

COVID-19 and Data Centres

Notes and actions from call 22nd May



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1 Update from DCMS

This had been another very busy week in government. A statement on quarantine was expected at 5pm. Subject to final confirmation, the DCMS team had succeeded in obtaining an exemption for essential workers within the data infrastructure environment. These were caveats, such as a requirement to maintain social distancing. Guidelines were also being published. These would be broad rather than prescriptive to enable flexibility. It was anticipated that a proforma document template would be issued for essential workers to complete and present at borders.

There was no suggestion that equipment, parts, components or other supplies would be subject to quarantine. However, a parallel workstream was already underway, looking at supply chain resilience, identifying potential logjams and bottlenecks on the flow of goods coming into the country and exploring ways to mitigate them.

To date, there had been no undertaking or announcements suggesting that testing would be part of quarantine, so it was unclear where recent news reports had picked this up.

Operators were delighted that DCMS had achieved an exemption for the sector and were very grateful to the DCMS team for their excellent work on behalf of UK data centres.

2 Questions from members

Testing: Members were keen to understand the government's policy position about antigen testing, antibody testing, screening and contact tracing. Updates would be circulated when available.

Cross-government decision matrix: Members asked how decisions were being made in government and how the DCMS team worked with other departments. Within government, work progressed through collective agreement. Within departments the process was for officials to make a submission to the minister which might be accepted or subject to amendment or rejection.

Cross government decisions under COVID were more streamlined than under usual circumstances. There was a COVID hub in DCMS to coordinate at departmental level but the governmental COVID hub was in BEIS. Six cross-departmental Boards had been established to manage different aspects of the pandemic and DCMS reported into these. Current activity fell under the GPS MIG ministerial

steering board and meetings were currently held weekly but would move back to a monthly schedule before long.

Digital department: members wondered whether earlier policy suggestions to form a Department for Digital were like to have gained more traction as a result of COVID. Whilst there had previously been early-stage discussions about consolidating digital elements into a single body, and there was now greater awareness of the role of data pinning everything together, further discussion was more likely to be delayed by COVID than accelerated simply because more urgent priorities were taking precedence.

Reach within Government: Would DCMS be in a position to help the sector's reach into other departments where understanding of data centres was lagging behind? This should be feasible especially on topics related to resilience and competitiveness. It was normal for relationships between government and industry sectors to vary by department to some degree.

3 Task and finish – change of priorities

Operators were informed that from this week, the focus of activity would change. To date activity had been dominated by fast turnaround reactive work they had been doing to respond to urgent requests for information in time to ensure the sector was accommodated in policy decisions. From this point forward the next phase of work would start, and the emphasis would shift to working with the DCMS team on longer term issues, primarily sector resilience and competitiveness. This had been articulated in the recent policy statement: <https://www.techuk.org/insights/news/item/17656-data-centres-and-covid-19-position-statement> (posted online on 21st May).

4 Supply chain

A call had been held on Wednesday 20th May to alert operators to recent developments on the EU Trade Agreement negotiations, and to identify operator concerns regarding supply chain bottlenecks. This was not going to be solved overnight as there were three perspectives to cross-reference:

Operators want to know where the pinch points are in supply and manufacturing, whether commodity or equipment prices are likely to rise, and whether there will be a shortage of contracting staff if there is a spike in demand as restrictions are relaxed.

Suppliers want to understand what supply issues operators are most concerned about, whether operators are getting orders in early for longer lead-in items, what shortages they are experiencing and whether these relate to replenishing inventory or whether they have got to the stage of impacting functionality.

DCMS want to understand which pinch points could present risks to critical infrastructure, whether government interventions could help and if so, what form they might take.

Supply chain resilience would be a major thread of work going forward.

5 Call frequency and duration

Members agreed that now the critical phase was easing off, call frequency could drop to fortnightly and duration to 30 minutes.

Members agreed that a Teams Group should be established to enable stakeholders to keep up with activity.

The next call was scheduled for Friday 5th June, 9.30.

6 ACTIONS

ACTION: quarantine guidance would be circulated when available

ACTION: meeting invitations to be amended

ACTION: Teams group to be set up

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