

Note for the Record -

Tuesday 19 May 2020 via Zoom

SofS for NI
Simon Coveney
FM and dFM
JM Kearney
JM Lyons
Minister for Health Robin Swann
Minister for Health Ireland Simon Harris

In attendance
HOCS David Sterling
PUS Madeline Alessandri
Phillip Weir
PS FM

Name Redacted

Anthony Harbinson

1. The Secretary of State asked what the reaction was in Northern Ireland to relaxation of the measures.
2. dFM advised that a lot of preparation went into the areas ahead of the announcement and that the public were remaining responsible and that to date feedback has been quite positive.
3. FM agreed and commented that there is a need to manage people's expectations given that people's first reaction is what will be next as everyone's reaction is to want to move to the next stage.
4. The Tánaiste advised that it can be harder to impose restrictions than relaxing. In Ireland people have acted responsibly but some sectors are beginning to lobby the Irish Government for relaxation of their areas/sectors. He commented on the need to carefully manage the relaxation of measures gradually in order to keep outbreaks to a minimum and to keep them localised, hence the 5km travel limit. He felt that pressure would continue to grow in the run up to the next review date, 8th June, especially if the current trends remain in a downward slope.
5. The Secretary of State mentioned that hospitality and tourism sector are expressing concerns about the ability to return to business given the summer

months are their most profitable. England currently has 6.3m jobs furloughed. The challenge now is how to support people to manage back to work but conscious that once a door has been open people general want to push further.

6. The Tánaiste advised that in Ireland were running similar support schemes to the UK and that there are around 460k on a COVID-19 wage subsidy scheme, 600k on the pandemic unemployment scheme and a further 250,000 on standard unemployment benefits. He advised that the challenge is to try to reduce the numbers and phase payments out over time. He continued that this is an expensive process and the Irish Government are estimating a deficit of 20-30 billion euros this year.
7. The Secretary of State mentioned that the 1 June is next milestone from a UK review point. Officials are having ongoing engagement on development of an app which it is hoped will roll out next week, 28th May.
8. Minister Swann confirmed the planned roll out of the NHS X App is set for the 28th May. He said that current NI is still watching how things develop with the App as he was aware of the switch to an Apple platform given sensitivities regarding data. He reported that his department are focussed on an App that talks North/South but recognised the difficulties. As a result NI may develop its own App and he confirmed that his team was getting support from the team that created the UK X App.
9. Minister Swann reported that there had been 77 deaths this week. Overall, the trend is for decline and R level is sitting about 0.7. There is an issue in care homes and whilst they have closed out infection in 31 homes there is still a problem in 73 homes. As of this morning, the residents in 47 care homes had been tested. He continued that the Nightingale hospital (BCH) had been stood down as they had discharged the last CoVID -19 patient today but that they would continue to monitor the situation closely.
10. Minister Harris acknowledged and thanked Minister Swann for the continued co-operation both at Ministerial and Official levels. He felt that we were all in a much better place and that there had been a 66% reduction in the number of patients on ventilators. The number of new and they were reporting 4 deaths yesterday and 16 deaths today (slightly higher due to weekend reporting).
11. Minister Harris continued that there was a need to focus on being vigilant in workplaces. He noted that Ireland sees the app as a complement to the other measures, pointed out that it is a tool to help not a solution. He continued that the NHS model is slightly different to the Ireland model as theirs operates on a decentralised basis whereas he understood the UK was operated on a centralised basis. He said that officials have been engaged on technical data but that they were committed to grant access to their data to partners. He agreed to share all technical documentation.

12. Minister Harris advised that in relation to the timeline, it was hoped that the app to be ready by end of May and that they would start large scale trials the second week in June.
13. The Tánaiste noted the similar timelines and commented that it was helpful that timelines were similar and that we should be working to make sure that there would be interoperability between all the various Apps.
14. dFM said that she was keen to see a N/S and E/W approach. She welcomed the movement on this issue and agreed that it was important to share technical support to rapidly develop a workable app.
15. The Secretary of State NI agreed with the dFM comments.
16. Minister Harris advised that there would be East/West issues depending of which systems are used given that Ireland has adopted the decentralised data model which permits individuals to decide whether to share their data. He commented that he understood interoperability would be very helpful and hoped that could be achieved as it would make a lot of problems go away.
17. The Secretary of State advised that a meeting of technical staff working on the App was to be held on Friday and that it would be very helpful to share information on developments.
18. The Tánaiste raised the issue of travel and desire to retain the Common Travel Area. He pointed out that this was discussed during the conversation between the PM and the Taoiseach last Friday and felt that it was a public health issue in regards international travel. He mentioned that Ireland is moving to implementing a mandatory completion of forms and a period of self-isolation for everyone arriving in Ireland from overseas requiring the disclosure of a forwarding address. He accepted that there is still work to be done on how follow up compliance would work and continued that the legislative process was difficult to work through and that it would not be a straightforward matter.
19. He said that Ireland does not intend distinguishing between nationalities as they arrive into the State and pointed out that it is likely to impact mostly on Irish people as most passengers are likely to be Irish and they would have to self-isolate in the same way as others would.
20. He recognised that there are no traffic flow restrictions between the North and South of Ireland and that individuals may choose to travel via Belfast as a way to avoid the mandatory self-isolation rules. He said that they needed to work out a sensible common approach across the Ireland and pointed to the 5km rule used in RoI. He felt that it was important to apply the same rules to everyone, including those crossing the border would have travelled from another country in the last 14 days.
21. He noted that while there were different arrangements in different locations there was a need to work collaboratively to get this right. He noted that this was not a new issue and that it had been raised before and highlighted that the

Taoiseach and the Prime Minister had some initial conversations around this matter in order to try to get a pragmatic approach which still respected the CTA.

22. The Secretary of State stated that UKG are in favour of exempting the CTA given the small number of people involved and the fact that there is still very limited air travel. He felt that whilst they have not yet finalised details they would wish to exempt travel within the CTA from the UK regulations as it was the only way in which you could protect the CTA. He said that officials were still working on the issues but that media Reports around France were inaccurate and that there would be no general exemption for French travellers, only for frontier workers who worked in the UK but lived in France.
23. The Tánaiste pointed out it was important to get sensible arrangements in place and whilst that numbers are currently small (up to 600 people travelling at present) this is likely to increase with relaxation of restrictions.
24. Minister Harris restated that this is a public health issue and that for his government not even Irish people travelling home would be exempt from the rules.
25. He advised that Ireland would be very interested in learning about the reopening of schools and crèches and finding out more about the different approaches across the different jurisdictions and in particular any learning from the work done across the regions. The SoS said he would be happy to talk with the UK Education Secretary to ensure that they shared any learning or information that they had and that officials should engage with each other on this issue.
26. DFM agreed that the Executive would be willing to share this information and agreed that officials would be in touch. She also asked about the wage subsidy payment scheme.
27. The Tánaiste advised that in Ireland are paying the wage subsidy for some people who are living in the North but who would work in the South and understood that those living in the South and working in the North could avail of the similar UK scheme. This could provide approximately 75-85% of their normal salary and is paid to an individual based on where they are employed. He said that the state then pays unemployment benefits or jobseekers allowance to individuals who live within the State but that this could not be paid to people who lost their employment in the South and who live in the North. This was a clear distinction between the two schemes. He emphasised the fact that unemployment and social welfare payments are paid by the State in which you live.
28. dFM advised that she understood the position but she asked that the Irish Government reconsiders the eligibility for the people who for many years have worked across the border, paid their taxes in the South and who now have lost their jobs.

29. The Tánaiste advised that it was unlikely that the rules would change but agreed to check with Regina Doherty.
30. The Secretary of State proposed inviting the two Ministers responsible for Education to a future meeting to share information and have an informed discussion around the opening up of schools and education issues.
31. The Secretary of State mentioned the need for further consideration to be given to the CTA. The Tánaiste advised that it is not about nationality but relative to all passengers coming into Ireland from overseas.
32. The SoS pointed out that it wasn't 'overseas' travel as the UK is a single country and that he felt that the two processes were not too far apart and that officials may be able to find common ground.