

## FIRST MINISTER & DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER CALL

Wednesday 25 November 2020

### STEER

1. COVID: You should note that you are happy to see that alignment over the Christmas period has been achieved, and offer to work with Irish Government and the Executive to ensure that regulations are as coherent as possible on the island of Ireland.
2. Forward Look: Now the Executive has reached a consensus on COVID restrictions, you should ask the First Minister and deputy First Minister how they can ensure ongoing collaboration between the parties, particularly over the coming months as we approach the end of the transition period, where landing the overall package with all of the parties will be important.
3. Spending Review: You should note that the CST was planning to discuss the SR with the Finance Minister before the Chancellor's announcement on Wednesday 25th.
  - If that call has already happened, you should acknowledge that the settlement gives a solid platform for the important work we need to deliver next year in the context of the need for fiscal responsibility as a result of the economic uncertainty arising from Covid.
  - If the call has not yet happened, you should commit to having a further discussion with them on the SR once the details have been confirmed by the Treasury.

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5. NDNA: You should propose rescheduling the Implementation Review meeting for mid-December. With the one year anniversary of the publication of NDNA approaching, you should test with the First Minister and deputy First Minister what other NDNA commitments they will implement ahead of the anniversary, including asking for an update on the Independent Fiscal Council.
6. Appointing a HOCS: You should enquire whether any progress has been made in appointing a new Head of the Civil Service.

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## ISSUES TO RAISE

### *Political*

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### *NDNA Implementation*

- I suggest we hold the first Implementation Review Meeting in mid-December. This will be a good opportunity to take stock of delivery against all NDNA commitments, particularly ahead of the anniversary of NDNA publication in January.

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### *Protocol and transition period*

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## **COVID-19**

### Background:

#### *COVID-19 Rates [as of 24 November]*

- The COVID-19 rate in Northern Ireland now stands at 130.3 cases per 100,000 over the past 7 days. This is a significant decrease, after the 7-day rate had

remained at approximately 200 for a week and a half, and a positive sign that the Executive's restrictions are having an impact on case rates.

- This is in comparison to the UK which stands at 205.4 and Ireland at 48. The case rate in Ireland has risen slightly in the last week, with an announcement expected on Thursday or Friday about exiting Level 5 restrictions.
- NI now has a lower incidence than England or Wales, though all indicators remain very high compared with Ireland.

#### *Testing*

- UKG Ministers are keen to announce the roll-out of mass testing across the UK. It has been agreed that UKG's offer of public-facing military support is not appropriate in NI. There is therefore a risk that NI receives less support than other DAs, on account of NI-specific sensitivities. NI may need to contract delivery services to a private sector supplier, and officials are seeking confirmation of whether, in lieu of military assistance, equivalent financial support can be offered to NI. NI officials have also expressed concern about the ability of the mass testing site to link to the NI contact tracing system and have requested DHSC provide a digital solution.

#### *ICU Capacity*

- As of 24 November, hospitals are operating at 99% occupancy, with five hospitals operating beyond capacity.
- There is a current total capacity of 123 ICU beds, with 26 currently unoccupied.

#### *Economy*

- Businesses and employees will benefit from the extension of the 80% furlough scheme and Self Employment Income Support Scheme.
- The Government has also announced new business and local authority grant measures that apply to England only. DAs have instead received additional Barnett allocations.
- On 5th November, the Government announced NI would receive an additional 400m, bringing the total additional Barnett to £2.8bn

#### Lines to take:

##### *Christmas measures*

- I am pleased with the joint approach achieved this week, and thank you for your quick consideration of plans to ease Covid restrictions over the Christmas period.

##### *Announcement of new restrictions for NI*

- I am happy to see that a plan for the coming weeks is in place and appreciate the balance of economic and public health factors which the Executive had to consider. Is there anything that I can do to assist communicating this message and encourage compliance?

- I would appreciate and update on the next decision point ahead of the 2 week 'circuit break' ending on 11 December.

#### *Mass testing*

- *(Depending on UKG announcements)* I am aware that a pilot testing programme is underway at Queen's University, as the Department of Health prepares for the wider roll-out of mass-testing. Is there anything I can do to help with the delivery of this exciting new technology?

#### *ICU capacity and resourcing*

- I understand that hospital admissions are under continued strain. What is your assessment of the pressure on the healthcare system currently?
- Is there anything I can do to help with this?

#### *Economic support*

- The UK Government will continue to do whatever it takes to support businesses, jobs and the economy as the situation evolves. The extension of the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme to March will provide businesses with the support to come through these restrictions and the certainty to plan.
- The UK Government has taken unprecedented action to support NI, including the provision of an additional £2.8bn in spending.

#### *Economy*

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*NB: Lines will need to be updated as Spending Review decisions are announced. The Economy team will provide Private Office with updates over the course of Wednesday.*

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**ONLY IF RAISED**

***Legacy***

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***UK Internal Market Bill***

Lines to take:

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***IGR Review***

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