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**Subject:** READOUT | Quad meeting 31 Mar  
**Date:** Thu, 2 Apr 2020 17:50:53 +0100

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Following the rough readout straight after the meeting, please see the full readout below:

## **UK GOVERNMENT, IRISH GOVERNMENT, NORTHERN IRELAND EXECUTIVE MEETING 31 MAR | READOUT**

### **Attendees:**

Secretary of State for Northern Ireland  
Tánaiste  
First Minister  
Deputy First Minister  
Northern Ireland Health Minister  
Ireland Health Minister

**The Secretary of State opened the meeting** by stating that covid-19 presented a range of common issues, and it is therefore important to have conversations about how the UK, Ireland and Northern Ireland (NI) can be joined up where appropriate. He said that this format gives the chance to go through these issues and share best practice across the nations. He welcomed the upcoming Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between NI and Ireland on Health and said that it would be helpful to receive an update.

**Tánaiste** reiterated the usefulness of the forum and said that he had spoken to the Irish CMO this morning. He said that there is a lot of agreement on the Memorandum of Understanding but it still needs their Attorney General's sign off on expenses to the exchequer. Nevertheless, he said that he expect that we could get this done very quickly.

**The Secretary of State** welcomed that progress and raised a recent Colum Eastwood letter on frontier workers not being able to avail themselves of certain financial support measures on offer from the Irish Government.

**Tánaiste** said he had received the same letter. He outlined his understanding that the Irish wage subsidy scheme covers those living in NI and working in Ireland, but he would write to the Secretary of State, First Minister and deputy First Minister to confirm.

**The Secretary of State** invited both health ministers to update on the current situations.

**Simon Harris**, Irish health minister, ran through the draft MOU with the list of 9 commitments underway focusing on formalising the following: modelling, common public messages, behaviour change and civil society, institute of public health (cross-border) on research, sharing information on ethics - all building on the Armagh meeting. He spoke through the principles of information sharing

and governance structure. The MoU notes variability is possible, but he said where that variability arises we will need to have strong collaboration to ensure that we understand each other's approaches. The Irish government view is that it would be signed by both CMOs.

He also gave a general covid update and stated the concern about clusters of the virus in the nursing home setting, with the nursing home almost overtaking the family home as the main place of infection. He said that severe social restrictions were now in place and high levels of compliance were being underpinned by emergency legislation. Modelling was showing significant decreases in new cases, but still too high if the Irish system was going to avoid pressure on ICU & hospital capacity.

**Robin Swann**, NI health minister, reiterated that the MoU is based on high level sharing of information and focuses solely on the covid-19 situation. He said it was nearly there, and was now about fine detail and language. He agreed that it was a formalisation of what we are already doing and said that the Northern Ireland Executive also agreed on the CMO signing point.

He updated on the Northern Ireland situation and said it would be days/weeks before the effects of social distancing/isolation measures are felt.

**Tánaiste** said that the group needed to be frank and try to see issues before they arise. He said that the nations were getting to a point of a similar approach on essential/non-essential work. But the extent of testing is the big difference between two approaches. He said that understanding medical perspectives differ, but different approaches may result in distancing measures being raised at different times - this could be difficult, especially if one approach is more effective than the other. He said that could be similar to the start of the covid-19 outbreak with schools and that created tensions and pressures publicly. He therefore said that anticipating how to coordinate between the two jurisdictions and thinking about how the Irish Government and Northern Ireland Executive can work together.

He pointed to the Irish Times article from 31 March that can create tension. He agreed that continued contact between CMOs and sharing data etc might be useful so that we can anticipate problems before they arise.

**Robin Swann** reassured the Tánaiste that the CMOs were working together. He said he was conscious of differences in testing approaches with Irish Government. He said that they will look to work on the medical side to take joint points.

**Minister Harris** said that we are now in a different place to where we were in Armagh and as much common understanding as possible is needed. He pointed out that if we all end up doing significantly different things, we may run into trouble. He said the importance of no surprises from any nation. He highlighted that Easter could be a crunch point when people begin to discuss lifting social distancing measures.

**The Secretary of State** acknowledged that the lifting of measures will be an issue in the near future and said it will ultimately be a political decision but based on the medical advice. He said that the key was to stay as transparent as possible about the modelling and advice and be upfront in the communications. He said that when the jurisdictions take different approaches it must be ensured that it is understood where each other are, so that differences can be managed. He said that doing

so will allow everyone to get the communications and narrative right so that it can be explained to the public.

**Deputy First Minister** said that communication is vital and welcomed the fact that NI and Ireland were moving towards an MOU.

**Tánaiste** said that he only raised the issue to ensure that the group was considering if different approaches lead to different outcomes. He said that he was also aware of the reliance on each other for consistent supply chains.

**The Secretary of State** said he had raised supply lines with UKG colleagues recently and asked about concerns that people have.

**Deputy First Minister** highlighted less regular ferry traffic could have a knock-on effect in terms of food provision and said that they will be discussing this in the Executive shortly.

**First Minister** said this was a real issue, especially with reliance on stuff coming across from GB. She said that she has asked for this to be escalated to COBR.

**Mark Larmour (NIO official)** said that officials were working on this and we were in contact with ferry companies regarding this.

**The Secretary of State** said that DEFRA's Secretary of State had updated the UK Cabinet on this point earlier in the day. He said that the easing of panic buying now meant that more focus can look ahead to supply chain difficulties.

**Tánaiste** said that they were similarly keeping a close eye on the issue and trying to keep open connections between Britain and Ireland, both air and ferry travel. He said that they were going to have flights coming in with PPE from China - so closing airports was not an option. He said that people who suggest closing airports are not considering supply chain issues.

**Deputy First Minister** raised how the MoU would be taken forward.

**Both health ministers** agreed that further communication on the MOU should continue through CMOs.

**The Secretary of State** said that the group should seek to reconvene on a fortnightly basis. The group agreed.

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