

CDL-DA ministers meeting

FOR INFORMATION

ISSUE: Briefing for a potential meeting with CDL, DA ministers and Territorial Office Secretaries of State regarding the review of social distancing measures.

PRIVATE OFFICE COMMENTS: We understand that CDL is considering holding a meeting with all devolved administrations ministers on Wednesday. You, along with other Territorial Office Secretaries of State, are likely to be invited to join the call.

We have not yet had confirmation of this going ahead or a time.

In the event that it does, attached is the Northern Ireland specific briefing that NIO officials have submitted to CDL's office for the meeting.

NR

SECRETARY OF STATE COMMENTS:

**BRIEFING | CDL, DEVOLVED ADMINISTRATIONS AND TERRITORIAL OFFICES CALL -
4-4.45PM - 15 APRIL**

MINISTERIAL ATTENDEES (TBC)

- **Michael Gove, CDL**
- **Mark Drakeford, Welsh First Minister**
- **Arlene Foster, NI First Minister**
- **Michelle O'Neill, NI deputy First Minister**
- **Nicola Sturgeon, Scotland Minister**
- **Simon Hart, Wales Office SoS**
- | |
|----|
| NR |
|----|

Scotland Office SoS

1. You have been invited to join a call convened by CDL with ministers of the devolved administrations and Territorial Office Secretaries of State to discuss the current social distancing measures and the UK Government's approach to the review of social distancing. **Oliver will join you on the call.**
2. The suggested agenda for the meeting is:
 - a. Current update on Social Distancing
 - b. Approach to the review of social distancing. **CDL will make clear that no decisions have been taken or will be taken ahead of tomorrow's expected COBR(M).**
 - c. Communications
3. CDL is holding the call with 3 main objectives:
 - a. to outline the process for the review of social distancing measures, with a look ahead to the decisions that may be taken at COBR(M);
 - b. to seek DA views on the social distancing measures and the review process, and reduce the likelihood of disagreement during the COBR(M) discussion; and
 - c. to agree an aligned communications plan with the DAs for the review and the announcement of any decisions taken at COBR(M).
4. You may want to contribute the following:
 - a. To underline that you and the UK Government appreciate the importance of continuing to closely consider developments in Ireland and their approach towards social distancing in the future, given the interconnectedness of daily life for people across the island of Ireland. **You may want to reaffirm that you will continue to meet with the First Minister, deputy First Minister and Tánaiste.**
 - b. If the MACA request is raised, be clear that when an official MACA request is received from the NI Executive this will be considered by the UK Government through the well established protocol that exists. (As you know, the Defence Secretary is the ultimate decision maker).
5. Below is the briefing that NIO officials provided to CDL's office for the call.

NORTHERN IRELAND: STEER & SCRIPT

STEER

Current NI situation

The Northern Ireland Executive has recently displayed some disagreement on aspects of Covid-19 management, creating tensions between some parties. The deputy First Minister has been publicly critical of Executive colleagues on issues such as PPE provision and testing. This was further evident over the weekend following the NI Health Minister Robin Swann's making public his intention to seek military assistance. This request was leaked to the media resulting in weekend headlines that caused political tensions within the Executive. No formal request has yet been received by the UK Government.

The request for army assistance to transport ventilators and to support the future build of an additional medical facility, was criticised by Sinn Féin, with Michelle O'Neill saying "I have raised the sensitivities of British military intervention directly with the British Secretary of State Brandon Lewis." The deputy First Minister did conclude, however, that she would not rule out any offer of support, given the scale of the emergency.

Social distancing

In considering any changes to social distancing rules (or other significant aspects of covid management), it will be important to consider the Irish Government position and to properly communicate the reasons if there is any difference in approach between the UK and Ireland. Last week, the Irish government announced a further three week extension to its lockdown until 5 May.

The Secretary of State for NI had a positive meeting last week with the Tánaiste, First Minister and deputy First Minister where all agreed the importance of keeping each other informed of approaches.

SCRIPT

- SoS Northern Ireland and I are pleased to be able to speak to you. UK Government is committed to a UK-wide approach - this is right for the citizens and businesses of the UK. As you know, the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland is in regular contact with the Irish Government.
- We continue to invite ministers from the Executive to key Ministerial Implementation Group and senior official meetings, and sharing our proposals in draft wherever possible (e.g. Social Care Strategy that has been shared in development in the last few days).

- On the social distancing review point, officials have been liaising with all DAs to gather data on Covid and non-Covid health impacts, social and economic impacts. In parallel SAGE has been commissioned for advice on the C19 replication rate and possible impact of lifting measures [*DA CMOs are invited to all SAGE discussions but the commission itself has not as yet been shared with DA officials*].

QUESTIONS

- What are the key considerations for you in Northern Ireland in relation to social distancing at the moment?
- Is the Executive conducting separate analysis about the impact of social distancing measures (and if so please share your thinking)?
- Is there additional data that you would like to share with us that could help shape the decision-making?
- What does the latest analysis you have show about when the peak in Northern Ireland will be?

Annex A: Additional Background for Northern Ireland

Testing

- We understand that FM and DFM have yet to take a final decision on testing - the Executive is meeting on Wednesday. The recommendation is that testing kits be made available by UKG on a per capita basis which officials in NI Civil Service support. There is no significant disparity with this approach than the one being taken by UKG. Healthcare MIG agreed that capacity delivered through mass commercial swab testing to UK nations to be on the basis of population demographics. Priority will be given to the most critical of the key worker populations that need to be returned to work to support the response and essential services.

Business

- Businesses continue to feed back to UKG and NIE about any gaps in support schemes available to NI businesses. This weekend there has been emphasis on concerns with NIE's Hospitality, Tourism and Retail Sectors Grant Scheme grant of £25,000 will be provided to companies in these sectors with a rateable value from £15,001 up to £51,000. Concerns have been raised within those sectors that the money will be made available too late when it is opened next week.

Ireland position and recent statements

- Broadly the position taken by the Irish Government has been similar to that of the UK Government in terms of social distancing. There has been divergence with regards to testing in terms of who is being tested, how many tests are happening per day and the approach to contact tracing.
- The Taoiseach has said he is hopeful and optimistic that it will be possible to start to unwind restrictions in Ireland starting in May and then throughout the course of the summer. He said the plan was to unwind in steps, with the option of reintroducing restrictions if the virus starts spreading again.
- In Ireland, people started changing to more restrictive behaviour ahead of the Government advice. He expressed some concern that the same might happen in reverse, with people changing to less restrictive behaviour ahead of the official relaxation of measures.
- Speaking at a press conference on Monday afternoon, Irish Health Minister, Simon Harris, said that/ lowering the reproductive rate below 1, increasing ICU capacity and reducing the growth rate as preconditions to any easing of measures. He also said that "there isn't going to be a magic point at the start of May where life as we knew it before the coronavirus is going to resume". He indicated some social distancing measures may be in place until there is a vaccine.

Connectivity

- **Connectivity:** Maintaining a minimum level of regional connectivity between NI - GB, be that in aviation or ferries - is crucial for the economic recovery post Covid-19. As you will be aware, DfT have been working with NI Executive officials to put forward a business case of support to HMT to support connectivity between NI and GB.

- **Airports:** DfT and NIO have been working with officials from the NI Executive departments to make the case for keeping all three of NI's airports, Belfast City Airport, Belfast International Airport and City of Derry Airport (CODA), open during the Covid-19 crisis and retaining routes between London and both Belfast and City of Derry.

- **Ferries and hauliers:** Work continues between DfT and HMT on financial support for ferry operators. A business case has been submitted to the Chancellor, with any announcement not expected until later in the week. Work also continues between DfT and HMT on a separate package of possible financial support for hauliers. DfT expects that any announcement or agreement on financial support will be done in parallel with Ferry Operators.

Request for Military Assistance by the Executive

The Health Minister, Robin Swann MLA, wrote to the First Minister and deputy First Minister on Friday stating that he intended to seek military assistance, by way of a MACA, to support the transport of ventilators between hospital facilities and the building of an additional medical facility for recovering COVID patients ahead of any second surge in late summer.

These were based on the fact that no advance notification was given to the Executive - even though they had just met that afternoon - and that for some politicians, including Sinn Féin, the use of the military remains contentious in Northern Ireland. The formal request has yet to be received by the Northern Ireland Office, ahead of transmission to the MoD for a decision by the Defence Secretary.