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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

SATURDAY 19<sup>th</sup> DECEMBER 2020  
At 0915 AM

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 Dominic Raab MP  
Secretary of State for the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office and First Secretary of State

The Rt Hon Priti Patel MP  
Secretary of State for the Home Department

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

The Rt Hon Gavin Williamson MP  
Secretary of State for Education

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

The Rt Hon Grant Shapps MP  
Secretary of State for Transport

The Rt Hon Oliver Dowden MP  
Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport

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

Sir Patrick Vallance  
Government Chief Scientific Adviser

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

Dr Clare Gardiner  
Director General, Joint Biosecurity Council

Baroness Harding of Winscombe  
Executive Chair, NHS Test and Trace

Bernadette Kelly  
Permanent Secretary, Department for Transport

James Bowler  
Second Permanent Secretary for the COVID-19 Taskforce

Kathy Hall  
Director General, COVID-19 Taskforce

Steffan Jones  
Director, Analysis and Data Directorate, Cabinet Office

Secretariat

S Case  
S Ridley  
E Payne

Name

NR

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## Response Options

THE PRIME MINISTER said that following the previous day's Committee meeting, colleagues would have had a chance to reflect on what action they thought should be taken. He feared that the mood of the Committee would still be to take drastic action to control the virus. The Committee was considering deciding to criminalise activities that only three days previously he had said would be allowed to go ahead. At the very least, something needed to be done in the areas with the new variant of Covid-19 (coronavirus). The key thing to land with the public would be a clear explanation of why the new variant had changed the situation substantially since Wednesday; it was something new.

THE SECOND PERMANENT SECRETARY IN THE COVID TASKFORCE said that the paper in front of the Committee outlined four proposals for consideration. First, there was an option of introducing a 'tier four' for some areas which would see tighter restrictions than the rest of the country through closing of non-essential retail, entertainment and personal care. Communal worship, and outdoor sports and leisure would remain open. The second proposal was around the geographies where the tier four restrictions would apply and these were focused on the areas that had been moved into tier three the previous week. The third proposal was about domestic travel and what this would mean for the new tier four areas. In tier four the message out be 'stay at home; outside tier four the message would be 'stay local'. International travel in tier four would be negated and for everyone outside of those areas, the guidance would be not to travel. It was expected that other countries may take steps against travel from the UK.

Continuing, THE SECOND PERMANENT SECRETARY IN THE COVID TASKFORCE said that the Christmas bubble option could be rescinded across the country or just in the new tier four areas. Any announcement should build on the Prime Minister's messaging on the need for the public to take personal responsibility for their plans. On timing, the travel proposals would have immediate effect. Shops would remain open that day but would be closed on Sunday.

THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE said that he agreed with the paper but wanted to highlight a technical point on regulations: some restrictions could come into place as soon as they were drafted, but the more novel restrictions would take a day or two to draft. He was in favour of the 'five mile' option as set out in the paper. A strong message should be given that a vaccine was already in the country. The reason that the 'stay local' messaging needed to be on a national scale was because there were pockets of the variant across the country.

In discussion, the following points were made:

- a) the situation faced presented a significant political challenge. The Committee favoured placing a 'ring of steel' around London and surrounding areas by placing them into a new 'tier four', and agreed with the restrictions proposed in the paper as to what that meant would be closed;
- b) the proposals were in line with the Government's strategy to suppress the virus using a local tiering system until a vaccine was fully rolled out. It would be useful to know for how long the new 'tier four' restrictions were anticipated to be in place;
- c) it should be made clear that even in 'tier four', people should still go to work if they could not work from home. This applied particularly to key workers. The 'stay at home' message was too strong and did not achieve anything additional to the closure of non-essential retail and other places. It had previously resulted in unintended consequences so should not be used again. Nor should the public be made to be scared by amping up the messaging about the virus being dangerous;
- d) there would be pressure to keep gyms open, and for children to be able to participate in communal sport. Things that made people's lives bearable should be allowed;
- e) whilst it made sense to use the geography for those areas that had recently been placed in 'tier three', it would be challenging to split up areas such as parts of Essex. In light of the prevalence in neighbouring areas - the virus was rampant - all parts of Essex were going to be infected anyway, so should be brought in sooner rather than later. The lesson of previous lockdowns was that it was better to go wider, and then give people good news if that was possible;
- f) on travel, a 'stay local' message was more practical, more enforceable and would be complied with more than a slightly ludicrous 'five mile' rule. The impact of restrictions on travel distances was different in cities and the countryside;
- g) restricting part of England that did not have a high prevalence of the new variant would go down badly in those areas. People would ignore the Government. Once they had started to disobey guidance, they would not adhere to it any longer;
- h) the Government should refund people who had already booked

travel that was going to be cancelled because of decisions taken to control the virus. This might be as many as 900,000 people at a cost of around £10 million;

- i) international travel restrictions were a matter for other countries, not for the UK Government. Given the virus spread in airports and on planes, the measures in the paper seemed to be the right ones. There could be additional measures such as allowing or mandating people to take tests before travelling abroad;
- j) on Christmas, given that the new variant was seeded across the country, cancellation of Christmas bubbles should apply beyond tier four areas. Taking this step now was the right thing to do because there was less economic activity anyway. It would be impossible to defend households mixing once people understood the implications of the new variant. Most people did not support the idea of Christmas bubbles anyway. The Government should learn from its experience and - against the temptation not to pile on additional restrictions and misery - bring the virus under control in this way;
- k) there could be a compromise where those in tier four areas were permitted to bubble for one day, or to meet another household outside. There should be some differentiation between those in tier four areas and those elsewhere in the country;
- l) the cancellation of bubbles would cause distress to the elderly and should be handled sensitively;
- m) it would be beneficial for messaging to be clear on what was known about the new variant, using scientifically robust statistics where possible. The numbers that had been presented to the Committee the previous evening were the reason that many colleagues had changed their position and agreed to more stringent measures. The public should be presented with these numbers;
- n) clarity on the impact the new variant had on the vaccine's efficacy was crucial to keep people signing up to be vaccinated;
- o) people should be told what they could or could not do in each tier - messaging should not be too technical; and
- p) to manage expectations, there should be a clear message given that people should stay at home on new year's eve. There would be no public fireworks displays or socialising between households.

Responding, THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE said that outdoor sports for children should be permitted. There was a good case for using the area surrounding London that had been placed into tier three the previous week as the tier four area, and then reviewing it the following week to see if further areas should be added. The message was simple: people should stop unnecessary social contact outside their households.

Responding, THE GOVERNMENT'S CHIEF SCIENTIFIC ADVISER said that three different methods had shown that the new variant was more transmissible. This was a scientific conclusion with a high degree of confidence. Numbers would be refined over the course of the week and it was not advisable to make them public yet.

Responding, THE GOVERNMENT'S CHIEF MEDICAL ADVISER said that there were some numbers that were clear, such as cases of coronavirus, hospital admissions and deaths. The Government should not make public more tentative numbers as these would be used against it. However, he would work with others to find robust numbers to use in the press conference later that day to explain the importance of the new variant.

Summing up, THE PRIME MINISTER said that people should travel to work in all areas of the country, including in the new tier four. The 'stay at home' messaging would be a return to the November messaging. People did need to be apprehensive about the virus: 60,000 people had died, and on average had lost ten years of their lives. There had been a lot of human suffering. The idea of the new measures was for people to change their behaviours. There should be scientifically robust numbers for him to use in the press conference later that day to explain the new variant to the public.

Continuing, THE PRIME MINISTER said that the Committee had agreed to put those areas of the country with a high prevalence of the new variant into tier four. This meant closing non-essential retail and other places, as per the paper. It was a return to the rules governing the lockdown in November. There would be further work by the Department for Transport and others on ensuring ways of refunding those whose plans would be affected by the Government's decision.

Concluding, THE PRIME MINISTER said that the decision about what to do at Christmas was very difficult. There was a good argument that people deserved a Christmas break and that in areas outside tier four, the rules should remain the same with greater messaging around being cautious. There should definitely be differentiation between those areas

in tier four and the rest of the county. On balance, there should be a total cancellation of the Christmas bubble plans in tier four areas, and in other parts of the country, three households would only be allowed to meet on Christmas Day. This would be tough, and he did not agree to this with gladness, but as a result of a good collective discussion.

The Committee:

— took note.