

FIRST MINISTER & DEPUTY FIRST MINISTER CALL

7 October 2020

STEER

FM/dFM minds will continue to be focused on the ongoing Covid response. This is a useful opportunity, however, to remind them of:

Irrelevant & Sensitive

Irrelevant & Sensitive

Covid-19

High case numbers and restrictions to combat Covid-19

- I note and support the continuing strong messaging from the Executive encouraging people to follow government guidelines.
- I am following with concern the continuing rise in cases in Northern Ireland. What's your understanding of why the numbers are much higher than other parts of the UK?
- Are you considering further steps to reduce transmission?
- Following the statement from NI's CMO and IE's Acting CMO on travel between Donegal and NI, I am keen to facilitate working across NI and IE relating to border outbreaks. I'd be interested to hear if there are any developments in this space.

Testing

- There have been issues with testing capacity across the UK and I'd appreciate an update on testing in Northern Ireland.
- Is there anything I can do to support you?

Wet Pubs Opening and Hospitality

- I understand that pubs, hotel bars and restaurants must shut at 23:00 in Northern Ireland under new rules for the hospitality sector which were announced recently. How has this announcement landed with the sector?

Background:

High Rates

[As of 6 October]

- The Covid-19 rate in Northern Ireland now stands at 212.8 cases per 100,000 over the past 7 days.
- This is in comparison to the UK which stands at 114.9 and Ireland at 64.7. Cases have continued to rise and the Executive announced that Covid-19 restrictions will be extended to all of Northern Ireland from 22 September to include no mixing of households (with some exceptions), and no more than 6 people from 2 households meeting in a garden. Due to the high number of cases, additional restrictions for the Derry and Strabane council area came into force on 5 October.
- The Chief Medical Officer for NI and the Acting Chief Medical Officer for Ireland met on Friday 25 Sept 2020 to review the ongoing Covid-19 response. Given the current number of new cases in Donegal and neighbouring areas of NI in Derry/Londonderry, Strabane and Fermanagh they made an appeal to the public to avoid all but necessary travel across the border. It is also

recommended that employers on both sides of the border make every effort to facilitate employees to work from home as far as possible.

Testing

- NHS Test and Trace is providing tests at an unprecedented scale. Testing capacity in the UK across all pillars between 17 September and 23 September was at 2,660,271 tests, a 5% increase on the previous week. Testing capacity for all swab testing was at 1,812,571 tests, a 26% increase since mid-August.
- There has been a spike in demand in recent weeks.
- DHSC are doing everything possible to overcome this challenge – including by bringing in new labs that can process tens of thousands of tests a day, opening new test sites, and trialling new rapid tests that will give results on the spot.

Covid-O

- NIE Ministers are now invited to attend a weekly Covid-O, a move which should be welcomed by NIE as FM/dFM are more involved in the decision making process.

IF RAISED: Economic support for NI

- I appreciate this is a major challenge for NI's economy, especially the hospitality sector.
- Commend the NIE on its swift work implementing tailored support packages for NI businesses, such as the COVID-19 Digital Selling Capability Grant, launched 10 September. [This provides grants up to £20,000 to support companies with digital marketing or enhance their digital offering].
- The Government has taken unprecedented action to support NI, including the provision of an additional £2.2bn in spending.
- We want to continue working closely with the Executive to get the NI economy backup and running, and to lay the foundations for economic growth.
- Under the Winter Economy Plan, businesses in NI will benefit from the new Jobs Support Scheme, the extension of the Self-Employed Income Support Scheme, the extension of government back loan schemes, and the extension of VAT reductions for the hospitality sector.

IF RAISED: Why introduce the Job Support Scheme rather than just extending furlough?

- By requiring a minimum amount of time worked, the JSS is focused on supporting genuinely viable jobs,
- The JSS is targeted at businesses who really need it – large companies must be experiencing a decline in revenue due to depressed demand.
- There are more expectations on larger companies such as limitations on their ability to make distributions to shareholders whilst using the scheme and employees will not be able to be made redundant or given notice whilst on the Scheme.
- Whilst furlough was the right intervention at the time, now the economy has reopened and the virus will be with us for a while, our approach to economic support needs to evolve. We cannot and should not pretend it is always possible for people to go back to the jobs they had and that those jobs have a viable future.
- Around the world, other countries have similar part time working schemes like this (e.g France, Austria, Germany).

Irrelevant & Sensitive

Irrelevant & Sensitive

Irrelevant & Sensitive