

## **INTRODUCTORY MEETING WITH SINN FÉIN MPS - 9/6/20**

### **STEER/ GENERAL RELATIONSHIP**

An introductory meeting with Sinn Féin MPs represents a useful opportunity to build relationships and reiterate some recent positive messages such as on changes to the immigration rules. Previous Secretaries of State have conducted similar meetings with this group - the discussion is often sprawling - covering a wide range of subjects. There is no formal agenda. The MPs will likely raise issues they want to say they have raised with you and will no doubt include the Protocol, legacy including Victim's pension and NDNA implementation particularly language legislation.

Francie Molloy, and Mickey Brady may press you on a border poll - in particular, asking you to set out the criteria you would use to judge when the threshold for a border poll has been met. They argue we are under an obligation to do so. We do not agree - indeed, 3 years ago the Court of Appeal agreed that we are not under a legal obligation to set out criteria. UKG argued that doing so was against the public interest as it would bind the hands of a Secretary of State who needs to be able to take a wide range of contemporary factors into consideration.

You should also be aware that as officials advised Private Office last week, Sinn Féin have told the Electoral Commission that they intend to raise the court case concerning the Boundary Commission's Final Recommendations published in 2018 with you at this meeting. Lines are included below but you should simply say that it would be inappropriate to comment as this is a matter for the courts and the Boundary Commission.

### **SPEAKING POINTS**

#### **General**

- Great to meet you today as a group - keen to work with you as Secretary of State for Northern Ireland in Westminster and to have an open and informal discussion today about how you can best work with me and my team, and for you to let me know what issues you are focused on.

#### **Covid-19 update**

- The NIO and the UK Government have worked, and will continue to work side by side with the NI Health Minister and wider Executive Ministers to support the response to Covid 19 in Northern Ireland.
- As part of the Government's UK-wide drive to increase testing, we have rolled out test facilities across the UK including four in Northern Ireland.
- The UK government and devolved administrations are committed to ensuring that those on the front line in responding to COVID-19 are provided with the critical PPE they need.
- As part of the four nations approach, the UK Government has allocated over 5.5m items of PPE to Northern Ireland who have in turn provided 250,000 gowns to England. We have signed deals with more than 100 new suppliers from around the world as well as ramping up domestic production to meet the demand for PPE across the UK.

- The UK Government and Irish Government are of course communicating at all levels to ensure a joined-up approach to the coronavirus outbreak.
- This includes regular discussions with the First Ministers, Health Ministers and the Tanaiste about how we can best work together as we tackle this crisis. The next Quad meeting is taking place today.
- Keen to hear from you about how your communities are feeling at present - and whether there is more UKG can do to support the Executive's response to Covid-19.

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## COVID-19

### *Support*

- The UK Government is supporting Northern Ireland through a combination of UK-wide support and additional Barnett consequential to be spent by the Executive.
- We have provided over £1.2 billion to the NI Executive to support people and businesses through the Covid-19 crisis.

### *Identity verification for SEISS*

- The UK Government is committed to the Good Friday Agreement and as such ensuring support is equally available to members of all communities in Northern Ireland.
- We are aware that some individuals have been unable to complete their Self-Employment Income Support Scheme application online using their Irish passport. The reason for this is that HMRC does not have access to Irish passport data in order to verify this form of identification.
- A similar issue has been identified with driving licences as the DVLA do not hold licence data for Northern Ireland where the Driver & Vehicle Agency (DVA) is separate. HMRC are

working with the DVA to agree the necessary data sharing agreements as part of ongoing improvements to the Government Gateway.

- HMRC are aware of this issue and I want to reassure everyone in Northern Ireland that they will not be excluded from the scheme. Anyone can check their eligibility for the scheme using the eligibility checker, and if they meet the criteria, can apply.
- If you have engaged with HMRC online before, to file your return for example, you should be able to use your existing Government Gateway credentials to claim online. Anyone using the HMRC online system for the first time can use the multiple choice questions option to attempt to verify their identity. If eligible individuals are unable to verify their identity, they are still able to claim their grant using HMRC's telephone helplines.
- We will continue to do all we can to ensure individuals are able to access the support we have put in place.

#### *Test and Trace*

- Welcome the publication of NI's Covid-19 Test, Trace, Isolate, Support Strategy - another important step in further supporting the huge amount of progress made to date in minimising COVID-19 transmission in the community in Northern Ireland.
- Contact tracing will play a key role in further containing and preventing the spread of the virus - therefore vital that we continue to work closely to ensure that the most effective measures are put in place in Northern Ireland, whilst also harnessing opportunities to adopt common elements where it makes sense to do so.
- Therefore also keen we continue to coordinate where we can with the NIE to ensure our approaches to testing and tracing are compatible, while meeting the needs of the individual nations.
- NI's Contact Tracing Service - would welcome your thoughts on how this has worked to date, and where there may be helpful lessons learned for the other nations.

#### *Social distancing Restrictions*

- Recently the Prime Minister chaired a call with DA First Ministers to discuss the timetable for easing restrictions.
- I note that the Chief Scientific Officer for NI has confirmed that there are still concerns over the transmission of Covid-19 on surfaces, and this is preventing Step 1's completion, where family members can visit each other indoors.
- I welcome the Northern Ireland Executive's recent announcement that larger gatherings and small weddings will be allowed from 8 June, with confirmation on 4 June. A range of other measures will also be allowed from 8 June, depending on the transmission rate.

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