

PM call with Taoiseach Leo Varadkar: 19 March 2020

The Prime Minister spoke to the Irish Taoiseach Leo Varadkar today about the ongoing coronavirus pandemic.

He set out the UK's science-based approach and the measures the government has already taken to stop the spread of the virus and protect the public.

The leaders agreed on the importance of international coordination to support the global health response and minimise the economic impact on our citizens.

They also resolved to continue working together to strengthen our bilateral relationship and to support the Northern Ireland Assembly at Stormont.

Update on the Withdrawal Agreement Joint Committee

Today (19 March), European Commission Vice-President Maroš Šefčovič and the UK Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, the Rt Hon Michael Gove, in their capacity as co-chairs of the EU-UK Joint Committee under the Withdrawal Agreement, had a constructive exchange by telephone to prepare the first meeting of the Withdrawal Agreement Joint Committee.

To maintain the planned schedule (30 March) and launch the work of the Joint Committee and the Specialised Committees, they formally agreed on a provisional agenda for the first meeting of the Joint Committee. Given the extraordinary COVID-19 developments, they also agreed to explore alternatives to meeting in person on 30 March, for instance by means of a video conference. As established by the Withdrawal Agreement, they confirmed the Joint Committee discussions will focus on the implementation of the Agreement, not on the future relationship between the UK and EU.

Vice-President Šefčovič and Minister Gove sent their best wishes for a speedy recovery to Michel Barnier and all those affected by the coronavirus pandemic.

PM statement on coronavirus: 19 March 2020

I want to begin by thanking everyone, by thanking you, in the media, and also thanking everyone for the huge efforts that the country is making to comply with the advice that we've been given

And we're asking such a huge amount,

asking students to put their education on hold,

we're asking people not to socialise in the normal way

And already we can see the impact that this is having on the UK economy and on business, on great, great companies

And so it's vital that we in Government stand behind them when what we are asking everyone to do is so crucial for saving literally thousands of lives by defeating this virus

And I am conscious as the days have gone by that people will want to know how long we are expecting them to keep it up

And I wanted to try to say something today about how I see the timescale of this campaign and where we're going and what we need to do

I do think, looking at it all, that we can turn the tide within the next 12 weeks

And I am absolutely confident that we can send coronavirus packing in this country but only if we take the steps, we all take the steps we have outlined,

And that is vital because that is how we are going to reduce the peak

and once we've achieved that, and I think that we will, if take the steps that I have said,

then the scientific progress that we're making will really start to come into play and I wanted to discuss a little bit of that this afternoon with you

because we are rapidly becoming so much better at understanding the genomics at the heart of this virus, a lot of that is going on in this country,

we're getting better at understanding the medicines that may treat and cure it

And today we have put the first British corona patient into a randomised trial for drugs that may treat the disease

UK experts and scientists expect to start trials for the first vaccine within

a month

And above all we are getting better at testing

This crisis is so difficult because the enemy is invisible

And the answer is to remove the cloak of invisibility

And to identify the virus, and to be able to know which of us, is carrying it or who has actually had it and now got over it

And to give you an idea of what is coming down the track

We are in negotiations today to buy a so called antibody test

As simple as a pregnancy test

That could tell whether you have had the disease

And it's early days, but if it works as its proponents claim then we will buy literally hundreds of thousands of these kits as soon as practicable because obviously it has the potential to be a total gamechanger

Because once you know that you have had it, you know that you are likely to be less vulnerable, you're less likely to pass it on, and you can go back to work

And of course by the same token we are massively increasing the testing to see whether you have it now

And ramping up daily testing from 5000 a day to 10,000 to 25,000 and then up to 250,000

And that knowledge of where the virus is, will make a huge difference to our management of the disease and our ability to reduce disruption and economic difficulties

And I wanted to set that out because this is rapidly coming down the track as I say, but it will take time to come on stream

And that is why in the meantime, to get back to a theme that you know I'm going to repeat, it is absolutely vital that we follow the advice that we've been hearing over the last few days,

The announcements we've already made about staying at home if you have the symptoms, if your family has the symptoms,

about avoiding unnecessary contact

Avoiding gatherings where you may pick up the disease

pubs, bars, restaurants

Please, please follow all that advice scrupulously

Work from home if you possibly can

Wash your hands, wash your hands

And it's by this combination of ruthless, determined, collective action and scientific progress that we're already seeing that we will succeed

And I know how difficult it may be, or it may seem right now, but if we do this together we will save, as I say, many many thousands of lives

and to everybody in the UK, business world, everybody who is worried about their jobs, and everybody who faces difficulties because of the advice that we are giving,

I say to business, stand by your employees, stand by your workers because we will stand by you

And you'll be hearing more about that in the course of the next day or so

And that is how, by a mixture of determined, collective action and scientific progress, I have absolutely no doubt that we will turn the tide of this disease and beat it together.

Coronavirus (COVID-19) guidance for the charity sector

Understandably, charities are concerned about what to do during the Coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak, so we have set out our response to the most commonly asked questions.

We want to assure charities that our approach to regulation during this uncertain period will be as flexible and pragmatic as possible in the public interest, whilst helping trustees to be aware of and think about the wider or longer impact of their decisions on their charity.

We will update this page with responses to further questions on an ongoing basis.

How do I get support to pay my charity staff?

The [government has announced that organisations, including charities, will get support to help them pay wages.](#)

Employers will be able to contact HMRC for a grant to cover most of the wages of their workforce who remain on payroll but are temporarily not working during the coronavirus outbreak. Any employer in the country- small or large,

charitable or non-profit will be eligible for the scheme.

Can I use reserves and restricted funds to help my charity through the crisis?

We understand that many charities are currently very concerned about their financial position. In the first instance, trustees should consider what are their short, medium and longer term priorities, and see if they need to amend their financial planning given their current situation. Trustees are encouraged in particular to think about whether or not certain projects, spends or activities can be stopped or delayed in order to focus on essential spending if they are facing financial challenges at this time.

Reserves can be spent to help cope with unexpected events like those unfolding at present.

You should identify which of your funds or assets have limits on their use. If these are internal only – for example your charity has decided to earmark certain funds for a particular purpose – you may be able to re-prioritise these. If they are restricted funds, meaning they cannot be spent at your (trustees) discretion, then they may only be used for a particular and defined purpose. For example, a fundraising appeal may restrict funds to a specific purpose, or if you have a permanent endowment, it may have restrictions on selling it to release funds.

If there are restrictions, in some instances there may be ways to amend these restrictions, but accessing or releasing restricted funds should only be considered if other options such as reserves are not possible. The Commission encourages you to also carefully consider the wider and longer term impacts of making such a decision on your financial resilience and donor relationships. You should seek professional advice on this if you can. The Commission will be as helpful as possible, and offer what guidance we can.

All decisions on such financial matters should normally be taken collectively, and significant decisions and action points noted in writing. We have further more detailed guidance on [financial resilience](#); on [charity reserves](#); and a [general tool to help trustees work out what to focus on](#).

Can I cancel or postpone my charity's AGM or other key meetings?

Coronavirus is having a major impact on charity events and the government's health advice may lead to some charities having no choice but to decide to cancel or postpone their AGMs and other critical meetings.

If as trustees, you decide it is necessary to do so, you should record this decision to demonstrate good governance of your charity. This is particularly important if it is not possible to hold your AGM which may make it difficult for you to finalise your annual reports and accounts.

Wherever possible, we would ask you to try to get your annual reports to us

on time. However, where the situation impacts on the completion of annual returns and accounts, charities with an imminent filing date can call us.

Can I use video, teleconferencing and the internet in place of face-to-face meetings?

In the current situation, it is becoming increasingly difficult to hold face-to-face meetings. Some charities have clauses in their governing documents that allow them to meet virtually or to use telephone facilities, so we advise trustees to check their governing document and see if they can make amendments themselves to facilitate changes as to how or when meetings are held.

Where there is no such clause in your governing document and you decide to hold meetings over the phone or using digital solutions, we will understand but you should record this decision and that you have done this to demonstrate good governance of your charity.

What do I need to report to the Charity Commission?

We appreciate that during the coronavirus pandemic the charity sector will face extremely demanding and ever-changing challenges. Charities' primary interest, and ours, must be looking after the public and the communities that we serve.

It is ultimately the responsibility of the charity trustees to continue to report serious incidents using our current guidelines, and we will continue to ask trustees to use their judgement in deciding whether an incident is significant in the context of their charity and should be reported to us.

We will continue to prioritise those incidents that place individuals at risk, or incidents that have had a significant impact on a charity's operations and therefore serious harm to the charity's work.

Keeping people safe

This pandemic is already giving rise to that spirit of charity and community that brings people together, and we appreciate and value that people will want to help others during the challenges we are all facing. But now more than ever it is critical to ensure that charities protect and safeguard their beneficiaries, volunteers and staff.

This is all the more relevant for those directly helping communities or vulnerable members of society who are self-isolating. Our [safeguarding guidance](#) is a source of support on how to keep people safe, and what steps you should take if you identify concerns.

Reporting accounts and finances

The Charity SORP has issued [updated guidance about what and how to report](#).

Supermarkets to join forces to feed the nation

The government is temporarily relaxing elements of competition law as part of a package of measures to allow supermarkets to work together to feed the nation.

The move allows retailers to share data with each other on stock levels, cooperate to keep shops open, or share distribution depots and delivery vans. It would also allow retailers to pool staff with one another to help meet demand.

The Environment Secretary George Eustice confirmed elements of the law would be temporarily waived in a meeting this afternoon with chief executives from the UK's leading supermarkets and food industry representatives.

The government has also temporarily relaxed rules around drivers' hours, so retailers can deliver more food to stores, and is waiving the 5p plastic bag charge for online purchases to speed up deliveries.

The support for supermarkets comes as the government and retailers continue to urge people to shop considerately and look out for their friends, family and neighbours.

Environment Secretary George Eustice said:

We've listened to the powerful arguments of our leading supermarkets and will do whatever it takes to help them feed the nation.

By relaxing elements of competition laws temporarily, our retailers can work together on their contingency plans and share the resources they need with each other during these unprecedented circumstances.

We welcome the measures supermarkets are already taking to keep shelves stocked and supply chains resilient, and will continue to support them with their response to coronavirus.

Business Secretary Alok Sharma said:

In these extraordinary and challenging times it is important that we remove barriers to our supermarkets working together to serve customers, particularly those who are elderly, ill or vulnerable in all parts of the UK.

The temporary relaxation of competition law for the food sector will allow supermarkets to cooperate with each other to keep their shops staffed, their shelves stocked, and the nation fed.

I am clear that we will continue to do whatever it takes to support business through this extremely difficult period.

Andrew Opie, Director of Food & Sustainability at the British Retail Consortium, said:

We welcome this important decision by the government to give retailers greater flexibility to work together to tackle the challenges posed by coronavirus. Retailers have been working hard to ensure shelves are stocked and this is an exceptional step taken by government to help retailers and their suppliers cope with problems that might be caused by widescale absences across the supply chain.

This is a short term measure, in the spirit of working together, and will allow retailers to agree common specifications for products to bolster food production, and co-ordinate certain operations to ensure customers anywhere in the UK have access to the essential items they need.

Legislation will be laid shortly to amend elements of the Competition Act 1998, which prevents certain types of anti-competitive behaviour. It can be relaxed in exceptional circumstances.

This will be a specific, temporary relaxation to enable retailers to work together for the sole purpose of feeding the nation during these unprecedented circumstances. It will not allow any activity that does not meet this requirement.

The announcement comes as the government confirmed today it would temporarily relax drivers' hours rules to allow supermarket delivery drivers to meet the increased demand for home deliveries.

The change to GB drivers' hours rules, which will come into effect tomorrow (Friday 20 March), will mean delivery drivers are able to work slightly longer hours – helping supermarkets offer additional delivery slots, which is particularly important for vulnerable people and those staying at home during the COVID-19 outbreak. It will also provide extra capacity if drivers are unwell.

The move comes after the Government temporarily relaxed the EU drivers' hours rules for store deliveries, helping move food and other essentials more quickly so that shelves can be stocked-up.

Transport Secretary, Grant Shapps said:

We know supermarkets have seen unprecedented demand in light of COVID-19. We're relaxing the GB drivers' hours rules so that supermarkets can complete more home deliveries – which is especially important for vulnerable people at this time.

But driver welfare is of course key and we will be working closely with employers to make sure the safety of their drivers and other people on the road is protected.

On his call with retailers today, the Environment Secretary also confirmed the government will temporarily relax the single-use carrier bag charge for online deliveries in England, to speed up deliveries and minimise any cross-contamination from reusing crates. This will come into force on Saturday 21 March. The charge remains in-place for in-store purchases.

This follows a series of measures the government has introduced to support the food industry's response to coronavirus, including working with local authorities to extend the hours that deliveries can be made to supermarkets to ensure stores are replenished quickly and extending drivers' hours to speed up deliveries.

The UK's food supply chain remains resilient and the Environment Secretary continues to meet regularly with representatives of the food industry to ensure people can get the food and groceries they need.