

BACKGROUND

Sir Jeffrey Donaldson has requested a call with DUP MPs to discuss:

1. I&S
2.
3. Covid-19 related matters
4. I&S

Gavin Robinson has confirmed he will join the call and your private office is seeking to confirm which other DUP MPs will join.

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3. RESPONSE TO COVID19

Steer

Reassure on the steps being taken by the government, highlighting the areas of close working between UKG and the NI Executive.

Lines to take

- We have a world renowned team of clinicians, public health experts and scientists working round the clock to keep this country safe. The Government is taking the right steps at the right time, guided by the best and latest scientific advice.
- We are working, and will continue to work, closely with the Devolved Administrations to make sure that the most effective measures are put in place in all parts of the UK.

Q&A

What is the latest scientific advice?

- The Prime Minister has urged people across the UK to work from home, limit use of public transport and avoid unnecessary social gatherings to stem the spread of Covid-19 and from Friday the 20th March the government has instructed all entertainment and hospitality premises, including pubs, bars and restaurants, across the country to close. New guidance also instructs families and households to isolate for 14 days if any resident develops Covid-19 symptoms, however mild.
- The PM announced yesterday on 23 March that people will only be allowed to leave their home for the following limited purposes:
 - shopping for basic necessities, as infrequently as possible
 - one form of exercise a day - alone or with members of the household;
 - any medical need, to provide care or to help a vulnerable person; and
 - travelling to and from work, but only where this is absolutely necessary and cannot be done from home.
- He further announced the immediate:
 - closure of all shops selling non-essential goods, including clothing and electronic stores and other premises including libraries, playgrounds and outdoor gyms, and places of worship;

- stopping of all gatherings of more than two people in public – excluding people who live together;
- stopping all social events, including weddings, baptisms and other ceremonies, but excluding funerals.
- The NHS is working hard to contain the virus and we are confident it is well prepared to cope with an outbreak, but we must be prepared for this to get worse before it gets better. We have been clear from the outset that we expect coronavirus to have some impact on the UK and a global pandemic could have a pronounced effect on the NHS, which is why we are planning for every eventuality.
- We have always said that it is likely we can expect more cases, and we are working hard to handle this increase through our four phased approach - contain, delay, mitigation and research. An approach designed by world leading experts.
- There is also a strong role that we can all play as citizens, as service users and providers, and of course as family members, friends and employers.

What powers will the Bill provide the Executive?

- The bill provides powers to Departments delivering front-line services with powers to contain and mitigate the effects of the Covid 19 outbreak. The powers include provision for emergency registration of healthcare workers, closure of schools, suspension of port operations, and expansion of video hearings in court. Additional powers added to the Public Health Act (NI) 1967 and provision is made for quarantine, screening and assessment of potentially infectious persons.

What powers does the Bill provide to impose restrictions on holding events or gatherings in Northern Ireland?

- The Bill confers powers on both the Department of Health and the Executive Office to impose restrictions for public health reasons (in relation to coronavirus) on the holding of events or gatherings. In both cases, the imposition of that restriction for the purposes of protecting public health must be necessary and proportionate.
- TEO's powers may also be exercised when the powers - in the face of an imminent threat to public health - will facilitate the most appropriate deployment of medical or emergency personnel.

Are the NIE supporting the LCM for the Bill?

- The NI Executive have supported the LCM for the Bill.

Further background information

- 1. NI headlines**
- 2. Covid 19 bill**
- 3. Financial package and business support**
- 4. Coordination with the Irish Government**

1. NI Headlines

- As of 2pm on Sunday 22 March, there have been 2,484 tests completed in Northern Ireland with 128 confirmed cases and two coronavirus related deaths. As of 22 March, there were 906 confirmed cases in Ireland with four deaths.
- Planning assumptions indicate that 8% of infected people in NI will require hospitalisation.
- Messaging and practice on social distancing, school arrangements for children of key workers, and provision of PPE are the priorities for the NI Executive this week (w/c 23/03).
- As with other parts of the UK, there have been large numbers of people congregating in parks and other public places. The Executive intend to prioritise tackling this in their messaging.
- All schools will be closed from 23/03 with 575 schools open to provide for children of key workers who have no “other viable option” for their care (with 800 schools indicating they could open at a later stage).
- Covid-19 has resulted in a surge in demand for all items of PPE, but most notably certain types of facemasks and hand sanitisers. Provision of PPE for frontline staff and other key workers is the primary policy issue facing the Executive this week which they will meet today to discuss. Packs of PPE have been delivered to GPs and Community Pharmacies and the Department of Health will procure PPE for their own purposes with the Department of Finance coordinating provision of PPE for others with a Hub being set up today.
- GPs will be writing this week to approximately 40,000 vulnerable advising them to shield themselves from the virus for 12 weeks in the first phase.

- Testing capacity will be expanded to about 800 Covid-19 tests per day by early April which is a significant increase on the current 200 per day. This will enable the HSC to test more frontline health and social care staff, ensuring that they can continue to deliver vital services.
- In terms of surge planning, DoH is exploring how to access private sector beds. To address concerns over the shortage of ventilators, forty additional mechanical ventilators have been ordered, bringing the total available in Northern Ireland to 179 by the end of March. Health Minister Robin Swann has reached out to NI manufacturers to help produce more ventilators.

2. Covid 19 Bill

- DHSC are bringing forward the Coronavirus Bill, which will be expedited to Royal Assent. Royal assent is due to be granted on 25 March. There is a small chance that ping pong could delay this.
- The purpose of the Bill is to provide powers for use only if required, judged on the basis of the clinical and scientific advice. The Bill contains safeguards to ensure that powers are only used as necessary and aims to balance the need for speed, as appropriate to the risk posed by the virus.
- The clauses of the Bill that extend to NI include: Emergency registration of health professionals; Emergency volunteers; Mental health and mental capacity; Health service indemnification; Registration of deaths and still-births; Food supply; Inquests; Schools, childcare providers; Statutory Sick Pay; Pensions; Protection of public health; Powers relating to potentially infectious persons; Powers relating to events, gatherings and premises; Courts and tribunals: use of video and audio technology; Powers in relation to bodies; Commencement; Power to suspend and revive provisions; and Expiry.
- The NI Assembly debated a Legislative Consent Motion for the Bill on Tuesday 24th. The Motion, that this Assembly endorses the principle of the extension to Northern Ireland of the provisions of the Coronavirus Bill was carried.
- The NI Executive and the other Devolved Administrations are considering mechanisms for deciding how the powers under this bill will be regulated once they are in place.

3. Financial package and business support

- Northern Ireland is being supported through a combination of UK-wide support and additional Barnett consequential to be spent by the Executive.
- On Friday 20 March, the Chancellor announced an unprecedented package of measures to protect millions of people's jobs and incomes. This support package was UK wide so all NI businesses and employees are covered by the extensive provisions.
- The Northern Ireland Executive will continue to take decisions on areas of devolved responsibility and put in place support for businesses in NI. The UK government will continue to work closely with the NIE as the situation develops to ensure they have the funding needed to tackle the impacts of COVID-19.
- The Chancellor's UK wide announcement on 20 March includes:
 - **The Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme** will provide grants for businesses to cover most of the wages of people who aren't working: 80% of the salary of retained workers up to a total of £2,500 per month, and employers will have the option of topping this up.
 - The extension of the **Business Interruption Loan Scheme** which will now be interest free for 12 months. This scheme will be open from Monday 23 March.
 - **The next quarter of VAT payments will be deferred.** No business will pay any VAT from now until the end of June. Payments will then only have to be made up by the end of the financial year. This amounts to deferring £30bn.
 - The Chancellor also outlined almost £7bn of extra support for the welfare system, to help families through the coronavirus crisis.
- Previously announced measures on Statutory Sick Pay were also UK wide and apply in Northern Ireland as was the £330bn loan guarantees.
- There have been some elements of UKG's support packages that are not UK wide, **such as the business rate holiday and business grants** which apply in England only. However, in line with standard practice, the devolved administrations have been provided a Barnett consequential to put in place their own local support programmes in devolved policy areas.
- The Barnett consequential for Northern Ireland have come through £12bn of measures announced at Budget and the further £20bn of support announced

by the Chancellor on 17 March. Taken together, **the NI Executive is receiving over £900m** to support people and business in NI through COVID-19.

- The main areas where economic decisions on Covid-19 support have been taken by the devolved administrations are on Business Grants and Business Rates:
 - **Business Grants** - The Northern Ireland Executive has used some of the Barnett consequential awards so far to replicate the England only grant schemes for businesses in NI. Using funding provided by the UK Government, the Northern Ireland Executive has announced two new grant schemes for businesses in Northern Ireland with a total cost of £370m.
 - **Business Rates** - In England there is a 12-month business rates holiday for all retail, hospitality, leisure and nursery businesses. As this is a devolved policy area, the Northern Ireland Executive had to decide how best to use the Barnett consequential awards they received to support business. Rather than copy the England approach, the Executive has decided to introduce a three-month rates holiday **for all business ratepayers**, excluding public sector and utilities. This means that in Northern Ireland no rates will be charged for April, May and June 2020. This automatically reduces the 2020-21 annual rate bill for business ratepayers by 25 per cent as this amount does not need to be paid back.
- Similar to the rest of the UK, there is likely to be increasing pressure in NI for more action to support self-employed workers.

4. Coordination with the Irish Government

- The UK Government and Irish Government are communicating at all levels to ensure a joined-up approach to the coronavirus outbreak.
- I speak regularly to the Tanaiste - the last time on Friday with the FS.
- PM spoke to Taoiseach last week and during the call both emphasised the need for close East-West cooperation.
- Work continues on the possibility of a virtual BIC..

- Cabinet Secretary has also spoken to Irish counterpart and agreed need for more coordination with IE.

I&S