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Subject: [INFO] OFF-SEN: Readout from CDL Union call with SoS TOs and Chloe Smith

Date: Wed, 22 Apr 2020 18:51:34 +0100

Hi all,

Please see below for a readout of this afternoon's call with CDL, SoS TOs and Chloe Smith on engagement with the DAs during Covid-19, following Mark Drakeford's request for weekly ministerial and official meetings between the DAs and UKG and a weekly COBR involving the DAs.

Going into the meeting there was a concern that Cabinet Office were seeking to take ownership of DA handling and the Union strategy more widely. The headlines were that CDL seemed keen to press ahead with instituting a regular meeting with himself, the DAs and the TOs during Covid-19. The precise shape of this is tbc - [NR] is going to draw up some options, covering the frequency, whether this could include officials, and the possibility of individual catch ups with DAs. SoS will reserve judgement on this until CO send something round, but we'll clearly need to keep a close eye on this.

SoS was clear on the call that he didn't see the need for another weekly meeting with DAs, given they already have plenty of exposure to UKG Covid decision-making, NIE hadn't asked for this, TOs were best placed to manage relations with their DAs, and official level cooperation between NIE and UKG was most likely to bring dFM to the UKG's approach. SoS Scotland said he'd prefer individual meetings with the DAs and CDL; SoS Wales was fairly ambivalent about the proposal; and Chloe Smith was supportive of instituting regular meetings.

Thanks,

[NR]

Readout

Speaking attendees: CDL, SoSNI, SoS Scotland, SoS Wales, Minister for the Constitution, [NR] [NR]
TOs SpAds & PSs

- **CDL** - reason for the call is a stocktake. 4 nations have marched more or less together in response to Covid-19; however temptation for DAs to jockey for position e.g. on their sensitivity to health issues. We have a responsibility to make sure the right policies are in place, using the strength and resources of the UK collectively. Referenced Mark Drakeford request for weekly meetings between FM DAs/UKG ministers and weekly COBR. Said he's fairly open to this - UKG doesn't want to seem high-handed. Trying to get DAs to contribute wherever possible. Useful for DAs to share their Covid data so we can hold everyone to account.
- **SoS Scotland** - weekly meetings may be too regular; any meetings should be explicitly focused on Covid-19 so they don't roll on when the crisis concludes. Would prefer for these to happen individually with CDL/DAs - easier to handle Scottish FM and likely to be fewer leaks.
- **SoSNI** - Covid engagement with the DAs has worked well; we've managed to encourage parties to work together, especially at official level e.g. through GPSMIG. DAs are getting huge exposure to UKG decision making - e.g. invited to committees, lead ministers are invited to COBR - another meeting feels top heavy. TOs are best placed to understand nuanced relationships with DAs and it's their job to get them to the right place for wider UKG meetings.

- **SoS Wales** - thinks Drakeford's request is positioning himself for next year's Assembly elections. There are profound differences between S, W & NI. It's been useful in defending and promoting UKG to say WG have been involved at every stage of the decision making process for Covid-19 - lots of public support for the current approach. Nervous of excluding DAs - could possibly engage more than we are at the moment. Expects Drakeford is speaking on behalf of all the DAs in his request.
- **Minister for the Constitution** - should continue principle of reasonableness in involving the DAs. Agree that we need to hold them to account on their approach to Covid-19. We may not need an additional forum every week, but should be working towards net goal of holding DAs to account. Weekly meeting might be best way to do this.
- **NR** - the context to the Drakeford request is UKG deciding its exit strategy from current social distancing measures over the next 2-3 weeks. DAs will also be interested in our long-term Covid strategy too. DAs appreciate there's a huge step up in complexity of the issues UKG is currently deciding on - the request for more meetings is an attempt to keep on top of this. There's an ambition to maintain a common 4 nation approach on this which is positive.
- **SoSNI** - agree with **NR** concern is that we're not going to get agreement on an exit policy in NI. Agreement will come from official level cooperation. The default position of dFM will be to agree with the approach in RoI. A regular meeting would be better at official level.
- **CDL** - Scottish FM said she'd announce the broader approach for social distancing measures. Do we know anything more about this?
- **SoS Scotland** - expect SG framework to be similar to that announced by UKG on Friday. Agree with SoSNI that working at official level would be better; would avoid Scottish FM grandstanding.
- **CDL** - conclusion: he'd heard SoS TOs' caution that regular meetings won't mean DAs agree on the approach to Covid, and that regular meetings could be a 'potential federalist trojan horse'. CDL said he'd reply to Drakeford proposing meeting DAs on a fairly regular basis on Covid, to test their views on issues. He was attracted to individual meetings, but expected Scottish FM to bounce these.
- **SoS Scotland** - prefer individual meetings with DAs given the differences between S, W & NI.
- **SoS Wales** - Flagged that if UKG isn't in a position to outline UK recovery plan in next 2 weeks, the Welsh FM would come forward with an (unworkable) proposal, and there's a risk of UKG looking like the unreasonable partner in recovery plans.
- **SoSNI** - DAs are dispersed in wider UKG meetings; if we convene them in a smaller meeting, they may prove more difficult to handle. Reiterated that the NIO hasn't been asked for this, and NIE have been very positive re UKG's approach to date.
- **CDL** - conclusion: fair point about handling the DAs. Could involve officials in these meetings to diffuse tensions. Will work with **NR** on a few options - won't commit to weekly meetings; could involve officials; will consider SoS Scotland's option of meeting with the DAs individually.

On Wed, 22 Apr 2020 at 10:27, **Name Redacted** <[\[redacted\]@nio.gov.uk](mailto:[redacted]@nio.gov.uk)> wrote:
Strand leads

Please could colleagues provide updated lines for SoSNI's meeting with CDL and SoS DAs today, focusing on two or three key issues to flag in his brief.

<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1D46V2sFdQq4HQnLuH1dPQR4o0B7Fzr7Epm9ZZ1V9Dhc/edit#heading=h.ebrdat5apew5>

We are still waiting for further update from CDL's office re a more detailed agenda but so far we understand the focus of the discussion will be around improving engagement with DAs on Covid-19, with a view to potentially setting up more regular DA meetings with the centre. Therefore from an NIO perspective, we will want to flag key Covid issues for NI and how we think contact with the NIE has been working so far. Please do also add any relevant background intel you have re the best ways to keep the NIE plugged in, and grateful for all updates by **1pm today**

Many thanks,

Name Redacted



Temporarily Covid-19 Central Team, Northern Ireland Office

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On Wed, 22 Apr 2020 at 09:46, Covid Secretariat Mailbox <covid-secretariat@nio.gov.uk> wrote:

Thanks **NR**

NR will hold the pen on this from Central team and will work with **NR** and stands as needed.

Name Redacted

On Tue, 21 Apr 2020 at 19:08, SOS **NR** <sos@nio.gov.uk> wrote:

Names Redacted

CDL has invited SoS to a Quad with SoS TOs and Chloe Smith tomorrow at 16:00 to discuss Union issues in relation to Covid-19. CDL requested this following a request from Mark Drakeford for the DAs to have more regular with UKG in the current climate (apparently asked for three weekly meetings with UKG - at official level, followed by a DAs FMs/CDL meeting, and a weekly COBR involving the DAs). CDL was fine in principle with more engagement with the DAs on Covid-19, but wanted to test with TOs SoS before committing to anything, including what the best approach for these meetings would be i.e. weekly meetings, deep dives on policy issues. Given Quads have been on the back burner for a while (particularly since Covid-19 blew up) it sounds like CDL may be leaning in to more regular contact with the DAs again - apparently he's shown a particular interest in maintaining intra-UK connectivity (**Covid-economy**, to note).

Please could you send up a short briefing note for 14:00 Wednesday? 1-2 pages max, using the attached template. Covering any relevant background you've picked up at official level from CO, TOs or the DAs about tomorrow's Quad, and including some lines for SoS to take on the best way to keep the NIE plugged in.

Happy to discuss any of the above.

Thanks,

NR



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