

Call with CDL, SoS TOs and Chloe Smith

22 April 2020, 16.00-45

BACKGROUND

CDL organised this meeting with SoS TOs following Mark Drakeford's request for more regular engagement on Covid-19 between the Devolved Administrations (DAs) and UKG. Drakeford suggested three weekly meetings with UKG: one at official level, followed by a DAs FMs/CDL meeting, and a weekly COBR involving the DAs.

OBJECTIVES

This meeting is an opportunity for CDL to test with SoS TOs how to more effectively engage with the DAs, both at official and Ministerial level and in particular on the frequency of engagement, as well as to receive an update on key Union issues in relation to Covid-19.

STEER

There is continued engagement with the NI Executive, both at official and Ministerial level; Ministers from NIE are invited to COBR meetings and to take part in the Covid Ministerial and Official level committee meetings as appropriate; and NIE Ministers have not asked for more engagement with UKG. You may therefore wish to use this meeting as an opportunity to:

- Flag any key NI Covid-19 issues that require closer cooperation with the DAs as part of the four nations approach;
- Reiterate the importance of coordinating the UK or GB approach wherever possible with Ireland to avoid tensions within the NI Executive and within NI society; and
- Make the point that NIE / NI departments are not routinely being looped into commissions, even when the commission makes clear that DA interests should be reflected.

LINES TO TAKE

Health

- There is a need for very close engagement in relation to PPE supplies. An emerging risk is that all HSC Trusts have indicated that the modelling assumptions indicate too low a level of PPE requirement particularly in addressing community provision. Work is continuing to refine further modelling assumptions.
- NI is joining the four nations approach to PPE and the delivery of 5.5m pieces of PPE the other week was appreciated widely in NI. The Executive are also looking into sourcing from local manufacturers, and China.
- Testing:
 - In the coming week, sentinel surveillance will be introduced in GP surgeries by sampling individuals who present with respiratory symptoms.
 - It is crucially important that all individuals are tested in care homes to effectively manage outbreaks. As of 12 April, we have been ensuring that individuals leaving health care Trusts / hospital settings are tested - all patients will be tested 48 hours from discharge.
 - Surveillance will begin in our emergency departments in the week commencing 28 April.
- In the area of care and residential homes, the health system has put in place significant support. The Regulations Quality and Improvement Authority (RQIA) has set up a support scheme and NI Public Health Agency (PHA) have a specialist team to provide advice when there is an outbreak in homes. Infection prevention teams across trusts will be bolstered this week even further with additional nurses to provide support.

- On staffing pressures - trusts are providing staff resources and we will continue to bolster this in the coming weeks as the need arises by directing some health care new recruits (recruited from health care talent appeal) directly into the care home sector.

Economy

- NI had been facing interruption to critical supply routes for food, medicines and other essential goods but, thanks to the Secretary of State for Transport and the Chancellor, I am pleased that that issue has now been resolved.
- We have been working closely with DfT and the NIE to put in place support for ferries and the aviation sector to ensure continued GB-NI connectivity during the Covid-19 outbreak.
- Subject to final negotiations with the operators, a temporary support package will see continued flights between London and Belfast City/City of Derry Airports - costs for this will be split 50:50 between the Executive and DfT.
- Over the weekend, the Treasury, DfT and the Executive agreed to meet 40% of costs for a package supporting the five key ferry routes between NI and GB. This will secure the supply of food, medicines and other essentials over the coming weeks.
- These support measures are expected to be announced this week.
- Meanwhile DfT and NIE departments are exploring the possibility of support for hauliers.
- We will continue to monitor connectivity between GB and NI and work closely with the Executive to identify problems before they arise.

Preparedness

- There is a need for very close engagement on approach to social distancing on a four nations basis, ahead of the UKG review point on 9 May. It is important to appreciate that the NI Executive may want to take a different approach taking into account their own experiences and evidence, and given NI connectedness to Ireland. The Taoiseach has said restrictions in Ireland may change from 5 May. This is earlier than the UKG review point which could trigger tensions within NIE.
- It is therefore important that we maintain close lines of communication with both the Devolved Administrations and the Irish Government in the coming days and weeks.
- On track and trace, it will be useful to be kept close to discussions and meetings which DHSC and the NHSX (unit which sets NHS policy on technology, digital and data) will be having with the Irish Government in regard to the development of an Irish App to avoid a situation where people of Northern Ireland are caught between two systems. There is a risk that this adds to political tensions within NIE if not handled carefully.

International

- It is important that we at a political level are communicating regularly with the Irish Government to ensure that our approach to social distancing and any easing of restrictions is closely aligned, to mitigate any possible issues arising within Northern Ireland politics and disagreement over which approach to follow. NIO officials are regularly in contact with their counterparts in the Irish Government to ensure join up at official level.
- There is a need to consider the update that the Irish Government may be changing on how they handle foreign arrivals to Ireland. They may look to move from asking new entrants to restrict movements for 14 days, to asking new entrants to go into isolation for 14 days. This could have implications for how people coming into NI, and then travelling to Ireland are dealt with.