



Northern  
Ireland  
Office

**To:** Secretary of State  
**Date:** 11.03.2020  
**Deadline:** Phone call to be arranged by Private Office

**Secretary of State phone call with Tánaiste regarding Covid-19**

**ISSUE:** You have requested a phone call with the Tánaiste regarding Covid-19, specifically to discuss the need for consistent public health messaging from both Governments to citizens on the island of Ireland, especially for those living in the border regions.

**RECOMMENDATION:** That you note the background information and speaking notes at Annex A for a phone call with the Tánaiste.

**MINISTER OF STATE COMMENTS:**

**SPECIAL ADVISER COMMENTS:**

**NEXT STEPS:** Private office will arrange a phone call with the Tánaiste for Thursday 12th or Friday 13th March.

**From:** NR

**Sent to SpAds:**

**Clearing SCS:** Holly Clark

**Additional materials:**

**Clearing lawyer:**

## **Background**

1. Following the COBR meeting on Monday 9 March, you have requested a telephone call with the Tánaiste to discuss the need for consistent public health messaging from both Governments to citizens on the island of Ireland, especially for those living in the border regions. The phonecall should also be used to emphasize the requirement to enhance the already strong connections between both Governments at official and ministerial level, to allow for rapid information flow as the situation evolves.

## **Current Situation**

2. A current situation update can be provided to Private Office prior to the call. *[NOTE- Private office to inform Covid policy team of date and time of phone call to request current figures]*. As of 1200 on 11 March, UK Govt data shows that 456 cases have been confirmed in the UK, (387 from England, 18 from Northern Ireland, 27 from Scotland and 15 from Wales), resulting in six confirmed deaths. The Republic of Ireland has 34 cases (with 1 death confirmed at 1630). A COBR meeting is scheduled for Thursday 12 March to consider the public health interventions that may need to take place for moving from 'Contain' to 'Delay'.

## **Role for Secretary of State in NI Health matters**

3. Within the NI Act 1998, Health and Social Services are transferred (devolved) to the NI Assembly. Therefore you do not have a direct role in any health matters.
4. In practice, you and the Tánaiste will want to stay in close contact regarding the UK and Irish Government response to covid-19, and how that is being rolled out in the island of Ireland. You will also want to ensure consistency, particularly around public communications for citizens, especially those in the border regions. Responsibility on the ground in NI is with the Health Minister, Robin Swann, supported by the Chief Medical Officer, and they are working closely with counterparts in London and Dublin.

## **North/South - East/West relations**

5. In liaison with the British Embassy in Dublin, we are aware that the Irish Embassy in London is sending reports on how the UK system is responding to coronavirus. DFAT has noted that the Tánaiste is thinking about the situation on the island of Ireland as a priority, which leads him to focus North/South.
6. The Irish Govt is aware that there is a cross-UK national response to coronavirus, in addition to devolved activity. For NI, there are Common Travel Area considerations, and therefore it is sensible to ensure that there are no gaps in provision/information, particularly in circumstances where the Irish and UK Govt's approach or communications to citizens diverge.
7. We have established that the Chief Medical Officers on the island are in direct contact, as are the Permanent Secretary and the Secretary-General in the Department of Health. Matt Hancock and Simon Harris TD (Minister for Health) spoke on Tuesday evening and are due to meet in person soon. Mark Sedwill is

also liaising with Martin Fraser (Secretary-General of the Department of the Taoiseach).

8. You should note that the Irish Times also reports that the Prime Minister's spokesperson has said that health authorities and Ministers in Britain and Ireland are keeping each other informed about the measures they are taking to deal with the virus.
9. As with Brexit, the uniqueness of the UK's only land border within NI requires sensitive handling to ensure all citizens on the island receive consistent messaging, which can be easily understood and acted upon by citizens to keep them safe/protected.
10. It is important that you note your respect for the devolved administration, and reiterate that your message is one of support and outreach. This is why the First Minister and deputy First Minister, as well as relevant NI Ministers, have been included in COBR meetings, to ensure the NI response is coordinated and linked.

#### **Recommendation**

11. That you note the background information and speaking notes at Annex A for a phone call with the Tánaiste.

**COPY LIST:** PUS, Lindy Cameron, Colin Perry, Mark Byers, Holly Clark, NR,  
NR, NR, SpAds, Clare Sloan, Paul Flynn

#### **Annex A**

## **Speaking Notes for the phone call with Simon Coveney**

### **Steer**

- The main purpose is to discuss the need for consistent public health messaging from both Governments to citizens on the island of Ireland, especially for those living in the border regions.
- You should reiterate the importance of enhancing the current, well-established UK and Irish Government connections, both at official and Ministerial level, in preparation for any potential increase in Covid-19 cases. These relationships are currently working well.
- The aim will be consistent public health messaging for Governments, where possible, for citizens on the island, especially those in border regions.
- You may wish to acknowledge the sad news of the first coronavirus related death (Wednesday 11 March) in the Republic of Ireland.

### **Lines to take**

- I welcome the opportunity to chat through some of my concerns in relation to the coronavirus on the island of Ireland.
- I will continue to ensure that Northern Ireland, and it's unique position in the UK, is being fully considered from any impacts.
- This is why the FM and dFM, as well as relevant NI Ministers, have attended COBR meetings to ensure the NI response is coordinated and connected, and information quickly disseminated.
- Due to the NI land border, special consideration must be taken by both Governments for public messaging on the island. Do you have any views on this?
- I will be asking my officials to reach out to both Irish Govt and NICS officials to offer any support and contact linking that is required.
- It is important for officials in both jurisdictions to ensure consistent public health messaging; To ensure citizens not only receive the correct guidance/instructions, but that it is understood and acted upon by citizens to keep them safe/protected.

*If the Coronavirus Emergency Bill is raised, may wish to mention:*

- The Coronavirus Emergency Bill is a temporary bill to be in force only so long as needed in an emergency situation to manage the effects of a Covid-19 Virus pandemic.
- Details of the Coronavirus Emergency Bill are still being worked through and I can offer a more detailed conversation once the legislation is finalised.
- The relevant NI Executive Departments have been linked into the process.