look more serious.

Continuing, THE PRIME MINISTER said that the proposed package of a four week pause with some targeted relaxations had been agreed, with some amendments. The recommended changes to weddings, receptions and commemorative events had been agreed, although this would mean that organisers would need to reduce their guest lists. The risk in care homes should not be increased, so only the changes to isolation and essential care givers should go ahead, and the rules on visitors should not be changed at that time. The proposed change for amateur choirs should not be made at that time, but the change to children's residential visits could go ahead.

Concluding, THE PRIME MINISTER said that at 6pm the following day he would stand up and explain why step four was not proceeding on 21 June, apart from some minor concessions to weddings and large events. This would be framed as time to protect more people with the vaccine and save lives that would otherwise be lost, as a result of the new delta variant. It would be important to explain that there was a very good chance that the 19 July really would be the moment that all restrictions would be lifted. The message would also need to be clear that there would be thousands more deaths in any scenario.

The Committee:

— took note.