

CDL

From: COVID TASKFORCE

Date: 16 December 2020

Chair's Brief

COVID OPERATIONS CABINET COMMITTEE (91)

13:15 - 14:00 - 16 December 2020

The Committee will run from 13:15 until 14:00. You are chairing.

Agenda:

1. Introduction (You are presenting, 5 mins)
2. Delayed return to schools and colleges (Secretary of State for Education, 40 mins)

Purpose and Context

The objective of the COVID-O is to agree:

- Agree a delay to the start of face to face education in secondary schools and colleges supported by remote learning.
- Agree the plans for vulnerable children, children of critical workers and exam years.
- Determine whether plans are deliverable to conduct testing in all secondary schools and colleges before the start of term and assess this in the context of other commitments.
- Agree not to announce the testing plans discussed here until the delivery point is satisfied.

Introduction

- Given the rising case levels, especially in school age children, as well as the potential impact from household mixing at Christmas, it is essential that we develop plans at pace both for pre-Christmas and to extend the testing programme in 2021.
- The Prime Minister has given a strong steer that he would like the return to face to face attendance to be staggered and for testing to be used as fully as possible to support this.
- We need to be clear that we are not deprioritising education by delaying the start of face to face education; but that this is a proportionate and sensible response to the Christmas relaxation period and the rise in case rates among secondary age children, and an opportunity to increase safety in schools and colleges even further by embedding a testing regime.
- We are all aware that this is a major delivery challenge, not least given the other pressures across winter and the broader context including the end of the transition period. It will require a cross-government effort to find the requisite workforce.

Steer

- Invite the Education Secretary to present the paper, the major delivery challenges and their mitigations; [including for concurrent risks for delivery within the winter round](#).
- Invite the Health Secretary and Dido Harding/Raghuv Bhasin to set out their level of confidence that the testing regime can be delivered on time across all schools and colleges.
- Invite the Deputy Chief Medical Officer to comment on the rise in cases among secondary school age children and the rationale for delaying the start of face to face education.

Points To Make

- Ask the Education Secretary how he will ensure uptake of testing across schools and colleges, particularly [in](#) light of any backlash from the sector.

- Ask the Education and Health Secretaries how the workforce challenges will be met; ask the Chief Secretary to the Treasury and the Minister for the Armed Forces to comment on this.
- Ask the Education Secretary how DfE will ensure sufficient quantity and quality of remote education for children not in school in w/c 4 January - especially as some pupils will be learning in school - and whether DfE can do any more to ensure schools are accountable for this.
- Ask the Education Secretary and DCMO how this should be characterised to ensure it is not seen as deprioritising education and how Government can help ensure young people are compliant with the requirements of the Tier they are in when learning remotely.

Conclusions

[Subject to the discussion]

- The Committee agrees that primary and early years settings will open as normal; exam years, children of critical workers and vulnerable children will return from 4 January and get a test; all other pupils will be tested throughout that week and return from 11 January.
- DfE should work with No 10 and the Taskforce to prepare comms for the announcement.
- *[If agreed]* DfE and DHSC (T&T) should report to the Taskforce on a twice weekly basis on delivery progress, in particular on surge workforce.

Background

- The Education Secretary is very concerned that any delay to the start of face to face education would undermine the hard won position on the importance of attendance and schools being open. However, CMO and CSA have talked him through the data that shows the increase in cases among secondary school age children and the likely impact of the Christmas easements.
- He spoke to the PM this morning and they agreed that primary and early years settings would open as normal; exam years, children of critical workers and vulnerable children would return from 4 January, after taking a test; all other pupils would be tested throughout that week and return from 11 January.
- There are significant delivery challenges. The Education Secretary has said he will deliver but we will need [to](#) see the detail of this plan and to monitor progress very closely. We anticipate some backlash from the sector, given the additional ask of teachers both for testing and to teach pupils in and out of school. The biggest issue to resolve ~~is the~~ workforce: there is not yet agreement as to where this will come from (teaching, [military](#), other surge workforce etc) and therefore DHSC SoS did not want to put his name to the paper.
- HMT will likely raise why this testing needs additional funding, and cannot come from NHS Test & Trace's existing budget. Our view is that this can be funded from their existing budget, and we should test that as part of this meeting.