



Northern  
Ireland  
Office

**COBR COVID-19(M)(21)**  
**21 DECEMBER 2020**  
**1400-1500**

**AGENDA**

- 1) Situation Report
  - a. Haulage disruption
  - b. Local impacts
  
- 2) UK Impacts & Mitigations
  - a. Food supply
  - b. Medicines and medical consumables supply
  - c. Covid-19 Vaccines
  - d. Veterinary Medicines
  - e. Border controls
  - f. Traffic management
  
- 3) Options for testing at the border
  
- 4) French / Irish Impacts & Mitigations
  
- 5) EU and International
  - a. Expected EU Action
  - b. Engagement plan
  
- 6) Communications

## 1) Situation Report

### a) Haulage Disruption

**Steer:** On current information it appears that disruption to flow of trade via the short straits is relatively limited. However, ongoing or wider disruption would risk serious and disproportionate impacts for NI which is reliant on supply chains via this route. If raised, we suggest you may therefore want to press for a four nations approach to be taken to manage onward supply of inbound goods.

There are mitigations in place to protect the delivery of the Pfizer vaccine in the event of disruption but it will be worth assessing the potential concurrent risk of EoTP and France's actions on the supply of the vaccine.

#### **Point to Make:**

- Any ongoing restriction on flow through the short straits will have disproportionate impacts for Northern Ireland given its position at the end of supply chains.
- Any plans put in place to manage flow and distribution of produce which does enter GB - particularly critical, category 1 goods - must be on a coordinated four nations basis to help mitigate these risks.

#### **Background:**

Previous planning for a no deal Brexit suggests that disruption to goods leaving and entering GB from Europe (particularly at the short Channel Straits crossings) will constrain supply and/or limit their specification (i.e. use by dates).

NI is dependent on flow through both the GB and IE landbridges. Delays anywhere in the system would have a detrimental effect on NI, which is more vulnerable to the impact of cumulative delays than the rest of the UK.

Ongoing disruption may make it less commercially attractive for business to transport goods to peripheral locations, such as NI, particularly for items with short shelf lives. It will also be more challenging (given the high instances of 'just in time' supply chains) for some goods to reach NI on time or within their specification.

The longer and more widespread this disruption, the greater the potential for serious impacts.

**At present however there is no indication that there will be any disruption to flow of goods from GB to NI - either via direct routes or via Ireland.**

**b) Local Impacts**

**Steer:** We do not consider that the recent decision from Irish Government will affect travel on the island of Ireland but we recommend that you raise the issue of transit from NI to IE and the potential for this to be picked up by the Irish media.

**Point to Make:**

- Although the ban on passenger flights from GB to Ireland will disrupt travel plans over the Christmas period, it will not affect travel on the island of Ireland.
- We will closely monitor the position of the Irish Government, but it is possible that there will be public pressure to consider transit from NI to IE.

**Background:** The Irish Government has imposed a 48-hour travel ban on flights from Great Britain. Ferry crossings will continue. The ban is in place today (Monday) and tomorrow, and will be reviewed by the Irish Cabinet on Tuesday. Some 15 European countries have suspended travel from the UK. In Northern Ireland, Sinn Féin has proposed a ban on travel from GB. LPP/LAP

LPP/LAP

Travellers are still able to travel to Belfast from GB in order to transit to Ireland. This may be picked up in the media in the coming days and may put pressure on the Irish Government to limit NI-IE travel.

**2) UK Impact and Mitigations**

Please see above information

**3) Options for Testing at the Border**

We do not anticipate that there will be any NI specific point to make on this item.

**4) French / Irish Impacts and Mitigations**

We do not anticipate that there will be any NI specific point to make on this item.

**5) EU and International**

We do not anticipate that there will be NI specific points to raise in this section. LPP/LAP

LPP/LAP

The upcoming potential travel ban from Schengen Zone Countries to the UK may also be raised as a potential exacerbating factor, which could lengthen the period of travel

bans. Ireland have now confirmed that they will not ban travel under this Schengen Zone agreement.

## **6) Communications**

You may wish to note that Irish communications will focus on limiting travel over the Christmas period, as opposed to the legal detail of the ban. This is largely in line with the UKG position and a successful comms campaign across the island of Ireland could draw out alignment.

### **Points to Make**

- I would encourage any communications approach to take into account the similarity in approach between Ireland and UKG, who both ultimately focus on the limiting of travel over the festive period.
- I have been in contact with Simon Coveney and will continue to work with the Irish Government to ensure a coherent message and mitigate impacts on Northern Ireland.

**Additional information - Executive discussion on recent restrictions / mass testing / vaccines**

**Steer:** You will wish to note that recent Executive cooperation on restrictions has been positive and that good progress has been made with vaccines and mass testing. However, case numbers continue to rise and you may wish to update that pressures on NI's health service are beginning to show, and that support from the Irish Government has recently been required.

**Background:** The Executive on Thursday announced a six-week lockdown, to begin on 26 December, with a review after 4 weeks. This does not affect Christmas Bubbles which can run until 27 December. The Executive will encourage people to 'work from home, and stay at home' after Christmas

In addition, there will be a one-week period of additional restrictions from 26 December to 2 January. The restrictions on retail, gatherings and household mixing will apply between 20:00 and 06:00 during this period.

*Covid rates in NI*

Rates across NI have increased this week, with the average 14-day rate per 100,000 now at 374.3, compared to 112.2 in the Republic of Ireland.

*Irish Government support to NI*

Last weekend, as part of continuing cooperation between NI and IE, IE provided a small number of ambulances to NI to support in a period of exceptional demand. There were some Irish media reports that this reflected a poor handling of the crisis but the Irish Government has kept a supportive tone while offering support.

**Additional information - Irish restrictions and CTA**

**Steer:** The Irish Government has made these restrictions on public health grounds and we anticipate that they will be acceptable under the CTA, especially as they do not apply specifically to Irish or UK citizens, rather, limiting some travel from an area of high disease risk to an area of low risk. Additionally, the decision to maintain ferry links means that travel to Ireland is still possible.

John Callinan, senior Irish official, stated yesterday that there was significant pressure to take this step and the Irish Government will have considered CTA implications. The next consideration is whether the Irish Government will be put under pressure to limit transit from Belfast.

**Background:** The CTA are arrangements that have developed over time that enable – essentially – the free movement of British/Irish citizens between the UK and Ireland (other islands) and certain other citizens' rights, such as healthcare and voting etc. Consistent with those arrangements both govts ensure that their domestic legislation enable this. There is no enforceable international treaty underpinning the arrangements, although an MoU setting out both governments' understanding of the arrangements (and how they would continue to operate post EU Exit) was reached in 2019.

Whether the Irish Government is therefore able to prevent travel from the UK consistently with the CTA is a matter of its domestic law. However, by analogy, whilst the UK govt could not require, under existing law, Irish citizens to require leave to enter the UK, public health powers do permit the restriction of travel within and to the UK. Both the Welsh and Scottish governments have used public health powers to do this. The Welsh government did this, for example, by preventing travel to or within Wales of people living in certain specified areas in England.

A similar move by the IG would not breach the principles of the CTA, since it is not refusing entry as such to UK citizens. It is preventing people currently living in GB from travelling to (or within) Ireland. It is not based on nationality/immigration principles, but public health principles. It's worth noting that the EU does also permit the restriction of free movement rights on public health grounds.

If NIE wanted to restrict travel to Ireland or vice-versa, any such restrictions would be on the basis of the restriction of travel by non-NI/IE residents on public health grounds.

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