

**UK/NI/IE Trilateral Covid Meeting Wednesday 20 January 2:30-3:15**

**Agenda:**

- 1) Introductions
- 2) Covid General Updates and Case Numbers
- 3) **Irrelevant & Sensitive**
- 4) Travel Restrictions and Sharing of Health Data
- 5) Areas for Cooperation - sharing vaccination plans.
- 6) Update on Astra-Zeneca
- 7) Actions and Date of Next Meeting

**Steer:** From a Covid viewpoint, there are 3 key issues which it may be worth discussing: travel and data sharing, vaccinations and healthcare capacity.

You should facilitate discussions between NI and Ireland officials on data sharing and agree a shared commitment to quickly resolve this issue, which has been running for months and is becoming increasingly important as new strains of Covid-19 from abroad affect the R rate and efficacy of vaccines [see Annex A for more detail]. This might lead to a discussion on travel restrictions in general where you can reflect that SoSNI steer is that a more aligned policy might allow joined-up comms with NI and Ireland. Robin Swann and Stephen Donnelly will also talk today and Ireland have indicated to BE Dublin they are happy to find a solution with assurances in place around the use of data.

You could also note that the pressure on hospitals in Northern Ireland continues and the NIO is working with other departments in UKG to ensure help is provided where possible. We will provide more detail on the progress of the MACA request as it emerges ahead of this meeting. Vaccines continue to be rolled out quickly in NI and there are no particular points to make on this.

On transition, you should use this as an opportunity to share updates on the improving picture and ask for updates from Ireland, the Executive and Simon Ridley.

**Lines to take**

Covid Data Sharing

- I am keen to discuss data sharing issues relating to travel and happy to facilitate a conversation between senior officials in DoH and Irish Government to ensure that we make progress on this important issue.
- I understand that DoH consider the information requested to be highly important, especially as new strains of Covid-19 emerge, and Irish Government needs to ensure that data protection regulations are observed.

Wider Travel [if raised]

- SoSNI and I are happy to coordinate in this group and in the quad on communicating the similar travel policies which will be in place on the island of

Ireland, aiming at more joined-up communications which could encourage compliance.

#### Healthcare Capacity

- I note with concern that pressure on the Health and Social Care System in Northern Ireland continues and the NIO are actively working to see how UKG might be able to support the Executive at this difficult time.

**Irrelevant & Sensitive**

#### **Background**

##### Covid

##### General NI Update

- The 7-day rate of cases per 100,000 in Northern Ireland is 323.7, down from 645.4 earlier this month. This reflects a significant drop in cases, however, there is still very significant pressure on healthcare in Northern Ireland.
- Over 114,000 vaccines have been deployed in NI - 6% of the NI population, representing the highest vaccination rate in the UK and across Europe. There are no particular points to raise around the AstraZeneca vaccine, but there have been some localised reports of supply issues in GP surgeries that we are monitoring.
- Mass testing has yet to be rolled out beyond targeted interventions.
- Restrictions in the past weeks have brought R closer to 1 but there are still high levels of Covid-19 and high test positivity rates.

##### Cases in Ireland and the UK per 100,000 over the past 7 days

UK: 473

Ireland: 455

These have both fallen significantly since early January but are well above pre-December levels and will continue to place strain on healthcare capacity.

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Transition

On GB-NI, many of the supermarket supply issues that have been noted are as a result of Covid-related staff absences affecting the retail sector and wider short straits disruption affecting the whole UK, with Northern Ireland being at the end of the supply chain. Some supermarkets in GB have also faced supply issues for some products and empty shelves. Where the correct data are provided the Trader Support Service is processing around 99% of declarations in 15 minutes, and business leaders, such as the NIRC and Retail NI, have accepted that the current challenges are likely to subside.

**Irrelevant & Sensitive**

**ACTIONS FROM LAST MEETING:**

- **All:** to keep in touch over the weekend/early next week regarding the new restrictions coming into force on all sides (including providing feedback on the approach to exemptions in Ireland under the new HMG policy).
- **All:** to ensure guidance and advice on borders (covering customs and testing) is aligned as far as possible.
- **BE Dublin:** to update travel advice to provide clear advice on the transition and developing Covid requirements.
- **Trilat Secretariat:** to introduce a standing item on practical bilateral transition issues.
- **Trilat Secretariat/FCDO:** to organise a more detailed conversation with the Irish Government regarding the Oxford/AstraZeneca vaccine rollout.

**Annex A: Detail on Data Sharing Issue**What is the Problem?

Passengers arriving to Ireland before travelling on to NI complete an Ireland PLF, but not all complete a UK one too as is the legal requirement. It is accepted that some passengers are genuinely unaware of the requirement to do so. However, there are likely to be some using the 'Dublin Dodge' to avoid completion of the UK PLF and any potential enforcement actions. The box to tick in the Ireland PLF to note that people are travelling on to Belfast has now also been removed.

Irish officials do not assess that they can share data from the Ireland PLF if it is intended by the NI authorities to enforce self-isolation. This is because Ireland doesn't collect data to mandate self-isolation. Irish health officials have indicated that they could make changes to their PLF once an agreement is reached on data sharing.

NI health colleagues have advised that they would still like the data in order to be able to send a text message to passengers informing them of the requirement to complete the UK PLF. They think this will still help with compliance.

What Engagement has Taken Place Already?

There has been significant ministerial and official level engagement already and NI ministers have guaranteed that data shared with NI would not be used for enforcement. FM has asked the PM to raise this, and Robin Swann and Steve Aiken have forcefully raised this issue with Simon Coveney and Stephen Donnelly.

Immediate Issue with Brazil Travel - and Other New Strains

More immediately, on passengers who have come into Ireland from Brazil, NI Department of Health would like to know if Irish officials are contacting all those indicating that they were transiting, so that they can be advised of the need to complete a UK PLF wherever appropriate.

What is DoH's proposed Solution?

To receive the data collected for NI bound travellers who complete the Ireland PLF. This will be used:

- To help increase compliance with UK PLF completion
- To allow contact with passengers in the event of particular public health needs, such as new variants arising abroad
- It will not be used for enforcement

DoH are frustrated as they feel they have offered multiple solutions but Ireland have not engaged properly. Ireland have, however, offered to share the data if NI offer more resources to map all possible uses. DoH are reluctant to do this.