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NORTH SOUTH MINISTERIAL COUNCIL

HEALTH AND FOOD SAFETY MEETING

NSMC JOINT SECRETARIAT OFFICES, ARMAGH AND BY VIDEOCONFERENCE

2 OCTOBER 2020

RESPONSE TO COVID-19

DECISIONS SOUGHT

The NSMC is invited to:

- (i) renew its expression of appreciation to all those who have played a part in the response to the Covid-19 pandemic, in particular the health and social care workers who have led the front line response;
- (ii) welcome the close and productive cooperation that has taken place between health Ministers, Chief Medical Officers and health administrations, North and South, to deliver an effective public health response;
- (iii) note that since the meeting of senior representatives of the Northern Ireland Executive and the Irish Government, and their Chief Medical Officers at the NSMC Secretariat offices in Armagh on 14 March to review the situation regarding the Covid-19 pandemic. Senior representatives of both Administrations continued to meet regularly to discuss the ongoing Covid-19 response;

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- (iv) **note that the twenty-fourth Plenary meeting of the North South Ministerial Council (NSMC), held at Dublin Castle on 31 July 2020, was briefed by the Chief Medical Officers on the public health situation and on ongoing cooperation in the response to the Covid-19 pandemic;**
- (v) **note the that the Chief Medical Officers met on 25 September to review the ongoing response to the pandemic, including the particular challenges being faced in the North West region and the joint statement issued following that meeting;**
- (vi) **recall the Memorandum of Understanding on Public Health Cooperation on Covid-19 Response agreed between Departments of Health, North and South, on 7 April;**
- (vii) **note the further Memorandum of Understanding for the sharing of anonymous 'diagnosis keys' generated by each jurisdictions' covid-19 Proximity Apps agreed between Departments of Health, North and South, on 30 July;**
- (viii) **welcome the achievement of interoperability on an all-island basis of the apps deployed in each jurisdiction;**
- (ix) **agree that Health Ministers will continue to meet, both within the NSMC and outside the structures of the Council, to discuss the response to the pandemic; and**
- (x) **agree that officials from both jurisdictions are committed to build on the experience and the relevant learnings from the first phases of the pandemic and will continue to exchange views to foster commonality in their approach, where possible, and provide a progress report at a future NSMC Health Meeting.**

BACKGROUND

1. The first case of Covid-19 identified on the island of Ireland was diagnosed on 27 February 2020. As of 29 September 2020, the Irish Health Protection Surveillance Centre reports 35,740 confirmed cases and 1,803 deaths among those confirmed cases. As of 29 September 2020, the Department of Health in Northern Ireland reports 11,269 individuals with a positive lab completed test, and 578 deaths.
2. A range of public health measures was introduced by each Administration from February onwards to tackle the outbreak and limit transmission of the virus. There has been regular dialogue and close cooperation between the Irish Government and the Northern Ireland Executive to address the threat posed by Covid-19 and to ensure the protection of the lives and welfare of everyone on the island.

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NORTH/SOUTH CONTACTS AND DIALOGUE

3. Building on ongoing cooperation, senior representatives of the Northern Ireland Executive and the Irish Government met at the NSMC Joint Secretariat Offices in Armagh on 14 March 2020 to review the situation regarding the Covid-19 virus and discuss how best to tackle the outbreak. The Northern Ireland Executive was represented by First Minister Arlene Foster MLA, deputy First Minister Michelle O'Neill MLA, and Minister of Health Robin Swann MLA. The Irish Government was represented by An Taoiseach, Leo Varadkar TD, the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade Simon Coveney TD, and Minister for Health Simon Harris TD.
4. At this meeting, detailed briefings were provided by the respective Chief Medical Officers, Dr Michael McBride and Dr Tony Holohan, and the very serious challenges to public health posed by Covid-19, North and South, were discussed.
5. All present recognised the challenging situation faced by the two jurisdictions sharing this island. It was agreed that everything possible would be done in co-ordination and cooperation between the Irish Government and the Northern Ireland Executive, and with the active involvement of the health administrations in both jurisdictions, to tackle the outbreak. Protection of the lives and welfare of everyone on the island is paramount, and it was agreed that no effort will be spared in that objective.
6. Subsequently, a Memorandum of Understanding to facilitate co-operation on the public health response to the Covid-19 crisis was agreed by the Chief Medical Officers on behalf of the Health Ministers.
7. Regular discussions between Ministers, Chief Medical Officers and senior officials in both Administrations have continued throughout the pandemic. Five 'Quad' meetings have taken place, co-chaired by the Tánaiste and Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade and the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, with the participation of the First Minister and deputy First Minister and Health Ministers, to discuss North/South and East/West co-operation in the Covid-19 response. Participants in these meetings agreed that, as the Covid-19 pandemic does not respect borders, there is a compelling case for effective cooperation on a North/South and East/West basis. They affirmed their commitment to continued close contact and work, through the process set out in the Memorandum of Understanding, for the benefit of all people across the island of Ireland.
8. These discussions have been supplemented by frequent contact between Ministers and officials to discuss aspects of the response and both the implementation and easing of restrictions introduced in order to reduce transmission of the virus.

COOPERATION BETWEEN HEALTH ADMINISTRATIONS

9. A Memorandum of Understanding was formally agreed by the Chief Medical Officers of the Health Departments of each jurisdiction on 7 April. The purpose of the Memorandum of Understanding is to strengthen North/South co-operation in the public health response to the Covid-19 pandemic.

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10. In the Memorandum of Understanding, Health Departments agreed that co-operation on the public health response to Covid-19 would build on existing and long-established cooperation on the island of Ireland between the Departments and the health services including across cancer, ambulance and congenital heart services, and the strong pre-existing co-operation between the respective offices of Chief Medical Officer in both jurisdictions.
11. The Memorandum of Understanding focuses on a number of key areas, including modelling; public health and non-pharmaceutical measures; common public messages; behavioural change; research; ethics; and supporting co-operation. It notes that while consistency of approach will be sought where possible, for justifiable reasons the public health approach and measures adopted in the respective jurisdictions may not always mirror each other in identical fashion. It further notes that strong collaborative arrangements, including good information-sharing, should help to mitigate possible negative consequences.
12. Engagement on foot of the Memorandum of Understanding has been pragmatic and constructive. Calls are held regularly, including at a technical level, to facilitate information sharing. These discussions have led to the sharing of papers and learnings from the first phases of the pandemic as well as close cooperation on sector-specific public health guidance. The Memorandum of Understanding has also facilitated direct collaboration between technical leads for various work streams, including modelling, inward travel and contact tracing, as well as between the teams working on initiatives of mutual interest, such as a surveillance testing programme of staff in nursing homes in Ireland and a similar rapid review in Northern Ireland as well as between incident teams handling outbreaks in workplace settings.
13. Health Ministers have been in ongoing contact throughout this pandemic in relation to how each health system is implementing various public health responses, including Covid-19 testing and contact tracing. In addition, there has been significant engagement between the Chief Medical Officers and officials in both jurisdictions.
14. Discussions have taken place and will continue to take place on respective plans for the gradual and controlled easing of restrictions introduced to reduce transmission of the virus as well as frameworks for living alongside Covid-19, given the importance of implementing consistent approaches, wherever possible. The Chief Medical Officers have agreed to continue to exchange views to foster commonality in their approach, where possible. All parties recognise that in terms of public health measures in both jurisdictions it will be important to maintain strong collaborative arrangements. The Administrations have sought to adopt similar approaches, where it is appropriate to do so on the advice of respective Chief Medical Officers.
15. Further areas for cooperation within the framework of the Memorandum of Understanding are under constant review by the Chief Medical Officers. The CMOs have agreed to continue to exchange views to foster commonality in their approach in areas including the preparatory work being carried out both north and south for the future roll out of a COVID-19 vaccine/s.

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NEXT STEPS

16. Health Ministers invite officials from both jurisdictions to consider the relevant learnings from the first phases of the pandemic and continue to exchange views to foster commonality in their approach, where possible, and provide a progress update at a future NSMC Health Meeting.

**Joint Secretariat
2 October 2020**

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