

## **MEETING WITH SIMON COVENEY**

**21/22 December 2020**

### **STEER**

The Irish Government have requested a bilateral meeting between you and Simon Coveney ahead of the Implementation Review meeting and the beginning of the relaxation of Covid restrictions over the Christmas period. We recommend that you should discuss the following topics during the meeting:

**Irrelevant & Sensitive**

3. COVID: This may be the last opportunity this year to encourage alignment over the Christmas period, discuss the new measures in NI/IE/GB in the new year and to assess Ireland's position on the new strain of Covid-19 in England. If not raised in the NDNA implementation meeting, you may also wish to discuss the current strain on the Northern Ireland Health system, and the Irish Government's plans to provide support in this regard.

**Irrelevant & Sensitive**

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**COVID-19**

*[If Raised] New coronavirus strain in England*

- I have noted this concerning new development and the Health Secretary will provide more information as soon as possible, although it is comforting that initial indications are that the new strain will not affect vaccine rollout, disease severity or antibody response - which is important to some therapeutics.
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*Rising case numbers and new restrictions in NI*

- I am pleased to see that the Executive has come to a decision on restrictions in January in good time, what is your assessment of the decision?

Background: Rates across NI have increased this week, with the average 14-day rate per 100,000 now at 356.4, compared to 94.2 in the Republic of Ireland. The Executive on Thursday announced a six-week lockdown, to begin on 26 December.

*Potential future restrictions (NI/IE/GB)*

- I am aware that the new year will present new challenges in terms of travel and compliance after Christmas and as the vaccine is rolled out. I am keen that we continue to work closely together, to ensure a joint approach to do what is best for the people of Northern Ireland.

*Alignment of comms - Christmas and January*

- As we move into January, I anticipate that there may be new restrictions across NI/GB/UK, and it will be helpful to coordinate messaging on the island of Ireland and discuss new restrictions. This would be a useful agenda item for the first quad meeting of the new year.

*Healthcare: strain on hospitals, Mass testing and Vaccines roll-out*

- I note with concern the recent pressure on the healthcare system in Northern Ireland and am pleased to see the recent support provided by the Irish Government

- As ever, I am in close contact with the First and deputy First Ministers and have made clear that UKG stands ready to support the Executive whenever possible, and we continue to provide vaccines and mass testing devices to Northern Ireland.

Background: Last weekend, as part of continuing cooperation between NI and IE, IE provided a small number of ambulances to NI to support in a period of exceptional demand. There were some Irish media reports that this reflected a poor handling of the crisis but the Irish Government has kept a supportive tone while offering support.

*EU third country travel ban*

Background: This issue has now been resolved and DFA have confirmed that Ireland will continue to treat travel from GB according to the traffic light system. There will therefore not be a ban on travel (other than for essential reasons) such as Schengen Zone countries may impose on 1 January.

**Irrelevant & Sensitive**

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