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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

MONDAY 22nd June 2020

At 1800 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 Dominic Raab, MP
Secretary of State for Foreign and
Commonwealth Affairs

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 Oliver Dowden CBE MP
Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport

ALSO PRESENT

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

Sir Patrick Vallance
Government Chief Scientific Adviser

OFFICIAL-SENSITIVE

Simon Case CVO
Permanent Secretary at No 10 Downing Street

Tom Shinner
Senior Advisor to the Prime Minister

Clare Lombardelli
Director General, Chief Economic Advisor and Joint Head of the Government Economic
Service

Secretariat

Sir Mark Sedwill

S Ridley

NR

E Payne

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Covid-19 Roadmap: Step
Three

THE PRIME MINISTER said that the paper before the Committee set out the third step in the plan to regularise the lives and business of the country. The package was ambitious. It represented a significant loosening of the restrictions that had been put in place in March. This was only possible because 'R' (the reproduction rate of transmission) remained below one, and the incidence rate was clearly falling. The package proposed was well-judged. It would open up the majority of the part of the economy that had remained closed, support greater social contact between families and friends, and change the advice on two metres social distancing. However, some businesses would remain closed and some activities would still not be allowed. The communication of the package to the general public should emphasise that the Government was proceeding cautiously, and people needed to continue to behave sensibly.

The PERMANENT SECRETARY AT NO 10 DOWNING STREET said that the paper set out three key decisions for Ministers: were they confident that the tests had been met sufficiently to progress to step three of the Roadmap; were they content to change the guidance on two metre social distancing in the way set out; and were they content to approve the proposed package of loosening of restrictions for 4 July.

THE GOVERNMENT CHIEF MEDICAL OFFICER said that the proposed package was at the top end of the risk boundary. There were four different risks which needed to be considered in deciding on the package: people would respond to the lifting of specific restrictions by becoming less careful in other aspects of their behaviour; although this package of measures should not push 'R' above one, taken together with the reopening of schools in September, it was more likely than not to do so; respiratory viruses like Covid-19 (coronavirus) were more dangerous in the winter months; and viruses went in waves, the UK's first wave was still not complete and evidence, including from the US, showed that further waves were possible. The most risky areas of the package were indoor hospitality and the prospect of reopening schools in September. The Government also needed to guard against behavioural changes as measures were relaxed. Public messaging needed to emphasise that people and businesses should continue to take all possible precautions to protect against infection. If people ceased to act with caution, the current package might push 'R' above one.

THE GOVERNMENT CHIEF SCIENTIFIC ADVISER said that individuals and businesses needed to continue to follow Covid-secure guidelines and the messaging needed to be clearly heard and understood. Otherwise the lifting of restrictions would quickly lead to further spread of the disease. In any case, the proposed package would certainly lead to an increase in localised outbreaks. That was why an effective Track and Trace system was so important.

In discussion, the following points were made:

- a) although 'R' was currently below one, the lifting of restrictions would raise the risk that it would increase. However, previous measures to lift restrictions had had less effect on 'R' than was expected;
- b) extra resources would be required to ensure that the NHS did not experience capacity constraints in the event that there was a second wave of infections;
- c) the proposal to reopen hairdressers but not nail bars or tattoo parlours needed to be explained and communicated to the public. Similar issues arose with theatres, which under the proposed package would remain closed, whilst cinemas would reopen, although this could be explained by the greater risk associated with live performance. A line needed to be drawn somewhere. There would always be a business or individual that could complain that the decision was unfair. Ultimately this was about the balance of risk;
- d) a dividing line between businesses which could open and those which must remain closed could be justified in many of these examples. However, there was an obvious inconsistency in keeping public lavatories open, whilst closing these facilities on campsites. Camping was a relatively low-cost holiday for many families;
- e) criticism might also be expected because the Government was opening facilities that led to unhealthy behaviours, such as alcohol consumption, whilst gyms remained closed. Concerns could be addressed by providing a

timetable for reopening gyms and other sporting activities and facilities;

- f) live performances were important and it would help significantly to give even a minimal lifting of restrictions to some struggling businesses. This was particularly important for museums, galleries and the arts, where there were organisations of national importance;
- g) the proposal to reopen hospitality on Saturday 4 July might cause a rush of customers that left businesses unprepared;
- h) the proposal to collect the names and contact information from customers on a voluntary basis was important to identify people who had been exposed to the virus. However, there was concern from businesses about compatibility with data protection legislation and whether they could be held responsible for any errors. Engagement with business ahead of 4 July could help address concerns and explain the purpose of the measures;
- i) it was important to communicate to businesses and local authorities how a local lockdown would operate in the event it proved necessary to impose such measures; and
- j) if local lockdown measures were not enough to contain the virus, national measures would need to be reimposed. The triggers for reimposing restrictions should be considered.

Summing up, THE PRIME MINISTER said that the proposed set of measures that had been set out in the paper, to the Committee, including the change to the 2 metre rule, was agreed. The five tests the Government had set were met. In addition, there had been agreement to: reopen shared facilities at campsites, take forward work on the reopening of gyms and other sporting activities and facilities, continue restrictions only on live indoor performance rather than theatres, as outdoor theatre could be permitted, and consult affected business and introduce the voluntary scheme for registering customers. It was also vital to step up all efforts on the Track and Trace system, combined with

a credible mechanism for a localised lockdown. This package, taken as a whole, was bold and well-justified. It represented a sensible and cautious approach to opening up the economy. But it was important to calibrate the message. This represented important progress, but not the end of the restrictions that people would face as part of the continuing fight against the virus.

The Committee:

- took note.