

Covid-19 Ministerial Meetings 18 March

13:00-14:00 CDL-chaired Preparedness, 15:00-16:00 Health (*Conf Room B, 70 Whitehall*)

You are attending Covid-19 Preparedness (Minister Walker) and Health (Secretary of State) meetings this afternoon. We do not expect Special Advisers to attend.

PREPAREDNESS

- This is the first meeting of a new structure and it is not yet clear whether DAs will be invited going forward. We have not received a formal agenda.
- We expect the Preparedness strand to be the largest outfit of the four new branches to the Covid-19 response.
- You may wish to use this meeting to press for DAs attendance.

Lines to take

- Health services in Northern Ireland are likely to reach capacity sooner than in Great Britain and may require support.
- The NI Executive and NI Civil Service will likely face unique challenges within the areas they are responsible for given the highly integrated nature of daily life across the island of Ireland.
- NIO are working with NICS and Whitehall Depts at official level to rapidly assess where the key challenges lie and steps to take to tackle these. But it is essential that we maintain and build on existing good communications between the UK Government and the NI Executive at both Ministerial and official levels.
- The Executive's Covid-19 communications strategy needs developing and may require support from the Government Communication Service.

Background

Schools

- Schools in the Republic of Ireland closed on 12 March. This has been an area of contention in the Executive, with Sinn Fein wanting to follow Irish Government lead and DUP wanting to follow UK Government lead. Some schools in Northern Ireland have closed unilaterally.
- The Executive has reached a collective position, based on scientific advice from the NI Chief Medical Officer, that schools should close at some point in the future. This issue came to a vote in the Assembly which was narrowly lost by Sinn Fein and SDLP.
- We expect that school closures will be discussed at COBR this afternoon.

Food supply

- Cabinet Office and Defra will co-chair a Public sector food supply and Covid-19 meeting at noon today. The agenda will cover
 - Overview of government position/latest information that can be shared with suppliers
 - Government department updates to focus on services under most pressure from Covid-19 – DHSC and MHCLG, DAs (any others under significant additional pressures)

- Supplier update - issues and impacts of current (and medium term) situation and contingencies/plans to mitigate impacts

Legislation update

- DHSC are bringing forward the Coronavirus Bill. The Bill is being presented to PBL today. This is a temporary bill designed to only be in force as long as it is needed. The Bill provides powers in an emergency situation to manage the effects of a Covid-19 virus pandemic. The powers in the Bill largely focus on public health interventions but there are three areas that intersect with NIO responsibility (canvassing, warranting, gatherings).
- The plan is to expedite the Bill through Parliament, with introduction on 19 March, and Royal Assent by 31 March. The Bill will include NI clauses - NICS have been consulted and NI Ministers have signed off on their specific clauses. NICS officials are making preparations to secure a legislative consent motion.

Irish Government

- We need to ensure best communication and collaboration with the Irish Government.
- Covid-19 poses risks to the short term stability of the Executive. It is helpful for our responses to be considered an East/West issue and not solely a North/South of Ireland problem.

Ireland travel advice

- On 16 March the Irish Government announced that all persons, including Irish residents, entering Ireland from overseas will be asked to make significant restrictions to their movements for 14 days on arrival. This does not apply to those entering Ireland from Northern Ireland at this time.
- The recommendation on restricted movement does not apply to specified categories of essential supply chain workers such as aircrew, hauliers, maritime staff, either Irish-based or foreign-based.
- We understand that the UKG advice will be updated later today regarding all but essential travel to Ireland. We are trying to establish further information.

Public sector preparedness

Points to make

- Important we continue to consider how we will best work and coordinate with the DAs given the extent to which public services are devolved.
- The NI Executive and NI Civil Service will likely face unique challenges within the areas they are responsible for given the highly integrated nature of daily life across the island of Ireland.
- NIO are working with NICS and Whitehall Depts at official level to rapidly assess where the key challenges lie and steps to take to tackle these. But it is essential that we maintain and build on existing good communications between UK Government and the NI Executive at both Ministerial and official levels.

Communications strategy

Points to make

- The Executive's Covid-19 communications strategy needs developing and may require support from the Government Communication Service.

Finances and the Economy

- There is now over £900m available through Barnett consequentials for the Executive to spend on Covid-19 related measures in NI.
- The Executive is considering where to factor in the additional funding announced by the Chancellor on 17 March.
- The Chancellor has said the Government will do whatever it takes to support the economy, but we must be mindful that the NI economy was already facing challenges before the COVID-19 outbreak (Ulster Bank's chief economist reports that NI is either in or entering a recession), which may exacerbate the economic situation further.
- The NIO is assessing the performance of the NI economy, and the measures being taken by both the UK Government and the Executive to support the economy.

HEALTH

Steer

- This is the first meeting of a new structure and it is not yet clear whether DAs will be invited going forward. We have not received a formal agenda.
- You may wish to use this meeting to press for DAs attendance.
- Northern Ireland is still recovering from well-documented pressures in the health system and hospitals are likely to reach capacity sooner than in GB.

Lines to take

- Health services in Northern Ireland are likely to reach capacity sooner than in Great Britain and may require support.
- Encourage further cooperation and coordination between CMOs in the 5 nations - and with the CMO from the Republic of Ireland.
- [You may want to test what creative options are being considered IN GB (i.e. university campus accommodation providing additional bed space) that can be applied to NI]

Background

Outbreak

- As at 17 March, there were 1950 total cases in the UK, of which 62 in Northern Ireland. There were no recorded deaths in Northern Ireland as of last night.
- There were 223 cases in the Republic of Ireland.
- The Northern Ireland Department of Health is following UK Government advice around social distancing and reducing social contact, including encouraging home working.

Testing

- Capacity for testing is being increased in NI and will ramp up quickly. 200 tests a day is the current capacity, which will quadruple in next week. The Executive are considering how best to use this capacity.

Capacity

- Northern Ireland is still recovering from well-documented pressures in the health system.
- On **Ambulance Service**, work ongoing to maintain resilience in service supply. Noted that volunteers coming forward as well as retired staff including St John Ambulance and Red Cross. Very positive.