

## **General Public Services Ministerial Implementation Group**

### **Zoom Video Call**

**12.30-13:30, 9 April 2020**

## **STEER**

- The two key items are policing and social distancing and delivery of benefits.
- On social distancing, the likely concern here will be the response required over the Easter Weekend where attention will be on ensuring that the public respects the social distancing guidelines. Ireland has similar concerns, exploring today whether additional measures are required to reinforce the message to stay at home. The Northern Ireland Executive discussed social distancing measures yesterday (8 April) and agreed the need for the measures to continue. In general, there has been a good level of compliance to the measures to date, across Northern Ireland.
- On benefits, the Department for Communities might push for support to supply technology (laptops) which would enable their staff to work from home (the kit comes from DWP). The provision of this kit in Northern Ireland is lower than in GB, so a significantly smaller proportion of operational staff are able to work remotely.

## **AGENDA ITEMS**

### **1230 General Public Services MIG**

***Chair: CDL***

- 1. Covid-19 Dashboard**  
*Civil Contingencies Secretariat*
- 2. Oral Updates**
  - a. Public Order (Home Office)
- 3. Policing and Social Distancing**  
*Home Office*
- 4. Delivery of Benefits**  
*Department for Work and Pensions*
- 5. Prioritisation of Local Authority Duties**  
*Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government*

### **Item 3. Policing and Social Distancing**

#### **Lines to take**

- There has been a good level of compliance in Northern Ireland to date.
- UKG and the Northern Ireland Executive need to continue working together to ensure clear, consistent guidance, keeping an eye on approach in Ireland.

#### **Background**

1. Papers for today's meeting include the incidence of need for enforcement notices, the limitations of measures in place, the challenges of public frustration and a look ahead to policing implications when measures are relaxed.
2. An Executive paper on legislation and social distancing is being prepared and is likely to be submitted to Ministers early next week but it is intended that a firm message can be deployed at today's (9 April) daily press conference.
3. PSNI has powers to stop and fine people who are flouting social distancing rules. The Northern Ireland Executive has warned that the police will be out on the roads over the Easter weekend and will stop people if they believe they are travelling outside the social distancing rules. People have been asked to exercise only within the vicinity of their area, and not to travel to beauty spots and other tourist attractions.
4. PSNI has highlighted that there has been a small rise in traffic, and though not huge, this is concerning as we approach Easter. It is likely that there will be a shift in PSNI focus with an increase in the enforcement strand. The Garda are adopting a similar approach. The NIE has also indicated that the lockdown would be in place "for the foreseeable future", as lifting it too early could spark a further rise in cases of the virus.
5. Guidance on social distancing in Northern Ireland is largely similar to the rest of the UK. Everyone should do what they can to stop coronavirus spreading. That is: to stay at home, only go outside for food, health reasons, work (but only if you cannot work from home) or one form of exercise a day, for example a run, walk, or cycle - alone or with members of your household. The public is asked to stay 2 metres (6ft) away from other people at all times and to avoid non-essential use of public transport, meeting with friends and family. Guidance is also similar to that in Ireland but the public is asked not to go beyond 2km of their home for any form of exercise.

6. The Irish authorities have put in place legislation to allow for fines of up to 2,500 euro if people are outside their home without 'reasonable excuse' and flout a one chance to comply with Gardaí instructions. The announcement yesterday followed a policing operation launched 8 April to crackdown on travellers ahead of the Easter weekend, which saw Garda at the border to stop northern motorists from travelling to holiday homes for Easter.

#### **Item 4: Delivery of Benefits**

##### **Lines to take**

- What can be done to make sure the Department for Communities has access to the kit it needs to enable staff to work remotely?

##### **Background**

1. The Department for Communities has redeployed staff and implemented new contingency arrangements to deliver the increased volumes of work needed for Universal Credit payments.
2. To administer and to pay social security benefits in Northern Ireland, the DfC is absolutely dependent on specialised IT infrastructure, telephony and kit provided by the Department for Work and Pensions.
3. For telephony the main difficulty across all the DfC service lines is the number of staff available in the telephony centres to deal with the volume of calls. The key technology constraint here is that the DWP's contact centre platform has (in the main) been designed to route telephony traffic into specific office locations and not to staff who are working remotely. The DWP is testing a solution to enable calls to be routed to staff working remotely on specialised laptops, but this is at the early stages of development and not yet scalable across all benefit areas.
4. In terms of kit deployment, the DfC has sought to strengthen its contingency response by seeking additional specialised laptops (Surface Pros) from the DWP to enable more operational staff to process and pay benefit claims remotely. To date, the DfC has been unable to secure the additional kit that is critically required. There is limited supply of this kit in the DWP too, but they currently have capacity to enable c20% of their workforce to work remotely whereas for Northern Ireland there is currently only capacity for c.5% of operational staff to work remotely. This has created considerable risk for DfC and significantly

impacts on the Departments ability to fully meet its statutory obligations at this critical time.

## **Item 5: Prioritisation of Local Authority Duties**

### **Background**

1. Local government in Northern Ireland is responsible for some functions which need to continue during the Covid-19 outbreak. These include waste collection and disposal; the registration of births, deaths and marriages; and the management of cemeteries.
2. Overall, councils in Northern Ireland have responsibility for a narrower range of services than those in England. Some functions which fall to Local Authorities in England are the responsibility of the Executive in Northern Ireland. It is not clear to what extent the duties retained by the Executive are being actively considered in this exercise, although they give rise to similar pressures on the Executive as those being experienced by Local Authorities.
3. It will be important to identify where legislation can be UK-wide, and where separate legislation would be needed in Northern Ireland to make the same changes. There are already some measures in place. For example, under the Coronavirus Act 2020, the Minister of Justice has powers of direction to councils around the death management process.