



Northern
Ireland
Office

C-19 CABINET SECRETARY OFFICIALS MEETING

Thursday 14 May 2020

17:00 - 18:00 | DIAL IN VIA ZOOM

AGENDA

1) PM Covid-19 Daily Dashboard

Alastair Whitehead, Civil Contingencies Secretariat

2) Ministerial Implementation Groups update

Simon Ridley: NR /David Quarrey/ Jonathan Black

3) Upcoming PM Decisions and updates

Forward Look Grid for the week - Cabinet Secretariat

i) Strategy Update

Cabinet Secretariat

ii) Test and Trace

David Williams, Department of Health and Social Care

iii) Joint Biosecurity Centre

Tom Hurd, Home Office

4) PMO Covid-19 Delivery Report

Colin Dingwall, Project Management Office, Cabinet Secretariat

5) Comms Update

Claire Pimm, Cabinet Office Communications

6) AOB

Cabinet Secretary

LINES TO TAKE

3 i) Strategy Update

- NI currently has stricter measures in place than England, retaining the 'stay at home' message rather than adopting the 'stay alert' message.
- The NI roadmap has more in common with the Irish and UK government plans than differences.
- The key difference is that NI is not relaxing any restrictions straight away (which both the UK and Irish Government did) and they have declined to put specific dates on any of the stages - again, unlike the UK and Ireland.
- All three plans favour a phased approach involving relaxing rules on outdoor activity, reopening of some parts of the economy, with indoor activity and close proximity social gathering coming in the later stages.

Background

We continue to monitor the NI Executive's approach. The NI Executive document, *Coronavirus Executive Approach to Decision Making*, was published and debated in the Assembly on Tuesday. The document states an ambition to relax restrictions and shares a five-point plan. The NI Executive approach is 'conditions-based' rather than linked to fixed dates for when each step of the plan might be reached, with a warning that the process will take "significant time". The NI regulations will continue to be reviewed every 3 weeks, as required under legislation.

3 ii) Test and Trace

- In the context of Northern Ireland, it is very important that the NHS app is interoperable with that developed by the Irish Government, recognising cross-border movements.

Background

Dido Harding is meeting the PM today to agree a pathway to launching the NHS Covid-19 app. We understand they will aim for a launch date of 01 June. Their conversation should inform the discussion during the Cab Sec (O) meeting.

UKGG has drafted a note about test and trace (with a focus on the NHS app) which is likely to go to No.10 today. As drafted, the note focuses on the impact of divergence of non-pharmaceutical interventions on use of the Track and Trace app. We have offered comments on the note to highlight the importance in the Northern Ireland context that the app is interoperable with that developed by the Irish Government, recognising cross-border movements both between the four nations of the UK and across an international frontier. There is likely to be a tension between

privacy considerations (heightened in the Northern Ireland context due to international-data-sharing requirements and individual concerns about data privacy) and the richness of data that can be collated and analysed from the app.

DHSC is increasingly aware of the need for DA engagement on the Test and Trace programme, and will now meet DAs twice a week. It is less clear what role the DAs play in making or influencing decisions about the overall design of the app.

3 iii) Joint Biosecurity Centre

- We understand that the ambition is for the JBC to be 'live' and have issued its first 'covid threat level' by 1st June.
- There is a risk that if this first communication is not fully joined up with the DAs and fails to land it will impact on the long term success of the centre.
- We have asked officials for the critical path leading up to the 1 June, so that we can understand where we need to dock in.
- We understand that an offer has been made to the DAs to embed staff with knowledge of local decision making/legal powers. It would be helpful if this was a written proposition.

Background

NI sensitivities

There are likely to be particular sensitivities in the devolved space as this is essentially national security infrastructure/governance being used in response to a devolved matter. The NI First Minister (Arlene Foster, DUP) has, however, indicated that she welcomes this new initiative, but the Deputy First Minister (Michelle O'Neill, Sinn Fein) has so far remained silent.

The presentation and the branding of this work will need to be handled very sensitively. The use and operability of the track and trace app has not been well received in Northern Ireland, for example because of the mistrust of perceived Government intrusion into privacy. In our view, if branded as a public health and a public safety initiative, this will land better in NI than focusing on a 'security' aspect. Initiatives that play up the security aspect are not likely to get any traction from communities, particularly nationalism, in NI and may be met with greater scepticism.

We will also need to be sensitive to the interoperability of this work with Ireland. Options or analysis that is pertinent to the border areas of Northern Ireland are also likely to be relevant and require a coordinated response with the Irish Government.

The current set of slides are (perhaps understandably) quite England focused. The structure of government and decision making in NI is obviously quite different, which may mean that decisions are not taken at such a local level in NI as the slides indicate for England. In practice in NI, many of the decisions will be taken at a departmental/executive level (and not the local level) and therefore there is not that much difference between local level and the “top down: central executive action”. Buy in from the Executive is crucial.

We do see the value in embedding someone with NI expertise into the JBC at the design stage as well as potentially when it is operational. We will continue to discuss with the Northern Ireland Civil Service as it's key that we are coordinating with them from the outset. Achieving their involvement at official level, particularly from the Department of Health at Stormont, would be advantageous and lead to a great likelihood of four nation acceptance.

5) Communications

The announcement on health checks at the border is expected early next week - the lead depts have accepted the point that we need to be clear about the land border and the Common Travel Area.

They are also working closely with the centre on placing NI content on a weekly basis as part of a paid for press partnership across the UK which includes the majority of NI papers. We are also waiting to hear how the Cabinet Office comms hub intends to address Northern Ireland in their paid-for recovery campaigns - the NIO has made a bid for £300,000 for a marketing campaign in NI but there is a feeling the centre would like to roll this into a wider UK campaign. We would not necessarily object to this, but we have yet to see how the NI elements of such a campaign might be properly tailored and weighted to have the necessary impact.

We have been in constant contact with the central comms hub and other depts to support relevant announcements.

As on the policy front, comms work around the Transition Period is also ramping up and taking focus away from C-19 to an extent