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Minutes

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COVID-19 OPERATIONS COMMITTEE

Minutes of a Meeting of the Covid-19 Operations Committee  
held in person in the Cabinet Room on

MONDAY 4<sup>th</sup> January 2021  
At 12:15 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

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  
Chief Whip

Dan Rosenfield  
Downing Street Chief of Staff

Stuart Glassborow  
Deputy Principal Private Secretary to Prime Minister

Nikki Da Costa  
Director of Legislative Affairs, No 10

James Slack  
Prime Minister's Official Spokesperson

OFFICIAL-SENSITIVE

Simon Ridley  
Director General for Strategy in the COVID-19 Taskforce

SECRETARIAT

S Case  
J Bowler  
K Hall  
R Harrison  
E Payne  
O Ilott

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## National intervention

THE PRIME MINISTER said that the data presented to Ministers in the dashboard meeting that morning showed that the position was deteriorating quickly. The Committee should consider whether to move to a national intervention.

THE GOVERNMENT'S CHIEF MEDICAL OFFICER said that he had met with the Chief Medical Officers across the UK that morning and they advised moving to Alert Level Five as that there was a material risk of the NHS being overwhelmed if action was not taken. It would be beneficial to announce this on a four nations basis later that day.

THE DIRECTOR GENERAL FOR STRATEGY IN THE COVID-19 TASKFORCE said that the paper before the Committee presented a proposal for a new, national intervention, based on a strong 'stay at home' message. The Government could close a number of the existing social contact exemptions including removing the ability to leave home for recreation or leisure, closing further premises including zoos and outdoor sports facilities, and banning take away alcohol sales. Those defined as Clinically Extremely Vulnerable would be asked to shield again, and not go to work or to school. Shielding had dis-benefits, but this would be a voluntary measure to seek to keep these individuals out of harm's way. There was an option to consider extending eligibility for support to self-isolate. The paper also set out options to go further, for example by removing the ability to exercise with one other person or by banning all take away sales. There were some options that were not recommended, such as a return to the two metre rule, which had been proposed by one of the subgroups of SAGE. This would have significant implications for a number of settings such as courts. The recommendation was to continue to allow communal worship in places of worship, and to continue with the rules on life events that were in place in tier four. The policy on working from home would not change, and those who could not work from home should continue to go to their workplace.

Continuing, THE DIRECTOR GENERAL FOR STRATEGY IN THE COVID-19 TASKFORCE said that there were big choices for the Committee on schools. A decision was needed on whether to delay return for secondary schools beyond 18 January and whether to move primary schools to online provision. The recommendation was not to delay the return for exam years, but this was a choice for the Committee and further consideration would be needed on exams. The paper proposed a further delay to the return of higher education students until the end of February, other than those returning to critical-worker practical courses.

Concluding, THE DIRECTOR GENERAL FOR STRATEGY IN THE COVID-19 TASKFORCE said that the intervention would last until

the middle or end of February by which time the top four vulnerable cohorts would have been vaccinated. This should all be supported by clear, consistent and tough messaging focusing on staying at home to protect the NHS and save lives. Enforcement should be pushed. The new regulations would be laid as soon as possible

In discussion, the following points were made:

- a) it should not be assumed that the public would comply with a lockdown as tough as March. If life was made too unbearable for people, they would break the rules;
- b) it was always better to surprise on the upside rather than the downside. Therefore the Government should act quickly and robustly to close all schools, to stop takeaway food and drink, and to introduce a curfew. There was mass flagrant abuse of the rules and unless the measures taken were even tougher than in March, they would not be taken seriously. This would be time limited, and should be announced through a national broadcast. If strong steps were taken at that time, there would be more flexibility later;
- c) without action, there would be a risk of the NHS being overwhelmed, which would be a huge catastrophe. In addition to the recommended package of interventions, primary schools and nurseries should be closed. Whilst the two metre rule should be considered, given the increased transmissibility of the new variant, it was unclear that two metres was enough.
- d) the centrality of the 'stay at home' message would be critical. The current advertising campaign was too soft;
- e) any intervention would only be successful if it succeeded in changing public behaviour. That meant that it had to be sufficiently drastic and the public had to be persuaded that it was the final push;
- f) whilst the data suggested that transmission in Kent appeared to be flattening, this was on the basis of fewer tests being taken;
- g) deaths had increased by 25 per cent within a week. The death rate would rise markedly at the point at which people started to not present for treatment or at which other services had to be cancelled;

- h) schools could resume face to face learning for all students at the end of January, from the February half-term, or from the end of February;
- i) a number of primary schools were already finding it impossible to open given that teachers did not want to be there. There was a risk that if the Government did not move schools to remote learning, many would simply close, and it would be a challenge to keep them open for vulnerable children and the children of key workers;
- j) there was an important strategic choice for the Government: whether to try to hold 'R' (the reproduction rate of the virus) to below one until the vaccination had delivered herd immunity or to hold it below one until the most at risk groups had been vaccinated. The assumption was that the latter was the preference, given it would not be desirable to hold non-pharmaceutical interventions forever or until herd immunity had been reached;
- k) the Government should explore whether it would be possible to move term dates in order to deliver an exam timetable. The Secretary of State for Education should hold discussions with the Trades Unions and school leaders to develop a plan; and
- l) if the measures were being brought in before a vote, there would be no point in recalling Parliament that week. If the regulations would not be ready until Thursday, it would be possible to recall Parliament to vote before they took effect.

Responding, THE GOVERNMENT'S CHIEF MEDICAL OFFICER said that there would be a two week period between vaccination and immunity. Mortality would start to fall rapidly as a result of vaccination, but not until the middle of February. As the vast majority of people who spent time in hospital were younger than the first groups being vaccinated, the pressure on the NHS would not ease until quite a lot later. It was hard to be confident about the date by which the NHS would not be under pressure. The vaccine would not deliver population immunity until a distant date, and as such it was not a relevant consideration for this decision.

Responding, THE GOVERNMENT'S CHIEF SCIENTIFIC ADVISER said that relieving the NHS pressures depended on more people being vaccinated in younger age groups, and so it was important to work through the age groups quickly. It was becoming clearer that the new variant was 50-70 per cent more transmissible, including amongst children. Primary school aged children remained less of a risk

than secondary school aged children, but both were able to spread the virus into the household. Children remained at lower risk from the disease than older groups. There would be limited benefit in increasing social distancing beyond two metres as this distance was based on being far enough apart to prevent droplet spread. There was no suggestion that the new variant spread in different ways to the old variant which included through droplets, through touch from surfaces, and through aerosols. The two metre rule sought to prevent transmission through droplets.

Summing up, THE PRIME MINISTER said that it was clear that the new variant was stampeding through and the tools were not in the locker to contain it. The economy and children were being penalised because people were not obeying the guidelines. The Committee agreed to move to a national lockdown as outlined in the paper but it would be important to set out a clear timetable. It was unclear why this would last until the end of February from the outset, and a strong commitment should be made on when the first four cohorts would be vaccinated and what the implications of this would be for non-pharmaceutical interventions. People would rightly want to know when this would all end and decent answers would be needed.

Continuing, THE PRIME MINISTER said that secondary school reopening should be pushed further to the right, but a clear timetable for reopening was needed. There would be implications for exams and answers would be needed that day. Closing primary schools should be the last resort and there was an argument to keep them open in areas where the disease was not out of control. However the mood of the Committee was to move all provision online.

Concluding, THE PRIME MINISTER said that mass testing needed to feature more prominently and the option of offering the whole country a test should be considered. It was right to discourage the elderly and vulnerable from meeting people who might infect them. The move to Alert Level Five should be announced later that day on a cross-UK basis. He would make a statement to the country that evening, and the lockdown should come into force as quickly as possible. Parliament should be recalled to vote on the measures, even if this was retrospective.

The Committee:

— took note.