



PAPER NSMC P1 (20) 2

NORTH SOUTH MINISTERIAL COUNCIL

TWENTY-FOURTH PLENARY MEETING

DUBLIN CASTLE

31 JULY 2020

RESPONSE TO COVID-19

DECISION SOUGHT

The NSMC is invited to:-

- (i) extend its condolences to all those who have lost loved ones as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic;
- (ii) express appreciation to all those who have played a part in the Covid-19 response, in particular the health and social care workers who have shown extraordinary courage and dedication in their work on the front line;
- (iii) note that senior representatives of the Northern Ireland Executive and the Irish Government, and their Chief Medical Officers, met at the NSMC Secretariat offices in Armagh on 14 March to review the situation regarding the Covid-19 virus and how best address the outbreak;
- (iv) recall that at that meeting Ministers affirmed 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;

- (v) **note that senior representatives of both Administrations have continued to meet regularly to discuss the ongoing Covid-19 response;**
- (vi) **note the Memorandum of Understanding on Public Health Cooperation on Covid-19 Response agreed between Departments of Health, North and South, on 7 April;**
- (vii) **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;**
- (viii) **agree that an early meeting of the Council in the Health sector should review ongoing cooperation in responding to the pandemic;**
- (ix) **note the impact of the pandemic on society and on the economy, North and South, and the measures put in place by both Administrations to support communities and businesses affected by the crisis and to assist economic recovery; and**
- (x) **agree that upcoming meetings of the Council in relevant sectors will consider how North-South approaches could contribute to the promotion of economic and social recovery.**

BACKGROUND

1. The first case of Covid-19 identified on the island of Ireland was diagnosed on 27 February 2020. As of 22 July 2020, the Irish Health Protection Surveillance Centre reports 25,802 confirmed cases and 1,497 deaths among those confirmed cases. As of 23 July 2020, the Department of Health in Northern Ireland reports 5,876 individuals with a positive lab completed test, and 556 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.

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 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

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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 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.
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

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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 phase 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.
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, 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, in preparations for a potential second wave. 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.

ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL IMPACTS OF THE PANDEMIC

15. The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic and the measures needed to control it on communities, society and the economy, in both jurisdictions, has been very significant. Both Administrations have put in place unprecedented measures to support businesses, communities and individuals affected by the pandemic, to sustain employment and economic activity, and to ensure the effective provision of necessary public services.

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16. Productive contacts have taken place between Ministers and Departments to discuss common challenges arising from the impact of Covid-19 across a range of areas of public policy. These have included contacts in the areas of education, justice and policing, tourism and sport.
17. The Northern Ireland Executive has published a medium term economic recovery plan, 'Rebuilding a Stronger Economy', which sets out a framework to deliver higher-paid jobs, a highly-skilled workforce and a more regionally balanced economy in the context of recovery from the effects of the pandemic. The Irish Government has announced the July Jobs Stimulus, a package of measures designed to stimulate a jobs-led recovery and build economic confidence while continuing to manage the impact of Covid-19. Later this year, the Irish Government will set out a National Economic Plan to chart a long-term, jobs-led recovery.
18. Sectoral meetings of the NSMC in the autumn will provide an opportunity to explore the opportunities that shared North/South policy approaches may present to contribute towards economic and social recovery across the island of Ireland. Particular consideration will be given to this area in sectors in which the scale of the shared challenges is most significant, including in Tourism, Trade and Business Development, and Education.

NEXT STEPS

19. Health Ministers will review ongoing North/South co-operation in dealing with the pandemic, including through the implementation of the Memorandum of Understanding, at an early meeting of the Council in the Health Sector.
20. Upcoming meetings of the Council in other relevant sectors, including the Tourism Sector, the Trade and Business Development Sector, and the Education Sector, will consider how agreed North/South approaches could contribute to the promotion of economic and social recovery across the island.

**Joint Secretariat
31 July 2020**

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