

## DRAFT - Module 2C – TEO Corporate Statement

I **[leave blank for name and position]**, of The Executive Office Northern Ireland make this statement to assist the Covid-19 Public Inquiry in response to rule 9 letter **[dated, leave blank for final letter]**. This corporate statement is intended to summarise the aims and objectives of The Executive Office and to outline key events in relation to Covid-19 and the response to it. It is intended to provide high level situational understanding on the basis that the Inquiry will seek further information from witnesses in due course. In relation to the matters set out below, we stand ready to provide further information as required.

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### 1. TEO structure

#### 1.1. Ministers

- 1.1.1. The First Minister and deputy First Minister (FM and dFM) are joint heads of the Executive Office (TEO) and are accountable to the Northern Ireland Assembly for their policies and programmes and the activities of the department, including its ALBs. All civil servants in the Executive Office operate under their direction and control in the discharge of their functions. All statutory functions assigned to the First Minister and deputy First Minister by the Northern Ireland Act 1998 must be exercised jointly and all decisions concerning the functions of TEO must be taken by joint agreement. The FM and dFM may appoint two junior Ministers to assist them in the exercise of their functions. While they may delegate certain functions to the junior Ministers or ask them to undertake certain activities on their behalf, decision making is not delegated to them.
- 1.1.2. The FM and dFM may also appoint Special Advisers in accordance the statutory Code issued under Section 8 of the Civil Service (Special Advisers) Act (Northern Ireland) 2013<sup>1</sup>.
- 1.1.3. The FM and dFM are also joint Chairs of the Executive Committee and in accordance with the Ministerial Code, are responsible for convening and chairing meetings and for drawing up the agenda for each meeting, taking account of proposals from other Ministers.
- 1.1.4. The Assembly was restored and the First Minister and deputy First Minister nominated to office on 11 January 2020. The Executive Committee was then formed by nominations of seven Ministers from those parties eligible to do so by virtue of their strength in the Assembly and by the election of the Minister of Justice by Assembly vote.
- 1.1.5. On 3 February 2022, the then First Minister, Paul Givan, resigned from office. While this also caused the deputy First Minister to cease to hold her office, she was entitled to continue to exercise the functions of her office, in accordance with the Northern Ireland Act 1998<sup>2</sup>, until the Assembly election on 5 May 2022. However, no decisions requiring the joint agreement of a First Minister and deputy First Minister could be taken.
- 1.1.6. An election to the NI Assembly took place on 5 May 2022. As it cannot fully discharge its functions in the absence of an elected Speaker, an Executive Committee has not

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/nia/2013/8>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1998/47/contents>

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been formed. Those Ministers (other than the First and deputy First Ministers and TEO Junior Ministers) appointed in the previous mandate have continued in office under the provisions of the Northern Ireland (Ministers, Elections and Petitions of Concern Act) 2022, and will do so until either a new Executive Committee is appointed or until 28 October 2022.

1.1.7. In the period from March 2020 to February 2022, in addition to chairing meetings of the Executive Committee, First and deputy First Ministers also:

- Jointly chaired Executive Covid Crisis Management Committee;
- Attended meetings of the Civil Contingencies Group;
- Provided written and oral statements to the Assembly;
- Attended the Assembly Ad Hoc Committee;
- Undertook ad hoc meetings with the Minister of Health and senior health officials;
- Attended meetings with UK Government Ministers and members of the Scottish and Welsh Governments and with Irish Government Ministers in various formats including North South Ministerial Council (NSMC)<sup>3</sup> and British Irish Council (BIC)<sup>4</sup> meetings; and
- Met with stakeholders.

1.1.8. TEO Ministers are supported by officials who are employed by the Northern Ireland Civil Service (NICS) which is a separate civil service from the Home Civil Service in GB. Further information about the status of the NICS can be provided if required. In June 2021, the NICS created a new Permanent Secretary role within TEO to lead the policy agenda and delivery (please see section 1.2 below). TEO's current functions include promoting equality, the oversight of the Executive's Together: Building a United Community programme, Good Relations programmes, the Racial Equality Strategy, work on Ending Violence Against Women and Girls and on supporting victims and survivors of the Troubles/Conflict. TEO also leads on a range of specific, emergent policy issues that require cross departmental co-ordination or which have not sat easily within the responsibility of individual departments. Examples include supporting survivors of Historical Institutional Abuse and Mother and Baby Institutions. At the core of these issues is the protection and support of some of the most vulnerable people in our society. TEO also plays a role in supporting the work of the Executive's COVID Taskforce and in building contingency planning arrangements to protect the people of

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<sup>3</sup> Home | North South Ministerial Council

<sup>4</sup> British Irish Council

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Northern Ireland. Building on this work here, TEO leads on International Relations on behalf of the Executive with offices in the US, China and Brussels.

1.1.9. The following bodies fall within TEO Departmental Boundary:

- Office of the Commissioner for Public Appointments for NI,
- Office of the Attorney General for NI;
- North South Ministerial Council Joint Secretariat (North);
- Historical Institutional Abuse Redress Board; and
- Victims' Payments Board

1.1.10. The Department has lead policy responsibility for the following bodies outside the Departmental boundary that are classified as, or analogous to, an executive Non Departmental Public Body (NDPB):

- NI Community Relations Council;
- Commission for Victims and Survivors for NI;
- Equality Commission for NI;
- Maze/Long Kesh Development Corporation;
- Northern Ireland Judicial Appointments Commission;
- Strategic Investment Board Limited;
- The Commissioner for Survivors of Institutional Childhood Abuse; and
- Victims and Survivors Service Limited.

### **1.2. Permanent Secretary in TEO**

1.2.1. Sir David Sterling was interim Head of the Civil Service (HOCS) until the end of August 2020 when he retired. At this time the HOCS also fulfilled the role of Permanent Secretary. On Sir David's retirement, Dr Mark Browne continued in his role as Accounting Officer and Karen Pearson continued to have day-to-day senior management of Covid-19 matters, providing advice and guidance to the Executive until Jenny Pyper was appointed as interim HOCS on 1 December 2020.

1.2.2. Jenny Pyper held the post of interim Head of the Civil Service until 31 August 2021 and as such undertook the role of Permanent Secretary for the Department until 25 July 2021. This role was subsequently divided into two roles, namely: (1) Head of the Civil Service; and (2) Permanent Secretary of The Executive Office (TEO).

1.2.3. Dr Jayne Brady was appointed as Head of Civil Service on 1 September 2021. At which point Dr McMahon was in post as Permanent Secretary for TEO.

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- 1.2.4. Dr Denis McMahon was appointed as Permanent Secretary on 26 July 2021. Chris Stewart undertook the Department's Accounting Officer role on an interim basis, from 1 April 2021 to 25 July 2021, following the promotion of Dr Mark Browne to another department.
- 1.2.5. Dr McMahon has responsibility to the First Minister and deputy First Minister for the day-to-day operation of the departmental functions and, as Accounting Officer, for the management and control of the resources used by the Department.
- 1.2.6. This responsibility also includes chairing the Departmental Board.
- 1.2.7. As Accounting Officer, Dr McMahon is responsible for maintaining a sound system of internal governance that supports the achievement of the Department's policies, aims and objectives. He also has responsibility for the propriety and regularity of the public finances voted to the Department and for safeguarding those public funds and departmental assets, in accordance with the responsibilities assigned to him in DFP's (now DoF) guidance Managing Public Money Northern Ireland <sup>5</sup>(MPMNI). In his role as Accounting Officer, he is supported by the Departmental Board ('the Board'). His responsibilities to the Board include highlighting specific business issues or risks and, where appropriate, their implications and/or the mitigating measures that could be employed to manage these risks.
- 1.2.8. In addition, Dr McMahon is required to combine his Accounting Officer role with his responsibilities to the Ministers, which include providing advice on the allocation of departmental resources and the setting of appropriate financial and non-financial performance targets for ALBs.

### **1.3. TEO Departmental Board**

- 1.3.1. During 2020-21, the Departmental Board was chaired by David Sterling in his capacity as Head of the Northern Ireland Civil Service (HOCS) and Permanent Secretary of TEO until his retirement in August 2020. Jenny Pyper was appointed as Interim HOCS on 1 December 2020 until Jayne Brady was appointed on 1 September 2021.
- 1.3.2. The Board supports the delivery of effective Corporate Governance and operates within best practice guidelines outlined in Corporate Governance in Central Government Departments: Code of Good Practice (Northern Ireland) 2013. It advises on the operational implications and effectiveness of policy proposals and takes an objective long-term view of the business of the department, leading its strategic

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<sup>5</sup> Managing Public Money NI (MPMNI) | Department of Finance ([finance-ni.gov.uk](http://finance-ni.gov.uk))

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planning process and supporting corporate governance responsibilities for the department. The Board had no role in decision-making in relation to the public-facing aspects of the pandemic.

### **1.4. Departmental Board Membership**

1.4.1. During 2021-22 the Departmental Board comprised the following members:

- Jenny Pyper, Interim HOCS from December 2020 also undertook the role of Permanent Secretary for the Department until 25 July 2021,
- Dr Denis McMahon, TEO Permanent Secretary and Accounting Officer from 26 July 2021.
- Denis Power, Independent Board Member.
- Andrew McCormick, Director General, International Relations Group until 31 August 2021.
- Chris Stewart, Accounting Officer until 25 July 2021.
- Gareth Johnston, (Acting) Director of Good Relations and Inclusion (formerly Strategic Policy, Equality and Good Relations) from 9 September 2021.
- Karen Pearson, Director of COVID Recovery, Civil Contingencies and Programme for Government.
- Tom Reid, Director of EU Exit and International Relations.
- Alexander Gordon, Head of the Office of the Legislative Counsel.
- Claire Archbold, Director of Ending Violence Against Women and Girls from 1 December 2021.

1.4.2. The Board is supported through attendance of colleagues to advise on finance, corporate services and human resources.

### **2. Devolution settlement for Northern Ireland**

2.1. Under the devolution settlement for Northern Ireland there are three categories of legislative powers: reserved, excepted and transferred.

2.2. Schedules 2 and 3 to the Northern Ireland Act 1998 (NIA) respectively specify those matters which are excepted and reserved. Any matter that is not excepted or reserved is a transferred matter. The Assembly can make primary and subordinate legislation on all transferred matters.

2.3. The Assembly has no legislative competence with regard to excepted matters which are reserved to Westminster, other than where the provision of an Act is ancillary to other provisions dealing with reserved or transferred matters; or with regard to reserved matters other than with the consent of the Secretary of State.



- 2.4. A reserved matter may become a transferred matter or vice versa by means of the Order in Council procedure set out in s4 NIA.
- 2.5. Parliament remains sovereign (section 5(6) of the Northern Ireland Act) and retains the right to legislate in all matters relating to Northern Ireland. It will not however normally pass legislation on transferred matters without first obtaining the consent of the Northern Ireland Assembly via a Legislative Consent Motion. (Devolution Guidance Note 8 – Post Devolution Legislation affecting Northern Ireland)<sup>6</sup>.

### **3. Supporting the work of Government**

- 3.1. One of TEO's key objectives is to ensure the effective operation of the institutions of Government in the delivery of the Executive's Programme for Government.
- 3.2. Following the return of a functioning Assembly on 11 January 2020 after an absence of three and half years, an Executive Committee was formed. Between 3 February 2020 and 27 January 2022, the Executive discussed and agreed its response to the evolving pandemic on 129 occasions.
- 3.3. Whilst the business of the Executive Committee was focused substantially on the response to the COVID-19 pandemic, it also took decisions on a range of other legislative and policy issues, including but not limited to Climate Change, Organ Donation, Parental Bereavement Leave, Private Tenancies and the Violence Against Women and Girls Strategy.

### **4. Executive Committee**

#### **4.1. Overview of structures**

- 4.1.1. The Northern Ireland Executive Committee ("the Executive") is the Executive Committee of the Northern Ireland Assembly and exercises executive authority on its behalf. Its functions are set out in s20 NIA. The Executive comprises the First Minister and deputy First Minister, who are joint chairs and convene and preside over its meetings, and eight "Northern Ireland Ministers" (Ministers). The procedures for the nomination of a Member of the Legislative Assembly (MLA) to the offices of First Minister and deputy First Minister and Northern Ireland Minister are set out in s 16A and s18 NIA respectively. The exception to these procedures is the nomination to the office of the Minister of Justice which is made in accordance with s21A NIA. In the

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<sup>6</sup> Devolution Guidance Note (DGN) 8 ([publishing.service.gov.uk](https://publishing.service.gov.uk))

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exercise of all their statutory functions, the First Minister and deputy First Minister are required to act jointly.

- 4.1.2. All Executive Ministers (including the First Minister and deputy First Minister) are required to take a Pledge of Office before assuming office (s16A(9) and s18(8) NIA). The terms of the Pledge of Office and associated Ministerial Code of Conduct are set out in Schedule 4 NIA. The Pledge includes a commitment to support and act in accordance with all decisions of the Executive Committee and the Assembly.
- 4.1.3. Meetings of the Executive are conducted in accordance with Section 2 of the Ministerial Code which is made in accordance with the requirements specified in 2.8 NIA<sup>7</sup>.
- 4.1.4. In accordance with paragraph 24 of the Agreement reached on 10 April 1998 (the 1998 Agreement)<sup>8</sup>, each Minister exercises executive authority within their department but is required under the terms of paragraph 2.4 of the Ministerial Code to refer certain categories of matter to the Executive for agreement. These include:
- matters which cut across the responsibility of two or more Ministers;
  - significant or controversial matters; and
  - matters which the First Minister and deputy First Minister have determined are significant or controversial and should be considered by the Executive.
- 4.1.5. Ministers seeking the agreement of the Executive to recommendations in respect of a certain policy or proposal will do so through the preparation of a draft Executive paper, which is circulated for comment to all Ministers, and copied to among others the Attorney General, the Departmental Solicitor and First Legislative Counsel (where the matter deals with legislation or has legislative implications). Where necessary, a subsequent draft (or drafts) will be circulated to reflect comments received and any changes proposed.
- 4.1.6. The agenda for Executive Committee meetings is determined by the First Minister and deputy First Minister acting jointly, taking account of the papers which have been submitted by Ministers. Those papers, that the First Minister and deputy First Minister have jointly agreed should be included on the Executive agenda, are then subject to substantive discussion and agreement at an Executive meeting.
- 4.1.7. Following discussion at a meeting of the Executive, the chair will formally put the paper's recommendations to Ministers for agreement.

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<sup>7</sup> Northern Ireland Ministerial Code

<sup>8</sup> The Belfast Agreement An Agreement Reached at the Multi-Party Talks on Northern Ireland.pdf (publishing.service.gov.uk)

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- 4.1.8. In accordance with the Ministerial Code, the First Minister and deputy First Minister have a duty as Chairs of the Executive Committee to seek to secure that its decisions are reached by consensus wherever possible. If consensus on a certain issue or recommendation cannot be reached, a vote may be taken, and may take one of two forms – a simple majority vote, or a cross-community vote. A vote may be taken on a cross-community basis if requested by any three Ministers before the vote is taken. Cross-community support has the same meaning as that set out in section 4(5) of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, i.e. the support of a majority of the members voting, a majority of the designated Nationalists voting and a majority of the designated Unionists voting; or the support of 60 percent of the members voting, 40 percent of the designated Nationalists voting and 40 percent of the designated Unionists voting.
- 4.1.9. The Ministerial Code also makes provision for the taking of Urgent Decisions. An Urgent Decision may be taken in circumstances where a decision which would normally require Executive agreement needs to be taken before the next scheduled Executive meeting. In this case, the responsible Minister will write to the First Minister, the deputy First Minister and the Secretary to the Executive, copied to Executive colleagues, the Attorney General, the Departmental Solicitor's Office, First Legislative Counsel (where appropriate) and Executive Secretariat, advising them of the decision required, and providing details of the background to the issue, the reason for urgency, the implications of not taking the decision, and as far as possible, the views of other relevant Ministers.
- 4.1.10. The First Minister and deputy First Minister, acting jointly, will consider the matter in consultation with the responsible Minister, and will notify them of the outcome of their consideration, copied to Executive colleagues, the Attorney General, the Departmental Solicitor's Office, First Legislative Counsel (where appropriate) and Executive Secretariat.
- 4.1.11. A matter dealt with in this way is deemed to have been dealt with in accordance with paragraph 2.4 of the Ministerial Code, and will be included on the agenda for noting at the next Executive meeting.

### **4.2. Processes for Recording Meetings**

- 4.2.1. Executive meetings are minuted by a member of NICS staff (civil servant) from the Executive Secretariat. The minutes of Executive meetings are not verbatim and record the following for each agenda item: the recommendations agreed by the Executive; details of any vote taken on those recommendations; the position of individual

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Ministers on those recommendations or on any other issue where they formally request that this be recorded; and any other agreed conclusions or action points.

- 4.2.2. The draft minutes of each Executive meeting are submitted to the First Minister and deputy First Minister for agreement, following which they are circulated to other Ministers for agreement at the next meeting. Ministers may request amendment of the draft minutes in advance of the meeting or during the meeting itself under the relevant agenda item.

### **4.3. Sources of Information Used to Inform Executive Decision-making on COVID-19 Matters**

- 4.3.1. Chief Medical Officer (CMO) and Chief Scientific Adviser (CSA) accessed a number of sources of information to inform the advice provided to the Executive, including vaccine programme progress, testing regime information and the daily Covid dashboard, all provided by the Department of Health.
- 4.3.2. Using this information, papers summarising the latest scientific and medical evidence were provided in advance of Executive meetings for consideration in addition to specialist Executive papers:
- DoH Emergency Response COVID-19 Update Report (first written update provided at Exhibit 1)
  - Weekly R paper<sup>9</sup> from the Department of Health (from 26 May 2020 onwards)
  - Mobility reports from the Department of Health (from 20 October 2020 onwards) (First paper provided at Exhibit 2)
- 4.3.3. The Executive also received the ECT dashboard, which included health, economic and societal data from 13 April 2021 onwards (first paper provided at Exhibit 3)
- 4.3.4. From March 2020 to January 2022, Northern Ireland's Chief Medical Officer regularly attended Executive meetings to brief Ministers and respond to questions. From April 2020 to January 2022 he was accompanied by the Chief Scientific Adviser or his deputy.
- 4.3.5. In addition, the senior officials responsible for the rollout of the vaccination programme and the testing regime here periodically attended Executive meetings to provide an update on progress.

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<sup>9</sup> R Number papers | Department of Health (health-ni.gov.uk)

- 4.3.6. During the first wave when the Hub was operational Anthony Harbinson, Hub Chief of Staff, supported HOCS at Executive meetings at which he delivered the situation report and reported new developments, as required by business need.
- 4.3.7. This information was used collectively to aid Executive decision-making in light of the nature and spread of COVID-19 in Northern Ireland.

### **5. Financial Position**

#### **5.1. Funding**

- 5.1.1. The Assembly passed the Budget Act (Northern Ireland) 2021<sup>10</sup> in March 2021 which authorised the cash and use of resources for all departments for the 2020-21 year, based on the Executive's final expenditure plans for the year. The Budget Act (Northern Ireland) 2021 also authorised a Vote on Account to authorise departments' access to cash and use of resources for the early months of the 2021-22 financial year. The Budget (No. 2) Act (Northern Ireland) 2021 which received Royal Assent on 4 August 2021 authorises the cash and resource balance to complete for the remainder of the 2021-22 financial year based on the Executive's 2021-22 Final Budget.
- 5.1.2. The Assembly passed the Budget Act (Northern Ireland) 2022<sup>11</sup> in March 2022 which authorised the cash and use of resources for all departments for the 2021-22 year, based on the Executive's final expenditure plans for the year. The Budget Act (Northern Ireland) 2022 also included a Vote on Account which authorised departments' access to cash and use of resources for the early months of the 2022-23 financial year. The cash and resource balance to complete for the remainder of 2022-23 will be authorised by the 2022-23 Main Estimates and the associated Budget Bill based on an agreed 2022-23 Budget. In the event that this is delayed, then the powers available to the Permanent Secretary of the Department of Finance (DoF) under Section 59 of the Northern Ireland Act 1998 and Section 7 of the Government Resources and Accounts Act (Northern Ireland) 2001<sup>12</sup> will be used to authorise the cash, and the use of resources during the intervening period.
- 5.1.3. Following the resignation of the First Minister and the subsequent lack of an Executive, a Budget for 2022-23 could not be finalised. The Finance Minister wrote to departments to set out a way forward in the absence of an Executive to agree a Budget. This process involved DoF issuing departments with contingency planning envelopes for

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<sup>10</sup> Budget Act (Northern Ireland) 2021 ([legislation.gov.uk](http://legislation.gov.uk))

<sup>11</sup> Budget Act (Northern Ireland) 2022 ([legislation.gov.uk](http://legislation.gov.uk))

<sup>12</sup> Government Resources and Accounts Act (Northern Ireland) 2001 ([legislation.gov.uk](http://legislation.gov.uk))

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the 2022-23 financial year. These envelopes provided departments with an assessment of the minimum funding they could reasonably expect for 2022-23 and allowed departments to plan for expenditure until such times as a Budget could be agreed.

### **6. TEO's Role in Civil Emergencies**

- 6.1. TEO leads Northern Ireland's long-established civil contingencies response arrangements to support strategic decision making at the Civil Contingencies Group (CCG), and the Executive. More information will be provided in statement form for Module 1. A brief summary is set out below.
- 6.2. The capabilities and capacities around these arrangements were mobilised during Northern Ireland's emergency response to the first wave of COVID-19, and further refined and strengthened to manage the concurrency of a second wave of COVID-19, EU transition and winter emergencies at the end of 2020, to sit alongside the UK-wide preparations being led by the Cabinet Office.
- 6.3. The following section summarises the situation in the early stages of Covid-19 and which fall within the scope of Module 2C.

### **7. TEO Role during Covid-19**

#### **7.1. Overview**

- 7.1.1. The emergence of Covid-19 required a rapid response which evolved over time and in which TEO had a central role. The Strategic Risk Management and Civil Contingencies Division (CCD) works in partnership with NICS departments, emergency responders, local government partners and Food Standards Agency to provide emergency resilience, response and recovery through delivery of the Northern Ireland Central Crisis Management Arrangements (NICCMA).
- 7.1.2. There was a special CCG (COVID-19) Officials Meeting on 20 February 2020 to provide members with a prognosis for COVID-19 and focused on next steps in terms of preparedness including continuity planning and maintenance of critical services (Exhibits 4a and 4b). Subsequently from March 2020 to June 2020, during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, CCD activated the Northern Ireland emergency response arrangements, which included the strategic oversight and co-ordinated enhanced decision making by the Executive, and by the Civil Contingencies Group (CCG) led by the Head of the Northern Ireland Civil Service. These arrangements were

delivered through the NI Hub, which operated as the focal point for Northern Ireland's emergency response, facilitating engagement and shared situational awareness with the UK Government, Devolved Administrations, Ireland, NICS Departments, and partner agencies. More detail of a practical level is set out at 7.2.1 below.

- 7.1.3. Following the stand-down of these arrangements in June 2020, a lessons learned exercise shaped a readiness programme of work (Exhibits 5a and 5b). The key objective of this was to prepare the emergency response posture for possible disruption from the concurrency of a second wave of COVID19, EU transition and normal winter emergencies. Arrangements were again activated in October 2020 and the NI Hub again coordinated the response for the second wave of COVID-19, monitoring disruption for the end of the EU transition period and winter events. CCG sat from October 2020 through to February 2021 in support of this. The arrangements were different in nature to those in place in wave one, reflecting the experience and learning. More information is provided at 7.2.13 below.

### **7.2. Hub stand up**

- 7.2.1. There was a CCG meeting attended by Ministers on 12 March 2020 at which it was agreed there should be regular CCG meetings with the next one planned for 18 March.
- 7.2.2. On 16 March 2020, the Executive considered the wider non-health response to COVID-19 and the activation of the strategic emergency coordination arrangements within government, i.e. Northern Ireland Central Crisis Management Arrangements (NICCMA) (Exhibits 6, 6a and 6b). The response was reviewed in May 2020 with ongoing actions mainlined into business as usual and Executive consideration.
- 7.2.3. CCG stood up in Hub mode in Covid-19 wave 1 on 18 March 2020. It was chaired by HOCS and attended by FM, dFM, junior Ministers, Permanent Secretaries and key external partners including the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service, Police Service for Northern Ireland and the Food Standards Agency. Anthony Harbinson, Department of Justice, took up a temporary secondment as Chief of Staff to run the Hub and its associated support structures, including the Departmental Operational Centres or DOCs. The COVID-19 Hub was operational until mid-June 2020.
- 7.2.4. The Hub operated seven days a week for the first four weeks ensuring the Command, Control and Coordination aspects of the Executives response to the COVID-19 crisis were established and functioning as necessary. The Hub was staffed by a combination of Civil Servants and consultants to ensure there was the appropriate level of resources with the right skills and experience. The Hub also had liaisons officers from

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each of the DOCs, the Police Service for Northern Ireland, Ministry of Defence and a representative from Local Government.

- 7.2.5. A Data Analytics team was procured to design and populate the daily situational report (sitrep) that provided the required data to Whitehall colleagues for the daily Prime Minister briefings.
- 7.2.6. Within three weeks enough staff had been secured to run three rotational shift teams in the Hub. Three additional venues were secured to enable the shift teams to operate from different locations to reduce the risk of Covid spreading between the teams, thereby increasing the resilience of the Hub. The ability to operate remotely if required was also tested. On average for the first four to five weeks the Hub operated for 18 hours, seven days per week.
- 7.2.7. A further two rotational stand-by teams were also subsequently established to provide a more sustainable structure should any of the three main teams become unavailable due to COVID-19.
- 7.2.8. The final overarching review referenced at para. 7.1.3 drew on all the findings and recommendations of the separate individual reviews as well as seeking additional feedback from a wide range of staff, Ministers and key stakeholders.
- 7.2.9. Daily NI Civil Contingency Group meetings, chaired by HOCS, were convened immediately bringing together Ministers, Permanent Secretaries, leaders of the emergency services and Local Govt. to discuss key issues and agree appropriate actions. Members were encouraged to join the meetings remotely via teleconferencing to help reduce the risk of spreading the virus. After the first four or five weeks the norm was for only junior Ministers to attend.
- 7.2.10. The Hub Chief of Staff, Anthony Harbinson, supported HOCS in the CCG and Executive meetings at which he delivered the situation report and reported new developments, as frequently as determined by business need. He also regularly briefed the First and deputy First Ministers and joined them on COBR meetings and calls with the Prime Minister and other First Ministers.
- 7.2.11. He was also the lead official for discussions and negotiations surrounding the establishment of the Joint Biosecurity Centre.
- 7.2.12. During May 2020 the Hub ran six days a week and by the beginning of June it moved to operating and reporting five days a week. The number of reports were reduced further and by the end of the month the CCG meetings were stood down and situation



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reports were no longer provided. The focus of the work then moved to the recovery phase.

7.2.13. Proposals were submitted to HOCS on how best to restructure the NI Civil Contingencies Unit in TEO to oversee the ongoing challenges presented by Covid 19 and any other serious civil contingency threat.

7.2.14. CCG stood up in a more limited way in Autumn 2020. The Hub was not stood up for this. On the 26 October the Northern Ireland Central Crisis Arrangements (NICCMA) were invoked to manage the COVID-19 second wave. This entailed a weekly meeting of the CCG at official level, chaired by a Senior Civil Servant and the production of a weekly SitRep from the 27 October onwards. The weekly SitRep was shared around all depts and responding bodies and was briefed to the First and deputy First Minister's offices. NICCMA was invoked due to concerns from the Department of Health around the doubling rate of infection, availability of ICU beds and overall hospital admissions. All of this, coupled with the Executive introducing further restrictions through regulation, meant that the anticipated impacts would move beyond the health space with wider cross cutting impacts to be coordinated and monitored at a strategic level.

7.2.15. With lessons learned, information flows in place and working groups established it was assessed that a full NI Hub stand up was not required and the Civil Contingencies Division (CCD) could act as the focal point for information flows and data, and therefore support CCG in the provision of the strategic oversight for the emergency response. CCG could then collate and share information with key NI partners and seek input to inform collective next steps and decision making at CCG and the Executive if required.

7.2.16. As the winter of 2020-21 progressed, the weekly meeting of CCG and the SitRep considered a broader concurrency of other non-COVID potential impacts on NI society over the winter of 2020. CCG stopped meeting weekly in early February 2021 with the final SitRep being issued on the 9 March 2021. With CCG no longer meeting and, therefore, not undertaking its decision-making role, the C3 system was no longer on a response footing. Business as usual monitoring proceeded through the Civil Contingencies (Exhibit 7).

### **7.3. Concurrent and Post-hub Arrangements**

7.3.1. On 19 March 2020, the Executive considered headline objectives for a planning framework to support a joined-up whole society approach to a COVID-19 response (Exhibit 8).

7.3.2. Subsequently, on 29 March 2020, Minister Swann wrote to the First and deputy First Ministers emphasising the need for a cross-Executive response to address the impacts

felt by all sectors and all levels of society in order to manage the broader societal response to the pandemic (Exhibit 9). A further letter issued from Minister Swann on 30 March 2020 (Exhibit 10) with the departments of Health's Emergency Response Strategy to COVID-19 attached (Exhibit 10a).

- 7.3.3. At the same time as Hub stand-up, a COVID-19 Executive Strategy and Plan was developed in March 2020. A verbal briefing was presented to the Executive on 30 March at which time Minister Swann and the Chief Medical Officer also briefed the Executive on the Department of Health's Emergency Response Strategy to COVID-19.
- 7.3.4. The COVID-19 Executive Strategy and Plan was regularly reviewed by the Executive, the first such review taking place on 3 April 2020 (Exhibits 11 and 11a). The purpose of the COVID-19 Executive Strategy and Plan was to assist the Executive's decision-making process by outlining practical steps that were needed in the early phase. For example, practical support to citizens and food security.
- 7.3.5. On 12 May 2020, the Executive Approach to Decision-Making<sup>13</sup> was published as described in the Strategy section below. Alongside this, a point in time review of the Executive's Strategy to COVID-19 was carried out and a report dated 28 May 2020 (Exhibit 12, 12a and 12b) was discussed by the Executive on 4 June 2020. This resulted in the COVID-19 Executive Strategy and Plan being stood down in favour of business as usual.
- 7.3.6. As case numbers began to reduce, a Special Executive Meeting was convened on Thursday 11 June 2020 to agree a strategic approach to decisions around easing of Coronavirus restrictions (Exhibit 13). Work also began on the development of the Executive's Strategic Recovery Plan with a paper brought to the Executive for consideration on 17 September 2020 (Exhibit 14 and 14a). The subsequent rise in case numbers meant that the recovery work was not completed until 2021 (see section 8.5).
- 7.3.7. As case numbers gradually increased in Autumn 2020, the decision was made to establish a more formal support framework as detailed below.

#### **7.4. Executive's Covid Taskforce (ECT)**

- 7.4.1. The Executive's COVID-19 Taskforce was established in December 2020 under the leadership of HOCS to lead and co-ordinate the Executive's ongoing response to, and recovery from, the pandemic. The Taskforce brought together the many strands of the

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<sup>13</sup> Coronavirus - Executive approach to decision-making ([executiveoffice-ni.gov.uk](https://www.executiveoffice-ni.gov.uk))

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Executive's overall response to the pandemic, by joining up the work already taking place across Government Departments, Local Government and public sector agencies.

- 7.4.2. Once established, the ECT provided timely advice and proposals on COVID-19 matters to support the Executive to ensure decision-making was proportional and based on the latest medical and scientific evidence.
- 7.4.3. The Taskforce built on the Executive's immediate COVID-19 response to progress an integrated programme of work across four key work streams: Protect; Recovery; Adherence and Strategic Communications. The unit established a 4-week review process to facilitate the review of restrictions and inform Executive decision-making to allow movement along the pathway when it was appropriate to do so. This enabled significant progress to be made.
- 7.4.4. The Taskforce consists of the Permanent Secretaries for Health, Justice, Communities and Economy and is attended by the Head of Covid Strategy and Covid Contingencies and the Head of Executive Communications.
- 7.4.5. The Taskforce also runs the Cross Departmental Working Group (CDWG), which initially met weekly, then fortnightly and then moved to monthly to consider the proposals submitted for the next set of relaxations as well as other Covid-related cross-cutting issues and to provide and receive updates on the position in other jurisdictions, sectoral engagement and recovery.

### **7.5. Adherence work stream**

- 7.5.1. The Adherence Group brought together departmental stakeholders as well as enforcing agencies in order to provide input into how changes in law and guidance impact on adherence, how to best encourage compliance with the public health messaging and to work with behavioural science experts to support efforts to reduce transmission of the virus. The Group ensured that timely guidance was developed to inform the public of what was expected, given the numerous changes to the rules during the previous 12 months.
- 7.5.2. The group implemented COVID-19 population polling from June 2021 to March 2022, producing 12 waves of polling data to ascertain attitudinal opinions from an adult sample of the COVID-19 restrictions in place. This information was key to confirm or challenge the approach to restrictions and enforcement.

7.5.3. To tie in with the Executive's Autumn / Winter plan, <sup>14</sup>a subset of members of the Adherence Group operated a Ventilation Group, which reviewed how to deliver good ventilation in order to reduce the risk of transmission of the virus. The Ventilation Group developed and published guidance for individuals and businesses which was published on NIDirect and NIBusinessinfo respectively.

### 7.6. COVID-19 Strategy and Recovery Division

7.6.1. The COVID-19 Strategy and Recovery Division (CRSD) was formally established in late summer / early autumn 2020. CRSD leads on the delivery of the key functions that underpin, support and coordinate the Executive's response to and recovery from COVID-19. It co-ordinated Strategies for the Executive's consideration. These are summarised below and more detail is set out in section 8.

7.6.2. The Division chairs and manages the Cross Departmental Working Group on Covid restrictions and relaxations, which coordinated the successful implementation of the Executive's strategic and sustainable COVID-19 Pathway out of Restrictions, published in March 2021 (see below).

7.6.3. The Division delivered the Autumn/Winter Plan for 2021/22 and Omicron Scenario Planning which supported and informed key Executive decision-making.

7.6.4. The Division also delivered the *Building Forward: Consolidated COVID-19 Recovery Plan*<sup>15</sup>, which was agreed by the Executive on 29 July 2021 and subsequently published on 2 August 2021.

7.6.5. Other work being taking forward across the Division includes:

- Supporting Executive's decision-making and response to the COVID-19 pandemic through the provision of advice.
- The Division also initiates, leads and managing cross-cutting time bound Task and Finish Groups in response to specific issues as they arise.
- Co-ordination and Support for Strategic Engagement with UK, Devolved Administrations and Republic of Ireland Governments/Officials.

### 7.7. Managed Quarantine Service

7.7.1. The Executive agreed on 25 March 2021 to the Introduction of a Managed Quarantine Service (MQS) for all individuals returning from Red List countries. 'Red list' countries

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<sup>14</sup> Layout 1 (executiveoffice-ni.gov.uk)

<sup>15</sup> Building forward: Consolidated Covid-19 Recovery Plan (executiveoffice-ni.gov.uk)

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are those countries and territories that were subject to additional restrictions. Details of these countries changed over time and was set out in the Health Protection (Coronavirus, International Travel) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020<sup>16</sup>. As a result, they were required to enter managed isolation for 10 days in a designated hotel at their own expense. The Executive retained the option of reviewing the countries this related to at any stage. The Minister for Health asked that the Executive's Covid-19 Task Force lead on arrangements for managed isolation.

- 7.7.2. The First Minister and deputy First Minister agreed that TEO would lead on a Task and Finish basis. TEO established a Task and Finish Group consisting of the Department of Health, Department for the Economy, Department for Infrastructure, Department of Justice and Department of Finance. PSNI, Local Government and G4S (the firm procured to provide security and advice for the scheme) also attended. Border Force were subsequently invited to attend.
- 7.7.3. The took Task Force forward the necessary work on managed quarantine arrangements on return travel from countries where there were new Covid variants. The Executive considered the public health and scientific evidence before agreeing to the introduction of the MQS.
- 7.7.4. The MQS was put in place for the first returning International flight into Northern Ireland airports on 19 April 2021. Responsibility for the MQS subsequently transferred to DoH mid-May 2021.
- 7.7.5. The Task Force submitted four ECT update papers with policy proposals for discussion at the Executive. Of note, the following were agreed by the Executive:
- Officials were mandated to avail of UKG contracts
  - The Executive agreed a Red list approach that was to be kept under review
  - Belfast International and Belfast City would be designated points of arrival for air travel, and City of Derry Airport would be kept under review
  - Offences and penalties would mirror the UK regime
- 7.7.6. Written updates from ECT on MQS were considered by the Executive on five occasions (Exhibit 15a to 15e).

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<sup>16</sup> The Health Protection (Coronavirus, International Travel) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2020 (legislation.gov.uk)

### **7.8. Travel Agents Coronavirus Financial Assistance Scheme**

- 7.8.1. A Ministerial Direction dated 11 March 2021 (Exhibits 16, 16a and 16b) by the First and deputy First Ministers resulted in TEO developing and implementing the Travel Agents Coronavirus Financial Assistance Scheme.
- 7.8.2. The support provided to Travel Agents as part of the Travel Agents Coronavirus Financial Assistance Scheme relied on self-declarations as a means of applicants demonstrating that, as a result of the outbreak of COVID-19, they suffered financial hardship (as a travel agent); and, intended to keep operating as a travel agent (meeting the requirements of the Regulations).
- 7.8.3. The Scheme closed for applications in 2020-21 with payments being processed in 2021-22. The 'Travel Agents (Coronavirus, Financial Assistance) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2021' contained two eligibility criteria that were confirmed via a self-declaration. These were:
- (i) intends to continue so operating; and
  - (ii) has suffered financial hardship as a travel agent as a result of the outbreak of coronavirus.
- 7.8.4. The self-declaration was taken as evidence that the applicants met these criteria. The decision to rely on self-declarations was taken in the context of the exceptional circumstances brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic and the extreme urgency with which businesses required these financial support interventions.

## **8. Strategy**

### **8.1. Overview**

- 8.1.1. Throughout the course of the pandemic, the Executive published a number of strategic documents outlining its approach to responding to the pandemic as it evolved and in recognition of progress made in programmes such as the vaccination programme and testing regime.

### **8.2. Coronavirus: Executive Approach to Decision-making (published 12 May 2020)**

- 8.2.1. On 12 May 2020, the Executive published the document Coronavirus: Executive Approach to Decision-making. This sets out the approach the Executive would adopt in the regular reviews of the Coronavirus Regulations. A number of key guiding principles were established:

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- Controlling transmission. A restriction or requirement should only be relaxed when there is a reasonable prospect of maintaining R at or below 1.
- Protecting healthcare capacity. The healthcare system should not be allowed to be overwhelmed by a second or subsequent wave of the pandemic.
- Necessity. In accordance with the terms of the Regulations, a specific restriction or requirement should be retained only as long as it is considered necessary to prevent, protect against, control, or provide a public health response to the incidence or spread of Coronavirus.
- Proportionality. The detrimental impacts on health, society and the economy that can reasonably be attributed to the restriction or requirement should be tolerated only as long as the risks associated with withdrawal or modification are assessed to be more severe.
- Reliance on evidence. Proposals for change or for the retention of a restriction or requirement should be informed by the best available evidence and analysis.

8.2.2. These principles were maintained throughout the course of the pandemic.

### 8.3. Pathway Out of Restrictions

8.3.1. On 2 March 2021, the Executive published its Pathway out of Restrictions <sup>17</sup>document. The Pathway set out a four-week review process and key indicators including economic, social and health data which would inform the stage at which relaxations to restrictions could be delivered. Ahead of each four-week review by the Executive, the Cross Departmental Working Group agreed departmental proposals for possible relaxations and potential knock-on consequences which would require consideration.

8.3.2. The regular discussions and reviews undertaken ensured that any restrictions put in place were only retained as long as was necessary and where possible, alternative arrangements and appropriate mitigations were considered and deployed in order to allow sectors to open as soon as conditions allowed. Guidance for the public was developed alongside the decisions to relax the measures in place to control the spread of COVID-19.

8.3.3. As part of this, the Executive Covid Taskforce commissioned TEO, in conjunction with other departments, the PSNI, Local Government and the Irish Football Association to take forward a Logistical and Operational Learning Event at Mourneview Football Park in Lurgan on 21 May 2021. This was an outdoor sporting event involving 1,000

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<sup>17</sup> executives-pathway-out-of-restrictions.pdf (executiveoffice-ni.gov.uk)

spectators to enable logistical and operational learning to inform the future safe return of spectators to large scale venues. The report produced from the event provided a number of recommendations on the safer running of large outdoor events (see Exhibit 17).

### **8.4. Autumn Winter Plan publication**

- 8.4.1. The Executive agreed the Autumn Winter COVID-19 Contingency Plan<sup>18</sup> on 7 October 2021 (Exhibit 18) setting out the options the Executive had at its disposal in the event of rising cases numbers or unsustainable pressures on hospitals. Extensive engagement took place with the arts, entertainment and hospitality sectors.
- 8.4.2. The Autumn Winter Contingency Plan refers to the use of Covid status certification and the potential to move from voluntary use to mandated deployment if required to provide a targeted and proportionate means to reduce risk while maximizing the ability to keep open certain settings and events where the risk of transmission of coronavirus was considered to be higher. On 17 November 2021, the Executive considered and agreed the use of mandatory Covid status certification in certain settings (Exhibit 19). As part of extensive engagement with the impacted sectors, TEO and DfC officials attended a Gaelic Football Association match in Armagh and an Ulster Rugby match in Belfast to observe the use of Covid status certification in practice.

### **8.5. Recovery Plan**

- 8.5.1. The 'Building Forward: Consolidated COVID-19 Recovery Plan' was agreed by the Executive on 29 July 2021 and subsequently published on 2 August 2021. The Executive Office worked with all departments to develop an integrated COVID-19 Recovery Plan which contains 83 high level interventions to be progressed over 24 months to inform priorities to deliver societal, economic and health recovery under four strategic Recovery Accelerators: sustainable economic development; green growth and sustainability; tackling inequalities; and health of the population.
- 8.5.2. The Recovery Plan was designed in the context of the draft PfG Outcomes Framework and it is anticipated that the work streams contained within the Recovery Plan may help to inform the basis of some key strategic areas in any new PfG.
- 8.5.3. In September 2021, the COVID-19 Recovery Taskforce was established to support the implementation of the Recovery Plan through collaborative effort at strategic level. Its focus is to help shape priorities and themes and to retain an ongoing focus on delivering outcomes for the people who live here. Since its inception, the Taskforce

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<sup>18</sup> Layout 1 (executiveoffice-ni.gov.uk)



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has met on five occasions and provided progress reports to the Executive's COVID-19 Taskforce and the TEO Committee. Owing to political circumstances it was not possible to report to the Executive before the end of the mandate.

- 8.5.4. At the end of March 2022, 80 interventions in the Recovery Plan have reported progress or activity.

### **9. Engagement**

#### **9.1. Sectoral**

- 9.1.1. Throughout the pandemic there has been extensive engagement by the COVID-19 Taskforce with a number of sectors, including hospitality, retail, business, events and faith groups. For example, the Taskforce held eight engagement sessions with a range of sectors, including hospitality and arts, in the week before mandatory COVID-19 Status Certification was introduced. These sessions were followed up with further sectoral engagement on 2 December 2021, when feedback on practical implementation was received. In addition, on 9 December, junior Ministers met with the sectors to discuss wider COVID-19 related issues and the emergence of Omicron, as well as thanking them for their support and engagement to date. Six further engagement sessions were held with the hospitality sector between 10 and 23 December 2021 to discuss emerging operational issues, enforcement and funding.

#### **9.2. With Citizens**

- 9.2.1. During the pandemic there was ongoing engagement with citizens via case work assigned to the COVID-19 Strategy and Recovery Division. Internal tracking indicates that the Division dealt with over 220 items of correspondence received directly from members of the public during 2021/22 period.

### **10. Intergovernmental Relations**

#### **10.1. UK Government and Devolved Administrations Engagement**

- 10.1.1. Weekly engagement with the UK Government's COVID-19 Taskforce and the Scottish and Welsh governments continued to support the Executive's COVID-19 response, building best practice and ensuring alignment, where practicable, across the four nations on key areas such as the Pathway out of Restrictions in early 2021 and Autumn Winter planning.
- 10.1.2. At Ministerial level, the COVID-19 Strategy and Recovery Division supported the First Minister and deputy First Minister in their regular engagements with the UK Government's Michael Gove MP, firstly as the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and subsequently as Minister for Levelling UP and Communities.

### 10.2. Ministerial Implementation Groups

10.2.1. Ministerial Implementation Groups (MIGs)<sup>19</sup> were established by the UK Government to oversee the planning for the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic across the UK. These were as follows

- (i) Healthcare: chaired by the Health Secretary to focus on the preparedness of the NHS, notably ensuring capacity in the critical care system for those worst affected, the medical and social package of support for those to whom we will be providing the new shielding regime
- (ii) General Public Sector: chaired by the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster to look at preparedness across the rest of the public and critical national infrastructure, excluding the NHS
- (iii) Economic and Business: chaired by the Chancellor, with the Business Secretary as deputy chair, to consider economic and business impact and response, including supply chain resilience. It will also coordinate roundtables with key sectors to be chaired by relevant Secretaries of State
- (iv) International: chaired by the Foreign Secretary, to consider our international response to the crisis through the G7, G20 and other mechanisms, including like-minded groups, and the UK five-point plan

10.2.2. Devolved administrations were invited as required. NI Executive Ministers, accompanied by officials, attended meetings relevant to their portfolio/department.

### 10.3. British Irish Council

10.3.1. The Executive Office Ministerial and official involvement in the British Irish Council (BIC) during the pandemic was through regular, bi-annual participation at summit level. These meetings, both formal and informal, afforded Heads of Administration the opportunity to learn from and share experiences with senior Ministers across the BIC membership. Discussions aimed to identify examples of best practice based on the experiences of other administrations that might be implemented in other member regions.

10.3.2. The table below details all Summit meetings that took place during the pandemic period and indicates: which administration chaired/hosted the meeting; the format (virtual/hybrid) under which the meeting took place; and, the communiqués for each meeting which report the focus of the discussion on the day together with a list of Ministerial participants.

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<sup>19</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/new-government-structures-to-coordinate-response-to-coronavirus>

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DATE	HOST	VIRTUAL/IN- PERSON/HYBR ID	COMMUNIQUÉ (inc. list of Ministers present)
June 2020	Scotland	POSTPONED Moved to November 2020	
Nov 2020	Wales	POSTPONED in Wales Moved to November 2021	
Nov 2020	Scotland	Virtual	<a href="https://www.britishirishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/communiqu%C3%A9s/Thirty%20Fourth%20Summit%20-%20Scotland%20-%2006%2011%2020.pdf">https://www.britishirishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/communiqu%C3%A9s/Thirty%20Fourth%20Summit%20-%20Scotland%20-%2006%2011%2020.pdf</a>
June 2021	Northern Ireland	Hybrid	<a href="https://www.britishirishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/communiqu%C3%A9s/Thirty%20Fifth%20Summit%20-%20Northern%20Ireland%20-%2011%2006%2021_0.pdf">https://www.britishirishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/communiqu%C3%A9s/Thirty%20Fifth%20Summit%20-%20Northern%20Ireland%20-%2011%2006%2021_0.pdf</a>
Nov 2021	Wales	Hybrid	<a href="https://www.britishirishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/communiqu%C3%A9s/Thirty%20Sixth%20Summit%20-%20Wales%20-%2019%2011%2021_1.pdf">https://www.britishirishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/communiqu%C3%A9s/Thirty%20Sixth%20Summit%20-%20Wales%20-%2019%2011%2021_1.pdf</a>
June 2022	Guernsey	Hybrid	<a href="https://www.britishirishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/communiqu%C3%A9s/FINAL%20BIC%20Summit%20Communique_0.pdf">https://www.britishirishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/communiqu%C3%A9s/FINAL%20BIC%20Summit%20Communique_0.pdf</a>

10.3.3. In addition, there were three Ministerial meetings held in sectoral format on Transport, Indigenous, Minority and Lesser Used Languages and Energy.

### 10.4. North South Ministerial Council

10.4.1. Established on 2 December 1999 under the terms of the 1998 Agreement, the North South Ministerial Council brings together Ministers from the Northern Ireland Executive and the Irish Government to develop consultation, co-operation and action on matters of mutual interest. The North South Ministerial Council is supported by a Joint Secretariat.

10.4.2. There were 22 NSMC Meetings between January 2020 and November 2021 at which Covid-19 was discussed. Three of these were Plenary Meetings, attended by the majority of Ministers from both the Executive, including First and deputy First Ministers and junior Ministers and the Irish Government on each occasion.

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DATE	LOCATION	VIRTUAL/IN- PERSON/HYBR ID	COMMUNIQUÉ (inc. list of Ministers present)
31 July 2020	Dublin	In -person	Twenty Fourth Plenary Joint Communiqué - Dublin 31 July 2020_1.pdf (northsouthministerialcouncil.org)
18 Dec 2020	Armagh	Hybrid	Twenty Fifth Plenary Meeting - Armagh 18 December 2020.pdf (northsouthministerialcouncil.org)
30 July 2021	Armagh	Hybrid	Twenty Sixth Plenary Meeting – Armagh 30 July 2021_0.pdf (northsouthministerialcouncil.org)

10.4.3. 18 of the 22 were Sectoral Meetings, attended by the appropriate Ministers from each jurisdiction (and the Executive Accompanying Minister) at which Covid-19 was among the topics discussed. The final meeting was an Institutional Meeting chaired by the First and deputy First Ministers with the Irish Government represented by the Minister for Foreign Affairs at which Covid-19 and other cross-cutting matters were discussed.

### 10.5. Engagement with the Irish Government

10.5.1. Ad-hoc engagement took place with the Irish Government at ministerial level outside the formal NSMC structures. For example, meetings with RoI involving the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland took place as well as bi-lateral engagement directly with the Taoiseach and/or the Department of Foreign Affairs.

10.5.2. A meeting between the Executive and the Irish Government to discuss the emerging COVID-19 crisis was hosted in the NSMC Joint Secretariat premises on Saturday 14 March 2020. Executive Ministers in attendance included First and deputy First Ministers, the Health Minister and junior Minister Kearney. The Irish Government was represented by the Taoiseach, Tánaiste and Health Minister. Both CMOs presented and proceedings ended with a well-attended press conference involving the principals. The meeting was arranged by the Irish Government and fell outside of NSMC structures.

## 11. Chronology of Significant Meetings

11.1. A chronology of the significant meetings which took place as between the First Minister and the deputy First Minister and senior civil servants with their UK Government counterparts is provided below.

### **11.2. Ministerial meetings**

Please note that this information will be provided by 4 November 2022.

### **11.3. Senior Official meetings**

Please note that this information will be provided by 4 November 2022.

## **12. Communications**

### **12.1. Executive Information Service (EIS)**

12.1.1. Executive Information Service (EIS) in TEO coordinated COVID-19 related communications on behalf of the Executive. This included:

- Media and communications campaigns
- Press conferences and press releases
- Public information on NI Direct
- Occasional speeches as required for the Assembly and other events
- Input into Written Ministerial Statements to the Assembly following Executive decisions
- Responses to specific press and citizens' queries including through correspondence cases

12.1.2. Strategies were also developed, coordinated and presented to the Executive for agreement at various points. Key Executive publications included:

- Coronavirus: Executive Approach to Decision-making (published 12 May 2020)
- Moving Forward: The Executive's Pathway Out of Restrictions (published 2 March 2021)
- Building Forward: Consolidated Covid-19 recovery Plan (published 2 August 2021).
- NI Executive Autumn / Winter Covid-10 Contingency Plan (published 19 October 2021).

12.1.3. Throughout 2021, EIS was responsible for the delivery of the COVID-19 public information campaign. Using a wide range of communication channels, the campaign raised awareness about COVID-19, and encouraged compliance with the latest public health advice and uptake of the COVID-19 vaccination.

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12.1.4. Independent evaluation demonstrated that 78% of individuals questioned agreed that the public information campaign “would persuade me to take steps to protect myself and others from coronavirus infection”.

### **12.2. Informal Communications**

12.2.1. Informal communications were not used by officials in relation to significant decision-making but rather to keep each other informed.

12.2.2. Officials cannot comment on use of informal communications by Ministers.

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